

36 HOURS

# 36 Hours in Montevideo, Uruguay

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East of there, the home of the architect Julio Vilamajó is now a free museum. Diego Giudice for The New York Times



By Paola Singer  
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Uruguay has made a splash in the news in recent months: Lawmakers allowed same-sex couples to marry less than a year ago, marijuana became legal in December and the country's folksy president, José Mujica, has appeared in many magazine profiles. While some developments can be seen as a continuation of the country's track record of economic and social liberalism, they also point to a new, bolder attitude, which can be easily glimpsed in Montevideo, the capital. New hotels, cultural spaces, restaurants and a residential building boom have quickened the city's tranquil pace. Still, the appeal of Montevideo lies not in novelty but in its timeless backdrop of fin-de-siècle architecture, shady plazas and riverside promenades bordered by sandy beaches — places where laid-back residents indulge in life's simple pleasures.

## **FRIDAY**

### **1. History and Fleas | 3 p.m.**

On weekday afternoons, the Ciudad Vieja, or Old Town, bustles with activity. Amid the district's many banks, auction houses, cafes and boutiques, visitors will find stately Art Deco and Beaux-Arts buildings, colonial churches and leafy squares. Start your stroll at the Plaza Independencia, with its 55-foot bronze statue of Uruguay's founding father, José Gervasio Artigas. Then head over to Calle Sarandí, a lively pedestrian lane that leads to Plaza Matriz where the first constitution took effect nearly two centuries ago. Nowadays, this tree-lined quadrangle hosts a flea market where you can pick up vintage mate gourds, gaucho knives with intricate silver handles, unpolished amethyst slabs and fine-art prints from the '60s and '70s.

### **2. Cortado, Please | 5 p.m.**

Uruguayans never skip the merienda, which in other parts of the world is known as teatime. Café Brasileiro is one of the city's most venerable coffee shops, with Gebrüder Thonet bentwood chairs,

lapacho-framed windows and brass chandeliers dating back to 1877. You might spot local intellectuals like Eduardo Galeano, a prominent writer and activist, sipping a cortado (espresso with a dash of warm milk; 50 pesos, or \$2.20, at 22.5 pesos to the dollar) by the window. Those who prefer contemporary interiors can head to nearby Jacinto, a restaurant and bakery opened last year by Lucía Soria, a young chef who trained under Francis Mallmann, the highly regarded Argentine chef. Breads, croissants, lemon squares and dulce de leche pastries are baked in-house; coffee drinks are made with Lavazza beans.

### **3. Southern Performances | 9 p.m.**

See what's on at the Teatro Solís, the country's premier performing arts center, with a four-tiered auditorium, gilded hallways and neo-Classical-style facade. This 1856 building is home to the Orquesta Filarmónica de Montevideo, and hosts opera, theater and ballet performances, including a recent tribute to the Russian choreographer Vaslav Nijinsky featuring the ballerina María Ricetto, a national star. Not into classic genres? Latin America's best indie bands play at La Trastienda Club, a cafe and concert-style space where you might catch rock-en-Español heavyweights like La Vela Puerca or Bersuit Vergarabat.

### **4. Late-Night Fuel | Midnight**

An unmarked bar on the corner of Paullier and Guaná Streets is the place for late-night meals and drinks. When the restaurateur Pepe Álvarez took over the space in 2009, he preserved its century-old floor-to-ceiling pine shelves and patterned floor tiles, along with a curious tradition: this former general store never had a name. Mr. Álvarez has helped to rejuvenate the centrally located but mostly sleepy neighborhood of Cordón, thanks to the young bohemian patrons that pour in on weekend nights. Dinner, which includes lamb ravioli and spinach risotto (entrees from 350 pesos), is served until 2 a.m.

