

Brazil's grand colonial capital rises again



“Bewitching”: Salvador’s old town, Pelourinho

After being displaced by Rio de Janeiro as the capital of Colonial Brazil in 1763, the sprawling city of Salvador de Bahia faded into relative obscurity. Yet almost five centuries since its founding by the Portuguese, in 1549, it remains one of the greatest jewels of the Americas, says Paul Richardson in the Financial Times – the beating heart of traditional Brazilian culture, with the largest collection of colonial architecture and the largest

population of African heritage of any New World metropolis. Perched on cliffs overlooking a vast bay, its cobbled old town, Pelourinho, is a “bewitching” assembly of grand churches and brightly coloured mansions. Elsewhere are dignified municipal art museums, an elegant early 20th century business district, and beachfront bohemian enclaves. The city has suffered economically in recent decades – but a new wave of investment now promises a cultural “renaissance”.

Shortly to open in a derelict palace near the docks is a museum of music – a “logical choice” for the city where most Brazilian musical styles originated and many of the country’s greatest musicians were born. There’s a new art space, too, in one of the city’s historical coastal forts, dedicated to the work of photographer and ethnologist Pierre Verger (1902-1996), who was interested in the local syncretic, African-rooted religion, Candomblé. Hotels include the Fera Palace, a “cool, calm” art deco building where the likes of Orson Welles and Carmen Miranda once stayed, recently revamped following a ten-year closure. Foodies will relish Paraíso Tropical, a restaurant serving creative takes on the city’s traditional, African-inflected cuisine. But of all the new openings, none is more delightful than the museum dedicated to Brazil’s leading 20th century novelist Jorge Amado. Set in his own house, it offers an insight into his communist beliefs, his fascination with Candomblé, and his obsessive hoarding of holiday souvenirs. *Miraviva (020-7186 1111, www.miravivatravel.com) has a five-day trip from £2,330pp, including flights and private guides.*