



BAHIAN GROOVE
A living space at Barracuda Hotel & Villas, a Tropical Modern retreat in Itacaré, with an artwork by Peter Åström. Opposite: each villa has a private pool.



SENSUAL HEALING

Itacaré is the Brazilian playground where surf meets samba. With idyllic breaks, mangrove forests and boho-luxe lodgings, all infused with the heady flavours and sounds of Afro-Brazilian culture, it's a newly sizzling locale.

STORY BY STEPHANIE RAFANELLI PHOTOGRAPHY BY MARTA TUCCI

EXPLORE



SWELL TIMES
Above from left: a surfer at Praia da Tiririca; pepper sauce and dendê oil; Café com Surf. Left: the beach town is a magnet for surfers from everywhere.



Bahia holds a special place in the hearts of Brazilians. “*Vamos para a Bahia!*” a woman screams with excitement at the back of my Latam flight from sprawling southern megalopolis São Paulo to Porto Seguro in the northeastern state that forever holds a steady 28 degrees. Everyone cheers; the heavy energy on the plane shifts. It’s June and my fellow passengers, all Paulistas, are shedding wet puffer jackets and scarfs that make them look less like miserable Londoners than handsome dogs dressed up in human clothes – a Brazilian swathed in woollens seems just plain wrong. After we land, boots are swapped for Havaianas, worn democratically by all and religiously for every occasion including hiking. The woman next to me strips down to a T-shirt with the word “axé”, which translates as “good vibes” in everyday Baiano. The Yorùbá term is the name for the divine force in Candomblé – Brazil’s African diasporic religion – and often used like “amen”.

Bahia is the very soul of Brazil. Its strong Afro-Brazilian identity has perhaps come to epitomise the blissed-out Brazilian lifestyle that some might consider – melded with the DNA and culture of indigenous Pataxós and Tupiniquims – a multicultural cousin of Australia’s coastal chill. Brazilians often joke that “Australia is the Brazil that actually worked out”, although it evolved from a more dire colonial past. If the famous Bahian world view, with its refreshing here-and-nowism, is as uplifting as a glass of *limonada suíça*, it has been squeezed from the bitter lemons of centuries of suffering. Salvador, the colony’s first capital, became the gateway



BOYS FROM BRAZIL
Clockwise from far left: shellfish and seafood are a Bahian mainstay; Tiririca signage; Diego Araujo and Toddy are recent converts; a lounge at Barracuda Boutique in Itacaré.

