



HIPPIE HIPPIE CHIC

A handful of new luxurious pousadas are turning up the volume on Trancoso's previously hushed glamour. Paul Richardson saunters in and orders a caipirinha.

There are two possible reactions to the news of your imminent visit to Trancoso. One: neutral, nonplussed, never-heard-of-it. The other: eyes widened, envious smile, you lucky so-and-so. This colonial town on the north-east coast of Brazil has recently joined the ranks of those eccentric, legendary and beautiful places that all of you wants to tell the whole world about, while the other half tries desperately to keep under your hat.

Part of the attraction of Trancoso, in a sense, is how far it is from almost anywhere. To get there from the UK you first need to fly to São Paulo, take a connecting flight to Salvador de Bahia and another short hop to Porto Seguro. From

there it's a 90-minute taxi ride, including a ferry across the river Bananeira.

My driver, Lucas, steered off the rusting boat, opening a path through a crowd of lean, brown, lightly clad bodies. The car radio was playing this year's Carnival hits in the axe style, a souped-up, drum-heavy dance music typical of Bahia. A few years back, shouted Lucas, the Brazilian model Giselle Bündchen had come down to Trancoso with an English girl called Naomi. Had I heard of her? We were now driving down a dust-blown

track, hemmed in on either side by tropical vegetation. I tried to imagine the two famous fashionistas coming down this track.

their inauspicious negotiating, the potholes, with their LVs bumping around in the back.

Trancoso might remind old hands of St Tropez in the 1960s, or Mykonos in the 1980s. Its closest equivalent in Europe might be Ibiza, but the Ibiza of 40 years ago, before the cheap tourism, the disco mayhem, and the avalanche of drugs. What makes Trancoso different from those other "sevens" is that it manages to be glamorous without really trying. Despite its fashionable patrons, the town shows a healthy lack of interest in the vagaries of celebrity culture – or indeed, in anything that might be going on in the outside world.

São João Batista dos Índios, to give Trancoso its original name, was founded by the festivals in 1586, as a position from which to fight the smugglers of pau-brasil (brazilwood). A few miles north at Porto Seguro lies the spot where Portuguese explorers

Main picture: a schlep from most parts of the world. Trancoso has retained its easy glamour. Right: traditional houses have become shops and cafés.



first set foot on April 22, 1500, said the first Masson Brazilian soil, and founded a colony.

For centuries, the village's population of Pataxó Indians lived off whatever they could pick, grow, hunt or fish. There was no access from outside but the dirt track and when it rained that became impassable. Francisco's disconnection from the outside world was so complete that until as late as the 1970s its inhabitants were unfamiliar with the Brazilian national currency, the real.

Anyone here will tell you the rest of the story: a group of young men from São Paulo, dropouts from good families, stumbled on the place in the early 1970s, looking to settle away from the long arm of the military government. "These outsiders bought up great tracts of land from the unbelievably locals (known as "natives"), paying in gas fridges, cows and crates of beer, and brought their sandal-wearing, wealthy friends. Ten years ago the town

was finally connected to the national grid.

You can now pay for things by credit card, and there's even a cash machine or two, though power cuts frequently take them out for hours at a time. In 2000 a new highway (OK, a two-track asphalt road) was built - but many drivers, like Lucas, swear the dirt track is quicker.

After its lazy hippie years, Francisco has thrown in its lot with tourism, and is now doing very well. The town doesn't "do" straightforward posh hotels, but a new line in gorgeous posidubs in the shape of converted village houses with tiled or hatched roofs, and "tropical minimalist" interiors in polished cement and recycled wood more than compensates for the lack of conventional five-star luxury. I opted for the Villas de Francisco, a collection of palm-hatched pavilions set among lush gardens with lawns, palms and beds of tropical shrubs.

The owner-manager, Caden Briggs PhD, was working as a chief information officer in



a hospital in Memphis, Tennessee, when he took a vacation with a Brazilian friend, fell in love with what was then still an idyllic backwater, bought a patch of land behind the beach, and set about creating his villas. I found him an excellent host – solicitous, helpful, but never intrusive. I came to look forward to the stupendous Brazilian breakfast, a panoply of dense chocolate cakes, *pão de queijo* (“cheese bread”), yam-flour pancakes, sweetmeats made from guava and coconut, endless tropical fruits and a delicious tapioca pudding that came close to erasing the childhood trauma of the boarding-school version.

