

TRAVEL

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my husband who was now second guessing our decision to visit the town and set off to explore. Given my notoriously bad sense of direction, I was slightly nervous about venturing out without a map, but I made for what I assumed was the direction of the "Barrio Historico" or old quarter, now a designated UNESCO World Heritage Site. The streets were mostly quiet, other than for a handful of tourists bumping over the stones in their little golf-carts. I scampered across the windswept promenade, pausing briefly to take in the vast expanse of choppy, murky waters slapping ferociously against the reeds on the riverbank. Out of the corner of my eye, I spied the lighthouse and made my way towards it. I realised it was parallel to Avenida General Flores, the street I'd just walked down from where my hotel was. Guess I didn't need that map after all—there's only one main thoroughfare in this part of town!

The Faro, Colonia's 19th century lighthouse, is apparently still functioning. Its red and white tower rose over what initially appeared to be a pile of rubble. I soon learnt these were the ruins of a 17th century convent, the Convento de San Francisco. I approached two men seated at a table plonked unceremoniously at the base of the lighthouse. A rickety sign read "Tickets: 50 Uruguayan Pesos"—about



The setting sun casts an orange glow over crumbling buildings



The Faro, Colonia's 19th century lighthouse rising over the ruins of a convent

USD 1.5. As I rummaged in my purse for change, the men, deep in what I assumed was riveting conversation, simply waved me in. No sooner had I stepped in that I found myself scaling the seemingly endless spiral steps. I emerged onto the tiniest platform with sweeping views over the river. My presence seemed to thoroughly excite a group of girls lounging on the rails. One of them handed me a phone and then proceeded to strike up a procession of increasingly elaborate poses. While I had little inclination to continue as their personal photographer, I had to admit the lighting was stunning. The sun was low on the horizon, on the brink of setting and had cast a subdued orange glow on its path. The Rio de la Plata, which had moments before been muddy

and unwelcoming, now shimmered in the reflected light. It was spectacular.

I slowly made my way through town in the late afternoon glow, photographing kitschy little boutique shops and old, crumbling buildings harkening an era of grandeur. Diners gathered around tables set out on the cobble-stones, the sharp clink of cutlery cutting through the sounds of laughter and conversation. I migrated towards the buzz of activity by Puerto Viejo, the small yacht harbour, where throngs of young people sat around amidst clouds of cigarette smoke, drinking and talking. Someone had put on music, prompting the congregation to sway to the beat. I found myself a low wall and sat down to absorb the vibrant atmosphere. The sun dipped over the

horizon, setting the sky aflame and prompting a stupendous round of applause. My confusion must've been blatantly obvious as the artist seated beside me leaned over his easel to explain that it is Uruguayan tradition to applaud the setting sun. A fitting response to the climatic finale of my time in Colonia del Sacramento.

Next stop: Montevideo!

*Samai Haider is a writer, traveller, artist and... economist. If her rather odd amalgamation of interests isn't dotty enough, she is currently travelling around South America - with her pack and toddler strapped to her back. Read about the fables of her foibles here at The Daily Star. You can see more of her work at: <http://samaihaider.com/>*

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