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JUNE 2019



# T H E R I C H E S O F

It was gold, diamonds, topaz, and tourmaline that drew the Portuguese, centuries

**MARCIA DE SANCTIS** follows in their footsteps, discovering bountiful nature





From far left: The lobby of the Solar do Rosário, in the town of Ouro Preto, Brazil; a toucan at Reserva do Ibitipoca, an ecolodge on a 12,000-acre nature reserve; the Igreja de Nossa Senhora do Carmo, in Ouro Preto.

# T H E E A R T H

ago, to Minas Gerais—one of the most abundant places in all of Brazil. reserves and romantic, colonial-era towns along the way.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY FELIX ODELL





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The sun seared my shoulders as I climbed the sandy banks of an imperial topaz mine in Ouro Prêto, Brazil. All around me, men were digging with picks and shovels, in the hopes of plucking a prize from the earth. Miners greeted me with palms full of crystals colored like hard candy—cherry, lemon, and butterscotch. Imperial topaz, believed to bring prosperity, is my birthstone, so I couldn't resist buying a few pieces to take home.

Ouro Prêto “lives off the sweat of other brows,” observed the explorer Richard Burton in 1869, when he was

Britain's consul in Brazil. For three centuries, men have dug the veins of Minas Gerais, the fourth-largest state in Brazil. The name means “general mines”—a tribute to the industry that once made Ouro Prêto, the state's former capital, the largest and wealthiest city in the New World. Fortunes were fueled by diamonds, gemstones, and, eventually, iron ore, the shiny mineral that made the soil around my sneakers sparkle. But of all the treasures in these mountains, it was gold—the greed for it, and the incalculable human cost of extracting it—that drove the rise and fall of Ouro Prêto.

It was not yet 10 a.m. on my first day in Minas Gerais, and I was already immersed in the region's history. The previous evening, my car from the airport in Belo Horizonte pulled into Ouro Prêto in darkness—for me, a claustrophobic way to arrive in an unfamiliar place. But when I awoke at Solar do Rosário, my hotel in the center of town, I was reinvigorated by the scent of eucalyptus in the air and the sight of a distant bell tower, stark white in the clear light of early morning.

I crossed a labyrinth of courtyards on my way to the lobby, where a breeze blew through rows of floor-to-ceiling windows. On the horizon, sun flared behind Itacolomi Peak. For breakfast, there were thick slices of mango, papaya, and watermelon. And cakes. Coconut cake, three different kinds of corn cake, condensed-milk cake, carrot

▲  
*Ouro Prêto, one of Brazil's best-preserved colonial towns.*





cake, chocolate cake. It augured well for the rest of my journey.

Ouro Prêto was to be my first stop in a three-part ramble through Minas Gerais, one of South America's most underappreciated regions. I had visited Brazil in my twenties, when I had arrived with little more than a bikini and a pair of flip-flops. But this trip was not about the sands of Copacabana. I was here to immerse myself in the glory and the grief of Brazil's colonial legacy and, at the end of the week, reflect on it all from an eco-resort in the jungles near Ibitipoca State Park, in the south of Minas Gerais.

My visit came at a time of political upheaval. A new, far-right president, Jair Bolsonaro, had been sworn in just a few weeks ahead of my trip. But Brazil has struggled for decades. The facts are disheartening: the country has the world's highest murder rate; Bolsonaro's two predecessors were

embroiled in corruption scandals; the 2016 Rio Olympics were clouded by the Zika virus and an economic crisis. Such news can overshadow the country's famed hospitality, the thrill of Carnival, Brazil's geographical diversity and beauty. Its gold.

Brazilian schoolchildren know Ouro Prêto as a crucible of their national history. In the 1690s, mixed-race pioneers known as *bandeirantes* ventured from São Paulo and the coast to begin exploring Brazil's interior. Along the way, many thousands of indigenous people were killed, captured, and displaced. Today, the surviving native communities mostly live in the north of Minas Gerais. The fortune hunters found black iron ore stones that turned out to be loaded with gold in Ouro Prêto (which means "black gold"). Settlers raced to the town, and its population quickly grew to 120,000—double that of New York City at the time.

In the late 1600s, the height of the Brazilian gold rush, there were more than 2,000 mines throughout the city, in which slaves toiled in airless tunnels. An estimated 4.5 million enslaved Africans were sent to Brazil to work—more than 10 times the number sent to North America. When Emperor Pedro II abolished slavery in 1888, he was the last leader in the Western world to do so. Today, Ouro Prêto is a shrine to the slaves who built the town, and the gilded visions of their overlords.

