

FIRST PERSON, FAR FLUNG

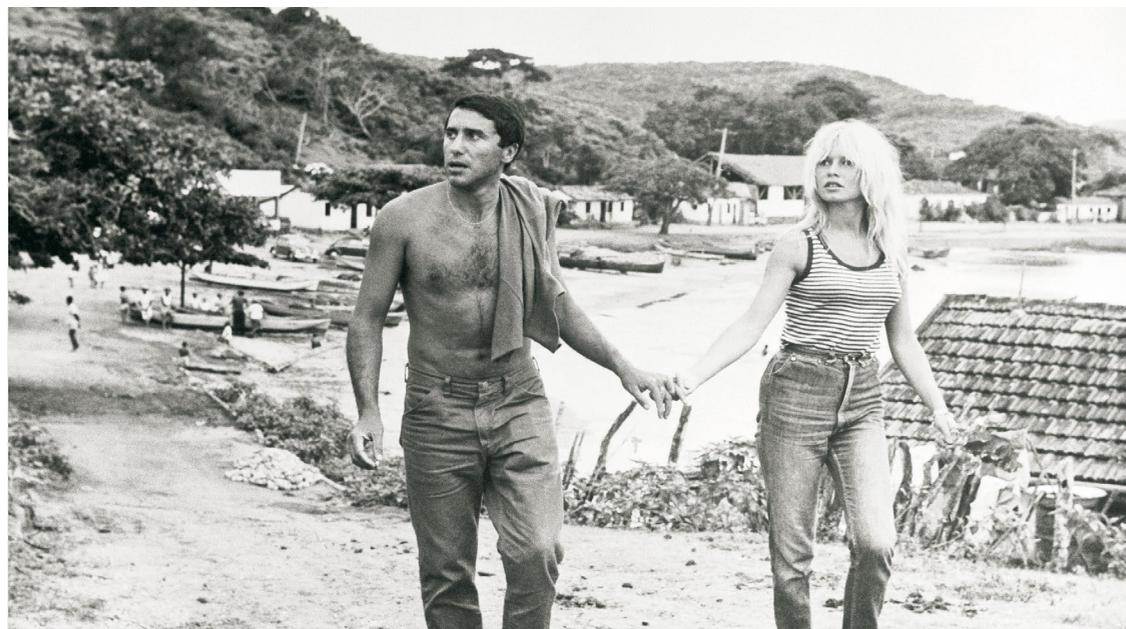
BÚZIOS, BRAZIL

All eyes will be on Brazil this month, as the 2014 FIFA World Cup kicks off in 12 cities around the country. But when soccer madness subsides, look east from Rio de Janeiro to Búzios, a once-humble fishing village that has been transformed into a stylish beach oasis.

By KEVIN RAUB Photography by LIANNE MILTON



FOREVER CASTING THEIR NETS
Dusk at Búzios Bay, with a view of Christina Motta's "Três Pescadores" sculpture



ON HOLIDAY Búzios' most famous (temporary) resident, Brigitte Bardot, in 1964 with Bob Zagury, her Brazilian-Moroccan boyfriend; below, a statue of the actress

BRIGITTE BARDOT could not have foreseen this. Alongside Orla Bardot, the almost perfectly paved cobblestone street that bears her name, sits the actress herself, above a sidewalk jigsaw of São Tomé sandstone, immortalized in bronze since 1999 thanks to sculptor Christina Motta.

Orla means “edge” in Portuguese, as in the edge of town and ocean—in this case, where melted sapphire sea meets Brazil’s most sophisticated fishing village: Armação dos Búzios, or just Búzios for short; sister city to Saint-Tropez, partner-in-crime of the Hamptons and often over-ambitiously compared to Ibiza.

