



INSIDE THE
AMERICAS

Leaf notes: fronds flank
the railway track between
Curitiba and Parangará

OFF THE BEATEN TRACK

In Brazil, Ed Stocker takes the train into the lush, unspoiled forests of Paraná

'Here we have three families of poisonous snake,' Ivan our host explains, a twinkle of mischief dancing in his eyes. 'In the UK you have poisonous snakes right?' 'Urm, maybe one or two,' I reply, apprehensive about slipping on the leather garters I've been handed to fit over my ankles, thus protecting me from attacks of the serpent kind.

'Ah,' he smiles, pausing for breath. 'Only hoo-ligans, yes?'

I'm deep within the sub-tropical rainforest of southern Brazil, one of the country's most isolated spots. The eco-lodge I'm staying at is the only inhabited place for miles. It's a breathtakingly beautiful area where nature is at its rawest and the mosquitoes are at their most potent. Despite my surroundings, the exploits of the English have penetrated even this last bastion of wilderness.

Southern Brazil and its lush rainforests often lose out to the country's big ticket destinations

like Rio de Janeiro or Bahia. The state of Paraná, sandwiched between São Paulo to the north and Santa Catarina to the south, isn't overrun with visitors like other parts of the country. Yet it's a fascinating region that feels a little more European and ordered than its more northerly territories, thanks to large numbers of Germans, Polish and Ukrainians who settled here in the 19th century. Unlike the sweltering tropics above, Paraná actually gets a chill in winter. And the mosquitoes, potent as they are, don't carry malaria.

I've been lured here by tales of virgin jungle and the chance to visit the vast Atlantic backwaters only an hour's boat ride from the nearest major town. But my introduction to the state is through its capital city, Curitiba. Despite a pretty old town of salmon pink and lavender-coloured colonial houses, it's not the most immediately beautiful place, clinging to its accolade of being one of South America's cleanest, most functional cities. But I'm not in town to hang around, for it's from here that I'm catching a train into the surrounding ➤



Haven of tranquility: taking the boat to Ilha do Mel (above); the region is famed for its birdlife (top right); the bright blue Serra Verde Express (right)



INSIDE THE AMERICAS

In the distance, araucaria trees stand tall, their elegant branches curving skywards while giant, electric blue butterflies float past the train windows.



countryside, one of the most picture-perfect train rides on the continent, and certainly one of its most ambitious.

As the train stutters and chugs its way out of town, waved off by a few curious locals, the immediate landscape spreads wide and flat around us, reminiscent of the Argentine pampas.

Then, as we exit the first of a series of tunnels, the scenery suddenly changes beyond all recognition. Rocky hillocks jut up dramatically around the train as thick rainforest vegetation clings to the mountains like giant heads of broccoli. In the distance, araucaria trees stand tall, their elegant branches curving skywards

whilst giant, electric blue butterflies float past the train windows.

The train line, linking the capital with the port city of Paraguá, was started in 1880 and completed five years later. It was a mean feat of engineering, given the wild terrain and dramatic change in altitude, the track climbs to around 950 metres above sea level before working its way downwards to the coast.

At one point we cross a valley on a bridge only as wide as the tracks – and for a moment it feels as though we’re suspended in mid-air. Looking out over the mountainous Serra do Mar, and the chilli powder-coloured earth, muddy

streams and vines hanging down from trees, it’s a sobering thought knowing that thousands of people died in the name of progress building this railway.

Our destination is the pretty town of Morretes, where the train terminates after several hours slowly working its way through the jungle. It’s a sleepy place, nestled in a valley.

As we pick up our transfer to the coast where we’ll be visiting the evocatively named Ilha do Mel (Honey Island) and then onto our eco-lodge, the driver jokes that in Morretes you can bake bread outside. Temperatures here regularly peak at over 40°C in summer.

Ed Stocker

Reached by a rickety 20-minute boat ride from Pontal do Sul, Ilha do Mel is a haven of tranquillity. Here cars are banned, and most of the island is an off-limits nature reserve. The remainder is sprinkled with small environmentally aware *pousadas* (historic hotels) and lodges, with several excellent seafood restaurants. At night, small groups huddle around candlelit tables as the sound of laid-back reggae *em português* wafts out of battered speakers. The island isn’t a place for action, but somewhere to unwind walking around the inland tracks, swimming in the warm ocean or trying your luck alongside Paulista

(native São Paulo) surfers showing off on the waves.

