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Until 2007, Uruguay was strapped for energy resources that forced it to rely on importing energy from South American neighbors. That has changed. Today, 98 percent of the country's power is delivered reliably and affordably from renewable sources. Compare that to the worldwide average that is typically reported in the low- to mid-20 percent range and you can see that this small country might just be on to something. Does little Uruguay have a blueprint for renewable energy that others could follow?

In the decade leading up to 2017, forward-looking policies and projects took Uruguay from having virtually no wind power to nearly 4,000 megawatts of installed capacity. Photo by Jimmy Baikovicius.

Located between Argentina and Brazil, its two larger neighbors and trading partners, Uruguay is geographically the second-smallest nation in South America, with a population of about 3.45 million people, of whom roughly 1.8 million live in the metropolitan area of its capital, Montevideo. Since the signing of the Kyoto Protocol in 1997, Uruguay has surprised its South American neighbors with its growing list of environmental successes, including conserving native forests, protecting biodiverse areas, and showing remarkable progress on a promise to be carbon neutral by 2030.

Among conservation projects that have made international headlines are Uruguayan architect Rafael Viñoly's ecologically driven bridge design at Puente Laguna Garzon that not only protects the lagoon's wildlife, but transforms a typical vehicular crossing into "an event" by reducing the speed limit of the cars so that passengers are provided an opportunity to savor the natural beauty of the lagoon.

Other progressive energy projects include the country's push toward a network of "electric highways". Piloted first along Uruguay's coast, a highway designed for electric vehicles deployed charging stations every 60 km over its entire 300 km length. This highway project links Colonia and Punta Este, two popular tourist cities. Future projects look to embrace the whole country.

To transform its energy landscape, the Frente Amplio, or FA, Uruguay's governing party from 2005 to 2020, recognized the reality of a country dependent on importing fossil fuels while living in an ideal location for solar, wind, and hydraulic power generation.

With its gently-rolling landscape, higher than average year-round sunshine, and hundreds of miles of ocean and river coastline, Uruguay has prime space for deploying energy alternatives. In addition, the country has identified significant opportunities for generating energy from biomass produced by the agriculture industry.

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In 2005, Uruguayan leaders laid out a plan for the country's future built upon a broad consensus among a wide range of national and international stakeholders. It's important to note that this comprehensive plan included not only outside investors, who could offer capital and expertise, but also dedicated in-country stakeholders. To date, the FA's vision for an inclusive, people-oriented strategy for energy transformation has shown not only remarkable promise, but results.

"The energy policy of Uruguay has focused highly on renewable energies, with the ambitious goal of incorporating them in the short term and providing attractive tax benefits for that purpose," says Fernanda Panizza, Biz Latin Hub's country coordinator and corporate lawyer, who counsels both foreign and national business stakeholders in the country. "Uruguay offers not only an advantageous business environment," she notes, "but also great social stability, and considerable fiscal incentives for investments."

Along with the benefits of sourcing renewable energy for new building projects, Panizza describes a foundation for all new architecture and construction that rewards energy conservation.

While Uruguay has made remarkable progress in expanding its renewable energy infrastructure, the country's ground-breaking energy initiatives now face a new challenge: a new governing party with more conservative views and a new president, Luis Lacalle Pou.

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