

TRUTH IN TRAVEL

CONDÉ NAST

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# Traveler

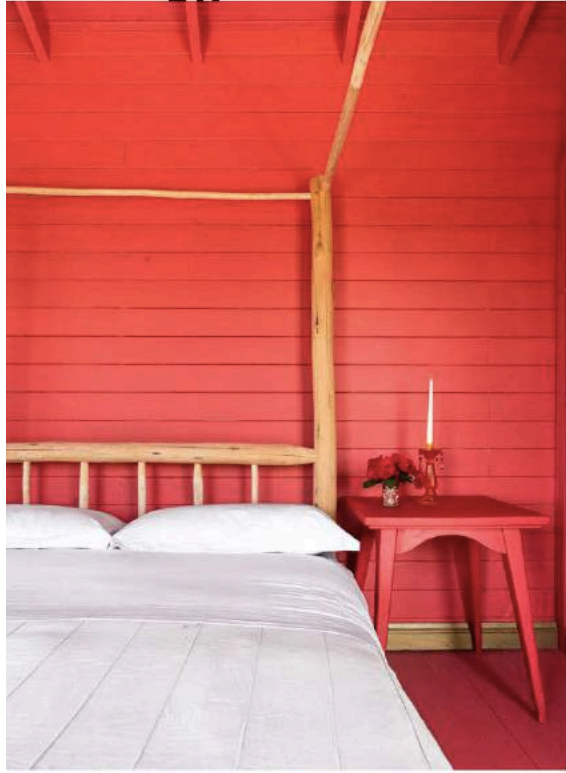
the  
**CRUISE**  
edition



ECCENTRIC STYLE  
SETTER AND  
HOTELIER  
ALAN FAENA FINDS  
HIS GREATEST  
INSPIRATION IN  
JOSE IGNACIO, A  
PLACE HE HELPED  
TRANSFORM  
INTO URUGUAY'S  
MOST EXCLUSIVE  
AND GLAMOROUS  
BEACH TOWN

LA

# BOHÉME



# THREE



decades ago, when Alan Faena decided to buy a plot of barren land along a remote stretch of coastline near the village of José Ignacio, Uruguay, his friends were divided into two distinct camps. There were those who thought he was crazy, and those who thought he was really crazy.

"Everybody said, 'This place is so uninteresting, and there is no highway to get there, and nobody will ever visit you,'" Faena recalls. "But I knew what it had the potential to become. And anyway, I wasn't looking for approval."

Faena is possibly South America's most free-thinking entrepreneur, known not only for his silk turbans and quirky hats but also for his determination to go his own way, secure in the knowledge that lots of people will eventually follow him. They did so in his hometown of Buenos Aires, where in 1999 he began transforming some abandoned docklands into the ever-buzzing Puerto Madero district, and more recently in Miami, where he recruited the firms of the likes of Ken Koolhaas and Norman Foster to help him dream up another residential-retail-cultural complex, anchored by the Faena Hotel Miami Beach. (The hotel earned the number one spot among U.S. properties in this magazine's latest Readers' Choice Awards.) For his José Ignacio retreat, Faena envisioned a lush oasis of rosebushes and pine trees, despite the fact that his chosen plot, several miles west of town and across the street from a petroleum depot, was all sand dunes and scrub. He tells me this as we sip yerbamate on his expansive back patio, now framed by what seem like a gazillion pink and purple hydrangea blossoms. In the decades since his purchase, José Ignacio has become one of the most exclusive and glamorous beach towns anywhere, but Faena says he doesn't think much about that.

If you've been to Argentina or Uruguay during the Southern Hemisphere's summer months, you've probably been told that Punta del Este is the Hamptons of Buenos Aires, and that José Ignacio—a smaller and more discreet enclave 50 miles up the coast—is the region's Montauk. In reality, José Ignacio is simultaneously more bohemian and more fancy than its Long Island counterpart. Dirt roads lead past understated, 20-million cottages toward exquisite beaches, where multilingual South Americans and Europeans flirt and play paddleball and discuss their next dinner reservations. (In 1999, the town adopted Uruguay's first local zoning law, prohibiting such evils as tall buildings, shopping malls, nightclubs, and condos.) Peak season here lasts about three weeks, from late



Photos spread from left: Faena, two dogs buggin' on the beach behind his house, a bio oven on one of his 3,600 rose bushes, and a red guest room. This spread from left: A Swiss traveler partied in José Ignacio's main square, polo players at Faena's V16. A gentleman surprises a man surrounded by a wall of roses, an outdoor spa at Pasamonte Golf & Spa.





## FOLLOWING FAENA

From Buenos Aires or Montevideo it takes less than an hour to fly to the small international airport northwest of Punta del Este. Rent a car there and you'll be in José Ignacio in another hour.

### WHERE TO STAY

**Vik Retreats** rules the top end of the hotel market, with three well-run and very different properties: **Estancia Vik** (bushy), **Estancia Vik** (horsey), and **Playa Vik** (sty). A less pricey option right in town is the laid-back, boho **Escondido Paradiso**. For vacation rentals, try the local site **gnaco** or the popular platform such as VRBO.

