



Back In Time

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Family Picnics

My parents loved to picnic. They both grew up picnicking with their parents so it was a deeply entrenched tradition in our family. On Saturdays or Sundays we'd climb into a car packed with provisions and head out along the Rambla from Pocitos through Carrasco to the Interbalnearia and off in search of a particular beach.

Ah, the beaches of Uruguay! The coast curves gracefully eastward from the Estuary of the Río de la Plata and then north against the dark blue Atlantic, a seemingly endless string of beaches all the way to Brazil. Each one unique in its own way: some long and straight, some half-moon shaped; some with soft golden sand, some dotted with pebbles and shells where the waves lap and break. Each with its own town of varying sizes and styles, usually a fishing village that grew to cater to summer crowds and year-round communities. The names are seared into my memory: El Pinar, Pinamar, Atlántida...

In the summer I'd keep the car window open, the stiff breeze blowing right into my face where I sat in the back seat behind my mother. My brother sat behind my Dad, who always drove. Between the road and the sea there was a seemingly endless procession of tall pine trees rooted in the sand, and I watched the green canopies fly past against a sky of perfect blue. The fragrance of pine was heavy on the air as my father turned off the highway and nosed his way down a gravel road to the beach, looking for the perfect place to park. We usually spent the morning in the water, surfing when the waves were up. As we dried off in the sun we'd sometimes wander off in different groupings—I might walk along the water's edge with my Dad, who would talk about the importance of living a life of principle. If we were on a particularly stony stretch of the coast he could seldom resist cautioning me (again) about the perils of thinking that I was the only pebble on the beach. When I walked with my mother she did her best to school me in the finer points of social etiquette, and introduced me to the joys of beachcombing. After that we were all hungry. My mother spread an old blanket, a veteran of a thousand picnics, over the inevitable bed of pine needles and we unloaded the car. My father, who was probably a caterer to a Maharaja in a former life, made sure we had everything we could possibly need to enjoy the meal, and the blanket was soon crowded with plates and linen napkins and cutlery and

salt cellars and so on. A hardboiled egg never tasted as good as it did at the beach, and my mother's *torta pascualina*—simply delicious at home—tasted sublime when consumed in the salty air blowing off the sea.

Sometimes we went further afield, to Parque del Plata, La Floresta, Solís, or Piriápolis with the Pan de Azúcar in the distance, a purple hill silhouetted against the horizon. Beyond that was Portezuelo, relentlessly flat in the shadow of Punta Ballena, and then Punta del Este, the most famous of all the Uruguayan beaches, about 85 miles from Montevideo.

One summer we took a family holiday and spent two glorious weeks driving up the coast beyond Punta del Este, past La Paloma, La Pedrera, Cabo Polonio, Punta del Diablo, and the final stretch: Santa Teresa, La Coronilla, and Barra del Chuy. From there, of course, we were planning to drive inland to the border town of Chuy—Uruguay on one side of the main street, Brazil on the other—and stock up on duty-free goods to take home. But before we did that my father decided to call ahead to check on our accommodations at a hotel near a Brazilian beach further up the coast. The telephone operator quoted an astronomical price and explained that, since there was no direct link between the Uruguayan and Brazilian telephone networks (in the early 1950s), the call would have to be routed through Montevideo, across to Buenos Aires, up to New York, back down to Sao Paulo, and out to the hotel that was, at most, fifty miles away from where we were. This incident became one of our stock family stories, repeated time and again whenever the occasion arose. If the subject of hotel reservations ever came up in conversation, my brother and I would look at each other and roll our eyes as one of our parents sat back and said, "That reminds me of the time we were on our way to Brazil..."

We were never closer than on those picnics at the beach. During the week we all had things to do and went our separate ways after breakfast. But on the picnic blanket we were a family, a unit, and it felt wonderful. Free of the distractions of school, work, and housework we had more time for each other. After lunch I'd lie on a towel, looking up at the pine trees towering overhead. A siesta was a regular part of the family picnic, and the rustling of the breeze in the branches would soon put me to sleep.