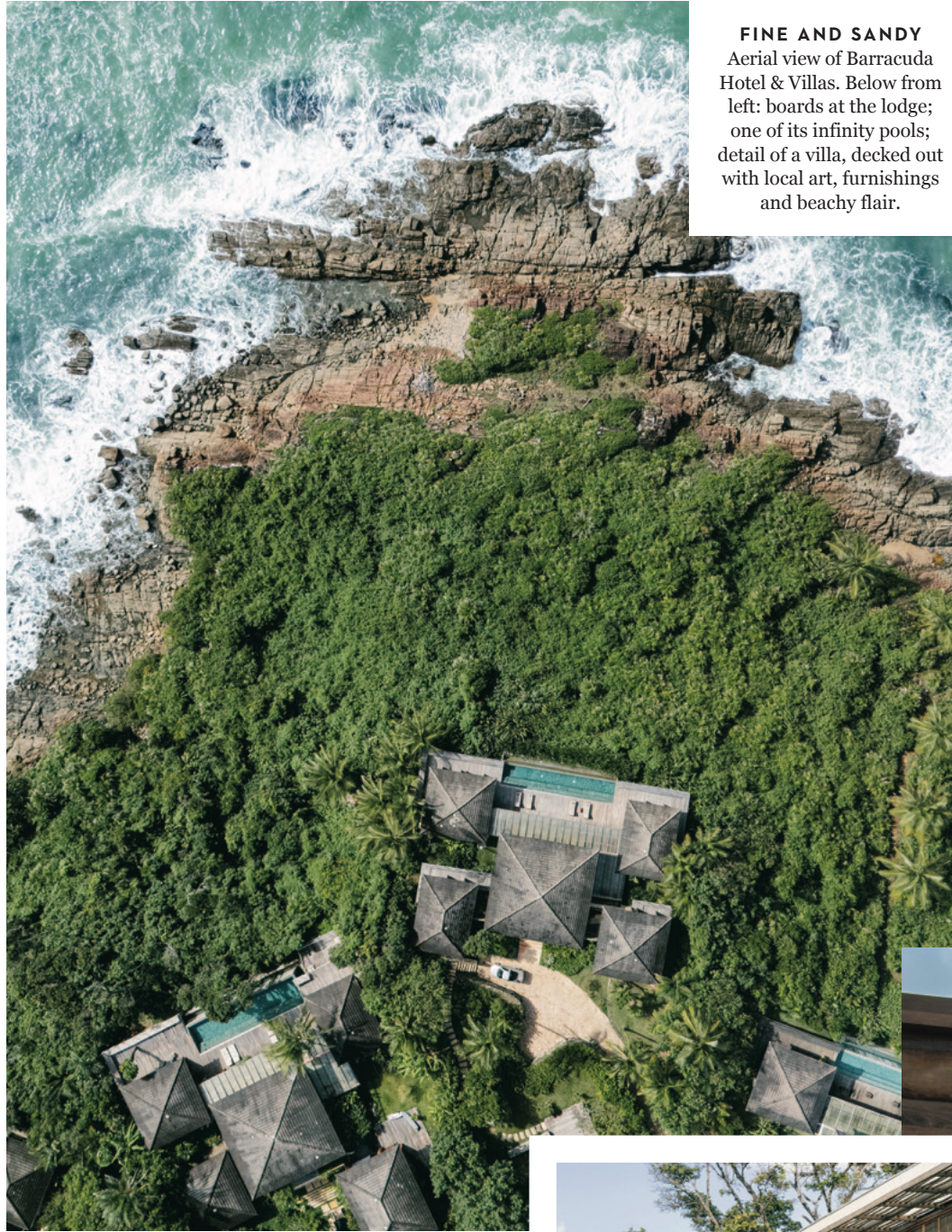
for some of the 5.5 million West Africans, forcibly taken to Brazil to work plantations and inland mines, who clung tightly to their Congolese and Angolan musical and culinary roots. These influences informed the hypnotic rhythms of Bahian *samba de roda* and *capoeira*, the black-eyed pea fritters of *acarajé*, and *cozinha baiana* cooked with the indelible red dendê oil that helped stain the African identity deep into Bahian soil.

The combination of this upbeat fusion culture and a thousand kilometres of tropical coastline, breathy with relentless rolling Atlantic surf, has made Bahia one of the world’s most coveted beach destinations, its newly reclaimed indigenous past in tune with the ages of ecology and wellness. The Bahian coast is crowned with the feathered headdresses of the Atlantic Forest, part of a Unesco Biosphere Reserve. This wonderland of medicinal fruits and flora is one of the most biodiverse habitats on Earth, fed by rivers and waterfalls and fringed by mangroves, rich with the crabs and prawns used in the state’s soul-food dishes. Much of Bahia was cut off from the world until it was connected by roads in the late 20th century. In the 1960s, artists and hippies from São Paulo fleeing the right-wing military regime colonised the sleepy fishing village of Trancoso. It is my first port of call, just an hour’s drive south of Puerto Seguro. Sixty years later, it is a stop on the global boho-luxe circuit of Tulum and northern Ibiza, leaving some purists to decamp further up the coast in search of the Bahian simple life.

