pousada picinguaba

Mention Picinguaba to most Brazilians and the likely response will be, Picin where? Fishermen and the odd foreigner in search of the unspoiled, pure beauty of Brazil's Atlantic coast know about it; nobody else does. Located exactly halfway between São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, just north of the Tropic of Capricorn, Picinguaba is the best-kept secret in Brazil.

To call this area breathtakingly beautiful does not do it justice. Big mountains, clad in the vivid glistening emerald green of primal (as in, never having been forested) tropical rainforest, tumble down into the swimming-pool blue of the Atlantic, forming a continuous series of bends and curves, defining one hidden gem of a beach after another. It's the kind of setting that would be perfect for a film about the first European explorers, because there are no people, no houses, no buildings, no telegraph poles, no sign in fact of this century: just nature in its most extravagant livery.

But if you look very carefully, tucked into one little corner of this virgin coastline is the tiny fishing village of Picinguaba: ten houses, two churches, a couple of bars and a padaria (bakery) just about sum the whole place up.

In the morning the men push their traditional hollowed log canoes into the water, paddle to their colourful wooden

fishing boats, and do what their fathers and their fathers' fathers did before them – catch squid, grouper and other local fish, and then wait for the merchants to arrive in their trucks to sell the catch (the locals have no cars and so are dependent on the wholesalers from the city).

It's hard to believe, when you're here, that the giant metropolis of São Paulo (twenty million-plus inhabitants) is only a three-and-a-half-hour drive away.... That's exactly what expat Frenchman Emmanuel Rengade thought when he first stumbled across Picinguaba, by accident, on one last trip along the Brazilian coast before heading off to London to take on a new corporate assignment. An enthusiastic fan of South America, Rengade had worked for a year in Bolivia, followed by four years in São Paulo. Careerwise he was making his way up the ladder of a large multinational corporation, but his heart wasn't in it. Secretly he longed for something more adventurous, a life out of the box ... which he found in the form of a colonial mansion hidden away amongst the jungle foliage of the forgotten town of Picinguaba.

Immediately Rengade knew exactly what to do with the property: make it an escape destination for people with a taste for adventure. With its whitewashed walls and traditional facade, the result is a romantic reminder of Brazil's colonial Portuguese past.

Considering its idyllic location, perched high on a hill with sweeping views of an immense stretch of beach in the distance, it would be tempting to stay within the compound, lounge by the pool and enjoy the fantastic food, which consists largely of the catch of the day. But not if Emmanuel can help it. He wants guests to experience the truly unique attributes of the surroundings. That's why the hotel has its own forty-foot schooner anchored directly below. Guests can take the boat to picnic on an empty beach, or to watch schools of porpoises at play.

The hotel also organizes mini-expeditions into the rainforest to find waterfalls, as well as sea-kayaking trips to explore uncharted beaches. The difference at Picinguaba is that when they say these attractions are next door, it's not a euphemism for a forty-five-minute drive.

One morning, for example, Ernmanuel and I checked out the local surf beach, five minutes by car from the hotel, and then disappeared into the jungle to climb a moss-covered pile of gigantic boulders to get to a spectacular waterfall, complete with its own swimming hole. After sliding on our derrières back down the slippery stone path of another waterfall, we made our way out of the jungle towards a headland where a local river empties into the Atlantic. By swimming across the headland, we managed to arrive back at the beach directly underneath the hotel. Total time taken by these mini-adventures: two hours. Length of time they will remain a fond memory: forever.

And therein lies the real appeal of Picinguaba. For those travellers who want to escape to a destination where nature is uncultivated, untarned and in large part unexplored, and which doesn't take half a work-week to get to, Picinguaba is hard, if not impossible, to beat.

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room rates from BRL 540