

And Barry Manilow doesn't sing about it



Parati was just a simple fishing village. Now the international literati are discovering this tropical haven. Clive Anderson joined them

In the business world there is a cruel joke about Brazil: it's the country of the future – always has been, always will be. But whatever its long-term economic prospects it is very much a place to visit now. A fantastic landscape with beautiful people, impressive rainforests, extensive beaches and famously exciting carnivals. It's the fifth largest country in the world, it plays the best football and offers a good rate of exchange to the pound. What's not to like?

Well, I understand you can get mugged and murdered in some of Brazil's finest cities, but as it happens I have not managed to find my way to the city centres nor have I lost myself in their shanty towns or *favelas*. In fact I have been to Brazil twice, both in the last few months. Just before Christmas I went up the Amazon for the BBC and this month I attended the first international literary festival organised by, among others, Liz Calder of Bloomsbury Books, in the small but perfectly preserved town of Parati. Parati is an old colonial port on Brazil's south-eastern coast, roughly half way between Sao Paulo and Rio de Janeiro. Some say it should be spelt Paraty. Even more pedantically, you can call it by its full name, Vila de Nossa Senhora dos Remédios de Paraty, but that might be taking it too far.

For my visit I stayed half an hour away in Picinguaba, a little fishing village in one of a sequence of breathtakingly beautiful bays that characterise this coast. Off-shore lie strings of islands, many of which are rounded like blobs of meringue floating in the South Atlantic.

From the coast rise thickly wooded hills and mountains, giving it the name, the Costa Verde. Unlike the tumbled peaks of northern Europe these hills are covered in abundant growth all the way to the top. The trees constitute one of the remaining parts of the Atlantic rainforest – the Mata

Atlantica – which used to stretch all along this coastline.

There's only 7 per cent of the forest left, but here it is still magnificent. Not that I am the first to admire this landscape – in 1503 Amerigo Vespucci, who somehow managed to get a whole new world named after him, came here and remarked: 'Oh God, if there were a paradise on Earth, it wouldn't be far from here.'

To get to paradise I flew to Sao Paulo. The airline industry is supposed to be experiencing hard times but my flights there and back (British Airways) were full to bursting. On a map of South America, Sao Paulo and Rio de Janeiro look close together but are more than 250 miles apart, leaving plenty of room for unspoilt coastline in between.

Sao Paulo is the larger, having a population of more than 10 million, compared with Rio's 7m. But it does not enjoy such a high international profile. It is, if you like, the Glasgow to Rio's Edinburgh. And Barry Manilow doesn't sing songs about Sao Paulo's beauty spots, so that's a bonus.

From Sao Paulo it takes more than three-and-a-half hours to drive to Picinguaba. The first part of the journey is along the Ayrton Senna Highway – the great Brazilian motor racing hero died in a 200mph crash at the 1994 San Marino Grand Prix and you can only hope commemorating him encourages road safety rather than excessive speed.

Away from Sao Paulo, the road takes you through hillsides of pasture land and tree plantations, climbs over the mountains and then descends to the coast.

There are just a few villages and towns on the way, the last of which is Ubatuba, a scruffy seaside town which I hope boasts a diving club called Ubatuba Scuba. 'Ubatuba' actually means 'place of canoes'. Picinguaba, which means 'fish



shelter', is another 30 miles along the coast road. The village has a couple of rows of buildings just by the shore – a school, a couple of dozen houses, a small shop confidently named the Emporium, some boat shelters and the open verandas of a few bars and cafes. In the bay a dozen cheerfully painted fishing boats wait at anchor.

At first, there is little sign of the Pousada Picinguaba, where I am heading. The road just peters out when it gets to the end of the beach. To get to the pousada you have to abandon your car, cross a little creek by way of a few planks

and climb a paved path between a few more houses.

Pousada Picinguaba is the brainchild of two young Frenchmen, one of whom, Emmanuel Rengade, was there during my stay, together with a small staff recruited from the village. The hotel building is in the Portuguese Baroque style: outside – white walls, blue framed windows, inside – polished tiled floors and airy rooms decorated with tribal artefacts. Overall, it combines Brazilian charm and French chic. The only tasteless elements are the

ubiquitous hummingbird feeders. Delightful as they are, hummingbirds are, like small children, attracted to garish bits of plastic and sugary water.

The rooms all have a view over the bay. Mine even had an *en suite* Jacuzzi but I wasn't able to use it because of a water shortage. The hotel does have something of an environmental ethos. So a warm shower and a shave with cold water was all I could enjoy.

The rooms are not air conditioned but do have a ceiling fan, though even that was not really needed in August, which is winter in these parts – Picinguaba is practically on the Tropic of Capricorn.

There are no phones in the rooms – apparently a deliberate policy to force the guests to relax, which I found slightly stressful. The hotel is also in a mobile phone blind spot, so to make calls hotel guests had to go down to the beach – admittedly only a two minute walk – to pick up a signal.

To receive emails I had to plug into the phone in reception, but you probably won't worry about all of this if you are really trying to get away from it all.

On the beach there are always a

Factfile

Clive Anderson travelled with Exsus Travel (020 7292 5050; www.exsus.com). The company offers seven nights at Picinguaba from £1,280 per person. The price, based on two sharing, includes accommodation in a double on a half-board basis, return flights with British Airways, transfers and taxes. For a Jacuzzi suite, the supplement is £190pp for your stay.





Sandwiched between Rio de Janeiro and Sao Paulo, Parati boasts a colourful street life, left, and a sequence of beautiful bays.