And so I’m headed north to the surf town of Itacaré, 70 kilometres beyond Ilhéus, on Bahia’s Costa do Cacao, named after its 19th-century cacao plantations, on a mountainous coastline backed by Serra do Conduru State Park with its dense sub-humid rainforest. A thumb away from Trancoso on a map of Brazil and a two-hour flight from São Paulo to Ilhéus, it’s a nine-hour journey overland. We drive north on the central BR-101 highway, past shiny



EXPLORE



FINE AND SANDY
Aerial view of Barracuda Hotel & Villas. Below from left: boards at the lodge; one of its infinity pools; detail of a villa, decked out with local art, furnishings and beachy flair.

chrome trucks loaded with soursop, jackfruit and mango. And then we're ferried across rivers, their waters fast-moving like old animations. The Rio de Contas, which once transported gold from the highland mines and cacao from inland farms, meets the ocean at Itacaré, its calm pouring into the beautiful fury of the Atlantic. I stand and watch the surf spin reams of white netting along the coast from a clifftop over the rainforest, *urubus*, or vultures, soaring like black gloves above everything.

There's something raw about the energy here that both belies and protects the simple charms of this down-to-earth surf town on the way to nowhere. This could be Costa Rica 20 years ago. On cobbled streets, which form a giant ear for the timpani of the waves, a group of local boys carry boards the colour of tropical birds past wooden signs pointing to surf schools and *pousadas* (inns). Near an *acarajé* eatery, with vases of flowers on outdoor tables, is the camper van of Diego Araujo, a roaming barber from southern Brazil who shut his shop to go on the road two years ago. He's been here for 10 months now, teaching his border collie Toddy to surf before the World Dog Surfing Championships in California – and he's in no hurry to move on. "We've been all over Brazil and this is my favourite place," he tells me. "It has warm people and warm waves. I'm tempted to stay."

Itacaré is one of those places people never leave. In 2004, designer Juliana Ghiotto abandoned her sophisticate's life in São Paulo for Baiano spontaneity after she fell in love with local former pro-surfer and free-diver Daniel Lima on holiday here. "*Confia, você está na Bahia*," locals say: "Trust, because you're in Bahia." "People thought I was totally crazy," she says, all windswept beach hair and loose linens. "But Itacaré showed me another lifestyle. There's a beautiful simplicity and authenticity to the way Baianos are happy with what they have. They don't go chasing things or

worrying about tomorrow. They value their pasts and live in harmony with nature." It's an ethos carried over into the sustainable boutique hotels the couple founded with a group of Swedish surfers and creatives who saw an unlikely common ground between the Baiano lifestyle and the Nordic ideal of *friluftsliv* – the free-air life immersed in nature. In 2013, the group of friends opened Barracuda Boutique, a funky 11-room surf lodge near the fishing harbour, bathed in the same copper light that turns the wading egrets dusky pink at sunset.

They followed up with sustainable retreat Barracuda Hotel & Villas, centred around a rectangular Modernist cement structure hidden up to its neck in 26 hectares of rainforest, palms swaying like dandelions above the roofs of orange cabanas. It is built, thrillingly, on a clifftop over the breaking surf of Praia do Resende. Half of the 17 suites have balconies that open out over the ocean's heavy breathing; there are times during the night when I feel as though I'm sleeping on a double longboard. There are also seven villas – the rentable private retreats of the Swedes – inspired by the Modernism of architect Oscar Niemeyer and decorated with Tupiniquim crafts and furniture by Brazilian designer Carlos Motta. (Four cabins and 15 canopy suites will debut in the year ahead, along with a gym, yoga studio and sauna.)

While Ghiotto is the eye and brain of the hotel, Lima is, without doubt, its Baiano soul. He was brought up in Itacaré by his mother and grandmother, a cook for local fishermen, whose sacred recipes he holds close to his expansive chest, as broad as The Rock's. In a villa kitchen he prepares me *moqueca*, the Bahian fish stew usually cooked with coriander, coconut milk and dendê oil. "Only this is a roots *moqueca*," he booms in musical Brasileiro while skilfully cutting up pieces of wave-fresh amberjack. "So I don't put in coconut milk and the dendê oil is handmade." Lima was only



TOUCH WOOD
Clockwise from above: at Barracuda, a photograph by Renata Guiotto; woven wall art; green peppers; hotelier Daniel Lima prepares *moqueca*, or fish stew, in a villa kitchen.



