

The Muted Delights of Colonia del Sacramento



The ferry, a much smaller vessel than I'd expected, bobbed up and down as it cut across the Rio del Plata. We were en route to Colonia del Sacramento—a quaint coastal town in Uruguay. I was researching day-trips from Buenos Aires when I realised just how easy it is to pop across the border into Uruguay. A mere 50 kilometres from Buenos Aires, it appeared to be more popular among Argentinian day-trippers than Uruguayans themselves—a trend aided by a breezy one-hour ferry ride, and an even smoother immigration process at the ferry terminal. It takes us longer to drive across Melbourne, and even longer still if we're navigating Dhaka's notorious traffic to get from Dhanmondi to Gulshan. There was no question about it, we were going to Uruguay.

I'm rather embarrassed to admit my knowledge of the country was limited and didn't extend far beyond the infamous story of the Uruguayan rugby



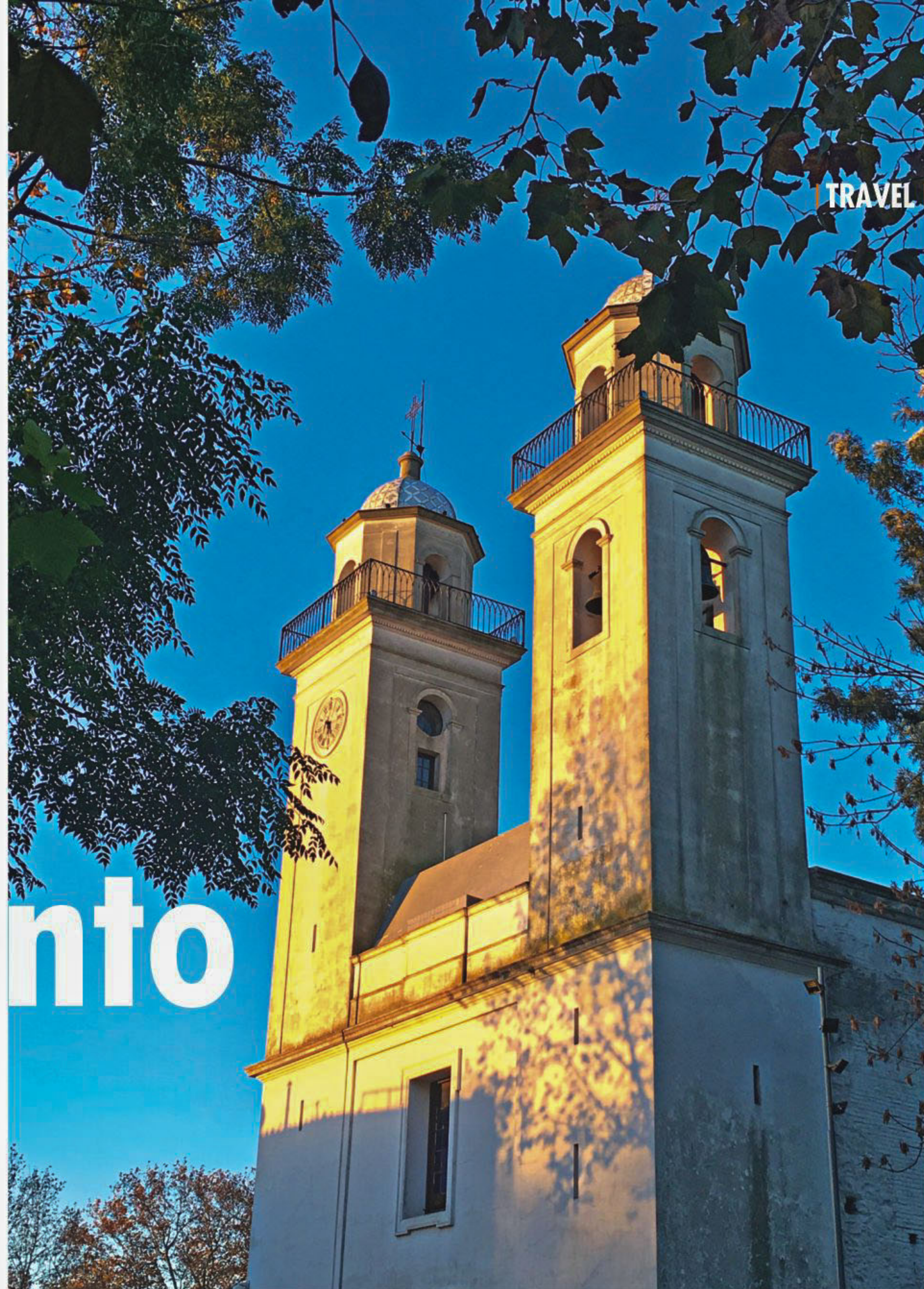
The Faro and Rio del Plata beyond, taken from the lighthouse platform

team who had to resort to cannibalism after their flight crashed in the Andes (thanks, *Reader's Digest*). So, I embarked upon my journey with a purpose to educate myself.