## SATURDAY

### 5. Crops and Shops | 9 a.m.

Housed inside a soaring iron structure from the early 1900s, with lustrous ceilings and stained-glass windows, the newly reconstructed Mercado Agrícola is among the most architecturally significant food markets in the region. More than 100 vendors, selling everything from local produce and dry-aged beef to herbs and hand-loomed shawls, attract residents and visitors to the working-class neighborhood of Goes. Several stands serve coffee and pastries, but why not start the day with ice cream? Del Nieto & Cia doles out gelato with a Uruguayan twist; ask for a yerba mate or tannat-grape sugar cone (65 pesos). Then look for leather-bound mate gourds and hand-painted ceramics at Diseño Sur Artesano.



Vintage cars at Bodega Bouza. Diego Giudice for The New York Times

### 6. Midday Flight | Noon

Book a remis, or town car, for the 20-minute drive to Bodega Bouza (car companies like Remises La Española have rates by the hour).

This beautifully landscaped winery is a front-runner in the local industry, creating hearty reds made with tannat, the signature Uruguayan grape, as well as tempranillo and merlot. At their brick-walled restaurant, try the lamb strip loin (600 pesos), culled from the estate's Hampshire Down herd, then the vanilla-bean flan with thick dulce de leche. Wines can be ordered by the glass or sampled in a flight (tastings from 750 pesos). In the owner's vintage car showroom, you'll find a 1964 Citroën D.S., Ford Model T's and a droll Messerschmitt 1957 minicar.

### **7. Private Rooms | 3 p.m.**

The home of the architect Julio Vilamajó, who designed the United Nations headquarters alongside Oscar Niemeyer and Le Corbusier, among others, is one of the most delightful museums in the city (free). It's a modernist five-story house, with curves and angles that form niches for inlaid furnishings, surrounded by interconnected outdoor spaces: a garden, a patio and a terrace. A short drive away is the former summer residence of Juan Zorrilla de San Martín, the poet who wrote the historical epic "Tabaré" in 1886. The colonial-style house, built in 1904, preserves the bard's private rooms, photos and art collection (free).

### **8. Contagious Beats | 5 p.m.**

Was the tango born in Uruguay or Argentina? Is yerba mate a Paraguayan import? And who gets to claim dulce de leche? Candombe, on the other hand, is unequivocally Uruguayan. This percussive folkloric music, played by bands of up to 40 musicians who strap on barrel-shaped drums and walk in unison as they beat, is a fusion of African rhythms created by Montevideo's black population in the 19th century. Several comparsas, or troupes, put on street shows in Barrio Sur and Palermo. Join the neighbors who step out to hear La Facala play every Saturday at the intersection of Ejido and Cebollatí Streets.



### **9. Culinary Imports | 10 p.m.**

Elsa Manelphe, from the island of Réunion, is bringing exotic flavors to Montevideo. At her weekly word-of-mouth supper club called Cuisine Secrete, expect to find Asian spices and French flair. A recent five-course dinner (about 1,300 pesos, including wine), held at her bohemian-chic house in Ciudad Vieja, included pea-and-pecorino soufflé, a ginger-spiced fish terrine with a coconut and shrimp sauce, and green-tea ice cream with flambéed pineapples. A caveat: Ms. Manelphe, a member of the gastronomic society Disciples Escoffier, spends much of the Uruguayan winter in southern France. As an alternative, check the schedule at Mutate, a concept store that organizes pop-up dinners at places like MAPI, a pre-Columbian art museum.

### **10. High-Voltage Night | 1 a.m.**

Fans of electronic music converge at Phonotheque, a year-old nightclub inside an old, somewhat out-of-the-way concert space. There are three D.J.s, but the club also hosts guests from Latin America and abroad, like the Texan music maker Brett Johnson and the Madrid-based D.J. Damián Schwartz. If the crowd is up for it, the turntables stay on well past sunrise.

## **SUNDAY**

### **11. Blooming Tour | 11 a.m.**

Board Montevideo's new hop-on, hop-off sightseeing bus (416 pesos) to see the charming neighborhood of El Prado, home to a 24-acre botanical garden with over 2,000 trees. Nearby is the Palladian-style Blanes Museum, named after the 19th-century portraitist Juan Manuel Blanes and dedicated to the works of Uruguayan painters like Pedro Figari and Rafael Barradas (free). Then walk through the Japanese garden nearby. Donated by Japan in 2001 as a symbol of friendship, this meticulously arranged collection of bamboos, cherry trees, orchids and rocks is a gem.

