

OFFSHORE THRILLING

South of Rio de Janeiro lies one of Brazil's most beguiling jewels - Angra dos Reis, with its jungled fjords, placid coves and feet-in-the-sand beach bars. Maria Shollenbarger boards a vintage yacht and goes exploring

It was the most alluring boating destination I'd never heard of. Actually, that is not entirely accurate. Before I arrived, I knew quite a bit about Angra dos Reis, in the southern part of Rio de Janeiro state, with its archipelago scattered in the shallow waters along the edge of the continent, where Brazil bends inward in a delicate arc towards São Paulo. Angra is bookended in the south by the colonial port town of Paraty, famous (natch) for its mossy cobbled streets, gaily painted Lusitanian houses and internationally followed cultural calendar. At its northern end, near the small harbour of Mangaratiba, is the site Amanresorts has chosen for its debut in South America (opening date yet to be announced; watch these pages). Some say Angra's islands number around 300; some maintain there are closer to 400. Locals like to cap it with a wink at exactly 365 - one for every day of the year. These vary from the aptly named Ilha Grande (pictured on this page), a mountainous nature reserve of some 75 square miles, to outcroppings barely larger than a tennis court, sprouting just a coco palm or two. There are primeval composites of beach, rock and glowing green scrub,

devoid of habitation. There are more subtly manicured islands that seclude a single house or small compound - the privately owned weekend escapes of some of Brazil's wealthiest citizens. Still others accommodate a wide range of enthusiasts - a mix of day-trippers, adventurers and affluent part-time residents.

Angra dos Reis is a particular favourite of *cariocas* and *paulistas*. Its proximity to both Rio and São Paulo means they can bring their boats to these parts to anchor for an hour, or a few days, in any one of Angra's deep-azure bays. They can buzz to shore at Ilha Grande or the smaller Ilha Gipóia for sundown caipirinhas and grilled seafood at one of the low-fi, sand-floored restaurants and bars jutting out over the water on precarious stilts, the music lilting and the lights reflecting out over the still, black ocean long after dark.

But for the rest of the boating world, it's remained more or less an unknown entity. For this, there is a simple explanation: federal law, which prohibits the chartering of non-Brazilian-registered boats in Brazilian waters. It is a restriction that has long irked Bobby Betenson and Martin Frankenberg, the founders, with Susanna Lemman, of Matueté, the country's premier luxury travel designers. So many placid bays and untrodden vanilla-sand beaches, so much pristine

Main picture: view from Ilha Grande near Rio de Janeiro. Right: Tamarind anchored in Palmas bay





Clockwise from left: Lopes Mendes beach on Ilha Grande. *Tamarind* moored in Saco de Mamanguá with Pico do Pão de Açúcar (Sugarloaf Peak) above. The yacht's stern deck

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littoral forest to explore, and yet it was next to impossible to provide their clients the right access – aboard a quality sailing or motor yacht. But Betenson and Frankenberg believe Angra has the potential to become a cruising nexus on the level of the Caribbean. In October, they're ushering its development along, with the launch of what will eventually become a small portfolio of locally registered boats available for charter.

Tamarind, a 32m vintage Brazilian-flagged motor yacht registered in Rio (pictured above, right and on previous page), is the first of these. Built in 1958 to designs by RA Newman & Sons in Poole, and owned throughout the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s by the late Roberto Marinho, founder of Brazil's largest television network, she is now in the hands of an Englishman who divides his time between London and Ipanema. She has plied Angra's waters for about 30 years, and some of her five crew have been with her for almost 25 of them. Between them they have a profound knowledge of the lie of the land and water here, from the safest moorings, to the best snorkelling sites, to the most prolific oyster farmers (on which more later). *Tamarind* sleeps six in three cabins: one master, one double and a twin. Betenson and Frankenberg assure me she's currently

the most exclusive private charter in these waters available to anyone not holding a Brazilian passport.