When the gold boom faltered in the mid 1800s, Ouro Prêto lost its position as the capital. "It became a ghost town," explained my guide, João Batista de Souza. "People did not want to be reminded of their colonial past." But in the 1920s, Brazilian artists and writers, searching for a symbol of Brazil's national identity, found it in Ouro Prêto. In 1932 the government designated the town a national monument, and in 1980 it was named a UNESCO World Heritage site. Time preserved an architectural trove: 95 percent of the buildings are original, including 13 magnificent churches and nine chapels. (The Grande Hotel, designed in 1938 by Oscar Niemeyer two decades before he created Brasília, is the town center's sole nod to Modernist architecture.)

The Portuguese designed Ouro Prêto to resemble the elegant cities of their homeland—with one crucial difference.

The town's churches, all built by slaves, are vastly more decadent than their European counterparts. One-fifth of all gold mined in the region was seized by the crown, but whatever was used in service to the Lord could stay in Brazil. So the most celebrated artists of the day were enlisted to ornament these temples using gold and indigenous wood. Together, they created Barroco Mineiro, a uniquely extravagant style found only in this region. Around 900 pounds of gold and silver powder burnish the holy carvings inside the most lavish of them all, *Basilica Nossa Senhora do Pilar*. The sensation upon entering this sanctuary is unlike anything I have felt inside one of France's grand stone cathedrals. There, I felt diminished. Here, faced with gilded cherubs, shells, and garlands, I was dazzled.

João led me to *Praça Tiradentes*, the kind of open space that invites one to drift, rather than walk, across it. The square is named for a local dentist turned insurgent who, inspired by the American and French Revolutions, steered a rebellion against royal rule. After his execution in 1792, his head was displayed in the center of the plaza. Today, his exploits are explained in the *Museu da Inconfidência*. Across the street, at a higher elevation, is the former *Palácio dos Governadores*, framed by fortifications and watchtowers. It is now a museum of mineralogy.

These days, gemstones are the essence of *Ouro Preto*. At the upscale shop *Ita Gemas*, the owner, Rasmire Valarini, unveiled his specimens: a jumble of garnets and a galaxy of tourmaline, including the watermelon kind, half-pink, half-green. A twang of rapture spiked in me, and I bought one of each kind. "Everyone finds something beautiful when they come to *Ouro Preto*," Valarini said.

Sunshine poured over farms and cornfields as I set out by car toward the town of *Tiradentes* with João and Marcio Macedo, a regional specialist

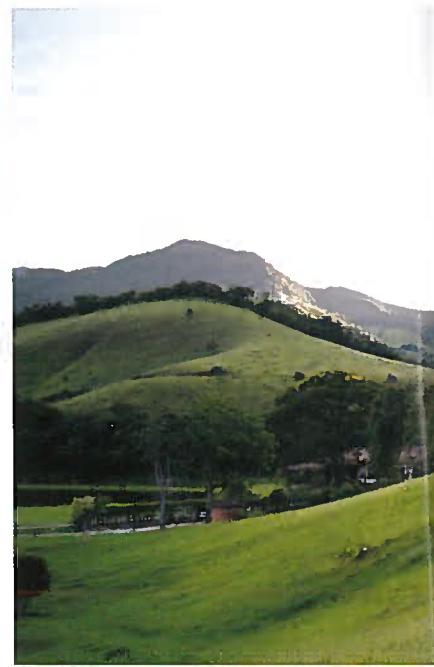
who was escorting me on this leg of the journey. On the way, we stopped at *Congonhas* to gape at the *Santuário do Bom Jesus de Matosinhos*, the Rococo masterpiece of Antônio Francisco Lisboa, one of Brazil's greatest sculptors and architects. The son of a Portuguese man and his slave wife, Lisboa carved the 12 soapstone prophets outside the entrance of the church despite suffering from leprosy, using chisels and hammers tied to his disease-ravaged hands. His malady gave him his famous nickname: *Aleijadinho*, or "little cripple."

Back in the car, we continued south along the *Estrada Real*, built during the gold rush to connect the inland mines with the port of *Paraty*. All was quiet until Marcio asked, "Do you know what is *saudade*?"—pronounced "sal-daj." He explained that it was an untranslatable concept ingrained in Brazilian culture. "It is when you are missing something or someone and it hurts, but in a good way," he said.

