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INSIDE MARIAH'S CRAZY WORLD

AN EVENING WITH
THE DIVA AT
CAREY PALACE

SUMMER HAIR
SENSATION
LUSCIOUS LOCKS
FOR SEASONAL
ALLURE

AROUND THE WORLD
THE AMAZING
GIRL GUERRILLAS
RISKING THEIR LIVES
FOR FREEDOM

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Going Brazilian


A tiny clifftop village in southern Bahia has become the hippest beach escape in Brazil, attracting a host of international stars. Nigel Tisdall joins the party



One thing you'll want to do in Brazil is hit the beach, right, whether it's to play sport, left, or chill out, below left



Celebrities are drawn to the village square in Trancoso, right and below left, for its shops and laid-back vibe



Despite the influx of tourists, local life continues in Trancoso, right, while Corumbau, opposite, still feels barely discovered





Pousada Etnia hotel is buried in tropical jungle, above, and its rooms have individual style, right



It's just over 500 years since Portuguese explorers first set eyes on the balmy shores of Brazil. Famous for its style and energy, the fifth largest country in the world seems instantly exotic. Havaianas, caipirinhas, samba, carnival, *futebol* – what can be more exciting than flying down to Rio? And, once there, the options are immense.

Shall I plunge into the Amazon jungle? Visit beautiful colonial cities like Olinda and Ouro Preto? See the extraordinary wildlife of the Pantanal? Chill out on the paradise island of Fernando de Noronha?

You'll certainly want to hit the beach. Brazilians are the champions of sand worship, and will happily spend sunny days after moonlit nights chatting, dancing, kissing, playing volleyball and splashing around. With a 4,600-mile coastline, there's ample opportunity to do this, but, for most locals, a seaside break means one thing – Bahia, the soul of Brazil.

Here, the quiet, sandy spot where the Portuguese first stepped ashore is now one of the major resorts to which Brazilians flock for their holidays from December to March. Just as we nip off down to the Med, so Rio and São Paulo city slickers jet north to Porto Seguro, where the high cliffs bordered by golden beaches are reminiscent of the Algarve.

Flying over the dense green forests and winding, tea-coloured rivers of the

country's interior, I suddenly worry I'm about to land in some Costa-style package hell. Silly me – this is Brazil, where even holiday excess is done with flair. Here, there are no high-rises, the hotels explode with trees and flowers and the historic town centres are painted in bright, Caribbean colours. But if you want it, there is madness to be found – Porto Seguro has a drinking strip known

Stars such as Leonardo DiCaprio come for the beaches, dream villas and easygoing vibe

as Passarela do Alcool (Alcohol Walk) and, in season, beach clubs like Axé Moi attract thousands of young Brazilians.

It was these beaches that sparked the late Eighties lambada craze and, today, most foreign visitors stay in Arraial d'Ajuda, a short ferry ride south. This resort is more refined, but still touristy, with a Club Med, charter packages from Europe, plus lots of shops, beach bars and clubbing. If you want to see the Brazilian seaside in full cry, just pack your thong.

But what about cool Brazil? Where does Gisele Bündchen lay her golden locks? 'In Trancoso,' I'm assured. An hour's drive south of Porto Seguro, this fashionable

cliff-top village was founded by Jesuits in 1586, but I doubt they'd approve of the scene today. The minute I step out of my hotel, heading off to see the Igreja de São João Baptista like a good sightseer, I'm virtually floored by a cloud of marijuana fumes. When I surface, possibly 500 years later, I notice the police station is directly opposite the chilled dudes dragging away.

Trancoso was discovered by hippies in the late Seventies, when Brazil was under military rule, then developed a rave scene that turned it into Trance-coso. There are still bearded, free-living, jewellery-selling hippies around, but now they've been joined by wealthy Brazilians and stars, such as Leonardo DiCaprio and Matt Dillon, who come to enjoy its demerara beaches, dream villas and easygoing vibe.

Trancoso is one of those benign spots where celebs go off-duty, sitting out under the stars in the candle-lit restaurants that line the grassy Quadrado, or square, at the heart of the village. The food's good, but not amazing, but the real surprise for a wandering Brit is the shops, which only open around 5pm – after everyone's spent the day on the beach, naturally.

