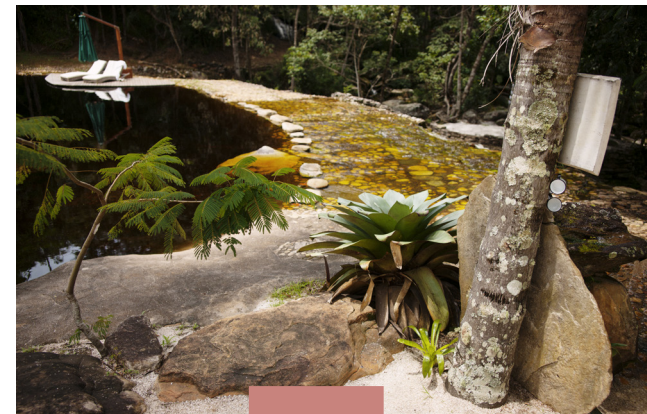


HEART *of* GOLD

More than a luxury resort, Reserva do Ibitipoca in Brazil's gold-rush country is helping to reverse centuries of environmental decay, writes *Bella Pollen*.

PHOTOGRAPHY TINKO CZETWERTYNSKI



REMOTE ACCESS

Above, clockwise from top left: a toucan in the dining room at Ibitipoca; the clawfoot tub on the deck of Carlinhos' guest house; Eagle's Nest guest cabin; the waterfall swimming pool. Opposite: Fazenda do Engenho entrance hall.

For two centuries after the Portuguese went halves on South America in 1494, they searched the land in vain for the glittering Inca riches plundered by their Spanish neighbours. Finally, at the end of the 17th century, a group of bandeirantes – ruthless adventurers and fortune hunters – pushed deep into the south-eastern hinterland of Brazil and there, in the muddy banks of rivers and streams, they found alluvial deposits rich in gold.

Soon half the nation's population, along with hundreds of thousands of African slaves torn from the Congo, had amassed in the remote hills of Minas Gerais. Next came Portuguese fortune hunters, quickly followed by the bureaucrats sent to tax them. The European settlers prospered, building Baroque towns such as Ouro Preto to celebrate and fortify colonial rule. Back in Lisbon the coffers of King João VI filled to overflowing and, by the middle of the 18th century, Brazil's great gold rush had become a grim fairytale of imperialism, brutality and unimaginable wealth.

Barely 50 years later, the gold seams were exhausted and the Portuguese left, taking their treasure with them. With loss of influence and population, the gilded masterpiece of Ouro Preto and towns like it fell into a time warp – until tourists in the 1950s discovered the region's architectural patrimony virtually intact and life trickled back.

There was no such happy ending for Ibitipoca, one of the first villages settled in Minas Gerais, 200-odd kilometres south of Ouro Preto and the remote setting

of our resort destination. Prospectors panned for gold here as early as 1693, but reserves ran out even quicker than elsewhere and the fortunes of the village plummeted accordingly.

Ibitipoca, an Araci Indian name meaning “exploded rock”, lies where the Atlantic rainforest converges with one of the largest areas of quartzite on Earth. The soil was too sandy for the cash crops of sugarcane and coffee, but naturalists were drawn by the region's triptych of biospheres – high-altitude plains, rocky fields, and Atlantic rainforest – and the abundance of rare endemic species. In the late 18th century, orchid hunters began collecting for a rich European market besotted by trophy specimens; villagers, meanwhile, continued to eke out a subsistence as dairy farmers.

In 1973 Ibitipoca's extraordinary biodiversity was recognised with a 1,488-hectare state park created on the border of the village. Without paved roads, though, it was virtually impossible to reach, and the area's few hundred inhabitants remained on the brink of starvation.

Eight years ago the luck of this isolated community changed once again when Brazilian businessman turned eco-hero Renato Machado began buying land encircling the state park – not for profit, but to protect it.

Once upon a time, the Atlantic rainforest, more than a million square kilometres, carpeted Brazil's entire coastline. Deforestation began in the 16th century and each ensuing industry, from timber to cattle, has taken its toll. Gold mining was no less destructive. Today less than seven per cent of the mighty Mata Atlântica remains, and degradation continues exponentially faster than conservation.

Machado's family, originally from Juiz de Fora, the closest city to Ibitipoca, made its fortune from producing mining-drill parts, and much of Renato's personal wealth comes from his interests in Zambian copper>





GOOD AS GOLD

Clockwise from above: a bedroom in Carlinhos; chef Marly Silva serves lunch in the dining room; the Fazenda do Engenho's porch.



so estate manager Nadja Hoffman explains, appearing seconds later with glasses of juçai juice, an indigenous purple berry known for its antioxidant qualities.

