

Aching to escape hectic urbanity? Montevideo, Uruguay is warm, slow and sweet—even if the locals do socialize all night long.

# SOUTHERN EXPOSURE

Three days after I arrived in Uruguay, a *gaucho* named José pointed out that I hadn't quite adjusted to the local culture. The morning of my arrival to San Pedro de Timote, a ranch two hours away from Uruguay's capital city, Montevideo, José offered to take me horseback riding. As we walked across a field toward our horses in the sunshine, I repeatedly found myself several steps ahead of my sombrero-wearing guide. Finally, he stopped, turned to me and gently said, "*Tranquilo.*" I laughed. Even a non-Spanish speaker understands when she's told by a tanned, handsome cowboy to put on the brakes.

If life's pace slows when one travels to South America, it decelerates even more in Uruguay. Once I adapted, I found the slower tempo to be one of the country's main attractions. And I came to understand what South Americans know well: Whether it's playing on the beach, dancing in a nightclub, watching a soccer match or working on a ranch, one travels to Uruguay to relax.

Located on the Atlantic coast of South America, 30 degrees south of the equator, Uruguay is dwarfed by Brazil to the north and Argentina to the west. Montevideo is often forgotten, overshadowed by its larger and more sophisticated counterpart in Argentina: Buenos Aires. But anonymity has its benefits: The city is recognized as one of the safest in the world, and the people are friendly, peaceful and proud of their small country. Most Uruguayans trace their families back to Spain or Italy, and, today, locals are still likely to speak Italian or Portuguese as a second language. English is not widely spoken, American retailers are nearly nonexistent, and fel-



Restaurant tables dot cobblestone streets in historic Colonia.

Melanie D.G. Kaplan

low tourists are likely to be Argentineans rather than Americans—which creates a blissful sense of remoteness.

My overnight flight from Washington, D.C., to Montevideo was about 12 hours, with a stop in Buenos Aires. I was relieved to arrive in a city with only one hour's time difference: no jet lag. But I soon faced scheduling problems that I hadn't anticipated. My first night, at 7:30, I walked into the **Ciudad Vieja**, the Old City, and the restaurants were closed. When I finally found one open, it was serving "tea" and didn't serve dinner until 8. "People don't eat here until 10," Diego Blixen, a local businessman, told me. "Then, they go to bars or clubs at midnight or two, and come home at eight. Our *siesta* is so important. You must sleep between 7 and 9 [p.m.] so you can stay awake later."

Later, I saw for myself: After midnight, tables spilled out of restaurants and covered the sidewalks. The Old City came alive, with crowds of young people filling the blocks until long after I had crawled into bed.

The architecture of Plaza Independencia and Palacio Salvo, seen here, evokes Spanish and Italian traditions.



