

Colonia and Carmelo Uruguay



BY KAREN VILLALPANDO

Two weeks ago, I wrote a travel story about the dynamic city of Buenos Aires. The city is always buzzing with activity, whether business or pleasure. So where do portenos travel for a little R & R? The countryside!

Colonia del Sacramento, Uruguay is a one-hour ferry ride from Buenos Aires across the River de la Plata, the widest river in the world. Colonia is a nearly 500-year-old town, and was the only Portuguese settlement on the River de la Plata. It operated as a port, mostly for contraband, in its early days, and now as a resort city, port and UNESCO Heritage site.

Its charming cobblestone streets, boutiques and restaurants resemble an Old World village, where tourists and portenos come to relax in the slow lane. The once walled city with a drawbridge entrance is now open, with the Puerta de la Ciudadela drawbridge marking the historic district. The lighthouse was built in 1857 from the stone ruins of the Convento de San Francisco, and is still a beacon on the Rio de la Plata.

We boarded the ferry in Buenos

Aires and were escorted to the first class section of the ship. We were served a glass of champagne and settled in for our short, hour-long excursion. A couple of jokesters next to us kept us laughing with comments like, "I wonder what those in steerage are doing." His friend replied cleverly, "Rowing, I presume." The fact was, the air conditioning in first class wasn't working well, and it was more comfortable in, well, steerage. We did get a good laugh from the fellas.

We were traveling first to Colonia by ferry and then on to Carmelo and the Four Seasons Resort. Once in Colonia, a driver from the Four Seasons Carmelo picked us up for another hour ride to the resort. Driving through the pampas of Uruguay, we marveled at the wide-open countryside, and livestock. Horse and carts still compete with cars for the road here. Once in the town of Carmelo, we saw school children walking home, all dressed in matching uniforms with angelic, smiling faces. Uruguayans look less Spanish and more European, with light eyes and skin. Everyone we met was very friendly, just like the portenos of



photo by Michael Villalpando

Cobblestone streets and narrow doorways are part of the charm of Colonia del Sacramento, Uruguay, a nearly 500 year old city that resembles an old Portuguese village.

Buenos Aires.

Seemingly in the middle of the pampas, is the beautiful resort that is the Four Seasons Resort Carmelo. Nestled among pine and eucalyptus trees, this AAA Five Diamond resort and spa features 20 bungalows and 24 bi-level suites, two restaurants, lobby lounge and meeting space. A full service spa is open daily, offering treatments with Asian and South American influences.

Dining at the resort is exemplary. At Pura, the all-day restaurant, the chef combines Asian, Latin and local cuisine. Be sure to order the "chivito" a typical Uruguayan sandwich made of — get ready for this — beef tenderloin, ham, bacon, cheese, lettuce tomato and mayonnaise, and topped with the coup de grace, a fried egg. By my calculations, you can eat this sandwich once in your life and get away with it. You're taking your chances with the second one. It was, however, delicious!

The fine dining restaurant on the property is Mandara, where the menu reflects the season. Now, it is winter in Uruguay, and it's "hunt season", so smoked deer is a featured entrée. The ambience is rustic meets casual elegance, with leather booths and spot lighting. The windows look out to the sparkling pool and just beyond is the Rio de la

Plata. A sandy beach runs along the edge of the water, where wooden bungalows provide sheltered seating and beautiful views.

The resort also has an 18-hole championship golf course where the carpinchos run wild on the wide open course. Carpinchos are animals similar to porcupines

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without the spines. The leather produced from the animal is soft and suede-like with a spotted pattern.

We spent a night amid the pines and eucalyptus trees and I could see why portenos retreat to this quiet resort, to

mellow and slow life down. Our intimate bungalow with one wall of windows to the open forest was private and romantic. I loved the unique Roman shades that could be drawn to let the sun shine in or let down for complete seclusion.

We had an interesting ride back to Colonia. Our driver, Francisco, was a retired bank executive from Buenos Aires. He spoke fluent English, and was very well informed on American politics. While his driving techniques were a little edgy, he was highly entertaining. He even presented Michael with a Cuban cigar, in honor of it being Michael's birthday. We told him we were spending a few hours in Colonia before boarding the ferry back to Buenos Aires, and he had a suggestion for lunch, La Florida. His friend is the owner and chef, and the food is tremendous, he said.

