

Uruguay

HIGHLIGHTS

- **Colonia del Sacramento** (p889) Get snap-happy on the picturesque cobbled streets of this former smugglers' port.
- **The Atlantic Coast** (p895) Hit the beach in style or in the wild along this beautiful stretch of coastline
- **Carnaval** (p886) Get those hips moving to the *candombe* rhythm at Montevideo's month-long party.
- **Termas de Daymán** (p894) Soak those weary traveling bones at the country's favorite hot springs.
- **Off the Beaten Track** (see boxed text, p897) Mingle with sea lions, penguins and whales in the secluded hippy beach town of Cabo Polonio.
- **Best Journey** (see boxed text, p903) Cross Uruguay's interior, from Chuy to Tacuarembó, through beautiful countryside few travelers ever see.

FAST FACTS

- **Area:** 187,000 sq km (roughly the size of the US state of North Dakota)
- **Budget:** US\$35 to US\$45 a day
- **Capital:** Montevideo
- **Costs:** budget hotel in Montevideo US\$18, three-hour bus ride US\$8.50, set lunch US\$8
- **Country Code:** ☎ 598
- **Languages:** Spanish; Portuguese (near the Brazilian border)
- **Money:** US\$1 = UR\$23.4 (Uruguayan pesos)
- **Population:** 3.42 million
- **Seasons:** high (November to March), low (June to August)
- **Time:** GMT minus three hours (daylight-saving time mid-October to mid-March)



TRAVEL HINTS

Most towns have a *rotisería* (takeaway food store) and at least one lovely plaza. Instant picnic.

OVERLAND ROUTES

Uruguay's border crossings include Buenos Aires, Tigre, Colón and Concordia (all Argentina). The Gualeguaychú crossing is closed until further notice. For Brazil, most people use Chui/Porto Alegre.

Like an oasis in an often-troubled region, Uruguay moves at its own pace. Known for years as the Switzerland of South America, the country earned this reputation not just for its super-secret banking laws, but for their love of the common plebiscite and the sense of peace that pervades the nation.

There are some pretty wild contrasts here. Don't be surprised to see a horse and cart clip-clopping down Montevideo's cosmopolitan downtown streets, or a traditionally dressed *gaucho* (cowboy) toting the latest model cell phone.

Traveling in Uruguay has never been easier. The spread of hostels across the country has built on the solid foundation of an extensive bus network, good restaurants and excellent camping facilities. Even in world-class destinations such as Colonia del Sacramento or Punta del Este, finding a cheap sleep is only tricky in absolute peak periods.

People come for the wild, surf-pounded beaches, to rub shoulders with celebrities at Punta or to soak in the history in Montevideo's old town and at the smugglers' port of Colonia. They stay for the people – warm, open and sincere folk who have constructed one of South America's most progressive societies. And when they leave, they almost always say they're coming back.

CURRENT EVENTS

After a somewhat rocky beginning, Uruguay's Frente Amplio government has presided over two small social revolutions recently – the legalization of abortion in late 2007, and the sanctioning of civil unions between same-sex partners in early 2008. That said, 2009 started badly for Uruguay – a drought forced the government to announce emergency water-saving measures and beef exports fell 33%.

The lead-up to the October 2009 presidential election was dominated by debates over security, the rising crime rate and Uruguay's faltering economy which, following the global trend, entered into recession in mid-2009. At the time of writing the ruling party lead the polls, but internal bickering and expected further economic downturns gave rise to predictions that the election would be close and probably go to a second-round runoff. Under Uruguayan law, Tabaré Vázquez is not permitted to run for a second term, and his expected successor is senator and ex-Tupamaro guerilla José Mujica.

HISTORY In the Beginning...

The Charrúa were here first, huntin' and fishin'. They had no gold and a nasty habit of killing European explorers, so the Spanish left them alone. Eventually they mellowed out, got some horses and cattle, and started trading. Once the big cattle farmers moved in, the Charrúa got pushed out and they now exist in isolated pockets around the Brazilian border.

Everybody Wants a Piece

The Jesuits were on the scene as early as 1624 and the Portuguese established present-day Colonia del Sacramento (commonly shortened to 'Colonia') in 1680 so they could smuggle goods into Buenos Aires. Spain responded by building its own citadel at Montevideo. For almost 200 years the Portuguese, Spanish and British fought to get a foothold.

From 1811 José Artigas repelled the Spanish invaders, but Brazil ended up controlling the region. Artigas was exiled to Paraguay where he died in 1850, after inspiring the 33 Orientales who, reinforced by Argentine troops, liberated the area in 1828, establishing Uruguay as a buffer between the emerging continental powers of Argentina and Brazil.

More Drama

Liberation didn't bring peace. There were internal rebellions, insurrections and coups. Argentina besieged Montevideo from 1838 to 1851 and Brazil was an ever-present threat. Uruguay's modern political parties, the Colorados and the Blancos, have their origins in this time – early party membership comprised large numbers of armed *gauchos*. By the mid-19th century the economy was largely dependent on beef and wool production. The rise of the *latifundios* (large landholdings) and commercialization of livestock led to the demise of the independent *gaucho*.

José Batllé, We Love You

In the early 20th century, visionary president José Batllé y Ordóñez introduced such innovations as pensions, farm credits, unemployment compensation and the eight-hour work