In northeastern Brazil, the state of Bahia is a place of colonial architecture, remote beaches and spicy seafood stew. David Hochman brings his appetite for all of the above. Photographs by Maura McEvoy.
He is right on all counts. Ceramic Portuguese tiles ornament the walls inside and out. Pilgrims of all ages file into the stifling Sala dos Milagres, the Miracle Room, where casts of body parts, in wax, plastic and even gold, dangle from the ceiling as thanksgiving offerings for cures. There are children everywhere, with vacant eyes and gnarled limbs, some begging for coins. Others are animatedly hawking Candomblé prayer beads or fitas, colorful ribbons tied around the wrist for good luck.

The luck, it turns out, is ours: we emerge to discover young musicians in Olodum Drum Troupe T-shirts performing in the church square. Paul Simon famously incorporated Olodum’s mystical drum beats on his 1990 album, *The Rhythm of the Saints.* Now the group, like many around the city, uses its clout to help young people like these find a way out of poverty through apprentice-ships, education programs and simply making music in the streets. It’s all enough to leave us feeling charged up and hungry for more. “Will it be moqueca again?” Mauro asks. This is his way of teasing me. Since our first night in Bahia, I have been singularly obsessed with the spicy seafood stew (pronounced moh-KA-yah), by far the tastiest emblem of Bahia’s melting-pot mojo. As orange as a pumpkin, the dish teems with fragrant garlic, onions, tomatoes, coconut milk, whatever’s fresh from the sea and peppers and golden manioc flour, was as potent a jet-lag remedy as I can recall. So what if it’s a cauldron of saturated fat? Everywhere you go in Bahia, chefs emerge from kitchens, insisting that their moqueca is the finest in Brazil. With Mauro’s help, I am determined to settle that score myself. He ushers us into Jardim das Delícias, his favorite courtyard. I speed-read the entrées, ignoring Ruth’s plea to try something healthful.

“Prepare yourself for five centuries under one roof,” Mauro says as we reach Bonfim Square and the neoclassical, 18th-century Church of Nosso Senhor do Bonfim. “Notice the hands,” our guide, Mauro Marchesini, says with a crooked grin as we round a corner on Avenida Oceânica. There before us is the seven-foot-tall Christ in white marble, surrounded by tourists aiming cell-phone cameras. “One hand points south,” Mauro says. “The other, to the ground. The message is: if you want to work, go south to Rio or São Paulo. But if you want to experience life, if you want to dance and celebrate and forget the rest of the world, stay right here in Bahia.”

As if we needed confirmation from on high. For days my wife, Ruth, and I have been in Bahia, one of Brazil’s largest states (the size of France), splitting time between the laid-back splendor of far-off beaches and Salvador, the pulsating and frequently unho-
“You know this quest just might kill you,” Mauro says. He’s probably right. But there’s comfort in knowing I would die happy.

**MENTION TO A savvy traveler that you’re going to São Paulo and the expectation is that you’re going for business. Rio, of course, conjures up images of hedonistic parties on beaches lined with hotels. But say “Bahia” to anyone who knows it and there’s inevitably a pause, followed by a smile, followed by an envious, “Ahhh, Bahia.” Even if they don’t realize it, what those people are sighing about is the Cacao Coast.**

Put it this way: Salvador is the perfect place to spend several days at the start and end of a visit. It’s called the Capital of Happiness for good reason. The sweeping vistas from the Upper City onto All Saints Bay are stunning. Shabby old colonial mansions are getting face-lifts; one is now the gleaming new Museu da Gastronomia Bahiana, a government-run cooking academy where women in turbans and bell-shaped dresses serve the classics of Bahian cuisine (such as xinxim de galinha, a traditional chicken and shrimp stew, and quindim, a yellow-custard dessert). And we stayed in the sexiest Carmelite monastery on earth. Convento do Carmo is a fabulously reconstructed 1586 friary in the heart of the Pelourinho, where our two-floor loft apartment came with vaulted wood ceilings, multiple plasma-screen TVs, L’Occitane bath products and a pillow menu that would answer any monk’s prayers.

But there is a yang to Salvador’s yin, and it lies along Bahia’s ivory-white coast about 180 miles to the south. When we touch down in Ilhéus after a short flight south from the capital, the pace is noticeably slower. On the chauffeured forty-five-minute Land Rover ride to Fazenda da Lagoa, our hardest decision is whether we want to hear samba or bossa nova on the CD player.