As relaxing as island life is, the final stop on our trip holds the most allure for me: two nights spent in the middle of Sebui Natural Reserve, a private national park owned by an Italian couple. Made up of four eco-huts and a communal eating area, Sebui is actually on the mainland, round the bay from Paranaguá. But such is the thick jungle and lack of road access, the only way to get there is by boat.

We’re picked up from Ilha do Mel by my namesake Ed (although he goes for a slightly different pronunciation: ‘edge-ee’), a young man

with piercing green eyes who skips the speed boat to the island. The trip over is so picturesque it sounds like a cliché: pink flamingos wading in the shallow waters near isolated islands; water the temperature of a tepid bath thanks to the protection of the bay; dolphins rising in the water for a split second to show off their fins, and once – just once – their faces.

The lodge is reached by walking along a raised wooden platform that winds past mangroves on the edge of a river inlet, where roots of trees look like twisted feet sticking into the muddy, saline soil below. The accommodation is basic but comfortable and, true to its eco credentials, ➤

In the pink: Ilha do Mel's eco-lodge is basic, but appealing – and there is plenty of wildlife in the near vicinity

Our nights are spent eating homemade fried fish with rice and black beans, listening to tales of the mythical puma that lives nearby.

all the power is generated by solar panels, while endemic plants filters waste before it's flushed into the river.

At the base camp we meet the rest of the team, including host Ivan and Joãozinho, the only member who lives there permanently. A small man, with a slight lisp, Joãozinho is a sort of Mr Fix It of the jungle. He single-handedly constructed the wooden decking that leads to the lodge.

Our nights are spent eating homemade fried fish with rice and *feijão* (black beans), listening to his tales of the mythical puma that lives in the jungle nearby – Joãozinho has only seen it twice – and recalling the guitar strumming of one of Brazil's last true *fandango* players (the local folk music) who lives in a secluded hut downriver.

Between them, Joãozinho and Ivan – an eccentric middle-aged man who likes to break into song – know everything there is to know about the jungle. Sebui is situated in one of the last remaining swathes of Atlantic rainforest; only seven per cent of the jungle that used to cover most of Brazil's coastline remains.

Through them we learn of the medicinal plants used by the *mestiço* fisherman and local Guaraní indigenous populations to cure stomach upsets and headaches. We learn about the incredible diversity of the mangroves and dart-shaped seeds that are designed to stick into the sediment once they fall from trees. We learn about the way vegetation grows in the jungle, with pineapple-like bromeliad plants sprouting from tree branches and vines growing down to the jungle floor where they try and form a root.

Aside from our jungle education, we go trekking through the rainforest, stopping off at waterfalls to cool off swimming. Another day we go canoeing around the mangroves and out into the bay.

We've only been here a few days, but the full jungle immersion makes it feel like months. Even the small town of Paraguá, where we get dropped off by Ed and say our goodbyes, feels like a thriving metropolis compared to the isolated enclave we've just been staying in. Back to civilisation it is, but with a head full of tales from Joãozinho and Ivan I think I'll be all right.

GETTING THERE

Gol Airlines flies between Rio de Janeiro and Curitiba
www.voegol.com.br

Gondwana Brasil Ecoturismo organise train trips, Ilha do Mel visits and stays at Sebui Lodge
www.gondwanabrasil.com.br

For more **Curitiba to Morretes** train information see:
www.serraverdeexpress.com.br

WHERE TO STAY

Slaviero Full Jazz, Curitiba
 The city's sleekest boutique hotel situated in Batel, the best area for bars and restaurants. It has tasteful minimalist décor, with black and white pictures of jazz stars adorning the walls.
www.hotelslaviero.com.br

Santuário Nhundiaquara, near Morretes
 This is a stunning hotel set in its own private rainforest. Rooms have their own balconies and fantastic views over the trees.
www.nhundiaquara.com.br

Grajagan Surf Resort, Ilha do Mel. This is the best accommodation on the island, located on Praia Grande, and rooms have comfortable beds, flatscreen TVs and wi-fi.
www.grajagan.com.br

Sebui Lodge
 The lodge has four self-contained huts with overhead fans, double beds and mosquito nets. Prices are for full-board stays, including a wide range of activities.
www.brazil-ecotravel.com