

# A Fishing Village Faces a Different Kind of Revolution



PHOTOS FROM PORTAL DEL DIABLO

It's not Ocean City: Del Rivero beach during high season. "There aren't many Americans yet, but lots of Europeans" are coming to Punta del Diablo, according to a local builder who says he sold two properties to clients from Iceland last year.

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directions, interrupted only by the village's namesake point — a rocky finger extending more than 600 feet into the sea.

"The place is beautiful," says Meissner, who fled Wisconsin's chilly winters to try his luck here. "But for me [the appeal] unquestionably begins with the onda, the attitude of the city."

Not surprisingly, news of Diablo's low-key vibe and stunning views has begun to slip out. Lonely Planet ranked Diablo among the top 10 cities in the world to visit in 2008, and during the December-February peak, as many as 20,000 travelers can pass through town each day. An afternoon walk along the village's main drag — a sandy seaside lane lined with fish markets and laid-back restaurants — turns up a decidedly international mix of people and languages.

"There aren't many Americans yet, but lots of Europeans," says Andrés Carrau, an energetic Uruguayan who came to Diablo eight years ago, fleeing a hectic life as a professional caterer in Montevideo, the capital.

These days, Carrau, who has the golden tan of a born-again beach bum, spends most of his time custom-building the brightly colored cabañas that line Diablo's narrow streets. These cabins, the accommodation of choice for most visitors, are deceptively rustic on the outside, with thatched roofs and bamboo trim. A peek inside, however, quiets any "Gilligan's Island" anxieties. Even the simplest cabañas — which rent for around \$60 a night — have full kitchens, hardwood floors and,



A traditional cabin overlooks a rocky beach. More-modern accommodations come outfitted with Jacuzzis, flat-screen TVs and outdoor fireplaces.

of course, a sun deck for taking in ocean views. On the top end, luxury cabañas come outfitted with Jacuzzis, flat-screen TVs and outdoor fireplaces for grilling up the catch of the day.

"Last year, I sold two cabañas to clients from Iceland, [and] this one belongs to an artist from Brooklyn," Carrau says, motioning to a mandarin-colored, two-story cabaña.

At Panes y Peces, an open-air restaurant tucked a few blocks back from the ocean, Carrau's observation about the mix of visitors proves right on the mark. As the sun sets, the diminutive patio fills up with a mix of sun-scorched Europeans, Brazilians and Uruguayans. Weaving between the tables, the restaurant's German owner — a stout, fair-

haired woman who splits her time between Diablo and the Mediterranean island of Ibiza — takes orders. In Spanish sprinkled with Deutsch, she rattles off the restaurant's few dishes: a half-dozen plates offering a French provincial take on locally caught fish and Uruguay's fantastic free-range beef.

"When I moved to Diablo in 2000, I had the first fax in town," Carrau says, raising his voice to be heard above an impromptu samba jam that has broken out across the patio. "But [now] we've got everything travelers look for."

One piece of Diablo that has remained stubbornly behind the times is its fishing trade. Out on the main beach, sunbathers jockey for position with wooden fishing boats, la-



Fishing boats are hauled onto the sand to unload the day's catch. Decades ago, such boats sometimes were deployed to smuggle urban guerrillas.

boriously hauled onto the sand to unload the day's catch. Diablo's anglers, descendants of immigrants from Spain's stormy Galician coast, still make their living by hand using weighted nets and rods.

Not long ago, however, many of these same fishermen put their boats to different uses. In the late '60s, Uruguay's urban guerrillas — the left-leaning Tupamaros — wreaked havoc in the capital, robbing banks, raiding gun depots and kidnapping dignitaries to put pressure on the repressive government. When the country's dictatorship ultimately cracked down, many radicals fled here.

"Diablo's fishing history played an important role in smuggling Tupamaros," Meissner explains.



BY LARIS KARKLIS — THE WASHINGTON POST

"Seems that an old boat called the Pinta Roja was commonly known to sneak people off to Brazil during fishing runs."

Eventually, the government caught on. After setting off from Diablo's sparkling beaches one summer morning more than 30 years ago, the Pinta Roja was never seen again.

More than a few locals insist a navy gunboat sank the vessel.

These days, you're unlikely to see many freedom fighters hanging around Diablo's seaside restaurants and plush cabañas. And Uruguay's liberal government has long since shifted energies from quelling uprisings to figuring out ways to preserve the natural beauty of the coastline.

A well-worn path leads away from the village and into the dunes of Santa Teresa National Park, a beachfront reserve that harbors a diversity of exotic wildlife, including rare cormorants. During the summer months, park visitors can watch whales migrating along the shore.

