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Three Ways to Stay in Parati, Brazil

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Parati's picturesque Bay can be viewed from the town.

Photograph by Fernanda Preto

By Daisann McLane, Photographs by Fernanda Preto

“A hotel room is more than just a place to sleep and shower. It is a threshold to an unfamiliar place and culture.” I wrote that in *Cheap Hotels*, a book inspired by more than 1,001 nights on the road as a newspaper travel columnist. For over six years, hotels were my home, my travel companions, my obsessions. My favorites weren't superluxurious; some weren't even hotels. One of my most transcendent overnights was spent on a tatami mat in a Buddhist monastery near Osaka, Japan. I listened to monks chant at dawn. Good hotels have a strong sense of place, letting you know you are somewhere—even if that somewhere isn't always an easy place to settle into at first. South America is a terrific place to find these hotels. Through their owners (often eccentrics) and staff (usually local), through thoughtful design and fluency in local ways, they help you settle in—and more. These properties are cultural engines—moving you into the heart of where you want to be.

Our 2011 Stay List South America reveals how much the hotel scene has evolved on this continent. With rising economies, incomes, and tourism, many hotels are catering to savvy travelers, connecting them to traditions and the environment. Our selections are outstanding not because they stand out, but because they blend in. I wanted to explore hotels in three categories: in town, outside of town, and in the wilds. Could I find them in one easy-to-reach area? Yes, it turns out. In Parati, Brazil.

A town of about 33,000 on Brazil's Costa Verde (“green coast”), Parati sits halfway between Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo and can be considered a laboratory for the new eco-conscious Latin American hotel scene. The 17th-century city fell into decline but was rediscovered by artists and creative entrepreneurs about a decade ago. It's become a crucible of sustainable tourism development, short-listed for UNESCO World Heritage recognition not just because of its handsome blocks of Portuguese colonial buildings but

for its surroundings. Here, I'd experience the indigenous landscape of Brazil: white sand beaches, a turquoise bay sprinkled with tiny islands, walls of mountains lush with rain forest.

Brazil prides itself on its sustainable credentials; it is said to have one of the greenest of the world's major economies. Not surprisingly, it's the rare property that doesn't liberally inject the prefix "eco" into its literature. But I wanted more than a label. So I turned on my hotel radar to find three unique places.

IN TOWN: CASA TURQUESA

How do you know you've found a perfect place to stay? Sometimes it only takes a single e-mail: "What good news that you can come! I'll be happy to receive you in my home." Even before I landed in Brazil, Tetê Etrusco, who owns the Casa Turquesa guesthouse in Parati's old colonial town, was treating me like an old friend.

"Welcome, Daisann," she says as I arrive around noon. Etrusco is petite, slim, with curly brown hair and the coiled intensity of a dancer. She whips into action, pulling out a map to guide me to a favorite haunt, just across the colonial town square, for lunch.

"You want to go to Refúgio," she says. "Sit outside—you can watch the boats. Don't bother ordering a big plate, too much food, too expensive. Just ask for the appetizer version of the prawns stuffed with *farofa*, you know it? Brazilian toasted manioc?"

Casa Turquesa is a meticulously restored 18th-century house with hardwood floors and candy-colored paintings by local artists. Each room is named after a color, and Etrusco hands me the key to the house's namesake "Turquesa." It's large, white, with colorful pillows and wooden shutters that open to a courtyard and blazing tropical light. I've never been to Casa Turquesa before, but this is familiar territory: the private Latin American home converted into a

luxurious yet laid-back guesthouse. A generation ago, South Americans of the upper class didn't need a hotel culture because they had second or third houses in the country, in colonial cities, or at the beach. Now the custom of private hideaways is turning public as chic little hotels proliferate.

The “my house is your house” style of hospitality seems to be hardwired into the culture. I enjoy staying in a place where I'm treated like a houseguest instead of a hotel client. Also, I know from experience that a hotel that strives to connect with me personally is also more likely to connect me to the surroundings.

“You want to go cruise on the bay?” Etrusco asks. “I'll call the boat captain and send my manager, Tiacho, with you. Is tomorrow morning okay?” She quickly lines me up so that even though I have only two days before I move on to the countryside and then into the wilds, I can get a deep sense of Parati. She even brings me a pair of turquoise made-in-Brazil flip-flops to wear indoors. Shoes get soggy in Parati, because twice a day a tidal rush of seawater flows shin deep into most streets, turning the city into something of a Brazilian Venice. The Freemasons invented this system in the 18th century—engineering the town so that tides from the bay clean the streets.

The next day, Casa Turquesa's manager, Francisco “Tiacho” Baenniger, comes to accompany me on a short cruise around Parati's bay. He's a lithe, handsome middle-aged man with Latin manners and dark sunglasses. We amble down to the long wooden dock that juts out into the blue bay. He points out his favorite wooden fishing boats, all painted in garish shades of green, yellow, pink, red, and orange and each one proudly bearing a carefully hand-lettered name.

