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Brazilian bounty: On the beach at Pouso da Cajaíba. Skirt by Giorgio Armani; sunglasses by Ray-Ban. Below: The area's largest island, Ilha Grande.



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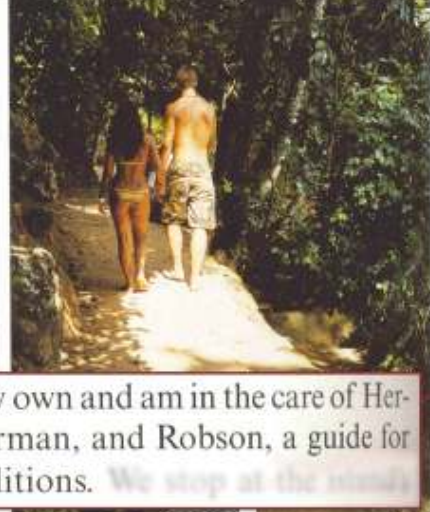
TEN DAYS BEFORE CARNAVAL, RIO IS shifting into overdrive, preparing for the hot-blooded crowds while samba schools practice late into the night for their moment in the spotlight. But from where I'm sitting, only a hundred miles to the southwest, it's hard to imagine that such a bacchanal is taking place—or even that such a teeming metropolis is just a two-hour drive away. Here on Brazil's Costa Verde, the spectacle is the Mata rain forest, small fishing towns, and the jade-green Atlantic. (Once, the rain forest stretched the length of the entire coast, over a thousand miles, to Bahia.) Empty sawtooth bays are backed by forested mountains. On the waterfront, fishing boats head out to sea, while a few white-sailed sloops do day-trips to nearby islands. It's no wonder these hidden beaches, deserted islets, tiny villages, and colonial towns between Rio and São Paulo are becoming favored retreats for well-heeled Brazilians and jet-setters who arrive by speedboat or helicopter.

I start my tour of the 365-island archipelago of Angra dos Reis ("Bay of Kings") on its largest landmass, Ilha Grande, a 119-square-mile tropical island that was first home to coffee plantations and then to a penal colony (until it became too expensive to transport prisoners and food across the bay). As I make my way around the 106 white-sand beaches and blue

You see the architectural fancies of the superrich as well as details like a family dog waiting on a pier



I have a boat of my own and am in the care of Hernani, a former fisherman, and Robson, a guide for Blue Parallel Expeditions.



lagoons whose sandy bottoms are littered with yellow and orange starfish, I can't help but be relieved that tourism came here only in 1994—and in such a gentle form. The jungle seems to want to reclaim whatever has been built on its shores, creeping down as far as it possibly can without touching the saltwater. There are no cars on the island, and the only way to explore the rain forest is on foot, with the most challenging hike being the one to the top of 3,200-foot Pico do Papagaio ("Parrot's Peak"). Rio's stylish set are not inclined to make the effort, preferring to hop on a boat and retreat to a cove to sunbathe and sip *caipirinhas*.

I have a boat of my own and am in the care of Hernani, a former fisherman, and Robson, a guide for Blue Parallel Expeditions. We stop at the island's main town, Vila do Abraão, a small stretch of restaurants, posadas, and a couple of trinket shops along the beach. Like most of the tiny villages around here, it has a whitewashed church surrounded by flowering trees. From Playa de Palmas, it's a twenty-minute walk to Lopes Mendes, Ilha Grande's most famous beach: Its position on the open Atlantic makes it impossible for smaller boats to reach the shore. I am still recovering from a broken ankle, and after attempting the steep rocky trail, I realize that I will have to sit this one out. I send my friend Barbara to investigate with Robson and lounge under a tree, listening to the



Parati's pull: A bar at Ranchos Beach in fishing village Trindade; painting on the Rua do Comercio; on the way to Ilha Grande.

[INDIA]

(91-120-424-2181; royalorienttrain.com; doubles, \$330).

HERITAGE ON WHEELS

Providing a three-day option leaving from Jaipur, *Heritage on Wheels* tours Rajasthan's desert regions. The first stop is the pinkish-red Bikaner. Although not the equal of Jaisalmer (see the *Palace on Wheels*, below), Bikaner's fort and Jain temples are impressive—indeed, the palaces inside the fort are breathtaking. Check out the Karan Mahal, with paintings in gold leaf on its walls, and the Anup Mahal, whose ceiling mirrors cast reflections onto carpeted floors.

After Bikaner, the train continues to the Gajner Wildlife Sanctuary, where you take a short safari,

as a platform for court ladies who watched street processions through its hundreds of windows while maintaining their seclusion. Home to the royal family, the City Palace is surrounded by exquisite gardens and has a magnificent brick observatory coated with gypsum; look for an enormous sundial.

On the third day, the train ventures into the forbidding Thar desert to visit the city of Jaisalmer, near the Pakistani border. A real desert city, Jaisalmer has buildings made of pale sandstone (hence its nickname "the Golden City"), and its *haveli* are elaborately carved and adorned with frescoes, especially the Patwon-ki-Haveli, built by noted opium traders. The main pleasure of the

ers). Getting there requires a specialist, and Emmanuel Burgio, of **Blue Parallel**, organizes everything from helicopter transfers to the Angra dos Reis islands to setting up your hotel and guide in Parati (800-256-5307; blueparallel.com). Book

PALACE ON WHEELS

The *Palace on Wheels* departs from Delhi for seven-day excursions through northern Rajasthan, including stops in Jaipur and Agra, before returning to Delhi (three cities collectively known as the "Golden Triangle"). Luckily, a full day's tour of each is part of the itinerary.

