

Uruguay: Colonia del Sacramento

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Colonia del Sacramento: Preserving the City's Past

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Friends gather at the old wharf for conversation and yerba mate.

Colonia del Sacramento is one of those small towns with such a photogenic historic center and a welcoming, laid-back atmosphere that you feel almost instantly at home; soon thereafter you find yourself imagining living there.

It's in the little-known country of [Uruguay](#) which gives you instant traveler cred since so few people know about it.

With a history stretching back more than 330 years and a well-preserved Barrio Histórico that's been a UNESCO World Heritage site since 1995, Colonia owes its existence to its strategic location on the banks of the wide Río de la Plata.

75 Minutes from BA

Just a 75-minute ferry ride from Buenos Aires, the Uruguayan town is an obvious top choice for a side trip when visiting the Argentine capital. Otherwise, from Uruguay's capital of Montevideo, the trip by bus takes about two hours.

But whether arriving by boat or by bus, the tidy town of Colonia with its ancient architecture and right mix of museums, artisan shops, restaurants, and sidewalk cafes makes for a stress-free day or two of relaxation and exploration.

You can also rent a car in Uruguay and drive to Montevideo yourself.

Ferry Ride to Colonia

Two ferry companies provide service between Buenos Aires and Colonia, [Colonia Express](#) and [Buquebus](#). Because both companies have only three or four departures a day, you'll want to check websites for exact times. During busy seasons (weekends, holidays, summer vacation) you'll want to purchase tickets in advance.

Simplistic beauty in front of an artisan's shop.

Because we were traveling during the winter season (which is summer in the Northern Hemisphere), my travel companion and I bought our roundtrip tickets at the Colonia Express ferry terminal near downtown Buenos Aires, arriving the recommended 90 minutes

prior to our noon departure.

Although many travelers make the trip to Colonia just for the day, we opted to spend the night, which allowed time to walk virtually every cobbled street of the historic district, visit several museums and kick back at outdoor cafes and restaurants, giving us a more intimate connection to the city. If we had had more time, two nights would have been even better.

One of the unique experiences about taking the ferry between Buenos Aires and Colonia del Sacramento is that customs for both countries is accomplished almost instantaneously in a single room, making this one of the fastest and most low-key border crossings I've ever experienced (be sure to have your passport).

Unfortunately, there isn't much of a view from the boat—the muddy-colored Río de la Plata is the widest river in the world, making the crossing seem like you're traversing a very large lake or sea.



Colonia's Historic District

Upon reaching Colonia, we took the exit next to the buses and crossed the street to the local tourist office, always my first stop whenever I arrive in a new town, to pick up a map

and ask for directions to our hotel.

The historic district is only a 10-minute walk from the ferry terminal; one of the most delightful things about Colonia is that you can walk virtually everywhere.

Impressions of Barrio Histórico

It was a slightly cool, sun-drenched winter's afternoon when we arrived in Colonia's historic district, which lent brilliance to the deep-blue sky, gaily painted homes and huge bougainvillea bursting forth in colors of fuchsia and deep orange.

Narrow cobblestone lanes, which follow the contours of the land, are in some cases so ancient, uneven and roughly hewn that some of them are almost impossible to walk upon with any sense of decorum.

Nonetheless, we made our way to the wide Plaza de Armas Manuel Lobo, shaded by sycamores and anchored by the Basilica del Santisimo Sacramento, first erected when the town was founded but restored in the mid-1800s after being destroyed by lightning.

Wandering the Lanes



Without any plan or direction, we wandered down lanes leading to the river, through a square noisy with brightly colored parakeets chirping noisily from palm trees, and to the old wharf, where young locals meet to talk and share yerba mate tea in traditional cups.

We saw dogs sleeping in shadows, gathering on grassy patches for play and socialization, and hanging out at open-air cafes hoping for a handout, making me envious of their carefree lifestyle.

The Lighthouse

It wasn't long until we discovered the old city gate and Colonia's most famous landmark, a lighthouse erected in 1857. To get a lay of the land, we climbed the many circular stairs to the lighthouse top, where we were rewarded with views over the old town, church spires, and the never-ending Río de la Plata.

At the base of the lighthouse are the ruins of the Convento de San Francisco, destroyed by fire in 1704. World travelers turned artisans, some with dreadlocks and tattoos, laid out their wares on tables beside the convent ruins; from one of them, I bought a bracelet fashioned from black and neon-green fishing line.

The smell of pot wafted faintly through the air. If I were a young traveler peddling wares, this would be as fine a spot as any for settling in while contemplating my next move.

There's a definite hip vibe to old Colonia, from art galleries tucked away in courtyards to restaurants inhabiting rustic buildings and serving innovative cuisine, but one of the things I found most captivating about the old town were the many old vehicles left standing on its cobbled streets or plazas, as though they were conceptual pieces of art.

We saw old VW bugs, a Chevrolet Bel Air, jeeps, old Ford trucks and more, making the old picturesque town even more picturesquely old-fashioned.



One of many retro cars that drive through Colonia.

“Oh, my father put his old car out on the street,” a shopkeeper said ruefully when I remarked about the abundance of old cars. “I told him he shouldn’t do it, but now there are even more cars. People keep adding to them.”

I like it, as though the streets of Colonia are awaiting a film crew or simply never caught up to the 21st century. And I find the old cars much more interesting than those huge painted cows, bears and other city mascots so popular around the world.

More Things to Do in Colonia

Surprising for a town this size but not considering its long history, Colonia has a handful of museums relating to its architecture and past. Most comprehensive is the Municipal Museum, housed in an attractive stone building first erected in 1795 and rebuilt by the Spanish in 1835.

Displays relate the town’s many wars between the Portuguese and Spanish, along with local archaeological, geological, religious and cultural artifacts. Colonial-era furniture, dinosaur fossils, military costumes and an array of mounted local birds and other animals are spread throughout several floors.

We also toured Nacarello's House, dating from 1790 and simplistic with its couple of small rooms and Portuguese furnishings of the time.



Other museums, which you can see with the purchase of one ticket that allows entrance to all of them (note that although Argentina pesos are accepted virtually everywhere in Colonia, you'll need Uruguayan pesos for the museum pass), including the Portuguese Museum in an 18th-century stone building and with an impressive display of maps.

There is also the Spanish Museum, first constructed in 1720 and rebuilt in 1840; and the Indigenous Museum with items belonging to the Charrua and other indigenous tribes of the area.

An 1880 rambling building that once housed a glue and soap factory, a laundry for wool, and a tannery is now the Centro Cultural Bastion del Carmen, with art exhibits, musical and theatrical events, and good views of sunsets from its park-like grounds.

But while Colonia del Sacramento is largely a sleepy little town when not bombarded by tourists, the bird that woke me up during the night seemed to be singlehandedly trying to rouse everyone to action. Its call was the same as I'd heard in Buenos Aires, so when I visited the Municipal Museum and wondered which of the many birds in the natural history

display might be the culprit, I mimicked the sound for the bemused women at the admission desk.

“Whoo Whoo! Whoo Whoo!” I gave it my best shot.

“It’s an owl,” they agreed.

I conceded that that’s what it sounded like, but in the middle of Buenos Aires? What struck me was that the hoot of the Colonia owl differed slightly from its counterpart in Buenos Aires, which puzzled me until a fanatic birder I know confirmed that birds can acquire different accents according to where they live. But of course! The Colonia owl sounded gentler, less strident than the owl over in Buenos Aires, as though it, too, knew it had a good thing going.