EXPLORE



JUNGLE HOOK
Clockwise from far left: guide Gui Vieira Midlej Silva en route to Engenhoca beach; Brazilian-style crêpe at Barracuda; pro-surfer Yagê Araújo; boats explore the mangroves and islands; wall art at Barracuda.



a small kid when Itacaré – then a subsistence fishing village cut off from the world after the collapse of the cacao industry – was discovered in the 1980s by intrepid surfers who had trekked through the jungle in search of virgin waves. They rented rooms from fishermen, slept on mattresses in the street – effectively becoming Itacaré’s first tourists – and lent him his first board when he was eight years old.

Lima is not the only pro-surfer to have grown up in Itacaré. After lunch I meet 28-year-old Yagê Araújo on Praia da Tiririca, the town’s surf beach, a mouth-shaped cove with long, layered fringes of white foam known for its rapid waves and barrels. It’s where Itacaré Surf Sound Festival takes place. “Yagé is a kind of ayahuasca,” he tells me over the shouts of kids playing *altinha*, a hybrid of soccer and volleyball. “My father was a hippie who lived in the Amazon and named all his kids after hallucinogens.” Araújo was only six years old when he was scouted and sponsored by the owner of South to South, a Brazilian surfwear brand. Since then he’s competed in Japan and California and represented Brazil in the Olympics. “Itacaré is the best place to surf in Brazil, so it produces surfers,” he adds. “Once upon a time, surfers were seen as bums; now we are considered athletes.”

Reaching the Olympics is now a local aspiration. The Yandê Itacaré Institute, an NGO set up by the Barracuda Group, runs the Adopt an Athlete youth sponsorship program. Since 2021, it has produced several national and Olympic canoeing champions. It has helped that Itacaré is blessed with a series of hidden coves south of Tiririca harbouring waves for all levels. Engenhoca’s long beach breaks with left and right peaks are best for beginners. To get there, surfers must trek with their boards through rainforest, past trunks polka-dotted with lichen, termite mounds and waterfalls, while blades of morning light filter through the canopy, towards



the sound of the waves. It takes an hour to trek to Jeribucaçu. Along with heavy right- and left-handers, it has a large lagoon created by the estuary of a mangrove river that curls like a large watercolour brushstroke onto the beach. Surfers bob like seals on their boards, taking in the beauty around them.

Itacaré is made up of two watery worlds. In the 18th century, the Portuguese planted cacao in the inland wetlands here, finding the coverage and high humidity of the Atlantic Forest offered ideal conditions for its cultivation (the plant originally grew wild in the Amazon where its beans were used as currency). From the mid-19th to mid-20th century, the banks of the Rio de Contas became the centre of world cacao production, earning the coast the title of Costa do Cacao and the cash crop the epithet of “black gold”. Adventurers turned wealthy plantation owners bought the rank of “baron” from the army to match the rose-coloured colonial mansions, which still sit like tatty stuffed flamingos in the jungle. Brazil’s most famous Modernist novelist, Jorge Amado, born near here, wrote about the cruel conditions of plantation workers, virtually enslaved despite the abolition of slavery in 1888, in *The Violent Land* (1943). Fifty years later, an epidemic of witches’ broom decimated the industry. Plantations went bankrupt. The centre of the cacao trade moved to West Africa. Some committed suicide. Mansions were abandoned and left to the forces of nature.

In recent years, however, cacao farms have sprung up again, many of them sustainable artisanal affairs. We set off early the next morning from the harbour, where local fishermen are returning with boatloads of prawns after several nights at sea. From here we take a boat upriver, floating, within minutes, into another silent world where egrets and the silver veins of mangroves reflect on the still green glass of the water. We pass young canoeists training. The riverbanks turn to dense canopies of rainforest



SULTRY AIR
Clockwise from left: rooms at Barracuda look out to the ocean; fruit bowl; one of its cosy bedrooms; poolside at a villa.





broken by waterfalls; the area suffered less deforestation in the 19th century than others in Brazil. Cacao is traditionally reared with the cabruca system, a historical form of agroforestry that means the plants, which need shade, are grown under the protective umbrellas of taller vegetation such as clove and cashew trees.

