



One of the beaches of Ilha Grande, fringed with Atlantic rainforest

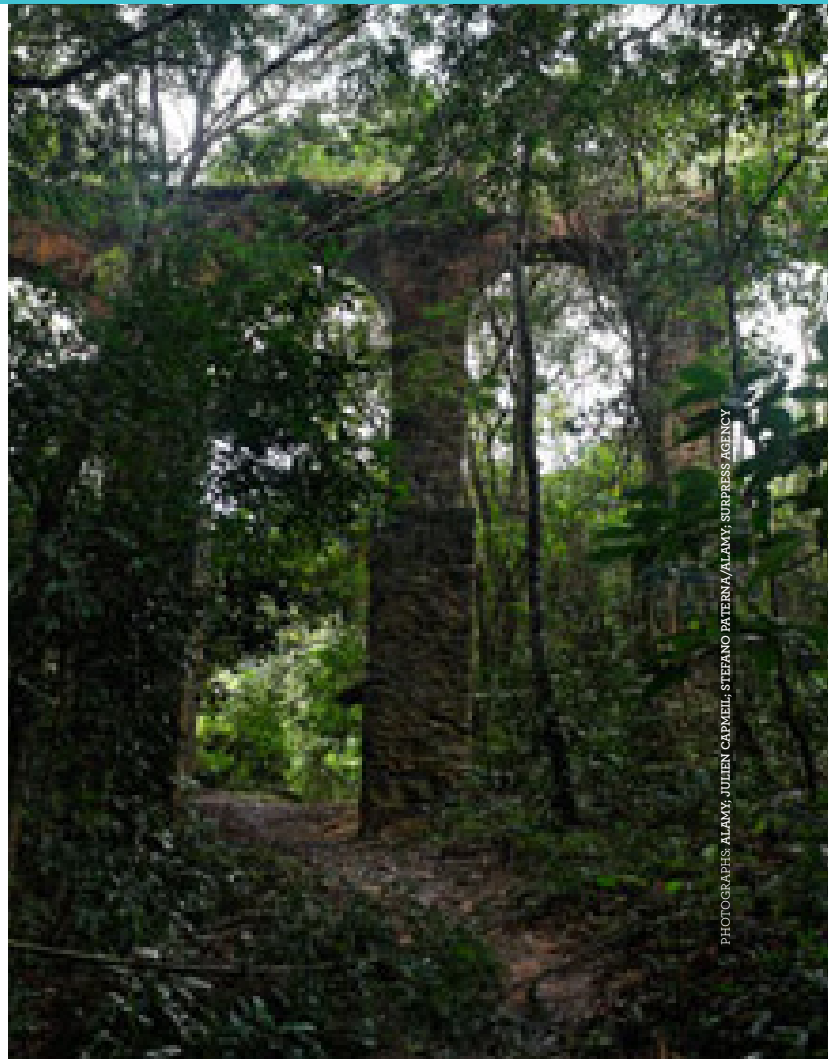


# WILDER THAN RIO

American author Eli Gottlieb revels in the untamed splendour of Ilha Grande, a car-free tropical island not far from Brazil's party capital, which has beautiful beaches and swathes of rainforest full of exotic creatures



Clockwise from above: snorkelling in a lagoon on Ilha Grande; a bar on the island; an abandoned aqueduct; marmosets in the forest. Opposite, beach near Abraão



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NTIL RECENTLY, for reasons that are not entirely clear, Brazil was barely on the conversational map for my fellow Americans. It lived in the US national consciousness, if at all, reduced to a lurid shorthand of cleavage, waves and endless parties backed by the lulling sounds of bossa nova, along with sporadic gunfire. Personally, I've always thought of Brazil as a kind of racy but distant American

cousin, connected through sharing the same landmass while remaining culturally, ethnically and linguistically a world apart.

But when I mentioned that my wife and I would be going to Rio for the Brazilian publication of my novel, enthusiasms and opinions came pouring out like *cariocas* (denizens of Rio) onto the beach. 'Drink Caipirinhas!' 'Get a thong for your wife!' 'Go nuts eating beef at a *churrascaria*!'





