



— Travel —

Brazil's Fazenda Catuçaba





Filippo Bamberghi

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The Brazilian resort combines the arts with nature in seamless harmony.

By Colin Barraclough on April 22, 2013

It is the mosaic of emerald grass and tannic-red earth that first catches the eye at Fazenda Catuçaba, an 1,100-acre former coffee estate in the Serra do Mar's crumpled folds, two hours east of São Paulo, Brazil. Pine and palm plantations in the lower reaches give way to rolling grasslands cut by gulleys and watercourses, utterly silent save for the sighing breeze and the chirp of chopi blackbirds.

It is here, on a series of rounded, grassy summits, where flycatchers flit between the last pockets of Atlantic forest. It is also where French-born hotelier Emmanuel Rengade is turning Catuçaba into a 20-home residential resort with an arts bent and a community philosophy inspired by California's [Sea Ranch](#), a Sonoma County settlement where homeowners pledge to protect the area's natural beauty.

Real estate developers in South America have popularized hotel-and-vacation-home residential resorts in recent years, favoring remote, spectacular locations such as Argentina's Mendoza winelands or the rocky Patagonian coast in Chile. Rengade, who has owned a pousada at the colonial port of Paraty on Brazil's Atlantic coast for 15 years, is striving to make this project different.

Catucaba exterior

Rengade first stumbled on Catuçaba in 2008, opening it three years later as a rural yet design-minded hotel. He juxtaposed the farmhouse's 1850s terracotta tiles and fired-brick floors with basketry-and-wood chairs by Fernando and Humberto Campana, a Martin Eisler chaise longue and the occasional well-chosen antique. Nineteenth-century workers' cottages became guestrooms, knotted woodwork painted royal Portuguese blue punctuating their whitewashed adobe walls.

Visitors stomped off by day through field and vale—the 1,200-square-mile Serra do Mar State Park, which protects biodiverse forest, borders the farm—returning at dusk to enjoy caipirinhas made from organically grown, home-distilled cachaça and hearty farm cooking.

The design-amid-nature concept soon attracted a creative crowd, which Rengade enhanced through an artist-in-residence program. Pop musicians holed up in isolated cottages to draw inspiration from waterfalls and streams. São Paulo photographer Fernanda Preto shot endearing portraits of farmworkers clad in traditional broderie, hanging the full-length photographs from royal palm trees fronting the farmhouse. Pasha Radetzki, a Belarus-born, New York-based artist, scattered the hilltops with evocative sculptures; the Campana brothers built a yoga center with walls of living bamboo.

For the permanent residences, Rengade marked out 20, 12-acre hilltop lots and convinced Marcio Kogan, a world-class Brazilian architect familiar with 1950s modernism, to provide a made-to-measure design for a large-footprint house with a floor plan open to nature.

Catucaba interior

Investors are offered title to the land, access, water, self-sustaining energy solutions—and a cut-price deal on Kogan's design. To protect Catuçaba's unique atmosphere, buyers must adhere to a constitution composed along the lines of Sea Ranch's covenant, which includes principles like "Nature predominates, not buildings" and "Home sizes should be modest not enormous." (Certain privileges, like use of the farm's horses or access to its organic produce, are revoked if homeowners fall out of line.)

Encouraging some visitors to stay on permanently was an idea that occurred naturally. “We realized the best asset we had was the quality of the people who came to see us,” says Rengade, who sold the first five parcels to friends of friends—“creatives, not bankers”—on the basis of the prospect alone. The next 15 lots go on sale in October, just as the first Kogan-designed houses near completion. *Rooms start at \$585; São Luiz do Paraitinga, São Paulo state; 55-12/3671-6158; catucaba.com.*

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