The drive to *Tiradentes* was long, and we were famished when we arrived at our hotel, *Solar da Ponte*. Mercifully, the salon was set for teatime, with baskets of *pão de queijo*, rolls prepared with manioc flour and cheese—first created in *Minas Gerais*, but today as ubiquitous throughout Brazil as the baguette is in France. Settled below the blade of the *Serra de São José*, *Tiradentes* felt instantly different, a place that draws energy from its present. The proprietor of *Solar da Ponte*, Ted Dirickson, is the son of the original owners, a Brazilian woman and her English husband, who in 1971 transformed an unfinished country manor into a genteel inn. The hotel is fresh and airy, and though regionally made wooden furniture lines the halls and landings, it feels pleasantly uncluttered. The ground floor encircles a dense, orchid-filled tropical

▶  
*Locals gather for evening drinks in the village of Tiradentes.*

▼  
*From left: Carving soapstone in Ouro Preto; a trail on the Reserva do Ibitipoca.*





garden. I could smell the orange blossoms. Tiny marmosets made birdlike sounds in the trees.

"We are an interesting mix of traditional and cosmopolitan," said Dirickson, describing both his hotel and the town his parents are credited with reviving. They spread the word to sophisticates in Rio and São Paulo about Tiradentes's pastel-colored houses and Rococo churches, built in the 18th century but bypassed by the next two. "The people who came were considerate of local culture," Dirickson told me. "You can feel it in the street."

A guitarist strummed Bach's "Bourrée" as I crossed the main square, Largo das Forres, trying to keep my footing on the uneven stone streets. I stopped at Entrepôt du Vin, a bar that had tables spilling onto the sidewalk outside. The server poured a glass of deep red Mineiro wine, and I ordered guava paste with soft local cheese. Jacaranda and birds-of-paradise bloomed against rows of white houses. A horse clopped up the middle of the street, no owner in sight.

Layers of culture thrive here in the high-design furniture and linen shops



and emporiums stacked with jars of peppers and *doce de leite*. Everywhere I went, the town urged me to look up, at marvels like the towering Igreja Matriz de Santo Antônio. It's another Aleijadinho masterpiece, with a grand gold interior that includes an organ shipped from Portugal and hauled in by donkeys in 1798.

The most unexpected pleasure was Mineiro cuisine, a triptych of Portuguese, indigenous, and African flavors. The town is the gastronomic capital of Minas Gerais and, some say, the whole of Brazil. At Tragaluz, a restaurant that felt nearly Parisian in its refinement, I ate duck foie gras, polenta, and confit of tender guinea hen.

Saturdays are the only day Brazil's suckling-pig king Luiz Ney de Assis Fonseca serves his signature dish in the courtyard of Villa Paolucci, a hotel he owns. He prepared his "pururuca" (an onomatopoeic term roughly translated as "snap, crackle, pop," for the sound of pork skin crisping up) by brandishing a contraption resembling a space heater directly on the pig, which had been roasted for seven hours after marinating for seven days. Tender meat, crunchy skin, and Luiz Ney's grandmother's versions of Mineiro all-stars such as *farofa* (toasted manioc flour) and buttery mashed potatoes completed my meal. A warm mist began to fall as Luiz Ney observed his sated guests with delight. "For me, food is about celebrating," he said.

So is cachaça, Brazil's national spirit, stirred with fruit juice and sugar to make caipirinhas. Small-batch cachaça production is booming in Minas Gerais, and after a tour of Mazuma Mineira's cane fields and copper alembic stills, I sampled a cachaça aged in an American oak barrel. The





## MINERS GREETED ME WITH PALMS FULL OF CRYSTALS COLORED LIKE HARD CANDY—CHERRY, LEMON, AND BUTTERSCOTCH.

sweetness of coconut, vanilla, and banana lasted until lunch.

During the afternoon car ride, we found out about a deadly dam collapse about 90 miles away, in the town of Brumadinho. Mineral extraction continues centuries after the gold cycle ended, and today Minas Gerais is the second-largest producer of iron ore in the world. As I read the reports of the most catastrophic mining disaster in the nation's history, it was clear that Brazil's tradition of exploiting workers was alive and well. "Nothing has changed. In fact it has gotten worse," explained Deolinda Alice dos Santos, a cultural historian I met in Ouro Preto. "The mine owners are more greedy now and even less concerned about safety."

When I reached Reserva do Ibitipoca, a glamorous eco-lodge set on a nature reserve, I was stiff from the drive and downbeat from the news. I took a walk to the nearest waterfall, one of many on the 12,000 acres of private property belonging to Renato Machado, who also owns the hotel. Cherries and wild pineapple appeared in bursts along the trail. The smell of white lilies was overpowering, like the perfume my eighth-grade boyfriend gave me. My guide, Junior Vicente, picked a cluster for my room.