From this vantage point, Bardot—the face so often associated with Búzios—has kept a keen eye, gazing straight across a beyond-blue bay peppered with sailboats of the bold and beautiful to a strip of sand called Armação Beach and the backsides of buildings flanking Rua das Pedras. Once a dusty, diesel-stained fisherman’s trail, it is now a buzzing, pedestrian-only drag of Brazilian haute couture, chic watering holes, trendy cafes and throngs of gorgeousness.

Among it all, the tiny colonial-style Assembléia de Deus church holds out as if to condemn all that surrounds it, especially those lining up to dance the night away across the street at the world-renowned nightclub Pacha. The church was built in



1963, one year before Bardot alerted the world that Búzios would be where she would hide away for her holidays, seeking refuge first inside the home of a rich Russian globetrotter, then a simple seaview room in Pousada do Sol—a rustic inn that still stands today—with a Brazilian-Moroccan boyfriend.

From just the right spot inside Bardot’s room (which can be yours for \$154/night) I look out to the sea, the window framing a single typical Brazilian fishing boat, surely with a name like *Talitinha*, *Josefina* or *Azulzinha*. But when I approach for a wider-angle view, a different story emerges: A giant MSC cruise ship and a Club Med schooner dominate the scene. The Búzios of then, which had a population of roughly 300 when Bardot departed for the last time in 1965, left for good along with her.

Today Búzios counts a year-round population of 24,560—tiny by Brazilian standards. But this peninsula and its 23 beaches bulge at the seams in the southern-hemisphere summer, the population tripling or quadrupling as 24-hour party people settle in to see and be seen. Asylum-seekers from gritty urban life in nearby Rio de Janeiro or Belo Horizonte colonize opulent hillside mansions perched above João Fernandes Beach or breezy seaside villas on Ferradura Beach.

It was the former where I and my partner planted ourselves on our first trip here in 2003. At the time it was only >

BETTMANN/CORBIS (BARDOT AND ZAGURY)



BRIGITTE SLEPT HERE The windows of the room that Brigitte Bardot stayed in at the rustic Pousada do Sol inn



THE FACES OF BÚZIOS
Left to right: Countess and hotelier
Emmanuelle Meeus de Clermont
Tonnerre; architect Octávio Raja
Gabaglia; sculptor Christina Motta



THE WORLD CUP CHEF

IN 2011, a very wealthy and publicly anonymous Brazilian decided it was time to pop the cork on his remarkable collection of Château Pétrus vintages. He invited 40 friends, including Italian-Brazilian super-chef Danio Braga, for a tasting at the Copacabana Palace Hotel in Rio de Janeiro. Today, the empties from this epic bacchanal line the wall of the dining room at Braga's latest restaurant, Sollar (sollarbuzios.com.br).

Braga's most famous restaurant, Locanda Della Mimosa, was at the time of its closing (also in 2011) one of only five establishments that had received three stars from Brazil's most important culinary bible, *Guia Quatro Rodas*. Braga got his first big break cooking for the Italian national soccer team during the 1978 World Cup in Argentina; two decades later, he manned the menu for the Brazilian team in France. As a man who knows his soccer, what is his 2014 World Cup prediction? "My heart is too divided," he explains. "I'm much more Brazilian these days than Italian. But I'll never lose my Italian personality."

Sollar, inside a historic home along Orla Bardot, is built around Braga's personality, his classic regional Italian cooking and a novel signature dish: a five-deep mozzarella tasting showcasing the cheese in various maturations, from *fior di latte* to smoked and beyond. It is a truly remarkable dish—but, being a wine lover, I cannot stop staring at the Château Pétrus wall. Braga recalls the tasting weekend: "Unbelievable."

my second trip to Brazil, and I possessed zero Portuguese and no cultural savviness, no way to know what I had just been talked into ordering by the fisherman/waiter who had waved a gorgeous fish across my field of vision. When the meal arrived, it was a freshly caught whole *badejo* (a type of grouper) that had been cooked over an open fire and laced with nothing but lime and salt: simple, perfect and, to this day, the most memorable fish I've ever eaten. On a crowded beach, caipirinha in hand, this was paradise. This was Búzios.