Exclusivity is a relative concept, though; and it's worth bearing in mind that Brazil is not a place where calacatta marble baths and gyroscopically stabilised wine cellars are de rigueur components of the yachting experience. Its boating classes are altogether more low-key. (Think of the last time you saw a Brazilian tooling around Rio or São Paulo in a Range Rover. Never? Exactly.) *Tamarind* is, by certain Mediterranean standards, downright modest; but many will find its old-school elegance far preferable to state-of-the-art showiness. The living room is cosy and shabby-chic, with built-in linen-covered sofas and wrap-around windows, a card table and a quite groovy lift-system television that rises from a cabinet at the click of a button. The teak panelling here, and in the cabins and dining room below deck (for inclement nights), has been burnished by years of polish and use. The upper deck holds just two pairs of sun loungers and a cooler cleverly concealed in an elegant wood sideboard. (Though a cruise director and a Matueté host are on hand at all times, and exotic drinks – lime, honey and red pepper caipirinhas, acerola spritzers – have a way of appearing just when you want them, the easy, help-yourself-to-a-beer vibe is arguably as attractive.)

Tamarind can be chartered directly from Rio, from which it's a seven- or eight-hour cruise to Angra. We chose instead to embark from Mangaratiba, a verdant two-hour drive west of the city (though most Matueté clients would be helicoptered in). We arrived in time for a gorgeous brunch, enjoyed on the wide breezy terrace of contemporary beachside villa with its own jetty, part of the extensive Matueté portfolio. As we ate, we admired the shifting jade-toned sea and, in the distance, against the richer emerald slopes enclosing the bay, *Tamarind*, moored and waiting. By midday we were aboard, chugging out of the deep horseshoe of Mangaratiba and towards the broad, forested peaks of Ilha Grande.

The informal appeal on board *Tamarind* is reflected in Angra dos Reis itself, which seduces slowly and subtly. On our first afternoon, we dropped anchor in Lagoa Azul – the Blue Lagoon – on the northern side of Ilha



Grande. The small bay makes good on its moniker: steep brown-black stone shears up from the preternaturally turquoise water, slopes dense with red and yellow ipê trees and acid-green palms. Here and there along the rocky shore, or tucked into the jungle behind a slender ribbon of sand, upcycled fishermen's shacks – painted shades of apricot- or lemon-tinged white and embellished with additions, terraces and the occasional satellite dish – were visible. Pedro Treacher, the host on board, told me the homes in these environs are among the most sought-after vacation homes (example pictured overleaf) along the Brazilian coast.

The sea around us was magical, moving with glittering speed over rock shallows in which black-and-yellow angelfish and parrotfish darted, and mirror-flat above the smooth sand bottom closer to the beaches. The air was rampant with birdsong from the steep cliffs. We kayaked to one of the beaches and sat in the shallows, the warm water burbling gently up and down around



Left: a holiday home on the Angra dos Reis coast. Below, from left: the swimming pool at Casa Turquesa. Ceci with oysters harvested from his oyster farm

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our legs. On the way back, Treacher spotted a massive starfish in the rocks below us. He dove in, brought it up and handed it over: it was a lambent orange-pink, and surprisingly heavy – probably 2kg – its underside lined with sharp tooth-like protrusions.

The time aboard *Tamarind* loosely followed this kind of easeful agenda: swim or kayak, hike or sunbathe, various combinations of the four. We spent two days exploring the many bays and beaches of Ilha Grande, including Lopes Mendes (pictured on previous page), an eminently photogenic swath of sand, 3km long, on the ocean side of the island. It can be reached only by boat or a meandering footpath leading from the bay of Palmas, on Ilha's land side. A stiff breeze the day we visited ruled out the former route, so we anchored in Palmas and wound in single file up the trail and over the top of a steep ridge, marmosets hooting and cheeping in the inky-green canopy above us. Occasionally a surfer overtook us at a brisk trot, short board tucked under sinewy brown arm, intent on catching Lopes Mendes's hollow, powerful break while the wind was up. After half an hour we emerged, blinking in the brightness, onto a broad crescent of paradise: the sand glaringly white, palms bowing and glinting in the sun, here and there a shack set up selling acai juice or halved mangoes and papayas. A picnic basket came out, mats were laid. We sunned ourselves and watched the locals blithely disregard the "no swimming" flags snapping in the wind.

