

You need to rest, relax and recuperate - there's no place like Uruguay!

Halfway down South America on the Atlantic side, squashed in between Argentina and Brazil, lies "little" Uruguay as it seems on the map but doesn't when you are there, given its landmass is at least the size of England and Wales. And, since it's shared by a population of about 3.4 million with about half living in Montevideo and everybody else fairly evenly spread across the countryside in homesteads and small towns, it never seems crowded. It's also somehow escaped mass tourism possibly because it doesn't have too many "must see" great geographical features except perhaps one of the longest sandy beaches we have come across, and doesn't have a vast number of exotic species (apart perhaps from Ombu trees which are absolutely massive but are not trees at all - they're just giant 'hierbas', or so we were told, plus lots of extraordinary birds). Tourism on any scale is confined to one or two pockets where mainly Argentinians holiday - such as Punta del Este on the Atlantic coast, which probably is an exotic sight!

What it does have is a tranquillity born of a country that seems at peace with itself - where humans seem to have got it right. Yes, it is poor by European standards and suffers an exodus of young people seeking their fortunes elsewhere, even so it appears to have good social services, a wide variety of housing (with many fascinating designs from enormous mock gothic to ultra modern with lots of Spanish variables in between and mostly neither over opulent nor obviously ramshackle, much of it highly colourful), an excellent bus network, taxis which meticulously do not overcharge, helpful police and, best of all, a population which seems to happily over-eat, stay up very late talking a lot, yet somehow manages to look extremely healthy on it. A rare place where you feel you can wander anywhere and often in the shade of beautiful huge leafy trees, and yes, their roots do break up the pavements so you learn to walk a little more slowly!

Never having been to South America, we picked on Uruguay, partly because we couldn't find out too much about it, which made us curious, and partly because in the four weeks we had, its size meant we had a chance to get to know it. We decided to stop in no more than four places in different parts of the country where we might get a real "feel" for each location and also the country itself. The problem, with so little information, was picking the right places to give us what we were seeking and, given our very limited Spanish, organising the internal travel involved! We gave up on the internet, loads of cold statistics (the best source being the CIA!) and automatic booking systems but for insightful information - no help. Finally, we phoned Audley Travel (01993 838 000), they impressed us by promising that someone would call us back the same day who actually knew Uruguay well - and he did (call us back and know what he was talking about - what's more he didn't say - "Uruguay - why there!!"). They arranged our stay at four perfect locations - each one different and each, in its own way, special.

We started out in Montevideo, even the airport was a relatively easy experience and it is a lovely city. We stayed out in Carrasco (on the airport side of the City), ate at Garcia's enjoying their superb Uruguayan steak barbecued the way the gauchos do it, accompanied by excellent local red wine (Tannat). We caught the 104 bus which winds its way from Carrasco into the heart of the city, passing small busy corner shops, street markets and housing of all sorts that make up the suburbs. It was a first hand way of seeing and experiencing the ordinary sights and sounds of Montevideo and its people, it was amazing that even in the country's busiest centre pushing and shoving just didn't seem to happen. We got off to a good start with the help of an English speaking guide arranged by Audley who gave us a thorough overview of the whole city. This included driving us right up to the equivalent of Uruguay's Trafalgar Square - Plaza de la Independencia - turned right into the square and parked! and didn't have to pay (it was a bank holiday - Boris please note!!). On the way back we diverted down a nice ordinary tree lined street, passed a reasonably substantial house with nothing particular to mark it out, even the car parked in the driveway was ordinary. Apparently that was the President of Uruguay's house - we didn't notice one guard!

In many ways Montevideo sums up the whole country - it is full of surprises, interest, nice people and very friendly dogs. Do visit the Gaucho and Mint Museum before you go into the countryside because there you will learn much about gaucho life which is deeply ingrained in the nation's culture (there are still more horses than people in Uruguay and they know how to ride them - watch them all over the country leaning back on deep sheep-skin covered saddles with long stirrups going about their horse born business with a relaxed ease). A short taxi ride from the centre we found the Botanical Gardens, a little run down but there was a section containing examples of many of the country's trees and larger plants - which you see scattered across the countryside in small copses, including some very tall palm trees which we didn't expect to see. The staff are really helpful and it has an added bonus of a very clean public toilet! Montevideo is full of interest and contrasts - even the weather can go from beautiful blue skies to heavy rain and back all in the space of an hour! - the buildings range from fine, grand Spanish to horrid '60's next door to each other, but somehow it works. There was so much to see, some we had to save for next time!

After Montevideo we chose to move on to Colonia de Sacramento or "story in shades of gold" as Iberia's flight magazine put it - which is a tourist attraction of sorts because of its well preserved Spanish/Portuguese architecture and "feel". Then we moved inland staying at two estancias (ranches - with real horses and yes we rode them - one of us for the first time ever!), one in the west and the other on the other side of the country near the Atlantic coast. What did we do? - all kinds of things - we walked in the countryside where we saw the amazing, abundant bird life at first hand (in spite of the few but still too many Europeans who go there purely to shoot them!); at Finca Piedra we were taken to a local Gaucho festival (*Criolla*) where they really showed off their horse riding skills - we probably saw more Uruguayans together that day than on any other and very friendly they were; paid a brief visit to Fray Bentos (yes where OXO cubes and corned beef were first made and the vast empty factory is still there - there's a small seldom visited museum and above it - a time capsule - the intact office exactly as it was when the site was abandoned complete with all of its 50's and 60's furniture and equipment, even including the ledgers); saw the vast deserted suspension bridge just outside Fray Bentos that should connect Uruguay and Argentina but has been closed for the last four years following a dispute (two out of the three bridges between these two countries are closed and given how important they must be to Uruguay's economy, it says much for the Uruguayan patient calming attitude to life that they just get on without them). And, just north of the rustic beach-side settlement of Aguas Dulces, we had the south Atlantic all to ourselves.

In between we just learned all about taking it easy - we will never forget running for a bus at Mal Abrigo and the driver, with the help of several passengers, waving and shouting at these weird strangers to slow down - it's hot and the bus will wait! Both estancias were really wonderful; at Guardia del Monte, Rocha, sitting out under the southern stars watching the full eclipse of the moon with two people playing flutes in the background was mind blowing and at Finca Piedra, San José - well - we cannot think of anywhere we have been better cared for or so well fed! We visited their vineyard, watched and even joined in the grapepicking and, at our suggestion walked back - that is the way to experience the vastness of the country and the beauty of the Eucalyptus trees moving in the light wind against the blue sky - unforgettable.

So, if you happen to be one of those people who wants to rest a while and enjoy watching the world around you as you find it and not expect everything to function exactly as it does at home, then try gentle Uruguay but be warned - you might end up going back and back and - - -!
(PS a tip - if you want to bring back your own Maté and gourd, a local herbal tea drunk throughout the day via a metal "straw" and supposed to have all sorts of health properties - really, go to Tienda Inglesa - a supermarket chain, there's an excellent one in Carasco).

By Charles and Sally from the UK _____