Above, the jetty at Ilha Grande's smartest hotel, the Sagu Mini Resort, which is in a secluded spot yet only 15 minutes' walk from the main town of Abraão

'Don't miss Carnival!' And persistently, in a somewhat lowered, conspiratorial voice: 'You must certainly go to Ilha Grande. It's the ultimate insider's paradise, and it won't stay that way for long.'

I've never been much of an island person myself. Island people, typically, have an inherent predisposition to indolence, and to lying supine in a hammock with a flower-bedecked frosty drink in their hand while passing the late afternoons studying the finer gradations of sunsets. Islands are for water sports and extended languor. I live in the chilly mountain town of Boulder, Colorado, a mile above sea level, by choice. I like being active, and the town's personal tastes, which run to four-weather sports with an emphasis on biking, running and climbing, suit me fine.

Ilha Grande? Well, we were going to be in nearby Rio, after all. And I was going to be reduced to a rag, no doubt, by the typical labours of book promotion. Yes, perhaps I'd need some island time after all. So in

the weeks before the trip, I began doing a little bit of due diligence on Ilha Grande. One of the interesting things I found out was that it only opened to tourism in 1994, when its large prison, a kind of Devil's Island affair which had housed some of the country's most dangerous narco-bosses, was dynamited. Since then, it had become famous in an underground way for being one of the

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last truly unspoiled remnants of the once-massive Atlantic rainforest and, as such, a veritable basket of biodiversity. Visitors who made the trek about 150km south-west of Rio ranged from eco-tourists looking for a pristine island holiday to biologists and entomologists craving an Amazon-rainforest-minus-yellow-fever experience, plus surf addicts,

'perfect beach' seekers and the occasional few, like myself and my wife, who wanted simply to get as far away from everything as possible and for whom the riotous vegetation and unspoiled panoramas were merely a value-added plus.

In the meantime, Rio. As it turned out, the city lived up to advance billing. It is a place of suavely violent oppositions: expensive/poor, dangerous/safe, incredibly refined and in-your-face nasty, with all of it somehow taking place outdoors, often on the beach. After four days of being hustled hither and yon by my cheerful publicist and her staff while remaining in the state of addled cheer inevitably produced by jet lag working in concert with Caipirinhas (for those out of the loop, the national adult beverage of Brazil is made of sugar-cane liquor admixed with pounded fruit), my wife and I were ready for a change.

A two-hour taxi ride from our hotel took us to the Marina de Porto Real where we piled into a small waiting



Above, Praia Lopes Mendes, considered one of the most beautiful beaches in the world, which is accessible by boat or by hiking through the rainforest

speedboat for the 40-minute trip to the island. The sun, which had collaborated happily the previous four days, decided to go away and a heavy cloud front rode in. The light grew dim, and as we boarded the boat, a spitting rain was dotting the windshield of the craft. Within five minutes of our departure, this turned into projectile vomiting. Near hurricane-force winds sprang up, and the waves grew troughed and mountainous. This was not touristic; this was not picturesque; it was merely terrifying. For the next half hour or so, the tiny boat was hurled up and down on the waves like the dollar on international markets, throwing out my wife's back in the process, and actually making me long to be back on dry land, being passively-aggressively questioned by sneering reporters.

As we drew near Ilha Grande we came into a channel of sorts, the weather cleared and, looking out, we had the

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## THE PERFECT COMBINATION: RIO & ILHA GRANDE

### GETTING THERE

**British Airways** ([www.ba.com](http://www.ba.com)) flies direct from Heathrow to Rio de Janeiro. **TAM** ([www.tam.com.br](http://www.tam.com.br)) flies from Heathrow via São Paulo. You can then drive from Rio to Mangaratiba or Angra dos Reis to catch a boat to Ilha Grande. Alternatively, **Sagu Mini Resort** (00 55 24 3361 5660; [www.saguresort.com](http://www.saguresort.com)), which has doubles from about £100, can organise transport from Rio to the island on request.

