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Uruguay, one of South America's smallest countries, is home to many treasures

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URUGUAYAN MINISTRY OF TOURISM / URUGUAYAN MINISTRY OF TOURISM

The Teatro Solís anchors Montevideo's ornate Plaza Independencia in the center of town.

A lover of big cities, I arrived in Montevideo, Uruguay with low expectations. I wasn't sure Uruguay could offer anything different than South American spots more popular with tourists -- Chile, Argentina and Brazil. When a Brazilian friend recommended this tiny country as a destination that would deliver just as completely on beauty, history and flavor, I bit. But still, I was skeptical. Uruguay?

The second smallest country in South America, lacking the altitude of the Andes and the sprawling development of its neighbors, Uruguay often goes unnoticed. Subsisting on agriculture and lacking political turmoil, Uruguay is a progressive state where 97 percent of the country is literate, church

and state are separate, same sex unions are legal and freedom of religion is guaranteed. A good start, you say? I agree.

As the ferry pulled into the port capital of Montevideo, a slightly decayed city of more than 1.5 million that was founded in the early 1700s, I felt a laid-back, easy vibe overtake me. More European than South American in feel, Montevideo didn't showcase itself in the same way as Rio or Buenos Aires, but this shy stepsister had plenty to offer.

I headed straight to Montevideo's center, the ornate Plaza Independencia, home to a 30-ton statue of Uruguay's founding father, José Gervasio Artigas. The city's subtle beauty resonated. Refreshingly devoid of tourists, Montevideo was a navigable peninsula of architecture and culture along narrow streets by the sea. Locals sauntered, leather satchels diagonally crossing their chests as they sipped from gourds containing the national drink of choice, *yerba mate*.

Compact enough to cross in 15 minutes, Montevideo's breezy plazas -- Plaza Constitución, Plaza Zabala, Plaza Cagancha -- are interesting enough to spend hours wandering.

Montevideo claims to be the birthplace of tango -- a claim disputed by Buenos Aires. Tango evolved on the streets of working-class districts in the early 1900s as a release from the daily

grind. I found it here still, where talented street performers danced for tips. The connection to Uruguay's past was refreshing, especially when a dancer urged me to join in a song and a twirl. I obliged, thinking I might have to invest in a proper tango lesson.

Art deco confections like the 26-story Palacio Salvo, once the tallest building in South America, loom. The immaculate Teatro Solís and the National History Museum beckon. The latter, housed in 10 colonial residences, traces the country's history to the mid-1900s and paints a comprehensive picture of Uruguay's little-known road to the present.

GAUCHOS

While I debated entry outside the busy Avenida 18 de Julio's Museo del Gaucho y de la Moneda, a weathered gentleman, clad in chaps, encouraged me. "This is how we live," he explained. "Please, come inside."

The gauchos have worked the Uruguayan countryside for centuries, laboring intermittently on ranches and inspiring legends about wooing local women. Nowadays, gauchos still maintain the many cattle and sheep ranches that dot the rolling landscape, and keep Uruguay's agricultural economy humming.

Inside the Museo del Gaucho, everything from traditional gaucho clothing to embellished mate gourds was on display. Most fascinating was the exhibit of frontier weapons, including lassos, Spanish swords and *bolás*, or slings. To my authentic gaucho guide, each exhibit was personal.

The cowboy and I made an unlikely pair as we continued on to the regal Plaza Fabini. The pièce de résistance of the meticulous square seemed to be the Monumento del Entrevero, a large José Belloni sculpture of battling gauchos, European settlers (*criollos*) and natives. But Plaza Fabini's true gem is La Pasiva, an outdoor restaurant serving *panchos*, or hot dogs, with a spicy mustard sauce and popular grapefruit soda. For less than a dollar, we joined the crowd in hearty snacking. Then, as quietly as he came, he disappeared.

At one of the many cafés on Calle Sarandí -- an Old City pedestrian street of outdoor artwork, clothing and antique shops -- I stopped for a *mate*. But when the bitter drink proved to be an acquired taste, I opted into the nearby boutiques, where I primped and preened.

Outside of El Fogón, an irresistible smell of grilled meat penetrated, and I couldn't resist. I tried the *chivito*, Uruguay's version of a steak sandwich stuffed with fixings. For less than 100 pesos (\$4.50), it felt like the deal of a lifetime.

On the riverbank of the Río de la Plata, Montevideo is encircled by La Rambla, a 14-mile waterfront avenue that links the Old City with moneyed suburbs, such as Pocitos, Punta Carretas and Carrasco. It's also home to some of the best restaurants Montevideo has to offer. My favorite was the *parrilla* La Otra. Teeming with fisherman, vendors and street musicians, La Rambla's many cafés offered the perfect perch for a *grappamiel* (alcohol and honey) cocktail to accompany sunsets.

MARKET DAYS

Come weekend, Montevideo is a city of markets. On Saturday, I spent hours searching for a leather belt at the Mercado de los Artesanos (Plaza Cagancha 1365), which features leather, pottery, wood, wool and bronze goods made by local artisans. I found the soft, braided, chocolate-brown belt of my imagination at the stall of a tiny female vendor who only spoke Portuguese. Her Spanish-speaking sister negotiated the deal. I purchased handmade dolls for my friends' children.

On Sunday, a stroll up Avenida 18 de Julio brought me to the most exhilarating street market south of Chichicastenango, Guatemala: the Feria Tristán Narvaja. This open-air fair thrives on an eponymous street and sells everything from live spiders to figurines. Though I left empty-handed, its spectacle was worth the trip.

I ventured into the lunch-only Mercado del Puerto, which is full of eateries where counter-sitting patrons oversee a colorful collection of meat and vegetables grilled to their liking. I chose Rio Alegre, partly because of its chatty proprietor, Pepe. The *asado de tira* (short ribs) didn't disappoint.

After dark, the Old City's bars and discos function at super-high decibels into the wee hours. At the century-old Baar Fun Fun, a hot spot for tango and candombé music, I enjoyed *uvita*, an ultra-sweet wine, and live performances. When I finally made it to the of-the-moment Lotus (circa 3 a.m.), I started to lag and headed off to bed. I was exhausted, but no longer skeptical. Yes, absolutely: Uruguay.

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