

Uruguay

Cruising Guide

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Navionics

Cruising Guide

Navigating the Switzerland of South

America: Your Master Guide to Uruguay Clearance Formalities

A Professional Navigator’s Briefing for Private Recreational Yachts *Updated for the 2026 Cruising Season*

Greetings, Captains and fellow navigators. Welcome to the Oriental Republic of Uruguay. Often referred to as the "Switzerland of South America," Uruguay is a beacon of political stability, safety, and highly civilized infrastructure

on a continent where cruising can often feel like a raw expedition.

Whether you are dropping down the Brazilian coast to escape the hurricane belt, or preparing to cross the turbulent waters of the Rio de la Plata towards Argentina and the deep south, Uruguay is a brilliant, welcoming safe haven. The locals drink *mate* by the gallon, the beef is world-class, and the maritime authorities are incredibly professional.

However, do not let the relaxed onshore vibe lull your navigational senses. The waters

here—specifically the massive estuary of the Rio de la Plata—are notoriously shallow, plagued by shifting mudbanks, and subject to the sudden, violent southwest squalls known as *Pamperos*.

Here is your authoritative, step-by-step navigational briefing for successfully clearing into Uruguay.

1. The Pre-Arrival Ritual: Weather and the PNN

Uruguay does not require complex, weeks-in-advance digital portals or mandatory local agents. The

process is pleasantly old-school and highly efficient, but it requires standard maritime courtesy.

- **The Prefectura:** The absolute ruler of Uruguayan waters is the **Prefectura Nacional Naval (PNN)**—the Coast Guard/Navy. They handle almost all maritime administration. You will become very familiar with their offices.
- **Advance Notice:** As you approach the 12-nautical-mile limit, or are within VHF range of your intended port, call the local "Prefectura Control" on

VHF Channel 16. State your vessel name, last port of call, and request permission to enter the port.

- **The Pampero Threat:** Before making your final approach to the Uruguayan coast, download the latest GRIB files and check for advancing cold fronts from the southwest. A *Pampero* can build from a dead calm to 50 knots in under an hour, turning the shallow coastal waters into a dangerous, steep-sided washing machine. Do not attempt to enter a shallow

harbor like Colonia during a severe Pampero.

2. Choosing Your Port of Entry

Uruguay’s ports are strung along its southern Atlantic coast and up into the Rio de la Plata.

- **Punta del Este:** The most famous port, marking the official boundary between the Atlantic Ocean and the Rio de la Plata. It is the "St. Tropez of South America." The marina is excellent but phenomenally busy and expensive in January. You can anchor off the beach

(Playa Mansa) if the wind has no westerly component.

- **Piriápolis:** Located about 20 miles west of Punta del Este. This is the ultimate cruiser's favorite. It features a massive, well-protected breakwater harbor, affordable rates, and very friendly PNN officials.
- **Montevideo (Puerto del Buceo):** Do not go to the main commercial port of Montevideo. Yachts must head to the suburb of Buceo, home to the **Yacht Club Uruguayo (YCU)**. The approach is somewhat

shallow and rocky, but the club is world-class and officials will process you right at the club offices.

- **Colonia del Sacramento:** A stunning UNESCO World Heritage site further up the river, directly opposite Buenos Aires. The approach is extremely shallow; pay strict attention to the channel markers.

3. The Arrival Dance: Step-by-Step Formalities

When you pass the breakwater, fly your **Yellow 'Q' (Quarantine)**

flag and the Uruguayan courtesy flag.

1. **Secure the Vessel:** Tie up at the reception pontoon (or where directed by the marina *marinero*).
2. **The Office Walk:** Unlike places where officials board your boat, in Uruguay, the Captain takes the paperwork and walks to the Prefectura office (usually located right on the docks).
3. **The Sequence:** The PNN officer will usually handle the Customs (*Aduana*) and

Immigration (*Migraciones*) paperwork all at once, though in larger ports like Punta del Este, you may be directed to separate windows within the same building.

4. **The "Rol":** The most important document in Uruguay (and Argentina) is the **Rol de Despacho** (often just called the "Rol"). This is your cruising log and crew manifest. The PNN will issue you a new one for your stay in Uruguay.