Fazenda da Lagoa has been open only a few years, but we’d heard it was already drawing sophisticated customers like the designer Valentino and Lizzy Jagger. Then again, as we bounce along the potholed access road with darkness and the rain forest closing in around us, I suddenly wonder if we are in the right place. In fact, where on earth are we? Our driver doesn’t speak a word of English, and we’ve come to the edge of a wide, inky black river. That’s when we spot the boat—the S.S. Mucki.

“Mucki” is Mucki Skowronski, a renowned artist and designer from Rio, who owns Fazenda da Lagoa with her husband, Arthur Bahia (yes, his real name). She welcomes us aboard her canopyed ferry, which has bright-red cushions and pillows handsewn with colorful silhouettes of Brazil. As we cruise to the chic eco-resort, her sense of style wins out over our panic.

Skowronski figured that the best way to preserve her 1,500 untouched acres along the coast was to build minimally (there are only fourteen cabins) but with maximum taste. That translates into guest pavilions with walls of sliding glass that open to the...
The intricate sandstone facade of Salvador’s Church of the Third Order of St. Francis. Opposite: Wax body parts—offerings of the infirm—at the Church of Nosso Senhor do Bonfim.
sea-scented air and groves of coconut palms. Inside are gauzy-netted platform beds and a veritable Pop Art gallery of Skowronski’s splashy floral oil paintings, rainbow-striped wall hangings and hand-beaded chandeliers. (Most of her work is done in a Rio atelier, where she mentors teenagers plucked from the city’s poorest favelas.) Behind our bed is a tapestry with delicately beaded stars as sparkly and awe-inspiring as the ones in the Southern Cross overhead.

It’s not until the next morning, however, that we behold the true star of this resort. We hadn’t even seen the ocean when we arrived; now, as an arc of white sand stretches for miles in both directions without a footprint in sight, I understand where the languid groove in all those songs by João Gilberto, the father of bossa nova, comes from. Forget Ipanema: this is the beach of your dreams.

The best thing to do at Fazenda—in fact, the best thing you may ever do—is what we spend each morning doing: pedaling cruiser bikes along the hard-packed sand for what seems like forever, stopping here and there for a dip in seas so clean, so warm, so private it feels illicit. At the resort itself, only a few of the staff members speak English, but that doesn’t mean the service isn’t world-class. Raise a flag on your cabana and a waiter in white will appear with a breakfast of fresh fruit, local eggs and Portuguese cheese bread. There is moqueca on the lunch and dinner menus, thankfully, and the servers remember exactly which chile peppers I like—the tiny yellow malaguetas—and have them sliced and ready for me each night.

The evening before we leave, we meet another couple in the main pavilion over toasted cashews and caipirinhas, the drink made of cachaça, a sugarcane liqueur, and tropical fruit juices that is the favorite local libation. She is model-beautiful; he’s a São Paulo businessman, clearly successful, who admits he’s a perfectionist when it comes to picking his getaways. “In Brazil, everybody has a secret beach they think is the best,” he says. “But between us, this really is the one.”

THE TRUTH IS, there are secrets all along Bahia’s coast, which contains some 600 miles of white-sand beaches. You simply need to know whom to ask. Susy Roosli is an exuberant Swiss expat with blonde hair and a string-bean figure whose business attire is a teeny bikini under a T-shirt and shorts. She came to Bahia twenty years ago and never left; she now runs Órbita Excursions and Tourism, a company we’ve hired to give us the lay of the land.

Susy and her hunk-of-a-Brazilian husband, Paolo Veloso, drive us through the heart of Bahia’s cocoa and sugar plantations, which still provide their sweet goods to much of the world. Our first stop is back in Ilhéus, a vibrant colonial town founded in 1534. The writer Jorge Amado grew up here, and the city as he saw it lent a backdrop for his best-known novel, Gabriela, Clove and Cinnamon. In the Ilhéus of his books, cocoa barons kill one another for power and land; the city is swarming with thieves and prostitutes. Today Ilhéus is a sleepy beach town. Amado’s mansion is a canary-yellow masterpiece in the middle of the city, with festive salons made of jacaranda wood and Carrara marble. But it’s hard to imagine Amado himself getting a better reception in town than Susy and Paolo, who are honked at and waved to by nearly every driver and shopkeeper we pass.