Disembarking from the ferry, we lugged our backpacks through streets devoid of life and over cobble-stones that wreaked havoc on my son's stroller. We passed money changers, tacky souvenir shops, restaurants that screamed tourist traps, and entered our shockingly overpriced and woefully underwhelming hotel. If I leaned out far enough and scanned the horizon beyond the drab



Kitschy, colourful souvenir shops

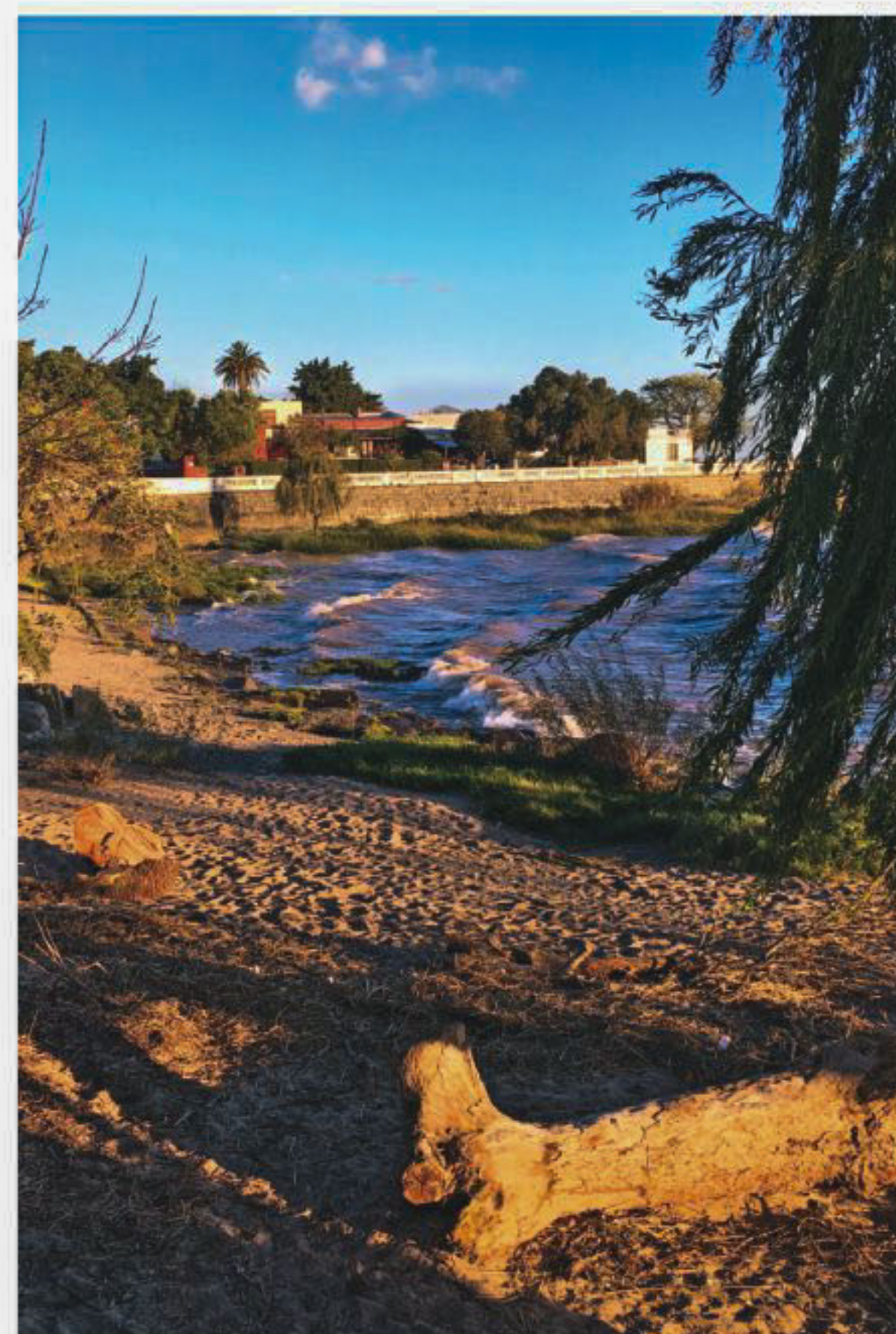


Plaza de Aramas

PHOTOS: SAMAI HAIDER

buildings and nondescript parking lot, I could just about manage to catch a glimpse of the River Plate, its waters brown and boring. It wasn't looking very promising.

We made our way towards the beaches via the wide avenues of Rambla de las Americas, and as we'd suspected, there wasn't a soul in sight. Not quite the heaving "weekend getaway" that I'd been promised, but I blame that on the frigid weather, so anomalous with beach towns. The seclusion, however, felt very liberating as we scurried across the sand, chucking rocks in the water and



Secluded beaches

giggling—our very own private romp on the beach. A largely uneventful stroll through Colonia's suburbs took us to a wooded area. The map had indicated a playground at the site and as my two-year old is on his own personal quest to check out playgrounds in every town, we found ourselves staring at a handful of rusty, forlorn-looking slides and see-saws. What I viewed as derelict, my son took to with glee, rushing to climb up the steps to the slide. And it was only as he struggled to heave himself up the rungs that I realised the impossible angle at which the slide was built, the tunnel providing more of a free-falling experience than a zippy ride down a slope. My eyes then fell on the see-saw, suspended at a 45 degree angle; across from it, another set of ladders led to a colourfully painted bridge which ended abruptly over a 10-foot drop. Clearly not a stickler for health and safety.

We did however find a slightly more suitable, but equally dirty, playground closer to our hotel. What was more exciting about this discovery was the little food truck that was parked alongside it selling chivito, the Uruguayan national sandwich. Sensing I was new to what is clearly Uruguay's quintessential food, the lady behind the counter took me under her wing and crafted a mountainous sandwich of strips of steak, cheese, tomatoes, fried eggs, relish—slathered in her "secret" sauce. I was full after two very messy, but very delightful bites.

As the afternoon wore on, I left my napping son with

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