



Green Getaways

Uxua Casa Hotel

What began as a relaxed home away from home for one fashion designer soon evolved into Brazil's newest eco-chic hotel.

By **Kevin Raub**

Trancoso's historic green sits on a perched bluff above Brazil's Bahian shores just south of Porto Seguro. Called the Quadrado, the green is almost museum-like — a pleasant patch of picturesque Brazilian tranquility lined with the facades of colorful homes. Each one a different swath of hue from the next, all leading to a whitewashed Jesuit church.

It looks like a painting of colonial days gone by, when life was simpler and folks hadn't a care in the world. Except in Trancoso, there still isn't much to work people up, as evidenced by the traditional *Bahiana* (the local women of Afro-Brazilian descent from the state of Bahia) — one of whom is casually rolling along a dirt path that cuts through the Quadrado on a beach cruiser-style bicycle, the distinct waft of marijuana following her like a shadow cloud chasing the sun. She inhales as she rolls by me. Beyond her, the sea glistens. “*Bom dia*,” (“Good morning”) she sings as she slides away, the likely pinnacle of her efforts for the entire day.

Along the Quadrado, hidden behind walls of pink and green, lie one-third of the Uxua Casa Hotel's accommodation inventory. This is Trancoso's newest boutique resort, an exercise in sustainability that has raised the bar in Bahia. One of the three rooms here was once a modest vacation home for Uxua's designer and owner, Wilbert Das, the creative designer of Diesel, who decided to lay down roots here after years of mellow vacationing.

“The first time I arrived, I was astounded by the beauty and peacefulness of this quiet fisherman's village,” recalls Das, who first visited Trancoso 15 years ago. “I was by myself, and it was so quiet that I worried about being bored. It turned out to be the complete opposite. I always felt incredibly relaxed, but at the same time very stimulated during that stay, and after ten days I left Trancoso with the typical Brazilian *saudade* (a word meaning a nostalgic longing) and could not wait to come back.”

But what began in 2006 as a small, two-bedroom home away from home took on an eco-life of its own once Das



got a good look at the natural resources at his disposal—and at the local artisans who are adeptly skilled at turning nature into living art. “Once I started working on a house for myself and realized the amazing potential for collaboration with the local artisans here who have an amazing skill level and respect for working in traditional ways, it really whet my appetite to expand the project,” says Das.

Suddenly, an abandoned lot strewn with deadwood and overgrown vegetation, essentially Das’s backyard, became the breeding ground for a hands-off-nature approach to construction (not a single tree was destroyed in the process)—and Uxua was born. Large trunks of salvaged eucalyptus, *roxinho*, *jacca*, and *sucopira blanca* trees became the artistic centerpieces of the resort in the form of massive showerheads (quite literally water-spitting tree trunks protruding from the interior walls). Last Supper-worthy dining tables carved from single pieces of hardwood and hollowed trunks evolved into outdoor shower stalls. And, one of Uxua’s showcase rooms, known as the Casa de Árvore (The Treehouse) is entirely carried with support beams that were once fallen trees.

When I arrive at Uxua it’s nearing three o’clock in the morning, but the late hour has nothing to do with the fact that Uxua doesn’t feel like other resorts. There is really no check-in to speak of. I’m merely escorted to my room, which is actually a one-bedroom home, complete with an outdoor kitchen, bar, living room, and pool. The room is creatively rustic, somewhere between barnyard bunker and wine country cozy. As far as resorts go, it’s one of the most welcoming and inspiring rooms I’ve ever slept in.

The love affair begins with the restored and refashioned Midcentury Modern furniture hailing from abandoned farms in Minas Gerais, an interior state of Brazil, the recycled wood giving off an aged air that burns home the idea that new is not always better. In their former life, the Little House on the Prairie-style locks and door handles also lived on Minas farms, as did the floors—pieced together from reclaimed timber like a mismatched puzzle, beautiful in its flaws—and lamps, hangers, and shelving.

Outside, the daybed is covered in a blemished canvas that formerly covered the back of an old Brazilian military transport jeep. In fact, with the exception of the iPod radio, mini-bar, air conditioner, and a plasma TV, I have to ask to be brought in, I don’t see a single new item in the place. The room’s only eco-flaws are its use of a non-natural Brazilian amenity line called Natura — high-end, but misleadingly named — and the entirely too large bathtub, which requires nearly an hour to fill (the aqua guilt I felt from one bath was enough to ruin its relaxing qualities). Otherwise, the attention to fashionable reincarnation and green construction practices is remarkable.

Throughout the property, which is tucked away clandestinely among the lush vegetation that borders the Quadrado, the

commitment to sustainable practices permeates; most notably in the social areas. To make room for the pool, lined with some 40,000 gorgeous, hand-laid aventurine quartz stones that offer a soothing muted green glow, clay was lifted directly from the ground and transferred to the walls of the kitchen and other social areas in a traditional process known as pau-a-piquei, invented and performed by nearby Pataxó Indians whom Das employed. Down at the beach (the 10-minute walk from the Quadrado’s cliff-top real estate to Bahian’s cerulean shores) is the extent of a day’s work at Uxua: The hotel’s beach bar and DJ booth were carved out of abandoned fisherman’s boats, previously swept up on the shore and left to die. The boats simply reincarnated as the beach cocktail of choice for the fashionable and trendy and the soundtrack *du jour* for the hotel’s discerning guests.

Behind the scenes, Uxua is pouring on the community action, including the rebuilding and maintaining of the boardwalk that stretches across the mangrove swamp between the ocean and village, as well as providing literacy classes for those non-proficient in Portuguese (Bahian literacy rates leave something to be desired), English lessons, full tuition reimbursement and healthcare, which is somewhat standard practice elsewhere but still rare in Bahia. The hotel installed a 100 percent effective system to manage the sewage and waste of its beach bar, so as not to contaminate the mangrove area, which they have maintained on their own accord since opening, as well.

If Uxua has a fault it’s that its commitment doesn’t extend as far beyond construction and community as it should. Organic is M.I.A. in the restaurant, right down to the sugar packets (organic sugar is readily available in Brazil, so no excuse there) and there are cigarettes on the dinner menu (no printable comment, as this is a wholesome magazine). But its upper management and staff are extremely open to suggestions (after all, their background is expensive Italian jeans, not hospitality), so these problems very well may fix themselves by the time you read this.

Back in my casa I realize that I love this room so much, I’m not sure I even care anymore what goes on at the restaurant. I’m staying in. I decided after the first dip that baths are not practical at Uxua from an environmental standpoint (I cannot justify using that much water for a little R&R), so I stick to the tree-trunk showers, which I still revel at after my third day here. I’ll use my own organic products. ☞

For more information: Uxua Casa Hotel, +55.73.3668.2166, www.uxua.com, doubles from \$505

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