

WHEN Kylie Minogue appeared at the opening night of samba spectacular *Brasil Brasileiro* at Sadler's Wells in London last month, records were smashed for the number of tickets sold by the theatre in one day.

No doubt the Aussie pop princess played a part, but there is also no doubt that Brazil is hot right now. Rap artists Snoop Dogg and Pharrell Williams have been making videos in Rio, Steven Spielberg has been frolicking on the beach at Trancoso and Leonardo DiCaprio knocked back a caipirinha or two in the trendier clubs of São Paulo while he dated the supermodel Gisele Bündchen.

Tourists are being lured by the weather, the value, a sense that it's far from the world's trouble spots, and more flights than ever — this autumn Brazilian airline TAM launches a daily service from London to São Paulo, BA is increasing its flights from seven to ten a week, and Thomsonfly flies to Natal from November. As the song says, there's an awful lot of coffee in Brazil — but soon, it seems, there'll be an awful lot of Brits, too.

WILL HIDE



Life in Rio is not just a beach

Sara Wheeler finds a new wave of stylish boutique hotels is giving the city its groove back

RIO might have cemented itself at the top of the touristic league table a century back, but latterly it has descended to the hinterland of cliché.

Monolithic behemoths such as the 226-room Copacabana Palace; girls from Ipanema in dental-floss bikinis; the garish spectacle of Carnival — these are the emblems of Rio's vulgar glamour. But recently shoots of new growth have appeared on the vaulted skyline. A wave of owner-occupied boutique hotels in districts unpolluted by tour buses offers an alternative to the beige-curtained pleasure domes. These boutiques, mostly in old family mansions, have not yet made it into the guidebooks. But they will.

To get the feel of the other side of Rio, I stayed not on the beach but up in Santa Teresa, a shabby-chic quartier of vertiginous cobbled streets. There are no traffic lights, just the lines of a canary-yellow tram, the *bonde*, the last of a fretted network of streetcars that once ferried Cariocas, as the residents of Rio are known, up from the crowded avenues of the coast.

In the mercantile heyday of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, wealthy Cariocas built their piles up here. But in the 1970s a series of unpleasant incidents between rival drug gangs drove residents down to newer, more secure districts. Artists and craftsmen moved in, setting up workshops and studios, the violence



Sara Wheeler tastes the delights from the kitchen of Casa 32

recoded, and, as you don't have to drive through Santa Teresa to get anywhere, the streets remain extraordinarily well preserved — preserved from the developers, I mean. This is one of the last remaining unspoiled artists' districts in the world.

Architecturally, Santa Teresa mixes gabled fences with impossibly high neo-colonial windows and stygian bars fronted by hand-carved doors. Arty bistros include the fabled Bar do Mineiro, offering traditional *feijão*, a velvety meat (mainly pork) and glossy black bean stew allegedly conceived by slaves with scraps from the plantation owner's kitchen. Pavements are lined with fleets of antediluvian VW Beetles, shops selling crocheted handbags and cardigans, and grocers displaying bombastic ziggurats of pineapples.

At sunset the play of light on water and granite shifts over swaths of skyscrapers in the

ourful Estrela da Capa. On the first Saturday of the month a huge antiques-and-kitsch street market sets up in Lavradio off Mem de Sá. In an old tiled bar at the far end I ate a lunch of shrimp *moqueca*, an unctuous stew with Bahian origins, and *picanha*, a thin cut of rump steak served with *farofa*, the roasted pulp of detoxified manioc, a staple of every table in Brazil, and the food that fed the first bewildered Portuguese settlers. Next to me three generations of women laid a baby on a plastic mat down the centre of the table before selecting black crates from a tank on the pavement. The cooked final product arrived accompanied by wooden shell-smashing mallets, and the girls spooned crabby juice into cloudy glasses of white Brazilian wine.

Favelas, or shanty towns, are a near ubiquitous feature of the urban landscape. There are close to 700 in Rio, dense thousands of mainly brick shacks cascading down the hill-sides in an apparently precarious jumble. Tourist favela tours have been marketed for some time, most of them offering little more than the uneasy experience of looking at poor people as if they were in a zoo. But the emerging new trend of Rio tourism, aimed at contact with genuine Cariocas, offers proper in-depth *avêda* tours guided by community leaders.

When I went round Prazeres (population 15,000), I watched the regular Sunday

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Boho chic: Mama Luisa is one of several elegant boutique hotels in the shabby but charming district of Santa Teresa

Need to know

Sara Wheeler's accommodation was booked through the travel website www.i-escape.com, which specialises in boutique hotels. Prices are per double room per night.

Mama Luisa: An elegant late 19th-century mansion in bohemian Santa Teresa. Six high-ceilinged shuttered rooms with views of Sugarloaf and Botafogo Bay. From £75.

Relais Solar: A stylish

guesthouse, also in Santa Teresa, set in a handsome garden and stuffed with artwork available for purchase. The owner, Gwenaél Allen, a wiry Quebec-born visionary, organises the best favela tours. From £40.

