



HOME + DESIGN

DEPARTURES

BEAUTIFUL NEW WORLDS

TOUR ENGLAND'S
MUST-SEE GARDENS

KELLY WEARSTLER
DOES SOHO

WHAT I COLLECT
by 14 EXPERTS

A GRAND VILLA IN COMO

+

POP ART
for the **KITCHEN**

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Photograph by Marc van Praag, shot in Amsterdam. "A Royal Welcome" begins on page 110. For details, see page 152.

OVERNIGHTING IN MONTEVIDEO

How a Roman businessman created the home—and hotel—of his dreams in Uruguay

By ROBERTO BEGNINI



Casa Roberto's owner sourced the library desk from Rome's famous Porta Portese flea market.

Curiosity drove me to Uruguay. I've always been a traveler, and after many years of roaming the world, I started looking for more "uncommon" destinations. I had visited Uruguay just two times before deciding to move there in 2012. I came completely alone, and I didn't speak a word of Spanish. One of the things I like most about the country is that it's visited by more "travelers"

than "tourists." Montevideo is a particular kind of Latin American capital—a magical, still quite undiscovered place, at the southern tip of the country. It reminds me of the Italy of the 1950s, charming and with a slow rhythm. There's a lot of early 19th-century architecture, and even with its 1.3 million inhabitants, it's quiet. There's a varied cultural life, with an opera theater dating to 1856, festivals, and cinemas. The Cinemateca Uruguaya, for example,



Clockwise from top left: Vintage armchairs accompany a Dema sofa in the living room; Begnini added the stained glass to the winter garden himself; Cole & Son wallpaper adorns a guest room; the entrance to the 4,300-square-foot home; the outdoor patio

shows cult films at least six times a day. La Rambla, the avenue that runs along the Río de la Plata (River of Silver), is the major meeting point, especially at sunset. Everyone is there drinking mate—a caffeinated infusion of yerba mate leaves—chatting, and smoking weed, legalized here in 2013.

I visited many properties before finding the right one. My real estate agent had told me about a two-story historical house in the city center, in an area full of sightseeing. An old couple from Florence lived there, and I went to meet them. They told me that Uruguay was too expensive (Montevideo is almost as costly as Rome), and that they were moving

to Paraguay. I said, “If you sell your house, I’ll buy it.” It was all so fortuitous, and it was just what I was looking for.

What drew me to the house was its original British design. It was built in 1912 as part of a project commissioned by the English property magnate Sir Henry Hamilton. Compared with other old houses, which are usually dark, this one was laid out in an L shape, making it lighter and brighter. Moreover, every room has a window.

In creating my home turned small inn, my vision was always to respect the original elements—the wood, the floors, the frames—because when I bought the house, it was basically untouched, some parts left in disrepair. The

couple had lived solely in the kitchen, two of the five bedrooms, and the living room. They had a dream to live in a big, old home, but the reality didn’t work out.

First off, I had to create five new bathrooms to accommodate guests. I chose tiles from the early 1900s, and to redecorate the rooms I used a palette based on Pre-Raphaelite paintings, which is contemporary to the house construction and fits its British mood. The furniture comes from searching the globe. The knives and forks are from Thailand; the tiles are from Sicily. My favorite artwork is a pair of watercolored photographs of two brothers from about 100 years ago that I found in Shanghai. And I have some sketches from famous painters of



Begnini designed the adjustable marble-top dining table. The Lotus wallpaper is from Osborne & Little.

ROBERTO'S MONTEVIDEO

Candy Bar (*Durazno 1402*) is the go-to spot for Sunday brunch, known for its eclectic gin selection. **La Pasionaria** (*Reconquista 587*) is a contemporary art gallery, boutique, and restaurant all in one. **Al Forno** (*Solano García 2421*) is a quiet eatery in the heart of Punta Carretas's blossoming food scene that cooks most of its dishes in a wood-fired oven. **Mutate** (*Juan Paullier 1065*) carefully curates objects such as vintage Hans Wegner chairs, locally sourced leather boots, and hand-tailored shirts. The **Museum of Decorative Arts** (*25 de Mayo 376*), also known as Taranco Palace, contains unique 19th-century furnishings. The **Juan Manuel Blanes Museum** (*Avenida Millán 4015*) displays Uruguayan art from the country's founding to today.

the Novecento Italiano movement, one by Emilio Greco, another by Corrado Cagli. I found many of the things on my tabletops and shelves in local flea markets—after all, Montevideo has the largest one in Latin America, Tristán Narvaja, just outside the old city, which is usually full of Deco pieces.

My adventure in Montevideo is all about following what some people might call a “crazy spark.” I have run my PR agency out of Italy for 20 years with my business partner, Flaminia Persichetti, who is still based in Rome. We specialize in arts and culture, representing international institutions such as UNESCO World Heritage sites. At the moment we’re working with the Palazzetto Bru Zane in Venice. But I needed a new challenge, and I wanted to follow my passion for design and architecture.

During the three years of restoration, the original project changed a little, and now Casa Roberto, with its five guest rooms, is a multifunctional space. In addition to my interior design studio, there’s a small vintage shop located in the basement; it’s kind of a permanent garage sale. We had our first guests in January 2016.

I’m passionate about this place. I like talking with my guests to discover what they do, what they like, so that I can give them the kind of experience they desire. It might be a romantic idea, but it’s a romantic project. My Rioplatense Spanish, the local dialect, sounds pretty odd to Spanish speakers, but day to day I get by with French, Portuguese, and English. For everyone else, design is the common language.

—As told to Rachel Hurn

Rooms at Casa Roberto begin at \$120; casa roberto.uy; 598-2/903-2507.