Tucked inside the long rows of one-room, 18th-century cottages is an irresistible parade of funky clothes and gifts. There are names like Rosa Chã (famous for beachwear), Ave Maria (eclectic dresses from Belo Horizonte), Jacaré do Brasil (gorgeous wooden crafts) and Cobras e Lagartos, which makes ▷



If you head for the touristy, yet refined, Arraial d'Ajuda, book in to the beachfront Pousada Pitanga



After celeb-spotting in colourful Trancoso, left, unwind in Fazenda São Francisco do Corumbau, below



◁ colourful bags and furnishings. Oh, and a little emporium where hand-decorated flip-flops are a mere £110. Add in thick heat, palm trees, hammocks and passion-fruit caipirinhas and Trancoso becomes a seductive place best enjoyed at weekends and during holidays.

Rent a yellow dune buggy, take a motorbike-taxi to join the surfistas catching waves or hit the discos playing cheesy *farrô*. Trancoso also has some brilliant

boutique hotels, such as Pousada Etnia, which is buried in tropical jungle with rooms individually designed on themes like Gypsy, Tribal and Morocco. Lazing here, I soon realise Brazilians aren't just kings of the beach, they're also queens of the poolside, too. Think sunshine, white bikinis, Marisa Monte on the CD – and that's just at breakfast. Tall and tan

and young and lovely... the girls and boys from Ipanema really do have it.

South of Trancoso, along the Costa do Descobrimento (Discovery Coast), there are dozens more beaches and coves, all linked by rough tracks and sprinkled

with chic hotels, hideaway beach bars and handicraft stalls. Everything stops at Caraíva, a rustic, car-free resort without mains electricity that you reach on a wooden punt. Beyond lies the

Parque Nacional de Monte Pascoal, which gathers round the 1,846ft peak of Monte Pascoal – the first land the Portuguese explorers glimpsed in April 1500. Sadly for them, the sailors were looking for India, and only stayed ten days.

From here, you can reach Ponta do Corumbau by speedboat, but I take an inland route, passing through fields filled

Tall and tan, young and lovely, the girls and boys from Ipanema really do have it

with papayas, coffee bushes and cattle ranches overlooked by the broody black mountains by Itamaraju. It's a long, hum-numbing drive that provokes better-be-worth-it looks from my companions, and a timely reminder that Brazil is BIG. Bahia state alone is larger than France, but with only a fifth of the population.

The road finally ends at Fazenda São Francisco do Corumbau, a serene designer hotel inserted into an old coconut farm fronted by a deserted beach. If you like beautiful isolation and are happy to look at the stars rather than TV, to hear lapping waves instead of other voices, this is a dream spot to end a mad Brazilian adventure. Staying here feels like being on a desert island, but thankfully one with a smart pool, a pretty white schooner for excursions to the reef and good food.

It's the most relaxing hotel I've ever stayed in, a chance to clear the mind and appreciate that, while Brazil is a great place to party, its real pleasures go far deeper and has everything to do with its glorious and abundant nature. 'From point to point, it is all beach,' the explorers recorded in their journal as they passed along this coast, 'very simple and very beautiful.' And Corumbau still feels like that – just waiting to be discovered. ■

BOOK NOW

✦ GETTING THERE

Varig (0870-120 3020, www.varig.co.uk) flies from London to São Paulo from £717 return in July including taxes. Tam (0118-903 4003; www.tam.com.br) has connecting flights to Porto Seguro from £180 return. Cazenove+Loyd (020-7384 2332; www.cazloyd.com) can arrange tailor-made tours featuring the hotels below and trips to other parts of Brazil.

✦ WHERE TO STAY

In Arraial d'Ajuda, doubles at the beachfront Pousada Pitanga (www.pousadapitanga.com.br) cost from £88. Doubles at Pousada Etnia (www.etniabrasil.com.br) in Trancoso, cost from £101. In Corumbau, doubles at Fazenda São Francisco do Corumbau (www.corumbau.com.br) cost from £268, including meals. All rates include breakfast.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Consult *Brazil* (£16.99, Lonely Planet). Useful websites include www.turismo.gov.br, www.bahia.com.br and www.bahia-online.net.