## 12. Hearty Adieu | 1 p.m.

Visitors in search of traditional asados, or barbecues, are invariably steered toward the Mercado del Puerto, a busy old market packed with steakhouses. But insiders prefer La Otra, an intimate parrilla in the Pocitos neighborhood that serves top-notch beef. For the main course (from 270 pesos), stick to classic Southern Cone cuts like asado de tira (a type of short rib), vacio (flank steak) or ojo de bife (rib-eye), but also try something less familiar, like choto, a crispy lamb tripe that's grilled only on this side of the Rio de la Plata.



## THE DETAILS

1. **Plaza Independencia** and **Plaza Matriz**.

2. **Café Brasileiro**, Ituzaingó 1447; [cafebrasileiro.com.uy](http://cafebrasileiro.com.uy). **Jacinto**, Sarandí 349; [facebook.com/pages/Jacinto/350293285061464](https://facebook.com/pages/Jacinto/350293285061464).

3. **Teatro Solís**, Reconquista s/n; [teatrosolis.org.uy](http://teatrosolis.org.uy). **La Trastienda Club**, Daniel Fernández Crespo 1763; [latrastienda.com.uy](http://latrastienda.com.uy).

4. **Paullier y Guaná**, Juan Paullier 1252; [paullierguana.com](http://paullierguana.com).

5. **Mercado Agrícola de Montevideo**, Jose L. Terra 2220; [mam.com.uy](http://mam.com.uy).

6. **Bodega Bouza**, Camino de la Redención 7658; [bodegabouza.com.uy](http://bodegabouza.com.uy).

7. **Museo Casa Vilamajó**, Domingo Cullen 895; [farq.edu.uy/museo-casa-vilamajo](http://farq.edu.uy/museo-casa-vilamajo). **Museo Zorrilla**, José Luis Zorrilla de San Martín 96; [museos.gub.uy](http://museos.gub.uy).

8. **La Facala**, Ejido and Cebollatí Streets; [facebook.com/lafacala.herederosdenyanza.1](https://facebook.com/lafacala.herederosdenyanza.1).

9. **La Cuisine Secrete**, various locations; [cuisinesecrete.blogspot.com](http://cuisinesecrete.blogspot.com). **Mutate**; [facebook.com/mutate.montevideo](https://facebook.com/mutate.montevideo).

10. **Phonothèque**, Piedra Alta 1781; [facebook.com/phonothèque](https://facebook.com/phonothèque).

11. **Bus Turístico**; [busturistico.com.uy](http://busturistico.com.uy). **Museo Jardín Botánico Prof. Atilio Lombardo**, Avenida 19 de Abril 1181; [jardinbotanico.montevideo.gub.uy](http://jardinbotanico.montevideo.gub.uy). **Museo de Bellas Artes Juan Manuel Blanes**, Avenida Millán 4015; [blanes.montevideo.gub.uy](http://blanes.montevideo.gub.uy).

12. **La Otra**, Tomás Diago 758; [laotraparrilla.com](http://laotraparrilla.com).

## Lodging

The new **Sofitel Casino Carrasco and Spa** (Rambla República de México 5461; [sofitel.com](http://sofitel.com); doubles from \$325) occupies a landmarked waterfront building in the tony neighborhood of Carrasco. Dating from 1921, the property was once a meeting point for the world's elite, hosting personalities like Albert Einstein and Federico García Lorca.

With 40 spacious rooms, reasonable prices, and an excellent location in the heart of Pocitos, the two-year-old **My Suites** (Benito Blanco 674; [mysuites.com.uy](http://mysuites.com.uy); doubles from \$193) is a "wine hotel," with a small tasting room behind the lobby where you can order from a generous list of local bottles.

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