A few yards from the hotel, down a short boardwalk through a mangrove forest, lay the Praia dos Nativos, part of the string of fabulous beaches on the coastline from Ilheus south to Vitória. The sea on this stretch of southern Bahia isn't dazzling and domesticated like the Caribbean, but full of energy, sound and colour, echoing along its length with crashing breakers, and beige-coloured sand underfoot, fine and crunchy, like walking on soft brown sugar.

Up this way, at the northern end of the beach, there was barely a soul. Pousadas and private estates lay hidden behind the palms. Towards the southern end, I could just make out the palm-roofed beach bars where in high season, wild parties bring together bohemians, fashion folk and *nativos*. Above that was the green-clad hill where the village rises on a promontory.

An hour later I was up there looking down here. The heartbeat of Trancoso life



is the Quadrado, a tree-shaded sward with a row of low-rise houses on either side and a small church. Charming in its absolute simplicity, at one end its whitewashed façade rises to a modestly rococo silhouette with the deep blue Atlantic Ocean forming a spectacular backdrop.

The Quadrado is Trancoso's social and ceremonial centre, a tropical cross between a Portuguese village square and an English village green. Only a handful of its tiled huts are still lived in by locals. The rest have been converted into funky little boutiques, pousadas and restaurants with outside tables under the shade of overarching trees, and prettily done up in a style that you may find either utterly charming, or unbearably twee.

Over the New Year, when Brazil takes its long summer hols, the Quadrado



resembles a catwalk, with beautiful people from São Paulo strutting their stuff, while the amused *nativos* look on. One long-term resident jokingly compared the constant sound of helicopters coming and going overhead, bringing in the trendy tourists, to the war scenes in *Apocalypse Now*.

It's a sod's law of international travel, at least in my experience, that whenever you arrive somewhere, the crucial concert or festival or otherwise important event will always have happened the day before. This time I was lucky: my arrival in Trancoso coincided exactly with the annual celebration of San Blas or Saint Blaise – a fourth-century Armenian bishop believed

by traditionally minded Catholics to provide protection against diseases of the throat. Up at the Quadrado the celebrations were in full swing. In the church a Mass

was in progress and arms were raised to heaven, black bodices swaying to a strumming guitar. Ceiling fans on long poles turned lazily, stirring the sticky air.

Out in the square, a very different kind of ceremony was in progress. A capoeira performance in the centre of the grass had small children in white costumes tumbling and bouncing to the chants of the onlookers and the hypnotic twang of the berimbau, a single-string percussion instrument of African origin. San Blas coincides with one of Brazil's most important festivals, that of Yemanjá, goddess of the sea in Candomblé folklore. When the kids retired, their elders began a dance in homage to the goddess, wearing big floppy straw fishermen's hats and carrying their nets on their shoulders. Bangers and fireworks filled the air with smoke.

I took a walk away from the action, checking out the former fishermen's huts

in their eye-popping livery of sky-blue, purple, Day-Glo orange, Brazilian-flag green, shocking pink, and canary yellow. Plaques on the houses, now lived in mostly by São Paulo fashion mavens and business folk, told the stories of their former residents. Like Dona Hígina, a nurse, midwife and seamstress, and occupant of number 45, who was famous for her nourishing bread-fruit stew. Changing times have turned villagers' shacks into luxury pousadas, such as Uxua, brainchild of Wilbert Das, creative director of the Diesel fashion label, and Jacaré do Brasil Casas, both of which have frontage on the Quadrado and amazing views of sea and forest. Both Uxua and Jacaré are stimulating essays in rustic modernism, playing with the textures of tropical woods, recycled materials and marble-smooth polished cement.

An evening breeze was coming in off the Atlantic as I sauntered down the cobbled



Pousadas come in the shape of converted houses with “tropical minimalist” interiors.

lanes towards the beach. At a picture-perfect beach bar incorporating a wooden fishing boat there was more partying in honour of Yemanjá. Waiters handed out flower bunches, to be laid at the feet of an effigy depicting the “queen of the sea” as a voluptuous maiden in a long flowing gown, or tossed into the rolling surf. As he mixed my caipirinha, the barman turned suddenly serious in demeanour, his dazzling smile briefly eclipsed. There have been some sightings of Yemanjá, he said, by fishermen in their boats out at sea, generally under the full moon.

In the early hours of the morning I walked back along the sand to Villas de Trancoso. Carnations and roses lay in drifts where the high tide had left them.