“Aren't they beautiful?” Tiacho half sings, half sighs. “It's the Brazilian way you know—you paint something in bright colors, and it makes you feel so much better!”

Casa Turquesa, as it turns out, is Tiacho's day job. "I am an artist. I do art naïf, naïve art—did you see my paintings in the hotel?" The exuberant childlike canvases adorning the lobby are his. Tiacho tells me the town has a big colony of artists. "Parati was almost like a ghost town until the artists and other creative people started to come," he says.

The artists turned the place into a Brazilian Woodstock, a Santa Fe. And then travelers started to arrive. Now the tourism economy supports the artists. Suddenly I understand that the reason I feel so at home at Casa Turquesa isn't just because of its genial owner. The hotel is part of a sustainable system. I'm not talking about reusing towels or recycling bottles, although the hotel does that. There's another kind of sustainability that involves the human spirit. Parati's bohemians provide the creative energy that makes people want to come here; meanwhile, hotels like Casa Turquesa offer artists a nurturing environment and an audience. It's a balanced system. In my book, perfect. But like all ecologies, fragile.

Etrusco meets me to say goodbye in the morning, but Tiacho isn't around—it's his day off. I get a lift to Parati's bus station, just outside the boundaries of the old colonial town. It looks like a strip mall, and I feel cast out of paradise. As I'm handing my bag to the taxi driver, I feel someone tap me on the shoulder. I jump and turn around. Tiacho.

"I came to say goodbye and wish you happiness as you continue your journey," he says. He thrusts something into my hand, embraces me, then quickly turns and is gone. I'm so undone by his gesture it takes me a beat to realize what I have in my hand: one single, perfect, long-stemmed rose.

Casa Turquesa 9 rooms; from \$468, including breakfast.
www.casaturquesa.com.br/casa_ing.asp

OUTSIDE OF TOWN: POUSADA PICINGUABA

For most of the drive between Parati town and Picinguaba village, I stare

dreamily at the wall of undulating mountains to my right, which looks like a massive green ocean crashing to the shore in waves. It's only at the end of the ride, as we turn from the highway onto a small road into the Serra do Mar State Park, that I realize that Serra do Mar means Mountain of the Sea. This is the natural wall that separates Brazil's rich interior from its coast. Once the rain forest covered almost the entire 4,654-mile length of Brazil's coast; now the Serra do Mar park, slightly smaller in area than New York's Long Island, is one of its last uninterrupted stretches. And I'm going to be surrounded by it. I've reserved a room at Pousada Picinguaba, a small seaside hotel that is a remarkable experiment in human ecology, a beach resort that shares a village with 400 fishermen and their families.

"I'm sorry the room is a little smaller maybe than what you're used to," says Talia, one of the pousada's lively managers, who meets me with fresh-pressed orange juice (from the pousada's organic farm) and an unstoppable smile.

"But, you see, we are not allowed to make this building bigger." Under Brazil's stringent new environmental law, she explains, nothing new has been built here since 1979, when the state park took over the area. The pousada, a large wood and plaster house in the old-fashioned colonial plantation style, was built in 1977, abandoned after that, then later brought to life as a hotel.

Talia has no need to apologize. I'm completely comfortable in my all-white room with a double bed dressed in organic linens and a wide balcony hung with a hand-crocheted hammock. This room doesn't try to impress with acres of mattress and enough space to run laps. At cocktail hour in the pousada's lounge, I sink into a sofa, and soon I'm sipping the house's homemade organic *cachaça*—a punch-packing sugarcane liquor—while chatting up my fellow guests: honeymooners from Cincinnati, a couple from Munich, and families from Holland and São Paulo. We nibble on organic white cheese made here and talk about politics, the weather, and travel. It's a scene you'd find at any small beach resort, anywhere in the world, I think to myself, except that nearly all 28 Picinguaba staffers are citizens of Picinguaba village. And in some intangible yet real way this alters the ambience.

“I feel like a houseguest here,” says Jo, the woman from Holland. “It reminds me of the backpacker places I used to stay in Bali when I was young.” She smiles. “But with more comfort.”

“If you run a hotel in a location like this, there’s no question—you have to work with the community,” says Emmanuel Rengade, the pousada’s owner. “Nowadays we call this sustainability, but before we just called this common sense.” He tells us the story of how he stumbled onto this place while with friends and ended up—impulsively—buying it. “I loved it because I loved the setting, this little fishing village.” Which meant, I realize, that the hotel had to fit into—become a true part of—the village.

“It took time,” Rengade says. “I had to train the local people in the ways of the hospitality industry.” He continues, excited to share his visions for Picinguaba’s future. Among other things, he has started a nongovernmental organization to help encourage sustainable village development.

“We already employ local people, and we send our guests to local guides,” he says. “But I’d like to get the village more involved. I want to help families open up their own little guesthouses for travelers who maybe don’t have the budget to stay in our resort.”

“But won’t that eat into your business?” I ask. He shrugs. “As long as the villagers can create sustainable, ecologically sound practices with recycling . . . well, it’s good for everybody.” Rengade is my kind of hotelier. He understands that his hotel is special because it’s of the village, not just in it.