### TOUR OPERATOR

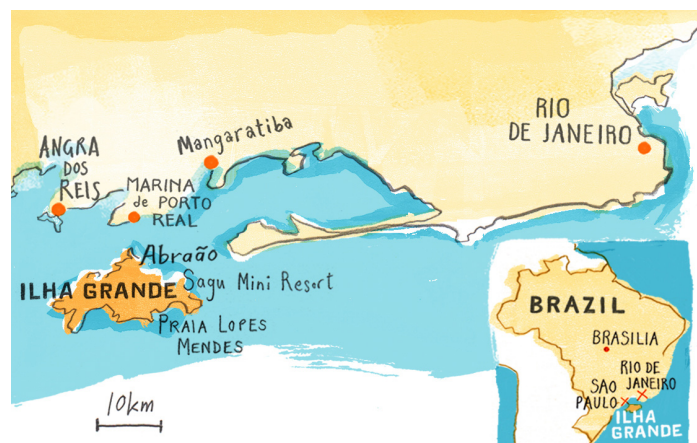
South America specialist **The Ultimate Travel Company** (020 7386 4646;

[www.theultimatetravelcompany.co.uk](http://www.theultimatetravelcompany.co.uk)) offers a 10-day, tailor-made itinerary costing from £1,990 per person. It includes three nights at Rio's **Copacabana Palace** and a week on Ilha Grande at the Sagu Mini Resort. On

an 11-day trip (from £2,020 per person) you can spend four nights at Rio's boutique-style **Hotel Santa Teresa** then six nights at the Sagu Mini Resort. Prices include British Airways flights from Heathrow and transfers.

### WHEN TO GO

Ilha Grande is a good year-round destination, with lots of sunshine and average daily high temperatures of 24°C to 29°C. Humidity is highest in January and February; June–August is the driest period.



# WILDER THAN RIO

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distinct impression of having wandered into the pages of *Robinson Crusoe*. Unlike most islands, which sport heavily colonised and built-up shores, Ilha Grande meets the gaze of new arrivals (at least at this particular point of the island) as a vast, unbroken wall of green. As you draw nearer, the green resolves itself into the simple particulars of a dock, a thatched roof and a wide, split-log veranda. Strolling towards you down the veranda and then onto the dock is the proprietor of the hotel where you've made your reservations. His name is Paolo Morosi, and he's a burly, bearded Italian fellow of middle age with a passing resemblance to Eric Clapton. He welcomes you with what will turn out to be his signature enthusiasm: 'I arrange the weather just for you!' he cries ironically; and swallowing down your nausea for the sake of amiability, you laugh.

Most visitors to Ilha Grande will disembark at the main town of Abraão, pronounced 'a-brow'. It's a place of bright, poster-paint-coloured doors, packed-dirt roads, shops crammed with tourist shlock, and lots of restaurants with copycat menus heavy on fish, rice and beans. Tourism, after all, may only be 15 years old, but it's catching up fast. As for us, having weighed the pros and cons of the various lodging choices, we had opted for luxury and decided on the Sagu Mini Resort, owned by Paolo, about 15 minutes' walk down the beach.

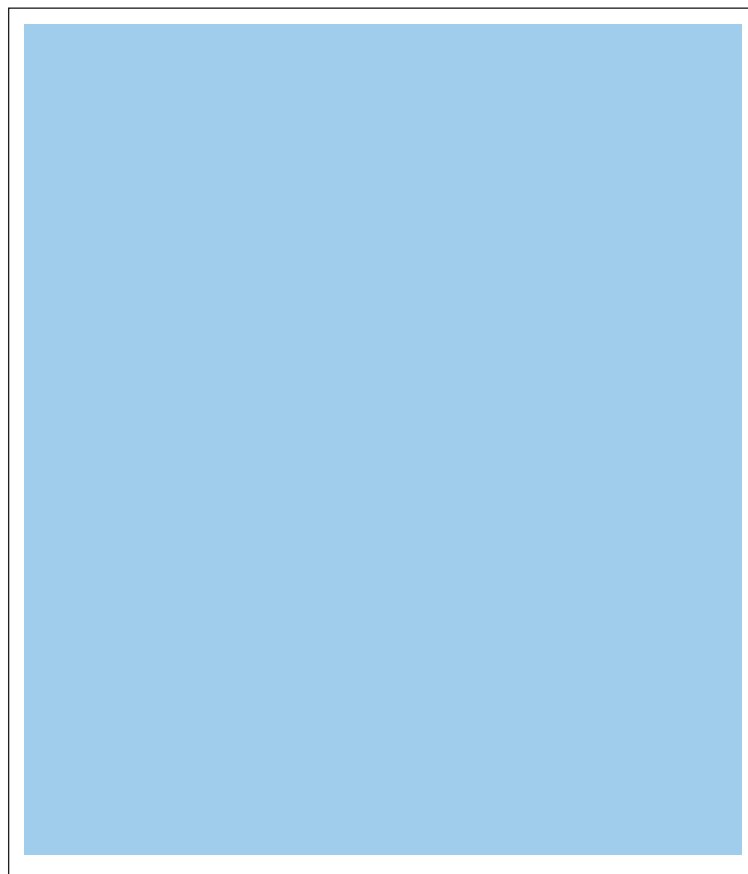
The upside of Ilha Grande is the truly unspoilt, undeveloped nature of the place. Cars are barred from the island, there's exactly one fire engine to serve the incendiary propensities of its 2,000 citizens, and most people walk or ride bicycles. But for travellers the infrastruc-