The desire to find out how this place came to be what it is led me this time around to the open-air office of architect Octávio Raja Gabaglia, perched adjacent to his home on a windswept hilltop in the well-to-do neighborhood of Ponta da Sapata. Gabaglia's desk faces the open sea, providing him with natural cerulean "wallpaper" off of which to bounce ideas, interrupted only by the occasional naps he takes in a hammock strung from the room's ceiling posts.

When Gabaglia first came here in 1951, "There was nothing," he tells me between swigs of ice-cold Brazilian beer, on a breezy late afternoon. "Huge pigs, chickens, fishermen and poverty. It was the beginning of a love story."

Gabaglia built the Búzios that stands today. He constructed the roads that cut through the peninsula's patches

of Atlantic rainforest, he built the majority of structures of note and he raised the walls of nearly everyone's tropical villa (including those of his neighbor, actress Amy Irving, who earned an Oscar nomination for her role in 1983's *Yentl*, alongside Barbra Streisand).

Yet as with many lovers, Gabaglia wanted to keep his beloved pure. All it took was a white lie: By the early 1970s, when Gabaglia had become an architect of note in the area, he began telling each prospective client (i.e., pretty much everyone) that building anything taller than two floors was against the law. This is why present-day Búzios is not an unsightly procession of all-inclusive resort hotels and high-rise condos.

Such was his fierce belief in maintaining the rustic, low-slung architectural style of the fishermen; he did what he had to do. Years later, the architect even

managed to make it true: In 1983 he became a local councilman, proposed his own building-height law and massaged the legislation through, ensuring Búzios could *never* become Saint-Tropez or Ibiza. "You have to lie with passion," he recalls.

That evening, after leaving Gabaglia far too soon, I stop off for a sundowner on the patio of the hotel Pousada Casas Brancas, on an Armação hilltop above Orla Bardot, perfectly positioned to frame Búzios' best sunset. Clouds threaten to

obscure my view, but at the last minute a light wind blows away the wisps, revealing what all the fuss is about. A fiery glow dips behind the bay's jutting sailboat masts and the peninsula beyond, another day in paradise done.

The next morning, I find myself sharing coffee with a French countess. It's not what you think; there was no sleepover. Her name is Emmanuelle Meeus de Clermont Tonnerre, and her family (Dauphiné) is older than France itself. Along with her husband, the Belgian ethanol tycoon Philippe Meeus, she owns Insólito Boutique Hotel.

Insólito is the most carefully curated hotel I've ever seen, each detail for a reason, each of its 25 rooms a work of art. There's the Laura Taves room, where Portuguese *azulejos* (ceramic tiles) form a Baroque-inspired replica of Rio's Outeiro da Glória church; or the Jorge Amado room, whose walls are lined by black and white photographs taken by troubled teenagers enlisted by the countess to express the poetry of the room's namesake, Brazil's most famous writer. The hotel's public spaces are peppered with striking wooden pieces, including dead-tree-trunk chairs from designer Elma Chaves and ecologically certified chaise lounges from the Rio-based furniture company Tamanduá Bandeira.

The hotel began life as the couple's private home and, three adjacent homes later, it stands as the MoMA of motels, on a hill overlooking Ferradura Beach, the sandbox of choice for movers and shakers. The thirtysomething countess herself is tall and bubbly, sexy and smart (she's a lawyer by trade), cool and casual. She, too, is the face of Búzios. >

"WHAT SETS BÚZIOS
APART IS THAT
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KIND OF SPIRIT."