Photographs by Peter Adams/Alamy; Christopher Pällitz/Network

few dogs, one of which has attached himself to the pousada and accompanies guests on walks to nearby beaches, jogs around the bay, or where they will. On my first day he nudged me in the direction of a beachside bar. He probably has shares in it.

In addition to the dogs, the beach is picked clean by a flock – if that is the collective noun – of small black vultures who bounce around all day like the ones who did the Beatles impression in the *Jungle Book*.

The Pousada serves a magnificent breakfast of fresh fruit, specially made cakes, locally baked bread, cheese, cold meat, jams and honey. Dinner is served in a single sitting at about 8pm. Large pots are put out and you take what you want. As elsewhere in Brazil, there is always rice and beans to go with the main course which most evenings was fish, of which there is an abundant local supply.

According to Emmanuel, the way of serving food and the spirit of the place encourages people to get to know each other, which worked while I was there. My fellow guests included a British family who had lived in Portugal for

several generations, and a very dynamic Danish couple. The pousada lays on various activities – diving, riding and the like – or you can just lie under the palm trees around the small swimming pool.

I had time to go on a trip on the hotel's 40ft schooner to picnic on one of the many offshore islands. We had the sea more or less to ourselves unless you count the dolphins which, here and there, arced out of the water in front of us. Unluckily it was a rather grey day, so we eventually sailed to a beachside cafe to sit out the drizzle. Nine of us had a reasonable lunch for 100 reais (about £21).

On a much hotter day we were taken on a rainforest walk by a local guide. The Danish couple led the way in stripping off and diving into every ice-cold pool and waterfall we came to. A half-Swedish girl and I led the way in being bitten to pieces by the insects.

The Atlantic rainforest is not quite the same as the better known Amazon forest – most notably it is not so wet underfoot – but it features a similarly wide range of enormous trees, plants and creepers. Everything is so fertile in the rainforest. Here and there wooden

fence-posts hammered into the ground are sprouting new branches. It's hard to track down many mammals, but butterflies, some the colour and size of Wedgwood plates are everywhere. As are birds of every colour and sound.

But enough of nature, there was the book festival to go to in Parati. Parati's days of glory were in the eighteenth century when it was an important port at the end of an old Indian trail used to transport gold on its way to Europe. Once a safer road was built to Rio de Janeiro, Parati declined. It perked up in a coffee boom in the nineteenth century but remains an essentially eighteenth-century town in a grid of mainly two-storey buildings – houses, shops and churches built in a simple baroque style (if it is possible to be both simple and baroque).

In recent years, a new coast

road has opened up the town and the whole of this coast to increased traffic. As a result the old town has now acquired a penumbra of a new town and a marina, but its core is basically as it was when the gold traders left. The streets are not paved with gold but with huge stones. 'Cobbles' would scarcely do them justice. They are rocks many times the size of anything you would see on *Coronation Street*. Walking around the town is more like picking your way over a beach.

The town is pretty well devoted to tourism – weekends from Rio and Sao Paulo as well as travellers from further afield. There are souvenir shops, pousadas and restaurants of all kinds. I am not a great shopper, but it is as pleasant as it can be in Brazil. Brazilians are not officious shopkeepers, leaving it up to you to decide what

you want. A small group of Amerindians sat in one of the streets, offering bows and arrows, musical instruments and other items. Europeans are supposed to have bought up tracts of the Americas for the price of a few beads. Now the original owners are selling the beads back to us in the form of ethnic jewellery. Good luck to them.

Ten miles up the road to Rio, hidden away in the hills, is a hotel and restaurant run by Olivier, another Frenchman, le Gite d'Indiatiba. Here the cooking is very French but they use local ingredients. The bill here came to £35 for two.

Parati drums up business with fetes and festivals. Holy Week, Saints' Days and the rum harvest do not go uncelebrated. And carnival sounds good in Parati. According to a local guidebook, 'Young people put mud and seaweeds from Jabaquara Beach on their bodies, frightening the other people. They walk rhythmically crying their shout of war "Uga Uga! Ha! Ha!"'

So the literary festival is just one of many. It comes hard on the

Continued on page 13



Bend it... on the beach in Brazil.

'Uga! Uga! Ha! Ha!' is the carnival cry

Continued from page 3

celebration of seafood. This weekend it's Julian Barnes, Hanif Kureishi and Eric Hobsbawm, a week before it was wetfish, prawn and crab.

Yes, I said Eric Hobsbawm. The festival featured British American and Brazilian authors who were all enthusiastically received by their fans. But, without doubt, the biggest star was Hobsbawm. I don't know if the octogenarian, Marxist historian plays to many sell-out crowds in England, but in Parati he packs them in. In his talk based on his autobiography, Hobsbawm mentions how tiresome it is that in Europe people keep bringing up his support of the old Soviet Union. Not so, here in Brazil, where he is listened to attentively.

But suddenly there was a disturbance in the hall. Was someone objecting to his analysis of history? No it was just a member of the

audience fainting in the stifling heat.

I'll tell you how big Eric Hobsbawm is in Brazil. On my journey home I must have been looking suspicious and I was subject to a random search by undercover police at Sao Paulo airport. They were unimpressed by my claim to be writing for *The Observer*. Pressed for credentials I could only produce a BBC biro.

But when I mentioned the Parati Festival, one of the officers enthusiastically claimed Hobsbawm as his favourite author. How many customs officers at Heathrow would say the same, or would be a fan of a Brazilian historian?

Anyway, with or without the festival, Parati is a little gem and well worth a visit, as is the Costa Verde as a whole. As long as we can all go there without ruining it. Something you always have to bear in mind when you are visiting paradise.