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Michael Pettis
Professor of Finance at Peking University's Guanghua School of Management

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A beach paradise in remotest Brazil

By Kate Weinberg
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There's a place in Brazil where clichés come true. Perched on a hill above a fishing village is a white house with blue window frames, overlooking a small bay. Fishing boats bob in the foreground; in the distance, the shore swings round into a long stretch of deserted beach, framed by miles of untouched rainforest and twisting mangrove swamps. As unspoilt paradises go, the village of Picinguaba is hardly an original.

As if to prove that this is Hollywood film set territory, enter Emmanuel Rengade, a handsome, high-flying and disenchanting Frenchman working for Enron. Stumbling on Picinguaba, at the age of 31, he decided this was his chance for a better, more emotionally rich life. Cashing in his chips just before Enron went down in 2001, he bought the picture-postcard property sitting on the coast, four hours between Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo. Over the next three years he transformed it into a small hotel.

Almost all of the 10 white-washed rooms have a small terrace and a hammock looking over a lush garden. Orchids twist up palm trees and even the roof of the small bar has become a tropical flowerbed. To one side of the swimming pool, four sun-beds are positioned towards the view, as if urging you, like Rengade, to turn away from your materialistic past and drink in the spiritual antidote that is Picinguaba.



For Rengade, the film turned into real life but for the visitor, Pousada Picinguaba is a respite from it. Beach holidays tend to leave me cold – or rather, hot and bored. In Picinguaba, after a breakfast of freshly baked pan de queso and guava juice, one of the impossibly good-looking staff (central casting surely had a hand in this) will ask you what your plans are for the day. Lazing by the pool is presented as an attractive Plan B. You are gently encouraged to pack ham and cheese sandwiches and a couple of beers and trek to the waterfall. Or go kayaking up the mangrove-lined river.

Best of all, you can rent one of the schooners bobbing in the bay to take you round a handful of tiny, mostly uninhabited islands. The crew tips you out into small coves to go snorkelling. After a morning of sun and salty air, you're deposited on another beach for lunch. The restaurant is a shack half-falling into the sea, but heaps of delicious fried squid and cold beers are brought to you to the background crackle of samba on the radio.

Rengade himself is the first to admit that his story is a cliché – in fact, he is exploring how much further he can take it. He has just bought a large *fazenda* (the Portuguese word for *hacienda*) two hours' drive up into the mountains, which he plans to turn into a rural version of Pousada Picinguaba. With its 500 hectares – including cows, horses, geese, a donkey and a large airy house that can be rented with the old owner's Stetsons still hanging on the hat-stands – Rengade seems to understand his market. Like him, they are the affluent in search of the authentic.

In the morning we wake to see three horses tethered to a palm tree outside our window. The mountain air is fresh, and riding around his raw, unspoilt estate we fall, wholesale, for Rengade's vision.

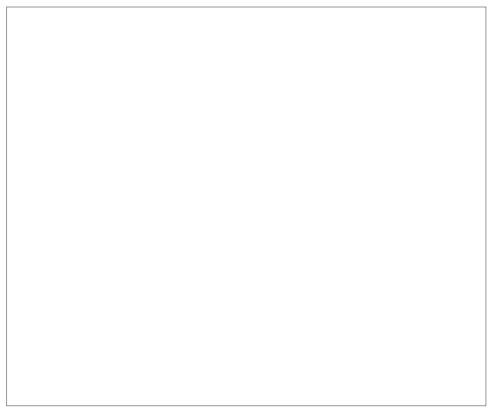
On the day before we leave Picinguaba for Rio, we squeeze in a last trek with our guide Meneguetti. Picking our way over moss-covered boulders and past giant, jewel-coloured butterflies, we arrive at a small freshwater pool in the forest and bathe in the cold, clear water. On our way out, my travelling companion freezes for a moment, then quietly tells me to come and look at one of the rocks. A small, olive- and brown-patterned snake is sitting, coiled in the sun. "Snake," Meneguetti says sorrowfully. "*Jararaca*. Very rare I see this here."

On the way back to the road, Meneguetti explains that the venomous *Jararaca* is called "the mother-in-law snake" because it strikes unprovoked. Why, I ask my travelling companion, is there such a cliché about mother-in-laws? He thinks for a moment, then smiles, before uttering the biggest truism of them all: that clichés are clichés because so often they are true.

Like finding a serpent in paradise.

Pousada Picinguaba, tel: +55 12 3836 9105; www.picinguaba.com

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