The atmospheric Fazenda houses the library, a dining room with antique cheesemaking tables and an outside bar full of cachaça bottles with labels so pretty the whole thing looks suspiciously like one of the property's art installations – which are, we're soon to discover, dotted like treasure throughout the grounds.

The property has a private airstrip and a stable of Mangalarga horses, yet its simplicity transcends conventional notions of a five-star retreat. "Real luxury," Machado tells me when we meet later, "is the freedom to enjoy whatever remote and beautiful spots are still left in the world."

Machado, accompanied everywhere by his cheeky pet toucan and small bat-eared dog, has an unerring eye for good design, mixing reclaimed and contemporary furniture, offsetting the pale green and amber colours of woodwork with burnished copper fittings. In Carlinhos, my three-bedroom house, furniture is made from recycled farm equipment and beds are covered in exquisite hand-dyed fabrics. Machado has turned the hotel over to his staff to run as a cooperative, a move that has added genuine heart to an already faultless service.

When I arrive I find the antique clawfoot bath on my porch has been drawn. It's late afternoon and the air is warm and lemony, rich with the buzz of insects and the lazy flit of electric-blue morpho butterflies. Some guests do nothing more strenuous than soak in the outdoor hot tub. Others submit to a massage in the beautiful converted granary. The Ibitipoca church, an easy walk from the Fazenda, has its original painted ceiling, and walls built of whale blubber, which locals traded for gold. For the energetic there are the unique quartzite caves of the neighbouring state park to explore, after which there is yoga, a blissful swing in a hammock, and still plenty of time for eating.

Oh, the things we eat. In a stroke of endearing genius, the grand, airy kitchen was modelled on the animated film *Ratatouille*, down to its black-and-white



tilled floor and copper pans swinging overhead. Local cook Marly Silva trained in classic French technique with legendary Rio chef Claude Troisgros, but it's her regional home cooking using the estate's produce that dazzles. Warming on the dining room's huge wood-fired stove for lunch are dishes of rabada, Brazil's slow-cooked oxtail, torresmo (crackling) served with greens of quiabo and couve, polenta with salsicha, and stewed eggplant and tomato. For breakfast there are Mineiros cakes of coconut, cinnamon and lemon, and the warm bread rolls called pão de queijo served with pale quivery cheeses and guava jam.

Ibitipoca wears its organic and sustainability credentials lightly, yet a stroll beyond the edge of the forest illustrates Machado's quest to forge a happier alliance between man and nature. A powerful copper-coloured waterfall has been edged with sand and turned into a swimming pool. Huge stone slabs have been carved to create outdoor ovens. During a hike with Brittany Berger, the estate's resident botanist who is leading efforts to save the miqui monkey, we come across a row of tin drinking cups hanging from a tree

beside a channel of rainwater. Crowning a hilltop is the surreal vision of black capuchin monkeys overrunning artist Karen Cusolito's installation of five metal humanoids, each 10 metres high, first exhibited at Nevada's Burning Man gathering.

Perched at the top of the mountain is Eagle's Nest, the reserve's most remote guest cabin. On our way there on horseback one afternoon we cross paths with Machado, who's about to head down. A storm is breaking overhead and so instead we settle by the cabin's blazing fire.

"What's gold good for?" muses the former mining magnate, cracking open a bottle of cachaça. "Decoration? A woman's earring? Where's the value in that?" At the reserve he has proved that green is the new gold and, as if to dispel any residual doubt, a sudden flash of lightning illuminates the miracle of the rainforest below – dark and dripping, a blooming, leafy, mossy wonder of secret caves and soaring trees. Machado knows what his guests quickly come to understand: that you have to see it, touch it, smell it to truly miss what is disappearing. **CT**



NATURAL CAUSE

Clockwise from far left: a waterfall in the reserve; founder of Reserva do Ibitipoca, Renato Machado; a sculpture by Karen Cusolito.



THE FINE PRINT

GETTING THERE

LATAM Airlines flies daily between Sydney and Santiago via Auckland, with connections to Rio de Janeiro three to four times a day. The airline also operates direct flights between Sydney and Santiago four times a week with codeshare partner Qantas (latam.com). Reserva do Ibitipoca is about four hours' drive north-west of Rio de Janeiro.

STAY

Rooms at **Reserva do Ibitipoca** cost from \$762 per couple per night. This includes all meals and daily yoga sessions. Drinks, excursions, spa treatments and transfers can be arranged at extra cost. **Cazenove+Loyd** specialises in customised luxury travel in Latin America. A bespoke 10-night Brazil itinerary to Minas Gerais and Rio de Janeiro including international and domestic flights, private transfers, car hire and guide costs from \$7,206 per person, twin share. cazloyd.com