La Maison: Cosy five-room "boutique guesthouse" in Gávea, a quiet residential district five minutes by car from the beach and the glam shops and restaurants of Leblon. From £150.

La Sulta: Sister to La Maison, on the swanky Joatinga peninsula. A contender for the best appointed hotel in the world, with wraparound floor-to-ceiling ocean and panoramic cityscapes. (It also looks up at Pelé's house.) From £210.

Casa 32: A magnificent house in Largo de Botafogo, one of the finest old squares in Rio, in the Cosme Velho district between Santa Teresa and Copacabana.

Once a focus of the modern art movement, Casa 32 has been immaculately refurbished with a stylish mix of 18th-century Portuguese tiles, carved Italian oyster vestry roofs and 1960s chrome bucket chairs. From £170.

Getting there: British Airways (0870 8509850, www.ba.com) flies from Heathrow to Rio de Janeiro three times a week from £722 return.

Brazil: airlines and operators

AIRLINES
British Airways (0870 8509850, www.ba.com) flies from Heathrow to São Paulo and Rio.
Brazilian carrier TAM (www.tam.com.br) starts daily Heathrow-São Paulo flights on October 28.
Thomsonfly (0870 1604529, www.thomson.co.uk) flies weekly from Gatwick and Manchester to Natal from November.
MyTravel (0870 2418926, www.airtours.co.uk) flies weekly from Gatwick and Manchester to Salvador.

OPERATORS
Audley Travel (01889 276210, www.audleytravel.com)
Brazil Rooms (0870 7879599, www.brazilrooms.co.uk)
Cazenove & Loyd (020-7384 2332, www.cazloyd.com)
Explore Worldwide (0870 3334001, www.explore.co.uk)
Journey Latin America (020-8747 8315, www.journeyslatinamerica.co.uk)
Last Frontiers (01296 653000, www.lastfrontiers.com)
Latin America Travel (0870 4424241, www.latinamericatravel.co.uk)
Latin Odyssey (020-7610 6020, www.latinodyssey.com)
Pura Aventura (0845 2255058, www.pura-aventura.com)
Scott Dunn Latin America (020-8682 5030, www.scottdunn.com)

Select Latin America (020-7407 1478, www.selectlatinamerica.co.uk)
South American Experience (020-7976 5511, www.southamericanexperience.co.uk)
Sunvil Latin America (020-8758 4774, www.sunvil.co.uk)
The Ultimate Travel Company (020-7386 4646, www.theultimatetravelcompany.co.uk)
Thomson Faraway Shores (0870 1604529, www.thomson.co.uk)
Tim Best Travel (020-7591 0300, www.timbesttravel.com)
Traillfinders (020-7938 3939, www.traillfinders.com)
Trips Worldwide (0117-311 4400, www.tripsworldwide.co.uk)
Tucan Travel (020-8896 1800, www.tucantravel.com)
Veloso Tours (020-8762 0616, www.veloso.com)

FURTHER INFORMATION
Brazil Tourist Board (020-7629 6909, www.brazil.org.uk)
Latin American Travel Association (020-8715 2913, www.lata.org)
The 2007 Rio carnival takes place on Feb 17-20.

READING
Rio de Janeiro (Lonely Planet £12.99)
Brazil (Rough Guides, £14.99)
Brazil (Footprint, £14.99)
Brazilian Portuguese (Lonely Planet, £4.50)
WILL HIDE

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 afternoon footie match and joined in a communal barbecue. Forget the Maracanã: Prazeres has the best appointed pitch in the world — directly below the looming Cristo Redentor statue. I felt safer up there than I did on the street. Favelas are controlled by drug traffickers, and as such they are self-policing. The saturnine fellows fingering guns at lookout points are looking for rival drug gangs, not tourists.

If you're ready up for it," said my guide, the affable Ricardo, "you have to come back tonight for our Baile Funk." These weekend parties have developed into a modern Rio institution: *favelas* vie to host the most popular. The Prazeres event started at midnight in an overcrowded warehouse kipped with smoke. A semi-crazed DJ played a bass-heavy funk that fused elements of Africa, Portugal and indigenous Brazil. The entire floor was taken up with bizarrely choreographed line dances following intricate rules, unintelligible to me. Snakes of armed men curved through the crowds punching guns aloft in time with the beat. Not for the faint-hearted.

But Rio entirely sans beach? It's still thrilling to cruise along the *corriche*, watching, on one side, the sun glinting on the Atlantic beyond the breakers, and on the other the needles of rearing granite. On balance, I think the new-style Rio suits my advancing years. It's difficult to have fun on the beach when, compared with the local swimwear, one's matronly bikini resembles full body armour. If that were not demoralising enough, I tried surfing at Joatinga, a pretty little strip farther out than Copacabana and Ipanema. Failing spectacularly to stand, I ended up crawling back up on to the sand like some creature from an earlier stage of evolution.

I withdrew to Santa Teresa, where I felt much more at home.

