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Brazilian masterpiece: Paraty, a colonial beauty... where everyone wears flipflops

By [Mark Palmer](#)

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We had wondered why our hotel in the Brazilian seaside town of Paraty wanted to know what size shoes we wore in advance.

Things became clearer when our taxi had to stop a few blocks away from Casa Turquesa. The streets were flooded, in some cases knee-deep. So we transferred to horse transport and waded towards the little hotel's back entrance.



Beauty and the beach: The sublime sands at Paraty on Brazil's Costa Verde

Nothing unusual about that around here. Ever since Paraty was founded in 1650 and the first Portuguese colonial buildings were erected slightly below sea level, the tide has been allowed to come and go. For many years it was the sole source of sanitation.

Our shoe sizes were needed so that flipflops would be waiting for us. Everyone wears them in Paraty. It is just one of many quirks that make this town such a captivating detour for anyone spending time in Brazil. Essential viewing, actually.

England football fans would do well to add Paraty to their itinerary next summer at the World Cup. I can think of no better place to recover from the team's exit on penalties in the quarter-finals. It has it all: spectacular low-rise buildings, fabulous beaches, hundreds of islands in the bay, a thrilling rainforest and a range of hills that provides the perfect, protective backdrop.

The history of Paraty is fascinating, especially when an Argentinian-born man called Harry is your tour guide. He explained colourfully and factually how the discovery of gold first put it on the map. Then, when the gold ran out, the town traded in sugar cane and cachaca (the sugar cane-derived spirit, now the basis of Brazil's national cocktail the caipirinha).



Portuguese wonder: Paraty's historic architecture makes it one of the Coste Verde's prettiest towns

In the 19th century, it was coffee that kept the tills ringing and the slave trade buoyant. But by the turn of the century, it became a ghost town and remained so until the Fifties when it was rediscovered - even though it was not until the Seventies that it was easily accessible by road either from Rio (four hours) to the north or Sao Paulo (five hours) to the south.

Casa Turquesa is made up of two houses back-to-back with a courtyard and small pool inbetween. It is run by bubbly, glamorous Tete Etrusco, who kisses guests on arrival and treats all as if they're long-lost buddies.

Turquoise by name, turquoise by design, from the outside doors and windows to the interior furnishings and the polo shirts and wrap-around skirts worn by the charming staff. Our room looked out over the courtyard and across baked-tiled roofs ahead, bougainvillea to the left, palms and ferns to the right.

When we emerged from our wafting white mosquito nets in the morning and threw open the shutters, we were greeted by the scent of freshly baked banana cake and the best coffee I have ever drunk.

There are cobbled streets, and then there are the cobbled streets of Paraty, where much of the stone - in the absence of pointing, washed away by the flooding - is like small boulders jutting out at angles. Never mind driving, even walking is an exercise in traction.



Loosening the vocal chords: The rum-tastic caipirinha



A-list attention: *Twilight Breaking Dawn*, starring Kristen Stewart was filmed here in 2010

There are few street lights. In fact, at night it looks like nothing is going on at all. But behind the doorways are restaurants, shops, art galleries. It's a bohemian rhapsody, but in a delightfully un-touristy sort of way, where no one touts for business or seems concerned when their enterprise is half-empty, rather than half full.

We made contact with Michael Smyth, an Englishman who has lived in Paraty for eight years and offers all kinds of activities. He took us on a boat trip across Paraty Bay and into Ilha Grande Bay, where there are meant to be 365 islands, most of which are uninhabited, almost all protected by the Brazilian government.

We splashed about with turtles at Jurumirim beach, then dropped anchor off Vermelha beach, swam ashore and ate fried fish, beans and fresh salad in a little cafe on the sand.

The owner brought over our boatman (and our wallets) in his little wooden rowing boat. Less than a fiver for a proper fill-up.

Back in Paraty, with the light failing, we headed for the hills, calling at one of only six distilleries still making cachaca by traditional methods. We sampled - and sampled again - and bought many more bottles than we needed. Then Michael took us to the Toboggan Waterfall, where locals go in for freshwater rock-surfing competitions. 'Fancy a go?' he said, turning to look at me. But I was already scampering up the path to the far more genteel Tarzan's pool, near where Ben Kingsley came every day while filming *The 5th Monkey* in 1990.

Film directors seem to love Paraty. *Twilight Breaking Dawn*, starring Kristen Stewart and Robert Pattinson was filmed here in 2010.

That evening over dinner and several caipirinhas, my wife and I tried to agree on one word to describe Paraty. We're not always in harmony on this kind of thing. But we settled happily for 'enchanted' and only wished we'd planned a week here rather than three days during a wider Brazilian adventure.

Travel facts...plan your own Brazilian adventure

The Ultimate Travel Company (020 3051 8098, theultimatetravelcompany.co.uk) offers seven nights in Brazil from £2,968 pp, including three nights' B&B at Casa Turquesa in Paraty and four nights' B&B at the Copacabana Palace, Rio, including BA flights and private transfers.

Contact Paraty Explorer (paratyexplorer.com) for sightseeing, boat trips and adventure.

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[Sarah](#), Nepal, 4 hours ago

I've been to Paraty, not far from Rio and so much nicer...yu forgot o mention the international book fair that takes place every year in Paraty.

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[TenaciousTaylor](#), West Midlands, 3 days ago

Me and couple friends are coming to brazil for the World Cup! And then traveling South America ! Can't wait!

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[dudapsantin](#), SMO, Brazil, 3 days ago

Ohh my Brazil :D There are so many beautiful places here: Guarda do Embaú, Canoa Quebrada, Jericoacoara, Trancoso, Marajó's island (in the middle of amazon rainforest), Genipabu, Lençois Maranhenses, Morretes,.....

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[MiriamGM](#), RIO DE JANEIRO, Brazil, 3 days ago

"...I can think of no better place to recover from the team's exit on penalties in the quarter-finals..." LOL, So mean! I sincerely hope that the British football fans will have plenty of time to celebrate their team's performance throughout the

championship, maybe even at the finals; why not?, at Paraty, Andra dos Reis or Búzios, you name it, they'll have so much fun, I'm sure! But I don't think they'll take the cup back to England! It'll stay here, sorry! :-)

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[Isi](#), Rochester, United Kingdom, 3 days ago

We had such a wonderful time in Natal a few years back when Thomson tried it out. Unfortunately it was not a success and they cancelled their holidays there. I bet if they tried again now it would be a huge success, but probably twice the price.

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