Amid the peeps of canaries carousing in the trees outside, manager Nadja Hofmann related the apocryphal tale that the water here is so rich in health-giving minerals that each dip in a waterfall would add 20 minutes to my life. The next day, Junior led me on

an eight-mile hike so I could be pummeled under six of the cascades that sit on hotel land. So pure is the ice-cold water, metal cups for drinking hang from nearby branches.

Late in the day, Junior led me to a hillside and handed me two ripe guavas. I ate them like apples, skin and all. Juice dripped down my arms as the yellow light cast shadows behind metal sculptures by Oakland-based artist Karen Cusolito, which Renato collects. A wealthy Mineiro, he bought his first parcel of land adjacent to Ibitipoca State Park in 1981 and since then has been passionately expanding his social and environmental experiment throughout these hills.

The hotel itself has three parts—the main house, a private villa, and the 11-room Engenho Lodge, where I stayed. Renato opened the art-strewn Engenho in 2009 and designed it according to his own tastes as a traveler. "I hate big hotels," he said. "I like small places that feel close to local habits and traditions." The reclaimed-wood floorboards are wide and the ceiling is high, to let the air circulate on sultry days. My bedsheets were cool Egyptian cotton. The service was subtle but flawless. It's the kind of place where luxury feels easy.

Renato is already realizing his vision to create opportunities and livelihoods for nearby communities, and is aiming, eventually, for total food, water, and energy sustainability on his land. At present, 60 percent of the food served in the lodge is grown on the property. Renato and his teams of botanists and biologists are restoring indigenous forest and reintroducing animals such as the muriqui monkey. "This is not about preserving what is left, but rewilding it, to bring nature back," he explained.

I did yoga and rode an electric bike, but I would have been happy just to stroll around the lodge, drink watermelon nectar, and decipher the music of 350 different birds. I was so cocooned in peace that leaving felt like a physical wrench. I sat back in the car, listening to the new driver's playlist. "Do you know Gilberto Gil?" he asked about Brazil's iconic musician. "The song is 'Toda Saudade.' Do you know what is *saudade*?"

I thought about what I was leaving and what I would long for back in snowy New England. Mounds of topaz that bring good luck. Bright cathedrals that hold dark stories. Waterfalls that added two hours to my life. Chocolate cake for breakfast.

"Yes," I said. "I do." ●

▲ Imperial topaz crystals unearthed from a mine outside Ouro Preto.

► The Reserva do Ibitipoca estate has waterfalls that are said to have health-giving properties.





## Visiting Colonial Brazil

Set aside a week to see the historic towns and unspoiled landscapes of Minas Gerais.

### Getting There

**United** ([united.com](http://united.com)), **Delta** ([delta.com](http://delta.com)), and **American Airlines** ([aa.com](http://aa.com)) offer nonstop service from New York City to São Paulo. The flight to Belo Horizonte takes about an hour. From there, it's a two-hour drive to Ouro Prêto; Ibitipoca is another five hours. As of June 17, U.S. passport holders will no longer need a visa to travel to Brazil.

### Ouro Prêto

**Hotel Solar do Rosário** ([hotelsolar.dorosario.com](http://hotelsolar.dorosario.com); doubles from \$97) is set in a carefully restored 1840 building with original tiled floors, antique wooden fixtures, and elegant four-poster beds.

### Tiradentes

**Solar da Ponte** ([solarlaponte.com.br](http://solarlaponte.com.br); doubles from \$117) has the air of a chic friend's country house. The restaurant serves only breakfast and tea, but it's just a short walk to the restaurants in town. The refined **Tragaluz** ([tragaluz.tiradentes.com.br](http://tragaluz.tiradentes.com.br); entrées \$7–\$13) serves European dishes like polenta and confit of guinea hen. Chef Rodolfo Mayer's chic **Angatu** ([angatutiradentes.com](http://angatutiradentes.com); tasting menus from \$63) was voted one of the 50 best restaurants in Brazil. Be sure to make a reservation for Saturday *pururuca* pork roast by chef **Lulz Ney** ([pururucadetiradentes.com.br](http://pururucadetiradentes.com.br)).

### Reserva do Ibitipoca

Days at this luxurious eco-resort are spent hiking, biking, and swimming in waterfalls on the adjacent nature reserve. There's also a spa and a restaurant run by chefs who trained with the Rio-based French chef Claude Troisgros. [ibiti.com](http://ibiti.com); doubles from \$615.

### Tour Operator

**Naya Traveler** is owned and run by women. Marta Tuccl, one of its founders, can curate any itinerary through Minas Gerais. [nayatraveler.com](http://nayatraveler.com); seven-day trips from \$6,000.