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# Brazil's little Rio

From dense rainforests to pretty fishing villages to a hip party zone, the island city of Florianópolis offers visitors a refreshingly diverse taste of the tropics, **Ed Stocker** discovers

“And this,” Talmir says with a dramatic flourish, pointing to a brown pile in the distance, “is the manure patch.”

We've only been in the guesthouse a few hours but the owner, with customary South Brazilian warmth, insists on giving us a full tour of the hotel's individual rooms, outdoor Jacuzzi and hammocks set amongst lush tropical vegetation. Plus, of course, the manure. It's all part of the hotel's green policy, he continues in broken English, which means water is heated by solar panels and food leftovers are turned into organic fertiliser. And who can blame him? If you were lucky enough to live in such ridiculously idyllic surroundings, between jungle and crystal clear Atlantic waters, you'd want it to stay the same too.

Pousada Natur is located in Campeche, on the south-eastern coast of the island of Santa Catarina. The island is more commonly referred to as Florianópolis (Floripa to locals), which is also the name of the city on its western coast, that's the capital of Santa Catarina state and spills over onto the mainland, linked by a suspension bridge.

The city itself feels a little bit like Rio – albeit a cleaner and altogether more functional version – thanks to its tall skyscrapers and views of stunning mountainous scenery. It's the sort of place where you see muscled joggers running along the coastline and tanned waifs breezing out of sushi restaurants in the evenings.

It seems a world away from Campeche, though it's actually just a 20-minute drive. But then, Floripa has very different personalities, depending on what part of the island you're on. And that's part of the appeal. Between December and February the majority of the island is packed with hordes of domestic holidaymakers and Argentinians in search of a decent beach. And decent beaches are something the island has in abundance – more than 40, in fact. The northern part is the most developed, whilst Lagoa da Conceição, half an hour by direct bus from the capital's main bus terminal, courts a reputation as Floripa's party capital, heaving with bars and restaurants. The island's most exclusive zones, meanwhile, wait hand and foot on Brazil's top models and footballers.

In comparison, the south is a rural backwater that eschews the party mentality of the rest of the island. Even in high season, it doesn't feel overrun with people. Campeche is probably the busiest area – a cluster of simple eateries set around a wide, white sand beach. The *Little Prince* author Antoine de Saint-Exupéry – known locally as Zé Perri – used to land his plane here when flying from Europe to South America for the French postal service, and there are streets named after him. The area is popular with the 20-to-30-something set and, although a great place to hang out in the sun, it feels a little bit like a fashion contest on the main beach calling itself “little Rio” (Riozinho). As reggae wafts out of beach bars, bronzed brunettes

**One could easily sit here for hours, pondering the magnificent views of palm trees and the sparkling ocean through the open French windows**



Rural, unspoilt and beautiful, the southern part of the island remains quiet and tourist-free even during the high season. Photographs by Ed Stocker for The National

and dreadlocked surfer dudes eye each other up over a snack of deep-fried swordfish.

After a few days, enjoying Pousada Natur's Jacuzzi and checking out the posers on Riozinho, we headed to Pousada Sitio dos Tucanos, just south-west of Campeche heading inland, a guesthouse that offered further tranquility still. The pousada is set in private grounds near the Costa de Dentro, located along a dirt track and run by an eccentric German lady.

Arriving, I spot a majestic green parrot fly from one tall tree to another. Excited, I turn to my partner to tell her of my exotic nature spot, only to find out that the parrot – native of the north – is in fact a pet of the owner. Undeterred, we explore the surrounding forest in search of the toucans the hostel takes its name from – birds that are viewable in the wild around these parts – before heading to the pousada's main house, uphill from the housing block, where there's a huge common room with a Seventies relic of a record player and comfortable armchairs. One could easily sit here for hours, pondering the magnificent views of palm trees and the sparkling ocean through the open French windows.

