



Uncommon Ground

The Brazilian state of Bahia is like a country unto itself, from the African-inflected flavors and sounds of the coastline to the cliffs and caves of its rugged interior

By Saki Knafo Photographs by Oliver Pilcher

*On Resende Beach in
Itacaré, a popular surf
spot south of Salvador*





Salvaged wood and hammocks set the scene at Casa dos Arandis, off the Atlantic in Marau

This is the place

where most of the Africans were brought. That's probably the first thing you should know about Bahia. They were brought from the western coast of Africa to toil in the vast fields of sugarcane that once helped make Portugal one of the wealthiest empires in the world. Nearly 1.7 million enslaved Africans arrived in Brazil during the slave trade, and the country was the last in the Americas to make the practice illegal. Today, Bahia is Brazil's most African state, with more than three quarters of its 15 million inhabitants tracing their roots back to the opposite side of the Atlantic. But really that's just another way of saying that Bahia is Brazil's most Brazilian state, since so many of the country's contributions to the world, from its Carnival to its capoeira, were first created in Bahia by Africans and their descendants and continue to grow and flourish there today.

My week in Bahia began last November in Salvador, the largest city in Brazil's northeast region and the thumping heart of Afro-Brazilian culture. My guide, Conor, picked me up at the airport and maneuvered through the traffic skirting the edge of the sea. Home to almost three million people, Salvador lies near the southern tip of a peninsula that divides the immense Bahia de Todos Santos (Bay of All Saints) from the bright blue waters of the Atlantic, and climbs up a tall escarpment. The 150-year-old Lacerda Elevator carries people from the lower part of the city, the Cidade Baixa, to the upper part, the Cidade Alta. As recently as a decade ago, Brazilians spoke of Salvador as a failed city, lamenting its high crime rate, its crumbling infrastructure, its abandoned buildings. But the years since then have seen its fortunes rise. As Conor drove me to the sleek Fasano Salvador, a recent opening from the sophisticated Brazilian brand with outposts in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, and part of the growing number of luxury hotels to bet on the city's prospects in recent years, he praised the revitalization projects of the youthful mayor, Antônio Carlos Magalhães Neto. "He's like a dog with a bone," Conor said. "Once he says he's going to do something, he does it."

We saw evidence of those efforts as we drove. Crews of workers were spreading fresh asphalt on the roads, and in a palatial old building, construction was underway on the Museum of Brazilian Music—a tribute to the illustrious musical legacy of a city where Gilberto Gil and Caetano

Veloso pioneered the Afro-Brazilian sound Tropicália.

Neto, who clearly doesn't lack ambition, has said that he intends to position Salvador as the premier cultural destination in all of Latin America. If he succeeds, it won't be the first time Salvador will have worn that crown. Four centuries ago, when Rio de Janeiro was little more than a pirate's nest, Salvador was the capital of Brazil. It's one of the only cities in the Americas that still looks largely how it did when it was established, during colonial times. Pelourinho, the historic neighborhood, is part of a UNESCO World Heritage Site, with steep cobbled streets twisting in every direction and stone plazas flanked by Portuguese cathedrals lined with gold. Throughout the day and into the evening, the sounds of elaborate drumming ricochet off the façades of the grand old houses, which are painted in the colors of the tropics—the orange of papaya, the yellow of mango, the blue of the sea. Brazil has been hard-hit by COVID-19, with Bahia being the fifth-most infected state as of July; lockdown means these sounds have likely been muted for now. One evening, while hurrying to a dance performance at a local theater, Conor and I ran into a throng that had gathered in a narrow street to watch an impromptu show by one of the neighborhood's drum groups. Abandoning our plans, we stood there swaying to the thunderous rhythms of Banda Olodum, a legendary samba-reggae band that performs each February during Salvador's Carnival, which rivals Rio's as the biggest in Brazil, if not the world. "It's not difficult to be waylaid here," said Conor. "There's a spontaneity and a sense of fun, you know?"

I didn't fail to notice that my guide to the most African city outside Africa was as Irish a guy as you could hope to meet west of Galway, but Conor has lived in Salvador since 1982, and he knows everyone. One of his friends is Mestre Valmir, a charismatic capoeira master who welcomed us into his training center and held forth about the origins of the martial art, recounting how slaves developed it in the sugarcane fields, adopting musical instruments and acrobatic moves to fool their oppressors into thinking they were dancing, as opposed to practicing a form of self-defense. We watched his students take turns facing off in the center of a circle while he led a group of musicians on the berimbau, or musical bow. The fighters would plant their hands on the floor and wheel their heels at each other while carefully avoiding contact. "Capoeira teaches respect for the other," he explained. "You don't want to hit the other person, you just want to show that you could."

Another friend of Conor's is Tereza Paim, the proprietor and chef of Casa de Tereza, one of a crop of restaurants that have established Salvador as a rising South American food city. Owing to its West African influence, Bahia's spicy cuisine has always stood out from the relatively mild fare found in other parts of Brazil. Conor and I shared a moqueca, a peppery fish stew cooked in the ubiquitous azeite de dendê, a thick orange oil derived from the berries of the African oil palm.



