

Discover Rio's arty side

With its hip bars and boutique hotels, Santa Teresa's bohemian charms are luring tourists away from the beaches, writes **Alex Gorton**

It's a balmy Saturday morning in Rio de Janeiro and, unlike everyone else in town, I'm heading away from the beach. Ipanema, Copacabana and Leblon may be among the city's most loved attractions, but Santa Teresa, a small district in the hills, is the most exciting place to be.

In a city whose reputation was built on the joys of sand and surf, the idea that a landlocked district can be the hottest place in town is surprising. And yet, as I wander through its winding, cobbled streets lined with beautiful old mansions, quaint cafes and arty stores, it's easy to see why this slightly shabby district is the most up-and-coming neighbourhood in Rio.

Backed by a forest full of monkeys and thick with birdsong, Santa Teresa dates back to the 17th century, when a convent was founded on the hill where chic boutiques and designer hotels now stand. By the early 19th century, the area was home to ex-pat aristocrats and businessmen and remained a wealthy enclave until the 1960s, when a combination of rising crime levels and a devastating storm persuaded the well-to-do inhabitants to up and leave.

Artists and hippies soon moved into the abandoned mansions, opening studios and workshops and turning Santa Teresa into Rio's most artistic district. Unfortunately, Santa Teresa's proximity to a nearby favela earned it a dangerous reputation.

Nowadays, Santa, as the locals call it, is on the up again. It's a world away from the modernist tower blocks and body-conscious aesthetic that has come to typify beachfront Rio. In Santa I found a much more bohemian, shabby-chic feel, characterised by run-down art nouveau and colonial mansions, small arty stores such as La Vereda and Trilhos Urbanos,

and low-key but obviously cool restaurants such as Aprazivel.

Perched on one of Santa Teresa's highest streets, Aprazivel is one of those places for which the term 'rustic chic' was clearly coined. All wooden tables, big candles and cowhide rugs nonchalantly thrown across long benches, it was packed with the kind of chic Cariocas that you'd expect to see strutting their stuff along the beach at lunchtime. Instead, they were here, dining on grilled fish and gazing out at the city below.

This cosmopolitan scene is one that is repeated throughout the district. Santa's restaurant culture is buzzing with a mix of contemporary Brazilian eateries, such as the fashionable Espirito Santa, and more traditional restaurants such as the perennially popular Bar do Mineiro, packed at lunchtime with artists, intellectuals and laid-back locals. Lunchtime is so busy for Santa's restaurant trade that the buzz of diners is interrupted only by the rickety sound of the approaching *bondinho*, the only tram left in Rio, which leaves from downtown and winds precariously, people hanging from the sides, up the hill to Santa.

With the old buildings, neighbourhood feel and rickety tram, Santa could feel like it's stuck in the past. But the opening of three new design-conscious boutique hotels in less than a year shows that it is ready for the future. Moreover, the crime problems that plagued the district in the 1990s are being tackled with security cameras and an increased police presence, meaning that safety is no more of a concern in Santa than it is elsewhere in the city.

It is the unique boho vibe that is integral to the district's charm. 'Santa Teresa has the elegance of old Europe combined with a sensual exotic Brazilian flavour,' says Jean Michel Ruis, a

stylish Parisian who runs Mama Ruisa, a sophisticated seven-room hotel with fabulous views, beautiful interiors and a gorgeous swimming pool. Having opened last December, Mama Ruisa's whitewashed walls have already played host to Rupert Everett who, according to Ruis, loved the area so much that he is looking to move in.

Solar de Santa is another of Santa's new boutique hotels. Less Euro-sophisticate than Mama Ruisa and more rustic cool, the five-room hotel is owned by Gwenael Allen, one of the founders of Cirque du Soleil. Surrounded by leafy trees, with murals adorning the walls and local artwork (all available to buy) dotted around the rooms, it is one of the most peaceful city hotels I have seen. Just as relaxed, but even funkier is Casa Mango Mango, the last of Santa's triumvirate of boutique hotels. The former home of feminist writer Julia Lopes, the beautiful 11-bedroom mansion has more than 400 banana trees in the garden, making you feel that you are in the country, as opposed to a bustling Brazilian urban sprawl.