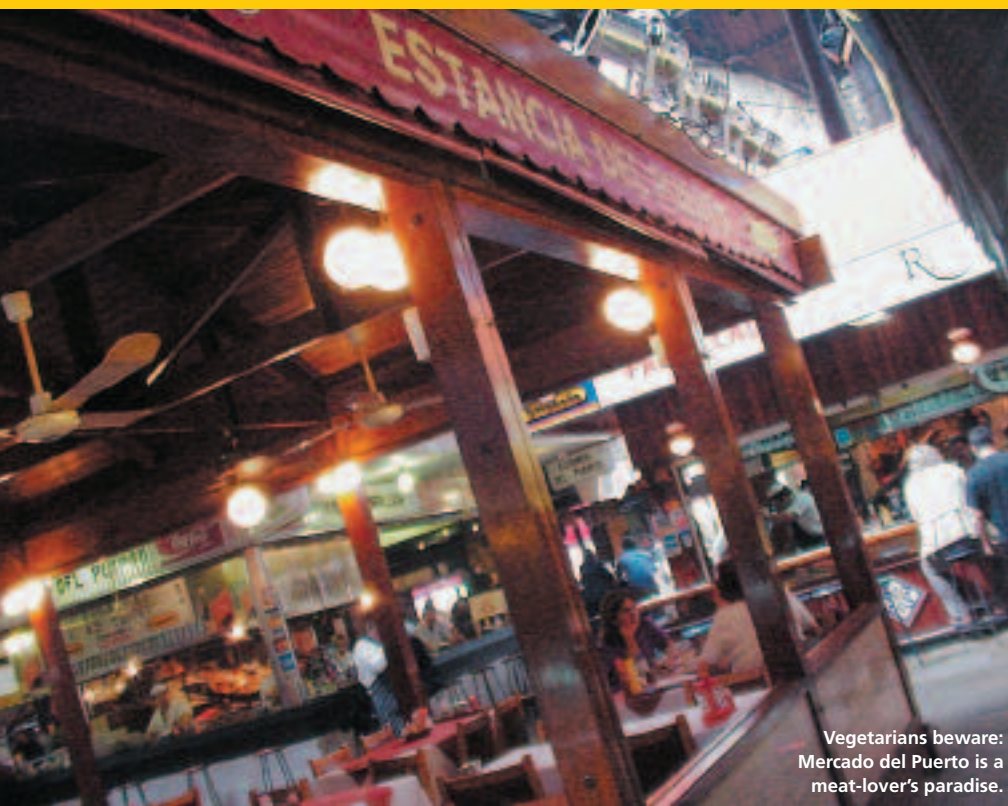
Harvey Lloyd/Getty Images

# MEAT AND MATE

When I stopped by the Embassy of Uruguay in Washington, I was told by an official, "You won't lose weight on this trip." He was right. Although Montevideo is not known for its cuisine, Uruguay—a country with three times as many cows as humans—is the place to eat beef. In fact, Uruguayans export so much meat, they are left with cuts unfamiliar to Americans. "We eat the entire cow. My favorite," the official said, touching his hand to his neck, "are the glands." With this in mind, I set off for my beef adventure.

The traditional way to prepare meat in Uruguay is on the *parrillero*, a wood-burning barbecue. Grilling is more serious in this country than religion. Families gather on Sundays, grilling *chorizo* and *molleja* as appetizers, followed by bigger cuts of meat such as *asado de tira* (ribs). The 136-year-old **Mercado del Puerto**, on the western edge of the city, is a lively collection of casual restaurants that serve every cut of meat imaginable. **El Palenque** (917.0190) is a white-tablecloth restaurant outside the food hall. The best time to go is a Saturday afternoon. Wash your meat down with local favorite *medio y medio*, a bubbly, sweet white wine, or Uruguayan Tannat wine.

After meat, the second most important diet staple in Montevideo is *dulce de leche*, a rich confection the consistency of caramel. Find it in about half of Uruguayan desserts—fruit, cakes, crepes and cookies. And lastly, you can't visit this city without noticing that everyone walks around with *mate*, a tea-like beverage sipped through a silver straw, or *bombilla*. *Mate*-drinkers in other South American countries tend to enjoy their drink at home, but Uruguayans take it to the street, carrying around a container of hot water, often consuming two liters a day. When I asked someone if I could order *mate* in a restaurant, he laughed. He said *mate* is a stimulant, loaded with caffeine and, although it's completely legal, it's not appropriate restaurant fare. The best way to try the drink is to share with a local *mate* drinker. They are more than happy to hand over their *bombillas*. ☺



Vegetarians beware: Mercado del Puerto is a meat-lover's paradise.

Courtesy of Uruguay Tourism Ministry



Punta del Este attracts sun worshippers and wealthy Argentineans.

The next morning, Diego took me on a driving tour of the city. Montevideo is surrounded by the Rio de la Plata on three sides. The river is one of the world's widest and separates Uruguay from Argentina, providing the capital with 13 miles of white sand beaches. Outside my hotel, the **Radisson Victoria Plaza**, we drove past the palm tree-lined Plaza Independencia, home of a monument to the country's hero, Jose Artigas. The adjacent Old City has five Italian-style plazas, buildings in Spanish and Art Deco styles, several museums and the beautiful **Teatro Solis** (915.9770), a theater that opened in 1856 and reopened in August after five years of restoration. Next, we drove by **Estadio Centenario** (480.1259), the 70,000-seat stadium where the first-ever World Cup final was played in 1930, when Uruguay defeated Argentina.

Montevideo is home to nearly half of the country's population, and its biggest residential neighborhood is Pocitos, a strip of high-rise apartment buildings and restaurants along the coast. In summer months, the beaches and promenades are packed during the day and filled with young people playing *futbol* past midnight. **Avenida 18 de Julio** is the main strip running through downtown, but many locals now shop at one of four malls in the city. A Sunday shopping gem: open-air **Tristán Narvaja Market**, which covers more than six city blocks

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and offers everything from fresh pasta to antiques.

Other than gasoline, prices are surprisingly low here. Ten dollars can buy a nice dinner and bottle of wine. A dozen empanadas on the street cost me the price of one in Washington. And I took several 10-minute taxi rides in the city, none totalling more than \$4.