The next morning I head down the narrow, steep path from the hotel for a stroll around Picinguaba. It’s 10 a.m., and the fishermen have just come in. Some of them are dragging woven plastic sacks overflowing with silvery fish to the cars of a couple of wholesalers who’ve arrived to buy the morning’s catch. Others have hit the town “bars”—the little clutches of red plastic tables

and chairs, protected by overhead tarps tied to poles. They're kicking back with red wine and Antarctica beer. I notice that the German guests from the pousada are here, too. They wave me over.

I wave and smile, but I don't join them—it's too early for me. But I'm tickled to see that the Germans are on "Picinguaba time," and that the line between the travelers and the locals is relaxed enough for that to happen. I head back to the pousada and almost don't recognize the beautiful young woman walking down the path to the beach, lugging a surfboard under her arm.

"Hey, Daisann!"

It's Talia from the pousada. "It's my day off," she beams, "and I'm going to the beach for some sport. Have a good day! Ciao!"

Yesterday she was the pousada's manager; today, she's Talia from the neighborhood, from Picinguaba. The small miracle of tourism at Pousada Picinguaba, I decide, is that its guests have the chance to meet them both.

Pousada Picinguaba *10 rooms; from \$355, including breakfast.*

www.picinguaba.com

IN THE WILDS: ECO-FARM

When I found out about the self-sustaining organic farm and homestay in the mountains above Parati, my curiosity was piqued. What would a guesthouse with a zero carbon footprint look like? I sent e-mails to Michael Smyth, owner of an adventure tour company in Parati that arranges trips to the farm, and set up a day-trip.

"*Bem-vinda!*" Swinging a machete, José Ferreira da Silva Neto—nicknamed "Zé," a sturdy man in his 50s with a wild black beard and cherubic cheeks—walks in from the field and to the path to welcome me. The Eco-Farm is actually his family farm and home, which he decided to open to the public

eight years ago. He's sweating, and so am I. A lot of places claim to be off the beaten track, but the Ferreira farm actually is. It's a two-hour walk up a mountain trail from Taquari, a village just a short drive north of Parati town. Smyth, serving as guide, led me to the sunny, high valley and Zé's farm; I felt like I'd climbed all the way to heaven.

It's a heaven of living, growing, things. Zé speaks only Portuguese, and Smyth, a British expat, tries his best to keep up with translation. But Zé is a passionate man—the farm is his life's work—and the words gush, like the mountain stream that he's proudly rigged with an old generator to power a few electric bulbs and a laptop.

"Agrofloresta," Zé is saying over and over as he points out various tropical trees and plants along the path. I think I recognize some—royal palms, manioc, papaya. But, I wonder, where, exactly, is the farm? Everywhere, it turns out. *"Agro floresta* translates into 'agroforestry,'" Smyth explains. "It means that you don't clear a field in the rain forest and plant just one crop, the way traditional farmers do. Instead, you figure out how to plant your food within the forest, in harmony with other plants."

Zé's eldest son, Jorge, who's about 25 and incredibly fit, arrives on the scene, machete in hand. He and his father have been doing research on how various food crops work together. "We have several growing seasons," Jorge explains. "If I plant beans, for instance, at the base of a fruit tree, when the beans finish producing, the plant will die and nourish the fruit." Almost everything the family—and visitors—eat or use, even soap, is grown and made here, from forest plants.

"Zé and Jorge spend a lot of time hosting researchers from agricultural universities from all over the world," says Smyth. Students are the target market for Eco-Farm's rustic single-bed guest rooms, located in a hand-built wooden cabin. Curtains flap in the breeze through glassless windows. "This is a work in progress," says Smyth. "Most travelers come up just for the day."

It's time to eat lunch with Jorge, up at his place—another 500 feet up the mountain and worth the walk. The view over the Serra do Mar is beyond heavenly, and so is the food—organic, vegetarian, from the forest: the beans, the bananas, the fresh hearts of palm. There's even something that looks like noodles but is actually a salad of the white, stringlike seed pods that spring from palm trees. It's all prepared by Jorge's wife, Dani, from Rio. "I studied agriculture at university, did an internship at the farm, met Jorge...." As she smiles, their baby son, Emmanuel, comes wriggling, on all fours, out of the new house that Jorge finished fixing up just in time for his son's arrival. The hotel lover in me begins to envision possibilities. What terrific guest cabins you could build here, filled with the hand-carved chairs, stools, and beds Jorge is making from local hardwood and surrounded by the flowers that Dani has planted everywhere. I try to communicate all this to Jorge, through Smyth's translation, and he smiles politely. I realize I'm thinking like a modern traveler, not an eco-farmer.

"Up here, things move more slowly," Smyth explains. "So when it's ready, it's really right. Come back next time you're here and check in again."

Eco-Farm 2 rooms and multibed dorm, from \$250, including two lunches, one dinner, one breakfast, and guide. www.eco-farmbrazil.com

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