This idea of getting away from the city will be key to Santa Teresa's future success as a tourist hotspot. Rio is a beautiful place but it is also full of people and bursting with traffic. By staying in Santa Teresa you get the best of all worlds – the peace and quiet of a low-key neighbourhood that is only 10 minutes from downtown's art galleries and museums and 20 minutes by taxi from the all-important beach. Hanging out in Copacabana or Ipanema may be essential for understanding the nature of the city, but if you have seen it all before and want to experience an untouched side of Rio that's totally Carioca, it is time to head for the hills.



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ESSENTIALS

Getting there

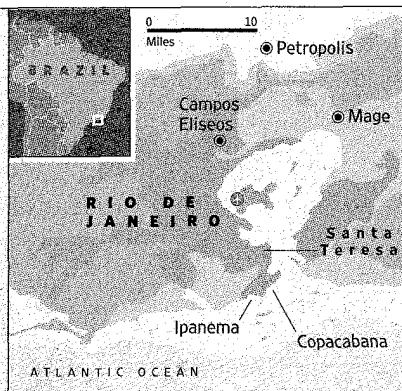
Exsus Travel (020 7292 5050; www.exsus.com) has four nights at Mama Ruisa, including BA flights and transfers, from £1,125pp based on two sharing.

Where to Stay

Casa Mango Mango (0055 21 2508 6440; www.casamangomango.com). Doubles with bathroom from £42.
Mama Ruisa (0055 21 2242 1281; www.mamaruisa.com). Doubles from £149 per night including breakfast.
Solar de Santa (0055 21 2221 2117; www.solardesanta.com). Doubles from £80, standard room with shared bathroom from £35 including breakfast.
The Cama e Cafe (www.camacafe.com.br; 0055 21 2224 5689) bed and breakfast network has 50 properties on its books. Rooms from £34 per night.

Where to Eat

Aprazivel, Rua Aprazivel 62 (www.aprazivel.com.br; 0055 21 2508 9174).

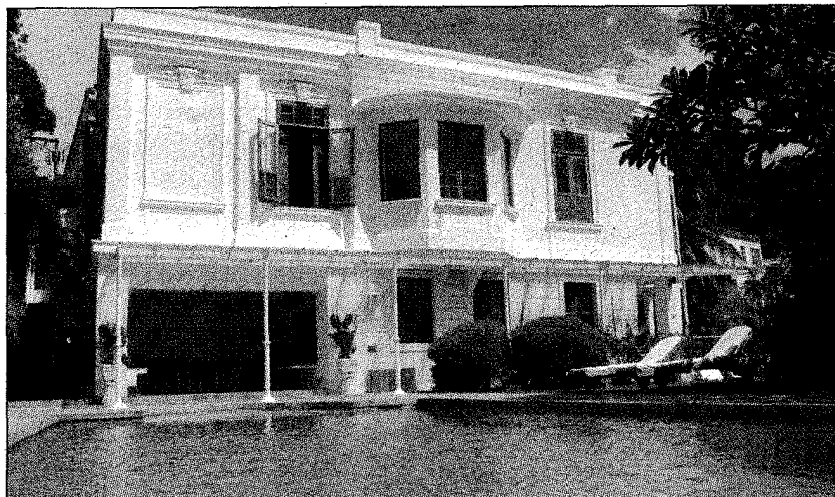


Bar do Mineiro, Rua Pascoal Carlos Magno 99 (0055 21 2221 9227).
Espirito Santa, Rua Almirante Alexandrino 264 (0055 21 2508 7095).

Where to Shop

La Vereda, Rua Almirante Alexandrino 428, for handicrafts; Trilhos Urbanos, Rua Almirante Alexandrino 402a, for music and work by local artists.

For more details visit www.santateresa.tur.br



Boutique charm: the Parisian-run Mama Ruisa hotel is a favourite of Rupert Everett.

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Streetcar desire: the rickety 'bondinho' tram that winds up to Santa Teresa from downtown Rio de Janeiro.

Photograph by MacDuff Everton/Corbis