The stew arrived sizzling in a terra-cotta pot, the smell of onions and tomatoes and fish and spices all mingling above the brightly painted tabletop. Ingredients from across the Portuguese empire merged before us into something delicious—Bahian history boiled down to its culinary essence.

A third friend of Conor's offered an engrossing account of an important facet of that history. Daré Rose is a scholar and *Filha de Santo*—congressional member—of *candomblé*, a Brazilian religion born of beliefs and customs that traveled to Salvador from West Africa in the holds of slave ships. As recently as the 1970s, its followers faced persecution by the government, but they kept the faith, and today in Brazil they number in the millions. Daré took us behind the whitewashed walls of her *terreiro*, a building where *candomblé* is practiced, set amid a stretch of forest in an outlying area of the city. The temples, inconspicuous structures of stucco and wood, stood in stark contrast to the gilded extravagance of the Baroque churches that loomed over the city's central squares. Some were decorated with simple carvings or motifs that represented different *orixás*, as the deities of *candomblé* are called. They include Xangô, the ax-wielding god of thunder, and Yemanjá, the fish-tailed goddess of the sea. Beginning in the '50s, Brazil's preeminent novelist, Jorge Amado, and the whimsical painter Carybé held honorary positions of prestige in the community, Daré told me. Together with the photographer Pierre Verger,

they brought international attention to Salvador's vibrant culture and the daily lives of its people, attracting visits from Pablo Neruda, Simone de Beauvoir, and Fidel Castro.

Salvador was a stronghold of the Brazilian left in those days, and it still is. One night we squeezed into a packed bar called *O Cravinho*, where *cachaça* infused with cloves and other spices filled an array of casks lining a high shelf along the wall. On the TV, Brazil's former president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, known as Lula, was giving what you could see was an emotional speech, even if you couldn't hear him above the cheerful commotion in the wood-paneled barroom. A Supreme Court ruling had just led to Lula's release from prison, where he'd served a year and a half of a 12-year sentence for corruption. He had taken bribes, to be sure, but no one I met in Bahia doubted the sincerity of his dedication to the cause of improving the lives of Brazilians of color. During my travels, his nemesis, the far-right president Jair Bolsonaro, was leading an assault on his social programs and affirmative action policies, which had been widely credited with lifting millions of Brazilians out of poverty. At the bar old men were staring at the TV with tears in their eyes. Watching from the sidewalk, a woman in a wheelchair who must have been 90 tipped a plastic cup to her lips.

If you visit Brazil, you're probably also looking for serene beaches and scenes of natural splendor, and you can find



From left: *The Maraú peninsula;*
spicy fish stew from Casas Bahia Salvador;
Cabana do Bobô on Resende Beach;
a spot to relax at Casa dos Arandis

superlative versions of both without venturing outside of Bahia, a state about the size of France with dazzling diversity of landscapes. In recent years, more and more people have been drawn to the remote Maraú peninsula, a thumb of land endowed with mangroves, waterfalls, sparsely populated islands, magnificent rain forest, and miles and miles of idyllic beaches. To get to the boutique hotel where I was staying, I first boarded an hour-long flight from Salvador to Ilhéus, the faded former hub of the chocolate industry that reigned over this region—the so-called Cacao Coast—until a blight decimated the crop in the 1980s. From there it was another hour down a dirt road that runs the length of the peninsula. The car bounced and lurched, but I wasn't complaining. The difficulty of getting from one end of Maraú to the other has kept the peninsula safe from the depredations of big developers.

My hotel, Casa dos Arandis, which was nestled between the palm-fringed beach and the rain forest, had the laid-back vibe of a surf retreat, with bungalows made of salvaged wood and Tibetan prayer flags flapping in the salty breeze. Lying in the hammock on my porch, I could hear the churning of the Atlantic beyond the clusters of tropical greenery that shaded

the sandy footpaths. Jogging down the beach, I passed three people in the span of a mile. The co-owner, a surfer in his early 60s, was a white guy from Rio nicknamed Cacau, which means “cocoa,” and although he tried explaining the origins of the nickname to me over a fresh bowl of locally grown açai, it was a complicated story and I got lost. He served nectar from cocoa fruit in a shot glass as soon as I stepped out of the car and continued to offer it to me throughout my visit, sometimes spiking the milky ambrosia with cachaça, always extolling its myriad nutritional benefits.