Trekking through the dunes on an early morning walk and dodging an occasional flock of wild parrots, it's not hard to understand why Diablo still feels like a smuggler's cove. Just five minutes outside town, the trail climbs steeply to a sandy bluff, then falls away, revealing a gracefully curving bay that extends clear to the horizon, uncluttered by a single sign of civilization. From up here, you can almost picture the Pinta Roja, weathered hull slipping through the waves with her clandestine cargo one last time.

Remy Scalza is a freelance writer traveling in South America.

## DETAILS ● Punta del Diablo

**GETTING THERE:** American Airlines flies direct from Miami to Uruguay's capital, Montevideo. Fare on American from Reagan National is about \$1,249 round trip. Punta del Diablo is three hours east of the airport along Uruguay's coastal highway and scenic Route 9. Glitzy Punta del Este, South America's resort capital, makes a requisite stop along the way. You can rent a car from the airport and drive; the airport Budget, for instance, rents sedans for \$104 a day, including taxes and insurance. (Visit [www.budgetinternational.com](http://www.budgetinternational.com) to reserve in advance.)

**GETTING AROUND:** Punta del Diablo is small enough to traverse on foot (mainly barefoot). A car is convenient for trips to nearby **Fortaleza Santa Teresa**, a Portuguese fortress from 1762, and **Proyecto Karumbe** ([www.karumbe.org](http://www.karumbe.org)), a multinational project protecting endangered sea turtles.

**WHERE TO STAY:** **Terrazas del Diablo** ([www.puntadeldiablo.com.uy](http://www.puntadeldiablo.com.uy)), it's a Spanish-only site but easy to navigate) rents airy, beachfront cabañas outfitted with an array of amenities (from flat-screen TVs to outdoor stone barbecues). Cabañas can accommodate two to six guests and range from \$60 to \$200 a night. For those in search of genuine seclusion, **La Viuda del Diablo** ([www.laviudadeldiablo.com](http://www.laviudadeldiablo.com)) offers suites outside town with Jacuzzis, floor-to-ceiling windows and sweeping views of nothing but sea and sand (\$100 to \$150 a night with breakfast).

**WHERE TO EAT:** A few blocks from the ocean, **Panes y Peces** serves up fresh seafood and steaks on its open-air patio. Try the *lenguado a la vasca*, a local whitefish grilled with olives and red peppers (about \$9). For beachfront dining, you can't top **El Diablo Tranquilo**, which offers a panoramic vista from its rooftop terrace. After dark, it's also Diablo's most lively night spot, with international DJs and a monthly full-moon party.

**WHAT TO DO:** Nearby **Santa Teresa National Park**, a UNESCO biosphere reserve, boasts miles of virgin sands and an abundance of birds and marine life. Locals offer guided horseback tours from town (\$10 per hour).

**INFORMATION:** Punta del Diablo is still gloriously free of tour companies, so you'll have to do your homework. Go to [www.puntadeldiablo.com.uy](http://www.puntadeldiablo.com.uy), which offers practical information on lodging and restaurants plus plenty of photos.

**Radical Getaway**

## Radical Getaway



## In Uruguay, a Refuge Is Losing Its Low Profile

By Remy Scalza  
Special to The Washington Post

You could say Punta del Diablo, a fishing village on Uruguay's rugged Atlantic coast, has always been a popular getaway.

First came the leftists and bearded revolutionaries, fleeing South America's iron-fisted regimes in the turbulent '70s. The dictators themselves followed, briefly turning the place into a kind of country retreat for the rich and reviled. These days Diablo continues to attract refugees, albeit of a different stripe: world travelers seeking anonymity, untouched sands and an escape from the standard beach holiday.

Just an hour's drive from the high-rises of swanky Punta del Este of the Uruguayan Riviera, Diablo feels fabulously remote and undiscovered. A kaleidoscope of brightly colored houses, shops and restaurants, the village sits on a gentle rise overlooking the

A traditional cabin on the rocks in Punta del Diablo, just steps away from the ocean.

slate-blue waters of the Atlantic. Sandy streets and a fleet of weathered fishing boats bobbing in the bay round out the vista.

The only thing missing is the crowds. True to its underground roots, the village has managed to remain below the radar, even while catering to a growing and sophisticated international clientele.

"It's just so unpretentious here," says Brian Meissner, American expat and owner of **El Diablo Tranquilo**, a popular beachfront bar and restaurant that also offers accommodations. "Other places, it's all about being seen. . . . People come here to enjoy a comfortable place without the need to be seen doing it."

From the sunny rooftop terrace of Meissner's restaurant, it's clear that Diablo has been passed over by the tides of development. Strict building codes mean there's not a luxury condo or hotel in sight. Down on the beach, white sand extends in both

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