

The Party Picks Up in Punta del Este

Autor By Horacio Silva - Travelandleisure.com
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In the 1950's, the once sleepy fishing village of Punta del Este, Uruguay, vied with Havana and San Juan as most happening landing strip in Latin America. Now, after surviving a dictatorship and economic woes, Punta is luring back the jet set.

Perhaps it's a function of my having been born as common as mud in a landslide, in the working-class suburbs of Montevideo, Uruguay, but I've always dismissed the summer resort town of Punta del Este as a vulgar party paradise for the continent's alleged beau monde: the Uru-trash, as I would later refer to my garish upper-class compatriots; the tasteless Brazilians with millions; and the ricos y famosos of Argentina—socialites and celebrities who divide their summers between Buenos Aires, Punta del Este (or "Punta"), and the party pages of society magazines like Gente.

My family emigrated from Uruguay in the early 1970's, months before the democratically elected government acquiesced to the military regime that would plunder the country for more than a decade. I like to joke that I was a six-year-old political dissident at the time, even though there is a photo of me at the airport looking anything but threatening in a safari suit and holding a pink man-bag; in truth, my parents just lucked out when they chose to move elsewhere. In any case, my mother, who is neither rica nor famosa, but who like me has the natural dark skin color that sun worshippers travel to Punta to acquire, is largely responsible for my unfavorable mental picture of the place. I vividly recall one anecdote about how she and her sisters saved up their money and hightailed it to Punta for the weekend only to be shunned by the old white ladies on the beach, who clutched their handbags for dear life as my mom's mulatto teenage posse walked by. The story sometimes changes—in one version the overcooked old hags have décolletages "like leathery old saddles"; in another, the ending is punctuated by a rosary of expletives not fit for publication—but the message is always the same: Punta is evil and must be destroyed.

With more than a little anxiety, I finally returned to Uruguay in March 2002, my parents in tow. When we arrived in Montevideo, it was depressing to see what had become of the capital, its dilapidated Beaux-Arts buildings fading reminders of the city's former allure and prosperity after the Second World War, when Uruguay was considered by many to be the Switzerland of South America. But it was hard not to be seduced by the shop-soiled charm of the city and the indomitable spirit of its residents. This time I had to see Punta as well—I am, after all, now old enough to know that evil can be fun—and whether she liked it or not, my mom was coming with me.

I needn't have worried. She ate it up like so much of her beloved dulce de leche (and thanks to her son's working in the fashion industry, her handbag was more chic than any on the beach). But just as my mom's attitude had changed, so apparently had Punta's. Although we'd arrived at the tail end of peak season, it was clear that the 2001 fiscal crash of Uruguay's relatively affluent neighbors (most notably Argentina) had derailed the conga line of monied partygoers. According to the locals, the usual thumping disco beat of the place had been replaced by the barely audible foot tapping of a Norah Jones concert; summer rentals, which in good times had been as high as \$40,000 a month for premium locations, had plunged to record lows; crowded restaurants and bars were as scarce as a vegetarian dish on a South American menu.

The conspicuous lack of 24-hour party people only threw into relief the breathtaking beauty of the peninsula, which is flanked by the Atlantic Ocean on one side and the Río de la Plata on the other. We had a blast lounging on the tourist-friendly white sand, walking in the surrounding dunes, and watching the sunset over the river (if not the sunrise from a late-night disco). But it was drawing too long a bow to still call Punta the St.-Tropez, or even the Hamptons, of South America.

Maybe it was inevitable that Punta would rise again, buoyed by its historic transformation in the 1950's from sleepy fishing village into the less decadent but no less alluring South American counterpart to Havana and San Juan. In the year or so after my visit, I began to hear reports that the crowds of bikini-wearing hedonists were returning to Punta, including supermodel Naomi Campbell and Duran Duran lead singer Simon Le Bon. So I went back, without my family, to see if the jet-set playground favored by the likes of Brigitte Bardot, Che Guevara, and the Rat Pack was really getting its glamorous groove back.

It's two in the morning in Punta del Este, and the Beautiful People are looking for trouble. On the crowded sidewalk of a tiny harborside strip crammed with cafés and bars, the tables are being removed to accommodate outdoor dancing, as are some of the skimpy tops worn by the preternaturally tanned and toned revelers. By 6 a.m. the alcohol and good times are still flowing inside popular venues like Soho and Moby Dick (a perennial hot spot on an otherwise ever-changing strip); outside, promoters distribute fliers for after-hours parties—including one for a rave on a beach that promises, in fluent Spanglish, a crowd of "verry interesting pipol."

Pipol, I'm so there. But as cheap as cabs are in Punta, they're scarce this morning. Uruguayans are nothing if not approachable, so I bum a ride with a group of party animals who are clearly not concerned with having to go to work in a few hours. "There's always time to sleep in winter," says Gabriela Rauschert, a 25-year-old Punta-born glamazon whose diablo-may-care attitude is typical of this idyllic but self-indulgent outpost. "From the end of December, it's been one big party every night."

Which is not to say that the place is in siesta shutdown mode by day. La Barra, a bustling, trendy area five minutes by car from downtown, is so popular in summer that it becomes as gridlocked as East Hampton on a Saturday morning. "La Barra is an interesting creature," says Rodrigo Cotelo, a 27-year-old musician. "Depending on the season, it can be either in step with the rest of Punta or very much apart from it. But there's no question that something's always going on—it's the place to hang out and meet people. It's close to the beach, there are plenty of restaurants and shops, and, like the rest of Punta, it's a mixture of a rough, unspoiled landscape and a fancy lifestyle."