It's hard to believe that the state capital – one of southern Brazil's larger cities – is just a 40-minute drive away. Harder still when you head to beaches like Armação, from where boats take day trippers out to the beautiful Ilha do Campeche, a tiny island off Floripa's east coast. The curved beach has a river inlet leading to thick tropical mangroves, with colourful fishing boats hauled up on the beach as holidaymakers and the occasional stray dog take a dip in the sea. On Praia do Pântano do Sul, another southern haven, a string of seafood restaurants line the beach. The best of them all, Bar do Vadinho, is an unassuming yellow and whitewash building, particularly popular at lunchtime. Vadinho, the owner, says he's not bothered about extending the restaurant – adding a rooftop or second floor dining area – because he makes enough at the moment and any more is simply unnecessary. He doesn't even have a menu. In fact, his is one of the few places that serves fresh fish year



The Pousada Sitio dos Tucanos guesthouse is situated in lush greenery with sweeping views out to sea.

round. Having no à la carte option means diners get what they're given – a fantastic mix of local seafood that is spot luck, dependent on market cost and how much he has. All rather refreshing, really, for one of Brazil's tourism capitals.

Dotted around the southern end of the island are hundreds of trails and walking options. We head to Caieira da Barra do Sul, right at the bottom of the island, from where we have a go at one of the island's most spectacular walks. Steep at first, before levelling out, we follow a path through the Parque Estadual da Serra do Tabuleiro, an area of regenerating rainforest. It's a stunning mix of palms and thick vegetation packed together and growing over each other. Thick vines grow down to the forest floor and the occasional butterfly flits past. At one point we pass the ruins of a mill constructed by early colonial settlers, dating between 1750 and 1850.

Walking through the jungle is a welcome respite from the intense

summer sun. But I'm not the only one who is enjoying the shade. Mosquitoes are out in force and I swat them away like a madman, though nothing can spoil the spectacular scenery. Finally we emerge onto a wide beach, the most beautiful that I've seen during my stay on the island, and there's hardly a soul about. We walk along the beach before taking a path on the hill-ock at the end of the bay that leads through shrubs and colourful wild flowers to a lighthouse. From there we look down on sweeping views of the bays and the surfers waiting patiently to catch a wave, specks in the distance. Our trip is completed by taking a local boat round the bay and back to our starting point.

Tourism may be the major earner for islanders, but fishing is a traditional way of life that continues to be an important source of income. Although not native to these waters, oyster farms are dotted all over the southern part of the island, sparkling on the water in the midday sun as boats chug out to check on

the produce. Towards the end of our trip we visit the crumbling colonial town of Ribeirão da Ilha, 30km south of the capital on the western coast. Again, it's amazing how many contrasting personalities this island has. The town is full of old colonial buildings painted in hues of pink, orange and yellow and has a magnificent 18th-century church. Old men sit at tables beside the water, playing draughts as the sun makes its descent. It's all absurdly picturesque.

We head to Ostradamus restaurant to sample what is reputed to be the best seafood on the island. Despite the über-kitsch sailor outfits that the poor waiters are forced to wear, the claim is a pretty good one. As we sit on the covered jetty trying several types of oysters flavoured with everything from rosemary to Tabasco, an impressive electrical storm is erupting in the distance, seemingly on cue, lighting up the hills with every fork of lightning.

Florianópolis, I think I may be in love.

## if you go



Source: Google

**The flight** Return direct flights on Emirates ([www.emirates.com](http://www.emirates.com)) from Dubai to São Paulo cost from Dh7,465, including taxes

**The stay** Double rooms at Majestic Palace ([www.majesticpalace.com](http://www.majesticpalace.com)) – a skyscraper within walking distance of a shopping centre and restaurants – cost from R\$238 (Dh500). Double rooms at Pousada Natur Campeche ([www.naturcampeche.com.br](http://www.naturcampeche.com.br)) cost from R\$110 (Dh230). Pousada Sitio dos Tucanos ([www.pousadasitiodostucanos.com](http://www.pousadasitiodostucanos.com)) is located near both beaches and a lagoon. Double rooms cost from R\$130 (Dh270)

**The tour** BrazilEcojourneys ([www.brazilecojourneys.com](http://www.brazilecojourneys.com)) is offering a five-day stay on Florianópolis with traditional fishing, surfing lessons and snorkelling, with half-board accommodation at Pousada Sitio dos Tucanos. Costs from US\$565 (Dh2,075), per person, land only, based on two people travelling