### THE FOOD SCENE

Come for the steaks, stay for the flawlessly grilled fish. After a few meals in José Ignacio, you'll wonder

how this tiny town managed to hog so many of Uruguay's dreamiest settings, freshest products, and most gifted asado masters. Faena's restaurant picks include the seafood mecca **La Huella** and candlelit, sandy-floor **Mariano**, where **Federico Dessano**, a bearded chef-surfer-carpenter, hand-built every piece of furniture using wood from trees on the property. Further inland, **Restaurante Garzón** is a showcase for **Francis Mallman's** famed experiments with hot flames; the desert dish of seasonal fruit **quesoides** (burned fruit) is a simple miracle. For late-night drinks, try the cocktails and local craft beers at newly opened **La Escua**, off the village square. Note that many restaurants and shops are open only during summer.

### OFF THE BEACH

Book a kayaker class at the **Shack**, **Yoga** or polo lessons on the world-class field behind **Estancia Vik** with its faraway views of the **Adriático**. For the ideal day-trip, drive inland through gaucho country to the former staging post of **Garzón**. In addition to Mallman's restaurant, there's now a sleek winery, **Bodega Garzón**, and a new international artists' colony, **Campo**, which hosts events and exhibits all summer. **C. B.**

**PHOTO LEFT:** Playing fetch on the sand behind Faena's house, Faena, on a morning in José Ignacio.

# FAENA

December to mid-January. Outside of that you're less likely to run into Elon Musk or Shakira, but you can still soak up plenty of the salty, surfy chic that the place is known for.

First visit is four years ago, when the delicate balance of fabulousness and rusticity was already under threat by the growing crowds. This time around I was glad to see that José Ignacio's elusive brand of magnetism—which has many first-time visitors spending the last few days of their trips shopping for real estate—is still intact. At the Shack Yoga, a popular studio not far from the 19th-century lighthouse, it's just as hard as ever to guess that the person in crowd pose next to you flew in on a private jet. Still, no fewer than 10 new restaurants opened in the area last season, including a branch of a famous diner chain on the main square. "Some growth is inevitable," says Ignacio Ruibal, one of more than a dozen real estate agents in a village whose year-round population is 300. "The important thing is that new businesses understand and respect the low-key, personal vibe here. If they don't, many of them will fail and go away."

For now the scene continues to revolve around a handful of groovy spots run by a tight clan of longtime insiders. Faena's favorite store in town, the eclectic housewares-and-clothing boutique Santas Negras, is co-owned by Paula Martini, whose husband, Martin Pittahuga, is apartner at everyone's favorite beachside canteen, La Huella. Good food has been the social glue in these parts since a young Francis Mallmann turned up in the late '70s; the Michelin-starred chef still has a restaurant in the town of Gaizón, and his former protégés can be found at their own restaurants cooking fresh-caught *brótola* or locally raised lamb inside wood-fired ovens.

Faena, who returns to José Ignacio every year at Christmastime, is known around town as a kind of eccentric icon, a mystery man who he ped put this place on the map but is rarely spotted in the flesh. (All the local chefs can tell you exactly how many times Faena dined at their places in each of the past few seasons.) A visit to his compound, which he named Tierra Santa (Holy Land), makes it easy to understand why he rarely feels the need to leave it. Faena sees himself not as a real estate developer but as a conjurer of utopias, and Tierra Santa is clearly his most

personal creation. He gently restored the property's modest original house, adding a couple of minimalist guest rooms, and later built a three-bedroom wood casita for himself closest to the ocean. Inside, the living room has a few antique incense burners, baroque mirrors, and ceremonial garlands, but Faena mostly spends time on the spare patio that overlooks his wide, empty lawn and his even wider, emptier beach. "When you're sitting there listening to the sound of the waves, you meditate without even trying," he says.



is a tall man who moves slowly and talks quietly. His speech is sprinkled with the philosophical pronouncements of a Zen teacher, albeit one who's far more interested in self-expression than self-denial. "If you're in an environment that draws out your emotions," he says, "then you're always much more in the present moment. And that is life." Staying with him this week are his 8-year-old son, Noa, and his cousin Sebastian Faena, a photographer and filmmaker. Sebastian tells me that in their native Argentina, where conformism and machismo often hold sway, his cousin was always a paragon of bright, bally glamour. "At my barmitzvah in Buenos Aires, Alan showed up wearing floral leggings," he recalls. "He handed me a check, and then he left. I mean, for a teenager, that's perfect, right?"

As Faena himself tells it, his life and career have been all about being true to passions, some of which took root right here. He went on a multiyear sabbatical to cultivate his rose garden, defying landscapers and logic as he found a way to make 3,500 individual plants thrive in inhospitable terrain.

● Opposite: Faena strolling his property in a outfit that includes pants trimmed with fabric from Mexico's shamanic Huichol people. Below: A view of the pool and the beach from

His latest pastime: singing Spanish-language love songs. Faena had never sung a word until last year, when he discovered the cathartic powers of crooning after a painful breakup with long-time partner Ximena Carrinos, who is Noa's mother. Since then he's been recording in a studio and plans to perform publicly in the coming months. "Now, singing is what I do," he says. "For me it's not about entertaining, it's about expressing emotions."

Many guests of Faena's can't help but fixate on the fact that he paid a mere \$80,000 for his property, which is currently worth untold millions. And everyone's always asking him which forgotten part of the world he plans to transform into the next must-visit spot. But if he has a place in mind, he's not letting on. When I last saw Faena, he was dressed in a long Japanese robe, sitting on a shaded bench and admiring a hibiscus blossom. ●