Our plan is to lunch at Itacaré, the surf town forty miles to the north that’s recently become a haven for talented artists (and escape artists) looking for Nirvana on earth. But Susy and Paolo are dead set on an adventure, and as we drive along the region’s remote main road—the BA-001 parkway, which wasn’t paved until 1998—we end up at Txai resort instead.

Txai (pronounced chay), on a hillside ten miles south of Itacaré, is undoubtedly the most gorgeous place to stop for lunch in South America. Set amid coconut groves, the resort was the first truly glamorous hotel to open in Bahia; aside from its...
Mucki Skowronski and her Rhodesian ridgebacks, Cacao and Joaquim, roaming the beach at low tide. Opposite: A candy-colored awning over the sundeck at Fazenda da Lagoa’s pool.
NATIVE INTELLIGENCE: BAHIA

Bahia lies on Brazil’s Atlantic coast between the equator and the Tropic of Capricorn. Roughly 600 miles north of Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, Salvador is Bahia’s urban hub and capital, a colonial jewel on an ancient bluff above All Saints Bay. The city is divided into two parts, Cidade Alta (Upper City) and Cidade Baixa (Lower City); the top hotels are in the historic Pelourinho district, in the upper City. Getting around town on your own can be tricky—narrow one-way streets, arcane traffic rules—so it’s advisable to use taxis or hire a driver through your tour company. Though the beaches everywhere in Bahia are spectacular, those to the south of Salvador—on the so-called Cacau Coast, a short flight away—are home to the sought-after resorts. English is taught in most schools, but its helpful to travel with an English-speaking guide (see below) or else to keep a Portuguese phrase book handy.

When to Go
It’s no exaggeration to say that the weather is almost always great in Bahia: warm and humid year-round, with temperatures averaging around eighty degrees. The best time to go depends on your appetite for festivities and crowds. December through March is the celebration season, especially during Carnaval. If it rains at all, it does so between April and July.

Getting There
American Airlines (usai.com) flies direct to Salvador from Miami (nearly eight hours) every night, with a connection from New York JFK. Last year Korean Air (koreanair.com) launched the only nonstop service between Los Angeles and Salvador, offers up-scale accommodations in twenty-eight suites and bungalows. The thatched-roof oceanfront villas are the ones to book: most have a personal plunge pool. The inviting 6,600-square-foot main pool, tiled by hand, has a palm-enshrouded island in the middle and a swim-up bar. At the spa, don’t miss the Armonia Ritual couples’ four-hand massage. Doubles from US$415, bungalows from US$735, including breakfast and dinner. Maraú; 011-55-71-3321-1449. kiaroa.com.br.

Where to Eat
For elegance in bustling Salvador, something close to Convento de Carmo. The magnificently restored former monastery, with courtyards and gardens, stately dining areas and a spa, dates from 1586 and is a sanctuary on a hill atop the Pelourinho. Doubles from US$442. 1 Rua do Carmo, Salvador; 011-55-71-3327-4600; pousoalto.com.br. He is knowledgeable and beyond accommodating.

Where to Stay
Quoos in the City
For elegance in bustling Salvador, nothing comes close to Convento de Carmo. The magnificently restored former monastery, with courtyards and gardens, stately dining areas and a spa, dates from 1586 and is a sanctuary on a hill atop the Pelourinho. Doubles from US$442. 1 Rua do Carmo, Salvador; 011-55-71-3327-4600; pousoalto.com.br. He is knowledgeable and beyond accommodating.

Where to Shop
Oxum Casa de Arte. Among the porcelain and gilded mirrors are pieces by noted muralist and painter Carley, whose work is in Salvador’s Afro-Brazilian museum. 14 Rua Gregória de Matos, Salvador; 011-55-71-3322-3520. oxumcasaarte.com.br. Colonial grandeur and fancy fish stew in a garden setting make Amado a Salvador’s best new restaurant for contemporary Brazilian cuisine, like chicken in mole pardo (blood sauce) and black anchovies over asparagus risotto. It’s impossible not to love the luxuriously laid-back Talí resort, one hour north of Ilhéus. For cooking up the splendor of the Ca­cass Coast, there are few places that can match a mahogany tub in Bahiana, the hilltop spa above the Atlantic. Book one of the forty rooms or, rent a bungalow on stilts. Doubles from US$560. Ban­gues from US$799. Ilhéus; 011-55-73-6508-7777; taui.com.br. Bahia by Way of Bali

A TASTE OF PARADISE

On the Maraú Peninsula, a short stroll down the beach from Kiaroa resort, Bar das Meninas is a superlative beachfront gem, grilled local fish) where you can live out your barefoot-in-the-sand fantasies. Tâufo do Pó, Morar; 011-55-72-3228-9015.

