

# Salvador de Bahia — renaissance of Rio's rival

After years of decay, the Brazilian city's charismatic barrios are finally being restored to former glories



The old town of Pelourinho © Getty

The billboard on the avenue tells it like it is — or at least, the way the town hall would like it to be. There's a black boy with a big smile and hair in dreadlocks; a figure, 468, celebrating the number of years since the city's foundation; and the legend "*Salvador: cada vez mais nova, cada vez mais nossa*" — which roughly translates as "more and more new, more and more belonging to us".

Propaganda? Possibly. But the phrase contains more than a grain of truth. After years, decades, even, in which negligible investment in infrastructure and maintenance has allowed whole swathes of it to slip into decay, the

marvellous city of Salvador de Bahia, which already rivals Rio de Janeiro in charisma and heritage, is finally getting the makeover it deserves.

I recently spent an immersive long weekend here with Latin America specialists Miraviva, whose on-the-ground Salvador agenda covers everything from adventures in Bahian gastronomy to classes in the Brazilian martial art of *capoeira*, percussion workshops with local drum dudes, and trips into the favelas (now correctly known as *comunidades*) to witness the work being done by NGOs to keep street children away from the double lure of gangs and drugs.

On a steamy, overcast morning, Salvador's famous old-town quarter the Pelourinho, said to be the largest assembly of colonial architecture in the Americas, was as sleepy as a country village. This bewitching barrio of crazily paved streets and little houses painted in vibrant colours with red-tiled roofs, each more desirable than the last, is kaleidoscopic, multifarious and multi-racial. The few neighbours up and about at this hour padded slowly, in the Salvador uniform of flip-flops and shorts, through a soup of heat and humidity. A pretty girl with a huge Afro and a tight turquoise T-shirt dress came sashaying past me on the Largo de Santo Antônio, carrying herself with all the stylish nonchalance of a supermodel. The smell of *feijoada* (bean stew) drifted from a kitchen window.

\*\*\*





Street vendors in Pelourinho © Getty

Three decades have gone by since the Pelourinho was rescued from near-terminal decrepitude by a much-loved governor, Antônio Carlos Magalhães (aka ACM), and his pioneering programme of inner-city restoration. However, a new chapter of urban improvements is under way in Salvador, and by a whim of destiny it's ACM's grandson, also called Antônio Carlos Magalhães and now the city's mayor, who is pushing through the changes. The hugely popular 38-year-old *prefeito* has secured \$105m from the Inter-American Development Bank to be spent on regeneration, and plans to reposition Salvador as a Latin American cultural hub. A museum of music, logical enough in the city of Caetano Veloso, Gilberto Gil and Dorival Caymmi, will occupy a derelict palace in the dockside Comercio district. A new metro will soon connect the city centre with the airport and eventually, with a total of 42 stations, become the longest in Brazil.

The Fera Palace hotel, where I stayed for the weekend, might be considered the glamorous symbol of Salvador's current wave of renewal. On a corner site in the Cidade Alta, this historic establishment opened in 1934, its triangular shape said to have been inspired by the Flatiron



building in Manhattan. It quickly became the focus of the region's nightlife, with glamorous guests including Carmen Miranda, Pablo Neruda and Orson Welles. After being closed for more than a decade, it has been restored by Antonio Mazzafera, formerly of London's Savoy Group, and reopened in February. It now features a cool, calm interior by Danish architect/designer Adam Kurdahl, who points up the building's art-deco leanings (and its original herringbone parquet floors in tacó wood) with mirrored cupboards, moulded ceilings, and sleekly elegant Brazilian furniture.



Bar of the Fera Palace hotel

The hotel's rooftop bar, where Mazzafera showed me the infinity pool lined with blue Portuguese-style *azulejos* and the restored cupola at the corner of the building, glittering in its carapace of copper, is a place to linger over your caipirinha as you take in a sweeping view of All Saints Bay. From up here the building resembled an ocean liner pushing through a sea of rundown shopping streets. Mazzafera is taking a risk by opening his first hotel in this down-at-heel district, but the Fera Palace (plus the 250-space car-park he is building nearby, also designed by Kurdahl) will surely



provide a boost to its recovery.



Roof terrace of the Fera Palace

Either way, change is coming to downtown Salvador. The Fasano hotel, latest branch of the hyper-chic Brazilian brand, is slated to open next year in the old A Tarde newspaper building a few blocks from the Fera Palace. Meanwhile the Rua Chile, once one of Salvador's noblest thoroughfares, is one of many streets chosen for a refit that will bury the snaking cables, smarten up the storefronts, and cleanse the fine façades of several decades of grime.