WALL OF FAME Empty
bottles from the epic
Château Pétrus tasting
attended by star chef
Danio Braga now line
one wall of his newest
restaurant, Sollar

THE BEST OF BÚZIOS

SLEEP

INSÓLITO BOUTIQUE HOTEL

insolitos.com.br

Each room tells a story at this artsy boutique hotel that also boasts an (almost) private beach, private ocean-water pools and so much hipness it hurts. Says the countess owner of her dream hotel, “You have all the comforts of a five-star hotel, but you can also learn something about art, culture and history. It’s not just about caipirinhas and the beach.”

POUSADA CASAS BRANCAS

casasbrancas.com.br

Opened in 1974, Casas Brancas was boutique before Ian Schrager. Awash in mostly white, its pool and patio are *the* spot for sunset Instagrams; flawless master suites feature luxuries like clawfoot bathtubs; and there are two seriously good restaurants, Café Atlântico (see below) and the more casual Italian restaurant and wine bar, Deck.

CLIFFSIDE VILLA LUXURY INN

cliffsidevillaluxuryinn.com

Dangling precariously near the edge of a cliff, this former private home is such a hidden gem, barely anyone in Búzios knows it’s here. The multi-national staff is well-attuned to every whim and fancy, but it’s all about the private bungalow, with cinematic floor-to-ceiling windows and an expansive patio, providing the most picture-perfect view in town.

DINE

ROCKA BEACH LOUNGE

rockafish.com

Ibiza-trained Argentine chef Gustavo Rinkevich serves the region’s best and most sophisticated seafood in a casual beach-shack atmosphere on Praia Brava. Nothing except the Canadian scallops comes from elsewhere in the world; frozen is a word that is not used in this kitchen. Start with the *esqueixada* (a typical Catalan salted cod salad) and order anything that’s fish.

CAFÉ ATLÂNTICO

cafeatlantico.com.br

Another Argentine chef, José Catriman, does startling work here, inside Pousada Casas Brancas. The cold almond, garlic and whitefish quenelle cream soup (similar to Basque country’s *ajo blanco*) is perfect in the heat. Don’t think about going anywhere else for a sundowner, either.

CIGALON

cigalon.com.br

Cigalon wasn’t here in 1964, when Brigitte Bardot slept 10 feet away, but this romantic, lowlit restaurant inside Pousada do Sol, the inn where she stayed, is a staple for French-leaning, Brazilian-tweaked seafood classics. Save room for the chocolate-overload dessert *emoción*. (And yes, the chef is Argentine; she’s been at the helm here for 15 years, an eternity for Búzios.)



ORLA BÚZIOS
Taking in the view at
João Fernandinho Beach

“What sets Búzios apart from Saint-Tropez and Ibiza is that everyone here is casual,” she explains. “People are not obsessed about being dressed up. Just have a look at the sculpture of Brigitte Bardot. You don’t see her as a glamorous actress but more as a simple person in simple clothes. It’s another kind of spirit.”

After I take leave of the countess, I meet up with the sculptor, Motta, back in Ponta da Sapata, in yet another stupendous Gabaglia-built villa. From this privileged parcel of real estate, she has sculpted bronze for the likes of the

Marquess of Hertford, composer Tom Jobim and samba singer Carmen Miranda. Her iconic works are scattered all around Búzios (my favorite, “Três Pescadores,” resides in the sea itself), but predictably it is Bardot that demands the most attention. “I think that Brigitte doesn’t belong to me anymore,” she says in a hushed, at-peace tone. “I see Brigitte as something that belongs to Búzios.”

Later, her words resonate in my mind as I set sail from the east around the tip of the peninsula. Búzios’ beauty is best appreciated from the sea, where you can see villas tucked

into green jungle yielding to one sun-toasted stretch of sand after another. Ossos, Azeda, Azedinha, João Fernandes—the beaches come and go, each strewn with beautiful people, above which perch the fortunate few who call this place home. I envy them, and realize I am one of those to whom Gabaglia was referring earlier, when we were discussing the evolution of Búzios from unassuming to untamable. “People come, people love, people want to stay,” he told me. “They have the right. But people must respect what attracted them to this spot.” ☺