

# SWEPT

# AWAY

BY NORA WALSH

Quiet luxury meets creative energy in José Ignacio, a Uruguayan beach town replete with world-class art, wood-fired dining and painterly sunsets.



Checking into Posada Ayana feels less like arriving at a hotel and more like being handed the keys to a dream home. Austrian couple Edda and Robert Kofler built the 21-room property in the town of José Ignacio, Uruguay, as a passion project that their daughter, Felice, now runs with quiet elegance. The rooms channel Côte d'Azur and Capri circa the '60s and '70s, where Edda spent her childhood vacations.



The exterior of Posada Ayana; photo by Jorge Chagas and Susie Elberse.



An outdoor space at Posada Ayana; photo by Tali Kimelman.

Designed by Uruguayan architect Álvaro Pérez Azar with interiors overseen by Edda, the architecture balances concrete, lapacho wood and glass walls, housing vintage furniture from South American antique stores, locally sourced ceramics and a gallery-worthy art collection in constant rotation. "Every year we change the atmosphere," Edda says. "It's never static, but the soul stays the same."

José Ignacio is little more than a crosshatch of tranquil streets and rustic beach houses, but its scale is part of the seduction. In the late 1970s, the sleepy fishing village was put on the map by Argentine chef Francis Mallmann, whose restaurant drew sophisticates seeking barefoot luxury. (The chef shuttered his José Ignacio outpost in favor of the inland village Pueblo Garzón; that restaurant, Garzón, is worth the 30-minute pilgrimage.) Today, José Ignacio maintains a get-away-from-it-all allure for well-traveled guests in search of art, gastronomy and nature.

The Kofler family is in good company here. The town is filled with creatives who lend their unique lens to the community. Argentine art collector and philanthropist Amalia Amoedo commissioned artist Edgardo Giménez to design Casa Neptuna, a pop art-colored abode that hosts the annual FAARA Residency, where two artists at a time immerse themselves in six transformative weeks of living and working on-site. Surrounded by ocean and

forest, the free-flowing, light-filled building functions as a multidisciplinary laboratory of ideas and experimentation.

In the town's main plaza, Argentine designer Paula Martini's *Bajo el Alma* atelier is hidden behind a lush tangle of greenery. Inside, linens tops hang in creamy whites, corals and blush pinks for women who favor effortless chic. Martini has lived in José Ignacio since the 1990s with her husband, Martín Pittaluga, one of the founders of Parador La Huella, a beloved beachside eatery. Passing the town's iconic lighthouse reveals La Huella buzzing with monied families jetting in from Buenos Aires and São Paulo, leggy models in gauzy caftans with bronzed men who look fresh off their sailboats. The air smells of woody parrilla as waiters ferry platters of grilled corvina, charred octopus and thin-crust pizzas to packed tables.

This past January, Fiona Pittaluga and Martín Cuinat hosted the 15th edition of the José Ignacio International Film Festival (JIIFF), which screens South American premieres, including Oscar contenders. In the nearby coastal towns of La Barra and Santa Monica, another couple — Diego Montero and Laura Sanjurjo — has shaped the area's dining scene with El Tesoro, a concept store and restaurant, as well as the area's first omakase bar at Posada El Pepe.

For an Albariño-soaked afternoon, many head to La Susana, the revived beachside haunt belonging to Vik Retreats. After a fire destroyed the original, the restaurant was reimagined with “a mix of high art, delicious cuisine and ocean views,” a manager notes. The menu has summery dishes like grilled shrimp with avocado, calamari tossed with zucchini and peppers and ember-roasted vegetables. Just in time for high season, the Koflers will debut Bliss, a new bar and dining concept fusing local seafood and seasonal produce with Japanese, Korean and Scandinavian influences, paired with Uruguayan wines.

Unlike many fashionable beach towns, José Ignacio's Playa Mansa remains blissfully devoid of commercial beach clubs. “We have these long, beautiful, untouched beaches,” Edda says. “If you go to Punta del Este, or anywhere in Europe, there are endless rows of lounge chairs and umbrellas.” Locals have fought hard to keep it this way, she adds. “I think the new challenge is

to preserve the places we love so that development doesn't obliterate what once made it special.”

On the sand, teenagers play soccer, children splash in the surf and vendors wander by with ice-cold drinks. As the sun dips, scores of people arrive with blankets and beach chairs, preparing as if for a concert. When the pink molten sun finally melts into the cobalt sea, applause breaks out across the shoreline.

During Uruguayan summer evenings, Argentine restaurateur Federico Desseno cooks up flame-grilled dishes at Marismo, in clay ovens he built himself. Diners sit under the stars with their feet in the sand, digging into dishes of line-caught seafood, lamb and plum-and-fig desserts prepared over smoking embers.

