

Relax on the other side of the river

From page 78 For porteños, crossing the river to live quietly for a few days is a classic outing. Comfortable lodging, good gourmet options and visits to some art venues are our way of upgrading this classic where you can't go wrong. An unhurried wandering that goes a little beyond this peaceful little jewel of the River Plate. **BY MARÍA CASIRAGHI. PHOTOS BY FLOR ALETTA.**

It was raining when we got here. A gentle, but constant rain which was the perfect excuse for us to remain sitting at the table while having lunch at Charco Restó, the tasty soul of its namesake hotel. In truth, the rain was an alibi because what explains the lengthy lunch is the exquisite cuisine by Sebastián Araujo, executive chef of Charco, well known for his Mistura restaurant, at Manantiales, in Punta del Este. It was Pablo Datria, founder of Mock, a Buenos Aires art gallery, who opened the hotel two years ago and turned it in what we see now: a unique place due to its esthetic approach and high-quality service, the level of its cuisine and its white rooms where, thanks to its synergies with Mock, several contemporary artists such as Alejandro Thornton, Gabriela Bertiller or Santiago Estellano exhibit their works. In spite of the rain, with a little bit of courage and an umbrella kindly provided by the hotel, we go out to wander through an almost ghostly Colonia. Many of the shops and cafés are empty, so we decide to take advantage of the bad weather to revisit the most relevant historic sites: the old city wall, the Calle de los Suspiros (Street of Sighs), the Main Square, the ruins of the Saint Francis convent, the lighthouse, the Basilica of the Holy Sacrament. After walking for a long while, we find the haven of our dreams: a small living-room full of life, music... and people. Everyone was here! The name of the place is Ganache, and it is a bar run by bartenders with low tables and chairs from the 1970s, felt flowers in vases, old books, records and collector items, warmth and very good music (we hear the soundtrack of the Radio Rock movie). Dahianna, owner and queen of the place, is behind the bar and serves us coffee—the pride of

the house—and a cup of hot chocolate just as tasty (or even more so) as the one they give you at San Ginés, the famous chocolate spot in Madrid. Here they roast their own blend of coffees imported from Colombia, Ethiopia and Guatemala, and their product ranks second in the country. We call it a day with a good red Tannat wine and a plate of cheese and cold meats at Buen Suspiro, a kind of timeless countryside pub. Wilde, one of the owners, talks about legends of the region such as the Curse of the Nun: expelled from her convent, this nun cast a curse on Colonia and from then on any local party or important event ends up ruined by rain. But not in our case.

WITHOUT HASTE, UNDER THE SUN

After a hearty breakfast and a short rest in our “rancho” (as they call the ample Portuguese-style house where Charco lodges its guests), we go out mate in hand to further explore a now sunny Colonia. We walk along Flores Avenue, a popular street with restaurants, shops offering handicrafts and regional products, and a few unique stores like El Túnel del Ayer or El Abrazo. One of the peculiarities of this city is that lots of artists relocate here and open their galleries. Such is the case of Fernando Fraga, a well-known Uruguayan artist who years ago opened his atelier on Calle de los Suspiros. Another example is recently-arrived Eduardo Álvarez, a young Brazilian photographer who has a very peculiar store where he sells his own photos. And there are many more. But the musician and artist of most renown probably is Perico Carbajal, who last November opened a gallery where he exhibits his and his brother Jairo's work: Casa Carbajal. Perico works while people get in, look around, buy something... it depends. He works on very different materials: he can paint on a printing type galley, on school maps or oil cans, on skateboards; and, for 10 years now, he has been designing the labels of the famous grappa produced in the area by the Bernardi family. As a musician, Perico Carbajal plays from electronic music to candombe. Noon finds us having lunch at Mesón de la Plaza, a traditional restaurant which was opened just when the historic quarter was included in the World Heritage List. We delight in a very tender sirloin and in a not-to-be-missed dish of arugula ravioli in the large Spanish-style room (there is another room in Portuguese style). From the tables, other patrons greet the owner of the place: Andrés Sobrero. He is the president of the local Gastronomic Chamber of Commerce, and as from next month he'll be Director of Tourism in Colonia. Three old cars parked on a nearby street draw our attention. One of them is a plant-holder car, with ferns, plants and wild flowers, while the others are a sort of resto-cars: each of them has a table inside set for those who dare to eat there. These art installations, created 20 years ago as an oasis of shapes and colors, are now emblematic of artist Guillermo Azulay, owner of the The Drugstore restaurant. But what's new here is the brand-new museum of humor, an endeavor of Azulay himself. It's a space offering rooms with a variety of interactive proposals where you can dress up and sing on stage or sit on any of several small cinemas to enjoy scenes by Jerry Lewis, Buster Keaton, Mr. Bean or, at the Chaplin movie theater, see films such as The Great Dictator, The Mask, Annie Hall, etc. On the roof terrace, overlooking the river and the historic quarter, a big hopscotch made in EVA foam invites you to go back to your childhood. Henri Bergson wrote

that laughter is a social gesture, that's why man is a laughing animal, and Freud studied the pleasure elicited by humor and the liberating effect of laughter, which allows the self to survive adverse external realities.

At dusk we go on discovering new places, such as Churana, a very cool restaurant offering good food and an exceptional view of the river and the sunset. Or Lentas Maravillas, where Maggie's proposal is to share her own living-room and her wonderful garden while delighting your senses with a drink, a nice cup of tea and her famous carrot cake, while sitting by the river on comfortable chairs and loungers. We go on foot up to the large wooden pier frequented in the afternoons by lovers and thoughtful people willing take in peace and D vitamin.