Though there were many tableaux as appealing as this, Angra is not perfectly pristine. This is inevitable, given its coordinates between Brazil's two largest urban areas. Occasionally oil tankers queue up near the horizon to the east, accessing Terminal da Petrobrás em Angra, the port below Rio. Weekends – even in low season – see enough pleasure-boat traffic to keep you from ever quite feeling like you have the run of the place, so if boldly going where none has gone before is an agenda item, it's not for you. But Angra dos Reis is drawn beautifully, in saturated colours and outsized dimensions. Island peaks tower into skies that feel higher than in other places, as empty as outer space or roiling with thick white bolts of woolly cumulus cloud. The water mutates through the whole spectrums



of blues and greens as capriciously as a chameleon. When it is gorgeous, it is fantastically so.

After our morning or early-evening excursions, we'd return to *Tamarind* to be equally dazzled by the talents of our chef, Maria Emilia Bonomi. A paulista of part-Syrian descent and the owner of a gourmet catering company, she contracts exclusively to Matueté for select villa clients and now also for *Tamarind*; and she worked no end of sorcery in the minuscule galley. A simple lunch salad was elevated to the sublime with fennel purée, pomegranate seeds and a fleur d'oranger-infused vinaigrette. Fish caught by the crew were baked whole in rock-salt crusts; just-picked guavas were magicked into feathery soufflés. One late afternoon on the Sitio Forte bay, near Lagoa Azul, a yellow powerboat sped up to our port side, manned by a tiny, grizzled local with light amber eyes. Ceci (pictured top right) is a secret weapon; his oyster and scallop beds supply the most discerning kitchens for miles around. We crowded in and buzzed off in the dim late evening, past jungle so green it seemed to have absorbed the last of the daylight. A hundred yards from shore, Ceci cut the motor and began hauling up a basket. Using a Swiss Army knife, he pried open a scallop, halved a lime from a bag of them at his feet, gave it a judicious squeeze and passed the shell to me with a nod. It was achingly delicate and sweet – the taste of fresh water meeting the sea.

The best of these this-close-to-nature moments was saved for our last day aboard. Just after dawn, we chugged past Gipóia and its surrounding constellation



of tinier, empty islands, and anchored inside the Saco do Mamanguá, an 8km-long fjord on the mainland. The craggy peaks at its entrance make excellent climbing, and afford the best views for miles; but they were fogged in, so we opted for a long kayak into the fjord. We paddled past two or three sorbet-coloured villages, into increasingly shallow water, and then up a curving creek lined thickly with mangroves, the ashy-black mud around them peppered with crimson and blue crabs glowing like jewels on dark velvet. The barest drizzle whispered in the leaves – the only sound apart from the odd, melancholy bird call and the low snapping of the crabs working their claws. The creek grew clearer and flowed faster the farther upstream we travelled, the mangroves gradually giving way to native forest as the slopes on either side of us steepened. Treacher described how a couple of years earlier, locals had barely seen off a crew of wealthy developers keen to build a marina in Mamanguá's untouched reaches.

Later that day, we disembarked in Paraty for a night. My hotel, the exquisite Casa Turquesa (pictured left), was quintessential Brazilian chic, marrying design by Sergio Rodrigues and Carlos Motta with Portuguese and Goan antiques. We dined on faultless pasta and drank nero d'avola at a cheerily rammed Italian, and shopped for bespoke fragrances and pricey, microscopic bikinis. And once in a while I thought of *Tamarind* moored just a few miles away at Mamanguá, in a setting unchanged for millennia, and breathed silent thanks those developers didn't succeed. ♦

JUNGLE FEVER

Maria Shollenbarger travelled as a guest of **Matueté** (+5511-3071 4515; www.matueté.com), which offers *Tamarind* for private charter from \$10,000 per day, including crew, chef, Matueté host, all food and beverages on board (except premium drinks), transfers in and out of Rio and Paraty, and a private walking tour in Paraty historic centre. **Casa Turquesa**, Rua Doutor Pereira, 50 Centro Histórico, Paraty, Rio de Janeiro (+5524-3371 1037; www.casaturquesaparaty.com.br), from \$563. **British Airways** (0844-493 0787; www.ba.com) flies non-stop from London Heathrow to Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo daily from £838 return.