## DIVINE DAY TRIPS

Thanks to its compact size, Uruguay offers several attractions that make perfect day or weekend trips. And although the roads are generally good, I would recommend hiring a driver or taking a bus. Uruguayan drivers take a Darwinian approach to the roads, whether it's passing on a curvy two-lane highway or negotiating downtown intersections (many don't have stop signs, and if they do, they're taken as a suggestion rather than a rule).

I spent one long afternoon and evening in historic **Colonia del Sacramento**. Located 112 miles west of Montevideo, Colonia is the strategic port city founded by the Portuguese in 1680, which was bitterly contested for a century before being taken over by the Spanish. Today, in between old Portuguese homes and remnants of a fortress, the cobblestone streets are lined with charming shops and delightful, if tiny, restaurants. Another ideal day trip for the summer is **Punta del Este**, 87 miles to the east of the capital and known by Uruguayans as the



This famous *estancia* was declared a national historic monument in 1997.

playground for wealthy Argentineans. Located on a narrow peninsula, where the river and the Atlantic Ocean meet, the resort is one of South America's most fashionable. In the summer, the beaches are filled and the port overflows with Argentinean yachts. Further along the coast, beaches and restaurants are much quieter, even in peak summer months.

My third trip outside Montevideo was to **San Pedro de Timote**, built in 1830 and the largest of about 100 *estancias*, or farms, around the country. Many of these traditional ranches have opened their doors for visitors to take part in horseback riding, cattle herding and harvesting. Driving north to the interior of Uruguay, my guide César pointed out the distinctive smell of eucalyptus trees. Grassy hills spread out to the horizon like green velvet, speckled with black and brown cows. At the ranch, I took a horse out in the morning with a *gaucho* who rolled his own cigarettes as he rode. After lunch, a feast of steak, homemade breads and locally grown vegetables, I rode again, this time through a forest with José. By day's end, after I milked a cow and fed a bottle to a calf, I was exhausted. "The ranch must have had a good effect on you," José said, noticing that I had slowed my pace considerably since the morning. And it had: At last, I was moving at a speed that reflected the peaceful country around me, and I hoped to never speed up again. ☺

San Pedro de Timote

## GETTING THERE GETTING AROUND

**FLIGHT INFORMATION:** Direct flights to Montevideo, Uruguay, are available on United Airlines from Washington Dulles International Airport.

**WHERE TO START:** English: [www.turismo.gub.uy/conozca/index.htm](http://www.turismo.gub.uy/conozca/index.htm)  
Spanish: [www.montevideo.gub.uy/](http://www.montevideo.gub.uy/) or [www.uruguaynatural.com](http://www.uruguaynatural.com)

**WHEN TO GO:** Summer in Montevideo is December to February. Temperature averages 83 degrees, and everyone flocks to the beach. For lighter crowds, cooler temperatures and slightly cheaper rates, visit in March or April.

**WHERE TO STAY:** In Montevideo, the **Radisson Victoria Plaza Hotel** ([www.radisson.com/montevideo](http://www.radisson.com/montevideo)) is steps from the Old City and a good choice if you enjoy sightseeing on foot. The **Sheraton Montevideo** ([www.starwood.com/sheraton/montevideo](http://www.starwood.com/sheraton/montevideo)) is in Carrasco, an upscale neighborhood with one of the nicest city beaches, a shopping mall and golf course. Also in Carrasco is **The Belmont House** ([www.belmonthouse.com.uy](http://www.belmonthouse.com.uy)), a 24-room hotel, by far the city's most elegant. **San Pedro de Timote** ([www.sanpedrodetimote.com.uy/](http://www.sanpedrodetimote.com.uy/)) is considered the best of the country's ranches. Click on [www.lares.com.uy/](http://www.lares.com.uy/) for other ranch details. In Punta del Este, top hotels include **Hotel Art Las Cumbres**, **Conrad Resort & Casino** and **L'Auberge** ([www.visit-uruguay.com/hotels\\_punta.htm](http://www.visit-uruguay.com/hotels_punta.htm)).

**HOW TO GET AROUND:** Carrasco International Airport is 12 miles from downtown. Look for black and yellow taxis with "Uruguay Natural" stickers, which indicate a partnership with the tourism bureau. **TransHotel** (402-9935) offers day trips to Colonia and Punta del Este and tours through the city, in several languages. Independent guides offer a more personalized service, in or out of the city. I hired César Arrizala from **D'ana Transport and Tourism** ([dana-transportes@adinet.com.uy](mailto:dana-transportes@adinet.com.uy) or 709.0374) for a day trip and was impressed with his service. ☺