Where to Shop
Bar das Meninas, based in an 18th-century colonial mansion in the Pelourinho, D. Klíty Gems & Arts brings Swiss quality to jewels like the imperial topaz, produced only in Brazil. Stones can be purchased individually or as jewelry made on-site. On the ground floor, the company runs a school to train disadvantaged youths from the community as goldsmiths and gem-cutters. 27 Largo da Cruz de Pau, St. Antônio Além do Car­mo, Salvador; 011-55-71-416-4467. The colorful boutique Bau Bau has a fine collection of alluring folk art and paintings. 37 Rua Gregória de Matos, Salvador; 011-55-71-3322-4467. For first-rate art and antiques, try Oxum Casa de Arte. Among the porcelain and gilded mirrors are pieces by noted muralist and painter Carley, whose work is in Salvador’s Afro-Brazilian museum. 14 Rua Gregória de Matos, Salvador; 011-55-71-3322-3520. oxumcasaarte.com.br. Colonial grandeur and fancy fish stew in a garden setting make Amado a Salvador’s best new restaurant for contemporary Brazilian cuisine, like chicken in mole pardo (blood sauce) and black anchovies over asparagus risotto. It’s impossible not to love the luxuriously laid-back Talí resort, one hour north of Ilhéus. For cooking up the splendor of the Ca­cass Coast, there are few places that can match a mahogany tub in Bahiana, the hilltop spa above the Atlantic. Book one of the forty rooms or, rent a bungalow on stilts. Doubles from US$560. Ban­gues from US$799. Ilhéus; 011-55-73-6508-7777; taui.com.br. Bahia by Way of Bali

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glass-walled library and sumptuous spa, its charms are decidedly rustic. The sun-faded bungalows in a hodgepodge of architectural styles are simply appointed, with furnishings of local hardwood. But its homey quality feels like a rain-forest antidote to the antiseptic sameness of so many ultraluxe resorts.

With the afternoon waning, we have time only for a quick açaí cocktail in Itacaré, which Ruth dubs “the cutest town ever.” Susy and Paolo want to make sure we catch the last car ferry to the Maraú Peninsula, an all-sand elbow into the Atlantic that until 2003 was home mainly to fishermen, coconut farmers and the occasional pioneering backpacker. As such, it behooves me to downplay the joys of Kiaroa, the lavish new resort where we would spend the next few days. If you don’t like private plunge pools in Balinese-style bungalows, a swim-up bar and ingredients flown in fresh daily to the hotel’s airstrip, then don’t bother visiting. But I will say that Bar das Meninas, a beach cantina in the nearby village of Taipu, serves a world-class (and blazingly hot) bowl of you know what.

“Back for More punishment?” Mauro asks.

Returning to Salvador feels like coming home. Mauro and Marcos meet us at the private airport after our half-hour charter flight from Kiaroa—the fastest way to make the trip—and we quickly get down to business. Ruth has shopping to do; I have one last stop on my tasting tour. The moqueca at Jardim das Delícias was good, albeit in a Brazilian auntie sort of way. But my sources are telling me there’s nothing in town that rivals the fish stew—or the chic ambience—at Trapiche Adelaide.

At the end of a pier in a gentrified gallery district that was once the most derelict part of Salvador, the restaurant offers a glimpse of what the city itself might look like in years to come. The decor is modern, with a wall of windows above All Saints Bay; the service is sophisticated; and the menu is rich with international flavors, from the risotto with quail and shimeji mushrooms to the mini apple pies for dessert. But the place still can’t shake the power of Bahia’s history. The most popular items are the ones that rise out of the vortex of influences that have shaped this region’s music and culture as well as its food: vatapá, a shrimp, coconut-milk and palm-oil paste; acarajé, a spicy bean fritter that came from Nigeria.

This time, even Ruth can’t resist joining me in moqueca heaven. As we look out to floodlit waters, dipping into the most elegant fish stew yet—this one has mussels, shrimp, soft-shell crab and lobster—we feel a rush of gratitude for the glorious ending to our pilgrimage. It’s just in time, though. My soul may be willing, but my heart can’t take much more.

Fashion and Shopping Information

LADY WANDERLUST


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