Often called the Pink City, Jaipur was painted the traditional color of Rajasthan hospitality in 1856 to commemorate a visit by Prince Albert, Queen Victoria's consort. It has an old walled quarter and vibrant 18th- and 19th-century palaces, far too many to see in a single day. Jaipur's bazaars have some of India's best textiles and jewelry, but the city is hot, hectic, and touristy—the train's highly structured tour will likely be a relief. At the heart of the City Palace complex (the historical epicenter) lie most of Jaipur's famous sites, including the Hawa Mahal, or "Palace of the Winds." Built in 1799, it served

its over-the-top opulence.

From here, the *Palace on Wheels* passes through a junction called Sawai Madhopur, which lies conveniently close to Ranthambore National Park, a famous tiger sanctuary. It's a beautiful spot, but you won't be alone since hordes of tourists flock to see the big cats. Although day hunters, the tigers don't seem overly concerned with the thousands of snapping cameras. The train then passes through Udaipur, winding up at Agra's magnificent Taj Mahal (212-920-2543; palaceonwheels.com; doubles, \$2,060-\$2,695).

VICEROY OF INDIA

The Viceroy of India tour takes in a 15-day trip from Mumbai to Calcutta on the train that is *The Deccan Odyssey*. There are two runs a year, in April and September, and the first stop is Jaipur, where you'll see the usual suspects: the Amber Fort, the Jantar Mantar observatory, and the

Hawa Mahal palace (with dinner at the Rambagh Palace). The next stop is Agra, then a day in Delhi, then Varanasi, and then Darjeeling, the mecca of tea lovers. The tiny Darjeeling Himalayan Railway (which received World Heritage Site status in 1999) makes the eight-hour journey up to Darjeeling, where you'll spend three nights. An excursion to see the sun rising over the Himalayas and a helicopter ride to Gangtok, in Sikkim, are both optional. From nearby Bagdogra, it's a one-hour flight to Calcutta, the grandest of all the colonial cities, where the British Raj lives on in the stately architecture (813-258-3323; coxandkingsusa.com; doubles, \$9,995). —Lawrence Osborne

Brazil's Costa Verde



The Costa Verde's high season runs from December through the end of February (expect frequent tropical showers). Getting there requires a specialist, and Emmanuel Burgio, of **Blue Parallel**, organizes everything from helicopter transfers to the Angra dos Reis islands to setting up your hotel and guide in Parati (800-256-5307; blueparallel.com). Book a boat to see the islands off the Costa Verde, whether a day's outing in a fishing vessel (hire one with a captain for about \$20 an hour at Parati's wharf) or a speedboat (hire one with a captain and guide for upwards of \$300 a day through your hotel or travel agent).

The country code for Brazil is 55. Prices quoted are for May 2007.

Lodging

On Ilha Grande, the largest island, with more than 100 white-sand beaches, **Sítio do Lobo**, with its own cove facing the main-

land, used to be a coffee plantation. The same family still owns it, and the place has a private-home feel (24-3361-4438; sitiodolobo.com.br; doubles, \$325, including breakfast, dinner, and boat transfer). On the mainland, **Pestana Angra's** 27 bungalows are the area's best equipped, with air-conditioning, TV, and big bathrooms (some with whirlpools, saunas, and/or ocean views). The amenities and dishes such as salt-crusted sea bass make up for the lack of English-speaking servers (24-3364-2005; pestana.com; doubles, \$430-\$470, including meals).

In the colonial gem of Parati, an able staff, well-restored rooms, and low prices make **Pousada Pardieiro** a quiet alternative to hotels on the main drag, a short walk away (24-3371-1370; pousadapardieiro.com.br; doubles, \$155-\$182). Half an hour south of town and twice the price, **Pousada Picinguaba** has a spectacular location overlooking the bay and a small fishing village, but it has no AC and lots of mosquitoes (12-3836-9105; picinguaba.com; doubles, \$307-\$385, including breakfast and dinner).

Dining

On Catimbau Island, you can eat a lunch of fresh fish at **Eh-Lahô** and then swim off the dock in the aquariumlike water (24-9222-8954; entrées, \$12-\$28). In Parati, the airy **Porto** has high ceilings and does an inventive take on classic Brazilian dishes (14 Rua do Comercio; 24-3371-1058; entrées, \$15-\$25). The unexpected find is in the Mata Atlantico rain forest, near Parati: **Villa Verde** sits beside a waterfall and is reached via a suspension bridge. The setting is incredible, as are dishes such as ravioli with pesto and a surprising Brazilian edge (Estrada Paraty—Cunha km. 7; 24-3371-7808; entrées, \$11-\$18).

Reading

Brazil resident Christopher Van Buren concentrates on the coast in **Moon Handbooks'** well-researched *Brazil* (\$22).

—Ondine Cohane