Cacau was bullish about the local cacao industry's prospects of recapturing its former glory. A growing number of farmers, many of them his friends, were embracing organic methods and other ecologically enlightened practices, partly to stave off the sorts of diseases that had ravaged the region's cacao crop in the past. Each morning at the hotel, I sat down at a table laden with their products—not just cacao nibs but also banana and papaya and mango and a cherry-like fruit called pitanga, as well as coconut milk and coconut water, all of it local and organic. One day after breakfast, I followed Cacau on a stand-up paddleboard through a maze of mangroves to an uninhabited island where some of his farmer friends had been growing all kinds of fruits I'd never heard of, let alone tasted. I bit into a capiá, a small yellow ball with the texture and taste of a sweet potato, then one of the farmhands hacked apart a cocoa pod—oblong, orange,

There are hundred-foot-high waterfalls, cacti taller than houses, and ancient white seashells on the bottoms of the ponds

with ribbed leathery skin. We all just stood around grinning at each other while chewing on the sweet lemony pulp, spitting out the bitter seeds that are used to make chocolate.

Chapada Diamantina, my final stop in Bahia, is a national park in the *sertão*, the rugged outback that ripples across northeast Brazil's interior. It's difficult to sum up the place's staggering scale and scenic beauty and sheer ecological variety without just resorting to a recital of its greatest hits. I'm thinking of its dozens of waterfalls, some hundreds of feet high, and its cacti, many of which grow taller than houses, and its extraordinary caves, which draw spelunkers from around the world, and a freshwater pond carpeted with ancient white seashells so tiny you could fit dozens on the tip of your finger.

The land is mostly dry and rocky, dominated by dramatic bluffs and buttes. Stretches might remind you of the American Southwest or the Black Hills of North Dakota, but then you'll spot a little capuchin monkey scurrying across a cliff, or a tree that sheds its bark each day so the green skin beneath it can draw energy directly from the sun, and you'll realize that there's no other place like this in the world. Right in the middle of all this natural beauty is a burst of unnatural color, the pastel-painted colonial town of Lençóis. I spent four nights at Hotel Canto Das Águas, a rambling *pousada* of pink and green stones on the banks of a rushing river. In the mornings I'd sit on the veranda with my coffee and watch jewellike birds peck at the papaya that the staff had set out for them in bowls. In the evenings I'd stroll across a footbridge into the town center, where scores of backpackers sat outside the restaurants that lined the cobblestone side streets, while street musicians strummed and sang mellow bossa nova classics.

Decades ago this town wasn't so charming. For a brief stretch in the 19th century, it was the diamond capital of the world, and the African people and their descendants in the area ended up working in the region's mines. This persisted for generations. My guide, Mil, told me that the mining companies would buy diamonds from the workers at just 1.5 percent of their market value—and in most cases probably less, since the workers were essentially confined to their isolated settlements and had no way of ascertaining the value themselves. Mil said his father had been a miner. The family lived day-to-

day, trading diamonds for sacks of tapioca and beans. Now the mines were closed, and the locals worked as guides, mining the beauty of the park itself.

Each day, Mil would drive me to some beautiful site that somehow outdid whatever he'd shown me the day before. One morning we hiked along a river in a striated gorge strewn with slabs of pink quartz. Another day we penetrated the darkness of the soaring Lapa Doce cave while Mil provided running commentary on the ghostly stalagmites that revealed themselves in the beam of his flashlight. ("This one, it look like an owl. That one, it look like the nativity when Jesus is born.")

On my last day, Mil said there was a view I absolutely had to see. We'd have to drive two hours to get to the trailhead, then hike another few hours after that, but it would be worth it. The place was called the valley of Pati. When I asked Mil what that meant, he said no one knew. People from Africa had given it that name long ago, and now its meaning was forgotten.

We climbed a steep trail onto the top of a plateau, then walked for about two miles across a savanna. Every so often some arresting new species of flora would appear. Furry cacti. Purple blossoms shaped like slippers. Bright red bursts of threadlike petals flaring up from the rocks. The view, when we finally reached it, was as stunning as promised, across the green valley to colossal gray cliffs rising like ships from a sea of leaves.

Slipping into a reflective mood, I thought about something Mil had told me on an earlier hike. We'd been discussing Bahia, what makes it special, when Mil contended, as Bahians often do, that samba was invented there, despite what people will tell you in Rio. He stopped in the trail, pressed his wrists together behind his back, and stood very still with his ankles touching. In the days of slavery, he said, if you were caught practicing capoeira or candomblé, or committing some other transgression in the eyes of your oppressors, that's how they'd make you stand, with your feet and hands bound together, sometimes for days on end. But if you just stood there and didn't move, you'd die. Your blood would stop flowing. So you shuffled your feet, an inch at a time. One foot forward, the other foot back. Samba. "It was necessary," he said, looking at me intently. He considered the point important enough to bear repeating. "It was necessary." That was Bahia. A beautiful place where people had endured unimaginable cruelty by creating a culture that made it even more beautiful. ■

VISITING BAHIA

Several airlines, including LATAM, fly into Salvador from New York and Miami via Panama City or São Paulo. Tour operator Matueté can arrange tailor-made multiday itineraries around Bahia, including guides, transfers, and accommodation. Prices vary. matuete.com



Clockwise from top left: The Portuguese influence on display in Salvador's Old Town; musicians on Resende Beach in Itacaré; a game of dominoes in central Salvador; a lookout at Chapada Diamantina National Park