tural sketchiness of the place cuts both ways, and accommodation there is almost entirely limited to small campsites and *pousadas* or bed-and-breakfasts of varying sizes and amenity levels. Most of these, because they are in Abraão, have the disadvantage of putting you in close contact with your fellow human beings. For my wife and I, these days on the island were

sagged before picking up again when we were ushered into our room. It was clean, large and attractively furnished in spare, Island Moderne style, with a well-stocked fridge, a tiara of mosquito netting gathered over the bed, a spacious bathroom and – most important of all – a large picture window through which the postcard view of boats bobbing and a

scatter of small forested islands could be seen.

Our spirits improved further that night when at Paolo's restaurant, an ambitious, Italian-themed place called the Toscanelli Brasil – which he built with Kurtzian insouciance in the heart of the jungle – we dined on one of the very best steaks I have ever eaten. Having slept soundly on a comfortable bed, we awoke the next day to an overcast but dry morning. What to do first? There is basically only one thing to do on Ilha Grande, and that's walk. Walk to the dock to catch a boat around the island, for sightseeing or scuba diving. Walk an hour or so to a beach such as Praia Lopes Mendes, which is universally acclaimed as one of the finest in the



a kind of late-in-the-day honeymoon, as we had been married a month before, and all we wanted, in the immortal words of Greta Garbo, was to be alone.

'Is said will rain for four days,' Paolo explained in his mangled Italo-English, helping carry our bags from the bobbing boat into the hotel proper, which is a visually compelling array of apartments hewn into a hillside and connected by flagstone paths to the whitewashed and dark-timbered main building. 'So you must decide now on plan to have good time.'

Four days was the precise length of our planned stay, and our spirits immediately

world for its perfect sickle curve and its dense, superfine sand. Race-walk along one of the several lung-searing trails up nearby mountains. Or walk, as we did, simply for the pleasure of moving your body through one of the most beautiful, spooky natural habitats on the planet.

Ilha Grande has been inhabited by hunter-gatherers since prehistoric times. It is possible that the original inhabitants were offshoots of a semi-nomadic people called the Tupi Guarani who lived in the forests of Brazil and who, among their other hobbies, enjoyed swilling a liquor called 'caium', which they produced from manioc flour 'leavened with the spit' ➤

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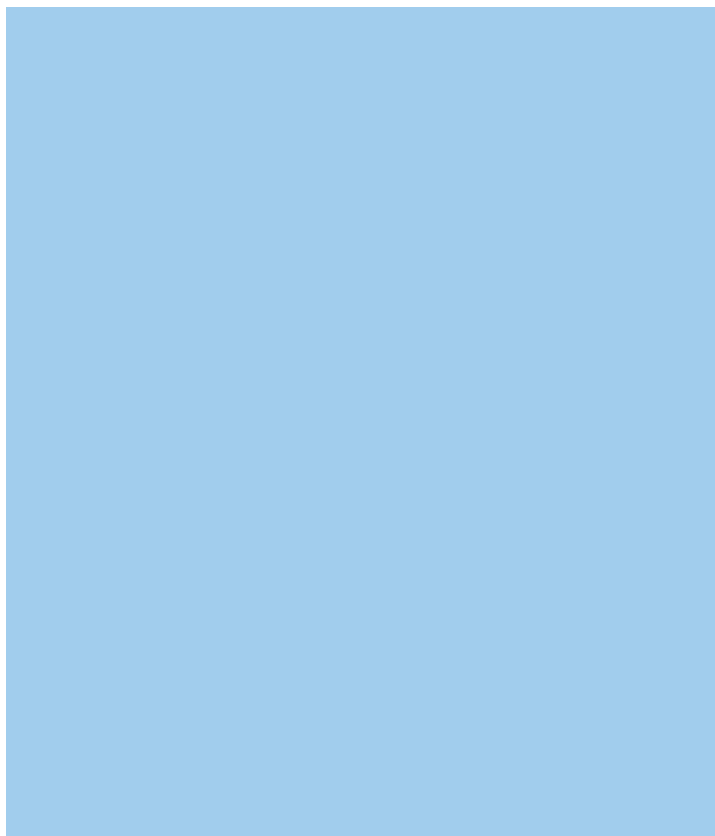
► of young virgin women'. What is known for certain is that in the 16th century, a German harquebusier named Hans Staden was captured and held by the islanders for nine months. He later immortalised the experience in a book with the Germanically literal title, *Story and Descriptions of a Landscape of Naked and Irate Cannibals*.