The morning after the night before, Dr Briggs took me on a tour of Trancoso’s secret swanky side, concentrated in the luxury enclave of Terravista, just outside the town to the north. Up here there is a small airport, Club Med has a property (not recommended, unless you have a pressing need for bland international five-star comfort) and a golf course, which clings to the edge of a cliff along an otherwise pristine stretch of coastline and is widely regarded as the finest in Brazil. The houses are grandly orchestrated symphonies in tropical wood, with palm-front roofs and soaring interior spaces, golf buggies parked in the driveways and discreet but omnipresent security. Galen pointed out the properties and reeled off their owners: this one belonged to the Constantino brothers, owners of the Brazilian airline Gol, this one to a British investment banker, that one to a woman who sells most of the gold



jewellery in Rio. The rich and famous, said Galen, come down to Trancoso discreetly by private plane or helicopter, stay up here in private villas, and venture out late for dinner in the Quadrado. You want names? Hell give you names: Matt Dillon, Calvin Klein, Leonardo DiCaprio, Valentino, Al and Tipper Gore and various Agnellis have all dropped by in recent years.

What do they find to do here? The same, it seems, as the rest of us: not very much, and all of it very slowly. The Trancoso programme, such as it is, consists in spending the day on the beach, fortifying oneself with fruit juices and/or caipirinhas, before returning to the pousada

for a late dinner at one of the restaurants of the moment, like Mariaca or Capim Santo, followed by drinks in the square, or a rave-up down on the beach. Various daytime excursions from Trancoso are possible: to the glorious beach at Espelho, regularly voted one of the loveliest in Brazil, or another hour down the dirt track to the rustic village of Caratava, which was connected to the electricity network in 2007 and is a time-capsule vision of what Trancoso itself must once have been like.

What is the future, then, for a picturesque colonial town overlooking one of the world’s most delectable stretches of unspoiled tropical beach? A cynic would think it entirely bleak. Then again, Brazil gives you a sense that, with 8,000km of coastline to play with, a certain amount of spoilage would hardly make much of a difference. As it happens, legislation is tightening up by the year, and it’s now so hard to get permits to build on the coast that a Spanish hotel chain, having bought a tract of land and wrestled with the paperwork for years, is rumoured to have given up and gone home. If Fasano, owner of the marvellous Fasano hotels in São Paulo and Rio, ever goes ahead with its dream of a property in Trancoso (local rumours suggest they may already have the land), it would undoubtedly push the town’s fashion credentials to a new high. But all that seems a long way off. Trancoso’s saving grace, perhaps, is that it really is a long way from anywhere.

Back in the town, the Quadrado had slumped into a deep post-party

slumber. A lissom girl with waist-length blonde hair and hot pants emerged from a turquoise-painted house and padded across the grass. In the shade of a giant fig tree a little black-clad granny lay snoozing in a chair. From a garden somewhere came the sound of a trimmer put to work.

After 40 years of being told as much by all comers, this tiny and self-absorbed community has finally realised what a convincing version of paradise it really is, but – to its eternal credit – refuses to let this knowledge go to its head. For the really remarkable thing about Trancoso is the way that, against all the odds, it has managed to retain the ingenious charm that brought it fame and fortune in the first place. ♦

FAR OUT...

The best time to visit Trancoso is during the summer months (December-March), when temperatures are between 28°C and 35°C. The average temperature in winter (June-September) is 24°C, with June and July the lowest months of the low season. Avoid the busy period before and during the Carnival (the weekend before Ash Wednesday) when prices are high.

Paul Richardson travelled to Trancoso as a guest of bespoke travel agent **Black Tomato** (020-7426 9888; +187-7815 1497; www.blacktomato.co.uk), which can arrange seven nights in Brazil from £2,450, including flights from London, two nights in the Fasano in Rio de Janeiro, five nights in Villas de Trancoso, private transfers with English-speaking guide and a guided tour of Santa Theresa. **Villas de Trancoso** (+5573-3668 1151; www.mybrazilianbeach.com); one-bedroom villa from R\$740 (about £265). **Uxua** (+5573-3668 2166; www.uxuacasaahotel.com); one-bedroom villa from R\$920 (about £325). **Jacaré do Brazil** (+5573-3668 1470; www.jacaredobrasil.com.br?); doubles from R\$514 (about £185).

Top: the Master Suite at Villas

de Trancoso is an exercise

in spacious tropical luxury. Above: a local cowboy rests his horses at a beach bar.