I stopped for lunch at Paraiso Tropical, a restaurant in the outlying borough of Cabula, unchallenged as the city's leading purveyor of baiano cooking. The venue: a rustic diner set in a rambling garden where cacao trees and exotic flowers lean in among the tables. The genial host: 83-year-old chef/owner Beto Pimentel (who claims to have 23 children). And the menu, a collection of classic baiano dishes with all the African-inflected flavours bestowed on them by coconut milk, dendê oil, peanuts and tropical fruit. So far, so traditional — but even here there were novelties.





Pimentel applies a restless creativity to Salvador staples such as the fish casserole moqueca, adding such unconventional ingredients as soft-shell crab, slithery slivers of fresh coconut, whole licuri nuts, and flowers.

Driving back into town I stopped the car in Barra, a middle-class neighbourhood at the south-western end of the city's jutting peninsula, for a stroll along the seafront

boardwalk — freshly paved and planted with imperial palms — towards a whitewashed Portuguese fortress on a promontory, one of Salvador's string of historic coastal forts. Here a new art-space showcases the work of Franco-Brazilian photographer and ethnologist Pierre Verger (1902-1996), who settled in the city and documented local traditions such as the syncretic, African-rooted religion of Candomblé.



Porto da Barra beach © Pierre Verger

Next day my explorations continued with a visit to Rio Vermelho, Salvador's bohemian nightlife quarter and another beachside neighbourhood feeling the benefit of a wash-and-brush-up. Art and design galleries rub shoulders on the main drag with a raffish cocktail of antique shops and music venues, chic boutiques and *boteco* drinking dens.

The square around the church of Sant'Ana has been reclaimed from a sea of traffic, but thankfully Rio Vermelho's white-clad, turban-wearing sellers of *acarajé*, Salvador's signature street food, have stayed put. At Cira's stall I nibbled one of these sensationally delicious bean-paste patties stuffed with dried prawns and lashings of hot sauce, momentarily forgetting I had a table for lunch at the neighbourhood's best restaurant, Casa de Tereza.

Tereza Paim's locale is a de facto cultural centre as well as an eating place, with art shows in the dining room and a shop selling locally handmade foods and crafts. Chef Tereza is a long-time Rio Vermelho resident who understands the area's strong attraction for poets, musicians and graffiti artists. At her suggestion I walked inland through residential streets to the former home of Jorge Amado, author of *Dona Flor and her Two Husbands* and Brazil's pre-eminent novelist of the 20th century. The Amado house, recently opened to the public in homage to the writer, his wife Zélia Gattai and the couple's artistic milieu, is set in a shady garden of tropical trees. Its enchanting displays shed light on such aspects of Amado as his political affiliations (he was a life-long communist), his deep fascination with the Candomblé deities, and his accumulation of souvenirs from a lifetime of incessant travel — he called them “useless things I cannot live without”.





Chef Tereza Paim in Casa de Tereza

The sudden tropical night fell on Rio Vermelho like a warm woollen blanket. Time to head over to the Museum of Modern Art (MAM), where every weekend a sunset jazz session, known as Jam no Mam, brings together the cream of Salvador's musicians. As I took my seat on the esplanade beside the harbour a few fat drops of rain hit the pavement, as if wrung drop by drop from the heavy, humid air.

The audience that night was racially mixed, wide-ranging in age, and listened attentively, sometimes swaying in time to the sinuous, soulful, samba-tinged music. On the dockside a little girl danced around her delighted father. The band, loosely formed of saxes, trumpets and trombones, guitars, piano, and percussion, expanded and contracted casually, with much schmoozing between numbers, but the improvisations were focused and infectious rhythmic. This wasn't a rave-up, but a flexing of musical muscle suggesting that Salvador's recent admission (in 2015) to the Unesco Creative Cities network was richly deserved.

Here was yet another example of the way this city is opening up, renewing



itself, and giving back. On busy nights in high summer, explained the girl sitting next to me, the Jam no Mam can draw a thousand people eager to enjoy the warm night air and the sweet Brazilian jazz. Slowly but surely, at its habitual loose-limbed, laid-back pace, Salvador is on the move.



Seafront at Rio Vermelho © Alamy





Jorge Amado museum © Xico Diniz

## Details

Paul Richardson was a guest of [Miraviva](#), which offers a five-day cultural and historic tour of Salvador and including accommodation at the Fera Palace Hotel, private guiding, transfers, and international return flights from London to Salvador from £2,330 per person, based on two sharing a room

*Photographs: Pierre Verger; Xico Diniz; Getty Images; Alamy*