We dropped our baggage at a small jewelry store, which stored our luggage at no charge while we wandered through the cobble stone streets. At a leather boutique, I purchased a pair of baby booties for my Godson, Cameron. Imagine a pair of Ugg slippers for a baby, with the rustic touch of a local cobbler. They were \$9 American. We picked up a few kilos of Yerba Mate, the national drink of Uruguay that's akin to green tea, only

See Colonia, page 13



photo by Peter Vitale

The 20 bungalows at the Four Seasons Carmelo are rustically appointed in an elegant style. Exposed beams, walls of windows and sheers over the bed all remind guests they are out in the wilderness of Uruguay. Additionally, there are 24 bi-level suites in the hotel, two restaurants, a spa and an 18-hole championship golf course.

Colonia

From page 12

more potent. We paid maybe \$1.50 each for them. Stumbling upon a quaint restaurant with white lace curtains, we peeked inside and discovered our driver sitting on the patio enjoying a cigar and glass of wine with the chef and owner of La Florida. What an enchanting place! Owner Carlos Bidanchon and his wife were quick with a handshake, the best table and a glass of wine. Carlos suggested we order the gambas (shrimp) and we agreed. We couldn't get enough of the delicious, tomatoey sauce that accompanied the tender shrimp. Carlos gave us a tour of the house that was once a brothel, and sat at the mouth of the old port. There were many different rooms, with antique "cocinadas" and nude drawings covering the walls. As Carlos repeatedly said, "I love women, and so does this house!" The colorful ambience and marvelous food made this a very pleasant stop for a birthday lunch!

stones and more modern jewelry, was one antique piece that I was drawn to. It was an 8-karat very light blue topaz, in 1930s rose gold, the original setting. I asked to see it and it fit my hand perfectly. A few years ago, Michael gave me a 1930s rose gold necklace with an aquamarine pendant. The two pieces seemed to be connected to me somehow, and I had to have that ring. We found my 20th anniversary gift on our 20th wedding anniversary trip! I was very pleased.

When traveling to Buenos Aires, a side trip to Carmelo is easy and quick. Within an hour, we were back in Puerto Buenos Aires, and a ten-minute cab ride to our hotel. While I'm a city girl at heart, the pampas and beautiful people of Uruguay are sites to remember.

Four Seasons Resort Carmelo, Uruguay; Ruta 21, km 262, Carmelo, Dpto. de Colonia, Uruguay Tel. 598 (542) 9000; www.fourseasons.com/carmelo

We wandered back to the jewelry store to retrieve our bags and glanced into a few cases. Among the wide variety of

Colonia del Sacramento, Uruguay; www.welcomu-ruaguay.com; gosouthamerica.about.com;



photo by Michael Villalpando

Sycamore trees create a natural entrance to the town of Carmelo, located in the countryside of Uruguay, where horse drawn carts still occupy the roadway.



photo by Peter Vitale

Mandara restaurant overlooks the sparkling pool at the Four Seasons Carmelo, where portenos from Buenos Aires flock for rest and relaxation.

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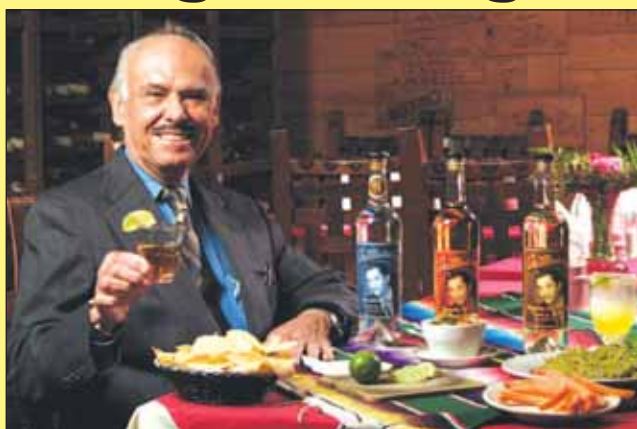
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