

COSTA VERDE

BRAZIL

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The Green Coast stretches 350 miles from Rio de Janeiro to Santos and promises stunning views. A vibrant, yet laid-back vibe and plenty of hidden surprises.

We love Rio, but, admittedly, as our bus speeds away from the chaos that is Novo Rio bus station, a sigh of relief is taken. With the World Cup through and an Olympic Games on the horizon, the bus interchange and nearby port is a hive of activity, with workers digging up roads in the baking heat, dump trucks groaning under loads of rubble and the endless tumble of suitcases and their owners flooding in and out.

We gaze through the bus window. Glimpses of favelas flash past; people living under sheets of iron next to the freeway. The 'real' Rio, some might say. Before too long the urban craziness gives way to the steep coastal mountains of the Atlantic Forest, wrapped around winding roads and shimmering blue seas. Finally, the reason they call it the 'green coast' becomes clear.

We stop at Angra dos Reis, a town with the country's busiest ferry port. In addition to being a transport hub for oil, the port also ships eager visitors to Ilha Grande – 80,000 hectares of forest-covered mountains fringed with stunning beaches and teeming with chic bars, restaurants and boutique hotels.

After a 90 minute chug on the ferry, we land at Abraão, the island's main town. It's bigger than imagined, with a bustling

main street stretching along the shoreline and a busy network of dirt roads behind, creeping their way towards the looming, mist-covered mountains. Pre-recorded Big Ben chimes mark the hour from the quaint local church. It's the first thing you see when you land on the island and, when you work in London, it's strange to have each hour punctuated by the very same chimes associated with the gloom and drizzle of the capital.

There are no cars allowed on Ilha Grande, except for one garbage truck, a fire engine and a police vehicle. Anything heavy is transported by clunky old buggies pushed by running groups

the location is one of the best on the island; it's quiet, intimate and romantic. Another waterside gem is Rei do Moqueca and their stew made from fish. Simply divine.

In fact, there are loads of great bars and restaurants down the far end of the beach, a little walk away from the heart of the town. You pay a little more to eat right by the sea, but it's worth every penny.

There are boat tours to the island's various beaches during the day. For active visitors there are plenty of hiking trails through the forest. The walk to Cachoeira da Feiticeira is a tourist favourite. The two hour round trip rewards walkers with a refreshing dip in a forest waterfall.

this part of the town regularly flood, washing the passageways clean and taking dirt and debris out to sea.

The younger crowd will love Praia do Pontal, a small beach with shady trees just a short walk from town, where funky kiosks serve cheap drinks and great food by the waters.

For nature lovers, Paraty is surrounded by rainforests, beaches and waterfalls. Schooner boat tours are a popular way of seeing the islands and swimming spots. Or you can take a short bus trip to the nearby village of Penha. Here you'll find a river and waterfall buried among the trees. Enjoy the view over the water from the rope bridge, eat a hearty lunch in the great restaurant on-site, and if you're feeling daring, there's a tall, steep rock face covered in slippery moss which acts as a natural water slide. It's hard to wipe the smile from your face after trying it once – like being a free-spirited five-year-old again! We even saw some Brazilian kids surfing on the rock; something that requires much more balance and skill than we ever mustered.

When it comes to accommodation, Casa Turquesa is definitely the best hotel in the region. Named after the bright splashes of turquoise that accentuate each room, Casa Turquesa is a sophisticated, tranquil hideaway, rivalling some of Brazil's finest hotels. This boutique property is comprised of nine rooms built around a serene courtyard complete with plunge pool, lush gardens and shaded daybeds. Expect unpretentious luxury, intimacy and the personal touch.

The hotel was originally a colonial mansion from the 18th century until it was destroyed in a fire 30 years ago. Casa Turquesa has quite literally risen from the ashes, retaining the style and beauty of the original building, but with many stylish, luxurious additions.

All rooms have plenty of natural light, solid timber floors, exposed beams and lofty ceilings. Some



ABOVE VIEW OVER ABRAÃO, ILHA GRANDE
BELOW FLOODED STREETS IN PARATY



When people think of Brazil, they think of Rio. But the Costa Verde is pure pleasure, showcasing what Brazil does best

of handsome, shirtless men. It certainly makes the passing traffic a lot more interesting.

Here, eating and drinking become an indulgent way to mark the easy passage of time. Lazy afternoon strolls spent perusing menus soon became a favourite part of our daily routine. Café do Mar is a highlight – it's just a short walk along the main shoreline of Praia do Canto. With candles in the trees, we kick back with our feet in the sand as the waves lap so close they almost touch us. With one eye on our food and one eye on the ocean, we sip our Caipirinhas and soak up the music drifting across the bay. The staff speak English, their food and cocktails are excellent and

There's a natural swimming pool on the way too, along with the historic ruins of the quarantine hospital, which was once a jail for political prisoners.

A few days on Ilha Grande is enough to recharge our batteries before we're soon on the move again. We board the morning ferry and a swift, hair-raising bus ride further south to the colonial town of Paraty.

This historical town really is something special. History and architecture buffs will adore strolling around the ancient centre, with its cobblestoned streets and dazzlingly white, well-preserved architecture. Due to Portuguese design innovation, the streets in

look out over the charming cobblestone streets, others have views over the pool and the distant mountains. The beds are divine, with 600 thread count cotton sheets, romantic mosquito nets and irresistibly fluffy pillows. Breakfast is spectacular – fresh pastries, dark coffee, fresh fruit salad, eggs made to order, charming cakes, meats and cheeses. You're not likely to eat again until the sun sets. If you fall in love with the food, you can buy their cookbook and try out the recipes at home.

During our stay, we were lucky enough to see the street outside submerged by the tide. Inside, unique touches are everywhere – from the turquoise coloured cocktails on arrival to the hotel-branded Havaianas that you'll take away with you as a souvenir of your stay. We were particularly impressed with gifts left on our pillow each night, including chocolates, bottles of local cachaça and Havaianas keyrings. It's the attention to detail that seduces you, and makes you feel truly at home.

When people think of Brazil, they often think of Rio. Yes, it's a beautiful city, but it can be a challenging place to wrap your head around. On the other hand, the Costa Verde is pure pleasure. If you're visiting Rio anytime soon, leave some time up your sleeve for a visit to the Costa Verde. It's a great showcase of what Brazil does best – blurring the line between indoors and outdoors, bringing sophistication together with spectacular wilderness and reminding you that the best things in life are free. ■

GT travelled with British Airways to Rio de Janeiro and Costa Verde Transportes to Angra dos Reis and Paraty. GT stayed at Casa Turquesa in Paraty. Rooms start from R\$1,100 (£286) per night (casaturquesa.com.br). British Airways fly daily to Rio from approx. £812 return (ba.com). Costa Verde Transportes buses operate regularly from Novo Rio bus station for approximately R\$41 per person (£10) each way (costaverdetransportes.com.br). The ferry to Ilha Grande is R\$4.50 (£1.20)