It's dark already when, on our way to the hotel, Gibellini takes us by surprise. It's a small restaurant which first lures us in by its look; then our palate confirms it has been a good choice. Alejandro, owner and cook, offers us a tasty sample plate hastily improvised to accompany the tempting cold beer. We save the night to visit Barbot. Colonia has not a very lively nightlife so we head towards this beerhouse where they have us taste small glasses of their wide range of beers. Though they are all very good, we choose the Sacramento (which is milder) and the Thames (just the opposite). Facundo, the owner's son, explains that today they craft more 3,000 liters per month. Barbot is a bar and factory, that's why behind the bar you see, on a higher story, the huge barrels used for brewing, aging and storage.

ON THE OUTSKIRTS OF COLONIA

They recommend two roads to explore Colonia del Sacramento's outskirts: one goes towards Riachuelo and the other towards the Real de San Carlos, Arensina beach and, a little beyond that, to the area locally called "Uruguay's Tuscany".

Early in the morning we head towards the first option along Route 1, which in 1930 became the first asphalted road in the country. In the same year they planted Yatay palm trees along 15 km to embellish the road. They are the same kind of palm you find at the Argentine National Parks of El Palmar, in Entre Ríos, and Mburucuyá, in Corrientes. On this road, a must-see is Bernardi, a distillery from 1892, famous for its grappa and run by the fourth generation of the founding family. In a large warehouse from 1930, we are welcomed by Mónica and Roberto, who invite us to taste their products. According to them, they were pioneers in making varietal grappa (made from a single grape variety) of Tannat, Muscat, Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot. With a rejoiced palate we go on towards Riachuelo, a small village shared by old inhabitants and artists of all kinds and origins. Antik, Objetos con alma (soulful objects) is an antique shop cum tea house which perfectly fits its name. This is what its owner, Chilean Cecilia Jarufe, chose to call this small esthetic paradise in which each of the exhibited items expresses feelings that go way beyond their simple shape. It may be the dreams, the origin or the endeavors of those who gave them their sense. Here you'll find sculptures and pieces of furniture from India; unique pieces of china made in England, Germany, Japan and Uruguay (Olmos); embroidered tablecloths; an old iron nut roaster; huge Asian cocks also made of iron; esoteric books... all of them jewels found by Cecilia in auction houses or bought for her by an itinerant friend who has been traveling in her stead since she became sedentary. We sit at very nice little tables set in the garden with Dean, her husband –a US-born geologist and sculptor– and Martín, her son, who takes care of visitors. They give us a little triple sand clock in three different colors to let us know the ideal brewing time for tea. The service includes a zucchini-chocolate cake and a "true" cheesecake, both made by her daughter Marien, who is a pastry chef.

Then we walk through the village up to a peaceful stream. On the way back we spot the atelier of Patricio and Liliana, two Argentine sculptors who are Cecilia's neighbors and have been living in Riachuelo for 22 years. Visiting them is a good idea: they make wonderful work in wood and life has turned them into astrologists. All you have to do is stand up on a large mandala drawn on the ground, and the artists will read you your astral chart, for free.

TOWARDS "URUGUAY'S TUSCANY"

First we stop at the Real de San Carlos to appreciate the monumental bullring built at the turn of the 20th century (and closed shortly afterwards when bullfighting was prohibited). There we visit the railway museum, where nowadays a restaurant operates within an old railway carriage decorated in the style of yesteryear. Nearby are the beaches of Mar de Solís, vast, restful and of easy to access.

And now we go on with our trip towards the undulating landscape with

fields of wheat, sorghum and alfalfa, which are the reason why the area is compared to the Italian Tuscany. This is a world of small farmers where you'll also find vineyards, olive-oil mills, dairy farms, organic orchards, and large lemon groves which embalm the air.

It is here that Río Ancho Gourmet Lodge awaits to receiving travelers keen on finding relax, comfort and the treats of a good cuisine. Its Argentine owners Miri and Marcelo opened the place on last January. We are kindly received by Debbie, the lodge's manager, and are immediately offered a soft drink made here with lemon verbena and local citrus fruits. Lodging in a luxury suite means that you have an ample balcony with a view of the native woods and the river, so you would immediately want to walk along the beach. Our walk is in the evening, accompanied by Debbie and, to our surprise, we find that Marcelo is already there, waiting for us behind a large bar set on the sand, ready to act as barman. Some of the drinks, like Sunset Walker or Río Ancho, were created by him and perfectly blend with the warm sunset colors. The loungers by a bonfire where they are cooking butternut squashes with local cheese, the dipping sun and the starry night revealing itself create the best of moments. Inside the lodge, dinner is a ritual celebrated amid the warm candlelight, with Stan Getz music and a carefully-tended seven-course menu. The next morning, we have breakfast looking at the river and eating homemade breads and jams, and warm croissants just popped out of the oven. After breakfast, we enjoy a bicycle ride through the thick copses and green hills surrounding the place. At noon we gather in the cacti yard for a lunch featuring potato vareniks, a traditional Jewish dish, which are delicious. In the afternoon, first we walk up to the bird-sighting place, a high tower ideal for ornithologists and bird watchers. Later, after a trek along a native forest preserved thanks to the continuous pulling up of privet (an alien, extremely invasive species), we arrive at a place where there used to be a greenhouse for hydroponic lettuce production and now there is an archery range. In order to complete our menu of open-air activities, we say yes to a placid sailing in kayak while the sun is setting. There is no breeze, you hear no sound. The river is quiet as a mirror. Once again by the fire, this time we enjoy a few mates with some delicious treats prepared by Miri, in the company of three newly-arrived guests. And, as happened the previous day, over the river and in our memory, the stars shine again.