More recently, the island has served as a centre for sugar-cane and coffee production and sardine-processing, as well as being home to both the aforementioned prison and a leper colony. Adding to the paths and somewhat picturesque ruins left by each of these incarnations, the island fathers wised up to the boom in eco-tourism and recently laid down an intricate, well-marked series of trails that branch over the entire 300sq km terrain. So, maps in hand, we packed our canteens, slathered on bug juice to ward off the malaria-packed mosquitoes and plunged in.

One simply forgets, caught up in an urgent metropolitan existence, what it is like to be in the midst of the stillness that an island canopied with a rainforest can provide. The experience is not only one of vegetable and animal superabundance, of strange squeaks and howls echoing across the distance, and thrillingly dense copses of bamboo like tightly packed quivers of green arrows. It's not only the hand-crayoned dinner plates of the butterflies flapping slowly by, or the inquisitive capuchin monkeys which hang from trees at eye level and gaze at you like so many tiny, bright-eyed old men while the *eau de island*, a rich, loamy exudation of the gigantic compost heap of the forest floor, tinctures the air. No, at bottom it is the fact that the blast of ancient life-force concentrated in one place gives you the head-clearing,

spirit-cleansing rush of a week of meditation, and you've never felt anything quite like it before.

We walked for hours, elated, without seeing a soul. We knew that in the woods and beaches around us not merely thousands but millions of animals were breathing along with us. We knew that these ranged from common birds and



fish to those rare, endangered few – such as the red-ruffed fruitcrow, the maned sloth and the broad-snouted caiman – who were making a last stand of a sort against the encroaching forces of development. At one point an ancient aqueduct, moss-covered as if posing for its turn in a Harrison Ford adventure movie, loomed into view. It had been built only 100 years earlier, for the leprosarium, and then abandoned; but it seemed to complete the vibe we were feeling, which was something out of *The Lost World*.

Later that same day, recounting our adventures over pineapple-flavoured

Caipirinhas back on the lovely veranda of the Sagu, we chatted with Geiza (pronounced 'zhay-za'), an official guide with the Brazilian Embratur organisation, who seemed to know absolutely everything there was to know about Ilha Grande and who, like most of those in the know I spoke to, was worried.

'The wider world should know,' she said, 'that they'd better hurry if they want to see the real pristine innocence of this place. The governor of Rio has signed a decree which goes against the suggestions of various environmental groups and will allow rich people to build mansions along the coast. We're getting ready to mobilise against it. But it may be the beginning of the end.'

So many things, these days, seem the beginning of the end that it's hard to take the warnings seriously. Chicken Little fatigue has now infected all of us. However, that said, it is clear that this tiny, dense and pristine garden of life deserves to be visited, and protected. My wife and I would stay on for another three days and – I'm reluctant to

admit it – enter into an Island Default state of mind ourselves. This was a bit like a human version of a computer's 'sleep' mode: minimal energy expended, and a kind of blank, happy screen drawn across the mind as we wandered the paths, ate our fish and beans, and drank our Caipirinhas. Remembered on the plane winging us back to chilly Colorado, Ilha Grande seemed like a dream, but a good dream. Hurry, if you want to savour it, because like all Edens still untouched for the most part by human intervention, this one is not only green and perfect, but waiting, sadly and inevitably, for its fall.