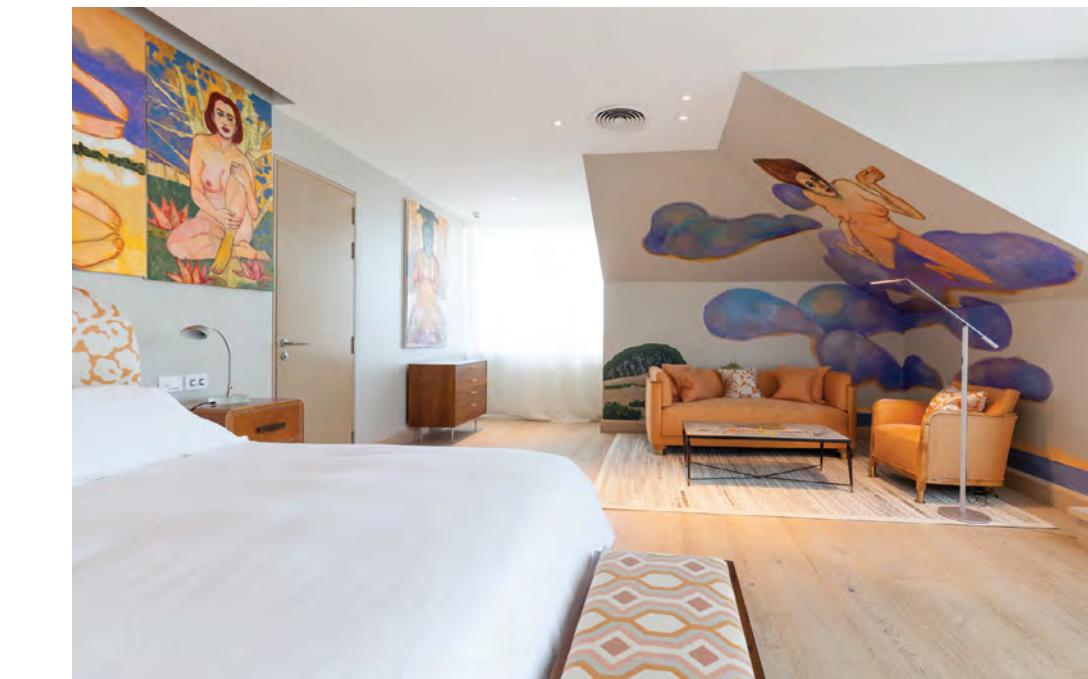


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This page: La Susana's beachside dining. Opposite page: Views of Playa Mansa. Photos by Nora Walsh.



This page: Inside James Turrell's Skyspace Ta Khut; photo by Florian Holzherr. Opposite page (clockwise from top left): Inside Bahia Vik, photo courtesy of Vik Retreats; a sculpture at MACA, photo by Nora Walsh; the Zinc Negro Bungalow at Bahia Vik, photo courtesy of Vik Retreats.



Nearby, hotel Bahia Vik beckons with its museum-grade art collection. Striking works include a maximalist zodiac mural by Uruguayan artist Carlos Musso sprawling across the ceiling, large oil portraits of the Vik family's children, and a mixed-media sculpture of Carrie Vik made from salvaged wood, vinyl records and a typewriter. "Art is everywhere," a staff member says, noting that 80 percent of the collection is Uruguayan.

Art enthusiasts visiting in January can count on Pavilion Vik's three-day contemporary art fair, *Este Arte*, which draws a mix of local and international galleries and collectors. For the next edition, Casa Neptuna will continue its long-term partnership with the fair by welcoming Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung, chief curator of the São Paulo Biennial, for a public talk and brunch.

Venturing inland, the Pablo Atchugarry Museum of Contemporary Art (MACA) in Manantiales offers sculpture gardens spread across 90 rolling acres. At the Capilla de la Pietà, an A-frame concrete and weathered-steel chapel, angelic hymns drift faintly through burnt sienna doors. Inside, a

triangular oculus illuminates a white-marble Virgin Mary cradling Christ, a vision so stark and poignant it can bring visitors to their knees.

Back at Posada Ayana, twilight is dedicated to James Turrell's Skyspace Ta Khut, built on the grounds. The experience feels like a psychedelic journey where eye-popping colors cycle through an oculus, bending light and volume in ways that transform perception of space itself. In December 2025, the Koflers will further expand their cultural footprint in neighboring La Juanita with *Dark Matters Pinus*, Fons De Muynck's camera obscura installation among the pines. "The work serves as an urgent call to protect our local forests from extensive real estate development that's turning them into apartment blocks and country club homes," Edda says. "Progress isn't always the result of adding more; it's about safeguarding what you have."