We moor and wait for a no-frills, flat-bottom boat to ferry us across to Fazenda Taboquinhas, a six-hectare farm run by Osvaldo de Brito and his wife, Laura, whose grandfather Maximiliano worked as a slave in the cacao plantations. Osvaldo, bearded, bespectacled and wearing a T-shirt that says “permacultor”, paces around tending his cacao – squash-yellow, rugby ball-shaped and growing directly out of trunks, as though they are babies in a nursery. He is evangelical about the plant. “It’s no coincidence that our ancestors called it the food of the gods,” he raves. “It has so many health benefits. It gives me goosebumps when I think about it. It’s rich in magnesium and phenolics, which help protect against cancer. It promotes a healthy gut. It helps the brain produce serotonin. Theobromine releases energy without giving you the jitters like caffeine.”

Cacao saved him from a life as a taxi driver in Rio de Janeiro – he gave it all up to take Laura back to her roots in Bahia – and now he is on a mission to save cacao. “Industrial production takes the health benefits out of cacao and the Swiss ruined chocolate,” Osvaldo avers. He explains the process of turning the garlic clove-like cacao pods into nutrient-packed artisanal chocolate in refrigerated rooms on the property – it’s all in the fermentation process. Meanwhile, the cloudy pulp, which tastes of lychee and naturally ferments to become alcoholic cacao honey, is used in the production of cocoa butter, drinks and desserts.

That afternoon, we hike through tunnels of vines to the Engenho Velho waterfall, where the water rains down like millions of tiny

silver fish. Our guide points out the Mata Atlântica’s other super plants. Ingá – the ice-cream bean tree that’s also found in the Amazon – is able to fix nitrogen levels in depleted soil. Not far from here, small family-run cacao operations like Restaurante Delícias da Fazenda serve up home-cooked lunches on lace tableclothes while swallows flutter like confetti over the river. As we head back to meet Lima at the river where he moors his boat, a 19th-century style wooden schooner, a rainbow magically guides us back east like part of a mythical eyeball. He cooks us red snapper on a charcoal pit and serves it on a banana leaf with a squeeze of lime. We watch the sunset silently from our deckchairs.

The next morning I feel energised, as if from a cacao ceremony. In recent years a holistic movement has swept this coast, with ayahuasca retreats happening in Serra Grande. Instead, I head to Txai Resort, Itacaré’s original eco-retreat, 20 minutes’ drive south of the town on Itacarezinho – Little Itacaré – beach, a three-kilometre stretch of sand guarded by bearded palms like skinny shamans. Opened 25 years ago on a former coconut plantation, it is currently renovating its 40 hibiscus-draped bungalows in watermelon pinks and hummingbird blues, along with its spa, inspired by the indigenous medicinal knowledge of the Mata Atlântica, on a cliff overlooking the whole coast. That afternoon, after a massage, I lie in a treatment room with the windows flung open, rainforest either side of me like giant green lungs, breathing steadily and deeply in time with the waves. 🌴

The writer was a guest of Plan South America, specialists in designing tailor-made adventures across Latin America. A nine-day journey through Brazil, with three nights in Itacaré and time in Rio de Janeiro and the Amazon, starts from around \$US9,000 (about \$13,800) a person, including accommodation, activities and domestic transfers. plansouthamerica.com



COCOA ZONE
Clockwise from top: cacao farmer Osvaldo de Brito; pure cacao powder; a beach suite at Txai Resort; artisanal chocolates made with unsullied cacao.

TXAI SERVICE
Clockwise from above: acarajé fritters at Txai Resort; its inviting pool; hibiscus flowers on the property; Bahian bibelot at Txai.