Essential Paperwork to Have Ready:

- **Zarpe (Clearance from Last Port):** Mandatory.
- **Passports:** Valid for at least 6 months.
- **Vessel Registration Document:** Original copies.
- **Proof of Insurance:** Mandatory for entering any marina or Yacht Club.
- **Captain's License / Certificate of Competence.**

4. Visas and Temporary Importation

Uruguay is one of the most generous countries in South America for cruising yachts.

- **Human Visas:** Citizens of the US, Canada, UK, EU, Australia, and New Zealand do not need visas and are routinely stamped in for **90 days** upon arrival.
- **Visa Extensions:** If you wish to stay longer, a 90-day extension is easily obtained at a local immigration office for a small fee, or you can take the

fast ferry across to Buenos Aires for the weekend and reset your clock.

- **Vessel Temporary Admission:** This is where Uruguay shines. Foreign yachts are generally granted temporary importation for up to **1 year**. It is an incredibly popular place to leave a yacht safely on the hardstand or in the water while flying home for the season.

5. Costs, Fees, Charges, and Payments

- **The Currency (UYU):** The Uruguayan Peso. Uruguay is highly modern; Visa and Mastercard are accepted almost everywhere, from the marina office to the local *parrilla* (steakhouse).
- **Clearance Costs:** The official government fees for clearing in and out via the Prefectura are practically negligible (often just the cost of a few printed forms and stamps, well under $20 USD).

- **Marina Fees (The High Season Shock):** While Piriápolis and Buceo offer reasonable year-round rates, **Punta del Este in January** (the peak of the South American summer) is astronomically expensive. Marina fees can quadruple between December 15th and February 28th. Plan your budget—and your bookings—accordingly.
- **Foreign Cards:** Because Uruguay encourages tourism, paying with a foreign credit

card at restaurants and car rentals often automatically triggers a refund of the 22% Value Added Tax (IVA) right on your receipt. It is a brilliant perk for cruisers.

6. Local Rules of the Road (The Navigator's Warnings)

- **Buoyage System Change:** Pay close attention. If you have just crossed the Atlantic from Europe or Africa (IALA Region A), remember that **Uruguay is in IALA Region B**. Red Right Returning.

- **The Rio de la Plata Water:** As you move west from Punta del Este, the water changes from blue Atlantic to muddy brown. The river is incredibly shallow, laden with silt, and full of shifting banks. Keep your engine's raw water strainers clean, as the silt can quickly clog heat exchangers.
- **Domestic Movement (Zarpe Local):** You cannot simply pull up your lines and sail from Piriápolis to Colonia. You **must** visit the Prefectura before you leave your current port to get a

domestic *Zarpe* (movement clearance) stamped on your *Rol*, and you must check in with the Prefectura immediately upon arriving at the next port. Movement control is strict but highly efficient.

- **Safety:** Uruguay is generally the safest country in South America. However, standard sensible precautions apply. Lock your dinghy, do not leave outboards unsecured at night, and keep hatches locked if leaving the boat in a busy port.

7. The Departure: Weighing Anchor

Checking out to head south to Argentina or north to Brazil is a simple, straightforward process.

- Proceed to the Prefectura 2-3 hours before your intended departure.
- Settle all marina and yacht club bills (you will often need to show the Prefectura your stamped "paid" receipt from the marina before they will clear you).
- Immigration will stamp your passports out.

- The Prefectura will close out your *Rol de Despacho* and issue your Outward Zarpe.
- Once the Zarpe is issued, you generally have 24 hours to depart territorial waters.

The Navigator's Final Word:
Uruguay is a breath of fresh air. The bureaucracy is logical, the officials are polite, and the infrastructure is safe and reliable. Your biggest challenges here will not be Customs officers or extortion, but rather the fierce *Pampero* winds and the shifting mudbanks of the Rio de la Plata.

Keep one eye firmly on the barometer, respect the Prefectura's movement rules, and enjoy some of the finest beef and Tannat wine on the continent.

Fair winds and following seas!

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You owe me a cup of coffee now.

Thanks.

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Alan Phillips