What passes for fancy has reluctantly changed over the years. (Even during the dictatorship, from 1973 to 1984, Punta remained relatively unscathed, in part because the generals wanted somewhere to tan and play bridge, but mainly because it continued to make money for them.) These days, Punta society is much more inclusive. Although traditional establishment playpens such as the Yacht Club and Cantegril Country Club remain hermetically sealed (ironic, really, when you consider that cantegril means "slum"), the majority of the places in town have relaxed door policies for locals and tourists alike.

Granted, there are restaurants where you can pay \$2,400 for a bottle of wine—I'm referring to Los Negros in the rapidly gentrifying area of José Ignacio, until recently a low-key surfer outpost about 30 minutes east that now counts novelist Martin Amis and Isabel Fonseca (daughter of the renowned Uruguayan sculptor Gonzalo Fonseca) among its glamorous residents—but in most of Punta dining is reliably good and affordable. Given their proximity to water, restaurants tend to be seafood-intensive. Try brótola, the local codlike whitefish on most menus, and be sure to have a bite at one of the many paradores (beachside diners),

which are particular favorites at sunset.

One person who remembers Punta's first heyday isn't surprised by its renaissance: Pedro Bordaberry, the son of the last elected president prior to the military regime, was until recently Uruguay's minister of tourism. "Our beaches are some of the most beautiful in the world, our cows aren't mad, and our chickens don't have the flu," Bordaberry jokes. The awe-inspiring coastline and healthy animals notwithstanding, other factors point to Punta's enjoying another moment in the fashion sun. For starters, it's become arguably one of the most tolerant places on earth, where neither gay couples nor American tourists have to hide their pride. "There's a lot more English heard on the streets these past few summers," says Delfina Frers, a public relations executive and adrenaline junkie who drives race cars and flies helicopters for kicks (her son-in-law, professional polo player Nacho Figueras, is the face of Ralph Lauren Polo's new men's fragrance). "Americans have figured out that this is one place where they are definitely welcome."

Punta is also one of the safest places to visit in style. A stroll down Calle 20, where designer-brand stores are as ubiquitous as the pizza joints on virtually every corner, reveals enough conspicuous displays of wealth to rival Moscow—except in Punta the voluptuaries sport real tans and wear flip-flops. And while everyone you talk to mentions Punta's practically nonexistent crime rate, they're also quick to point out the slew of reasonably priced, recently opened hotels. "The building boom in the last few years has changed the tenor of the area," says Fabián Andrés Repetto, a 30-year-old fiction writer and DJ (it seems that everyone in Punta has a hyphenated career). "Sure, there have always been posadas and the odd hotel, but it used to be that you pretty much came to Punta only if you owned a place here or could afford to rent one for the summer."

The largest and most attention-seeking addition is the Conrad Punta del Este Resort & Casino on the playa mansa, or "mild," river side of the peninsula. A plus-size, bikini-wearing extrovert among modest gamines such as the upscale La Capilla, the Conrad, which opened in 1997, is located in the heart of Punta, across from Gorriti Island, a popular spot for watching sea lions. A Vegas-style mega-hotel with almost 300 rooms and a casino that's especially favored by visitors from Brazil, where gambling is illegal, the Conrad is not for the traveler who wants a romantic getaway or hopes to savor the authentic flavor of Punta. There's a convention-center coldness to the place—you half expect to walk into an off-site software retreat at any moment—but it's big enough to accommodate the summer hordes, and the location is hard to fault. The hotel also pays big pesos to attract marquee-name Latin entertainers such as Shakira, Ricky Martin, and Luis Miguel, making it an essential stop on the Punta social circuit and one of the few places in town to show any signs of life during the otherwise moribund period between April and December.

That's no small feat, and one that proved too difficult for the Conrad's short-lived rival, the five-star Cipriani Resort Spa & Casino in La Barra. The Cipriani was pitched as a more intimate alternative to the Conrad: chic enough to appeal to the carpaccio crowd, accessible enough for the weekend gambler happy to eat shrimp cocktail at the slot machines. But after only two summers, the management, including Arrigo Cipriani, fell out with the owners—oddly, the national oil company of Angola—over the hotel's direction and parted ways.

These days, the Cipriani Resort has another name, the Mantra, but judging from my recent visit, what they're chanting is, "Cutbacks! Cutbacks!" Although the hotel's spa has hardly changed and remains worth the visit (the Vichy-water treatments are standouts), the rooms and the restaurant are both noticeably more populist, and the wilting plants suggest that maintenance on the once perfectly manicured grounds is less frequent than it used to be.

A much more attractive option is the Serena Hotel, a boutique hostelry not far from the Conrad. The bad news is that the Serena has only 32 rooms, with possibly the most attentive staff and the best location of any accommodation in the area—the view of the marina from the swimming pool is unrivaled—so getting in requires booking a reservation well in advance.

Whether you stay there or not, Casapueblo—the residence and workshop of Uruguay's greatest cultural treasure, the artist Carlos Páez Vilaró—is a required visit for any traveler to Punta. Set in Punta Ballena, a whale-watching promontory outside town, Casapueblo is a sprawling white confection of a place that brings to mind a meringue created by Gaudí. It is Punta's artistic focal point and its most interesting architectural landmark—and it has affordable rooms. "I call it my habitable sculpture," says Vilaró, in his atelier. "It's the result of my personal war against the right angle. And like me, it's part of the furniture of Punta del Este."

Although Vilaró and Casapueblo are revered as folkloric, almost anachronistic fixtures, the artist represents many of the locals when he says he is not concerned that Punta's recent modernization will sacrifice the cultural heart of the place on the altar of tourism. "I was worried that the arrival of these huge hotels and investors would compromise the artistic vibrancy of Punta del Este," he says, "but the opposite has happened. The Conrad, for example, has presented all types of artists—painters, singers, dancers—whom we could never have afforded otherwise. So it's all good. The only downside is that it's going to be hard to keep Punta our little secret."