

The impossible dream

*Mina*²'s Brazilian cruise

Tim Barker

I was sitting on the bow of *Mina*² in the marina in Salvador in Brazil one evening when I saw an unusually fine example of Latin chic sashaying down the pontoon. 'Hell-lo,' I drawled as she approached. 'Fancy coming aboard for a drink?' 'You bet,' she said in almost faultless English, 'I could murder a gin and tonic.' There was something disturbingly familiar about the easy way she chucked her luggage up to me, climbed up and swung her shapely leg over the pulpit. Having poured us both a stiff drink, my unease persisted until it all came flooding back; this was no common-or-garden South American beauty - this was none other than the Downstairs Skipper herself. I had seen so little of the DS over the last few months that I had completely forgotten what she looked like.

Before we left the Bahia of Salvador we spent a couple of days exploring its upper reaches. Having weighed anchor after our first night in the Itaparica Channel, we went to witness the great Tororó Waterfall, trumpeted by the pilot book almost as one of the seven wonders of the world. So we motored the few miles down the channel to witness a tiny trickle of water barely dampening the side of a small rock wall.

We turned tail, headed out of the channel and up into the Rio Paraguaçu, past the Ilha Francés and off the chart into the area excitingly marked 'Uncharted'. The river is wide and shallow apart from a narrow channel which we managed to negotiate without going aground too often. Some two miles upriver we swept round a bend and were greeted by the sight of a glorious baroque church surrounded by palm trees. Now disused and destined, I fear, to fall into dangerous disrepair, Santiago de Iguapé (St James by the Water) was built by the Portuguese Jesuits at the turn of the 17th century. Tucked away behind the church is a small village whose inhabitants fish the river in dugout canoes and harvest oysters.

It was the time of Carnaval when the world stops to party, dance, sing and drink. We had enjoyed Carnaval in Salvador enormously, but what we hadn't expected was that even villages as small and simple as this have their own Carnaval. Dozens of kids, some covered in ash and all in fancy dress ranging from tutu'd ballet dancers to ghouls with hideous masks and horns, were wandering around. When the van blasting music appeared, everyone crushed round it, all dancing.

The impossible dream: *Mina*²'s Brazilian cruise



*Mina*² is an Oyster 485.

The following day we had a pleasant beam reach 40nm down the coast to Morro de São Paulo, an up-market albeit very chilled out beach resort for the better-off Brazilian. The anchorage is bang in the middle of the route where dozens of tourist boats hurtle past between Morro de São Paulo and the next village up the coast, Gamboa. It is like being anchored in the middle of an aquatic motorway - noisy and not a little dangerous.

At a delightful bar overlooking lush vegetation of banana and palm trees we sipped *caipirinhas* as the sun went down. As I was taking a sip of the nectar through my straw, another straw slipped into my drink and drained the entire glass in one expert suck. It was the DS. 'You were drinking too slowly,' she explained.

Having allocated a couple of days to the extensive islands inland from Morro de São Paulo and Gamboa, we made an early start to Cairú, the last navigable settlement upriver, only 12nm away over the ground but into a 2-knot ebbing tide more than a 3-hour slog. Its 17th century Franciscan monastery is still operating and is being painstakingly renovated.

After another early start back out into the Atlantic we sailed a further 35nm south to another big inlet riddled with islands, the Bahia do Camamu. From the pilot book, the entrance looked terribly tricky involving a tortuous route through rocks and shallows. Without the intricate buoyage system one would be doomed to be dashed on the rocks. Imagine our dismay to find all the buoys had gone. However, with the use of a detailed chart downloaded from the Brazilian Hydrographic Office website we worked our way in with no problem.

We had an even earlier start to catch the 0600 ferry to Camamu itself (it's too shallow to get there in one's own boat). The wooden *saveiro*, open with benches down each side and serving as a ferry, was full of local Brazilians going to the Saturday market, mainly women and children. As we wove our way through the mangroves, one of the babes in arms got a little fractious so a comforting breast was produced to succour the infant. Being an Englishman I averted my eyes. Soon, on the other side of the boat, another small child was demanding similar comfort from its mother

Tim Barker

and another breast was produced. In no time, breakfast was in full swing, with so many breasts on display that there was hardly anywhere I could look for fear of potentially giving offence.

At 0730 we arrived at Camamú, a small provincial town serving the island communities. After the obligatory hike up to the top of the hill to see the few so-called historic buildings, all of which were closed, we went to the market, a seething pit of feral commerce. Most of the fruit and veg were unidentifiable, with more bananas than I've ever seen in my life. Although I'm a healthy carnivore and like my steaks rare, the building dedicated to dead animals and all they contained was enough to turn even my stomach. Every constituent part of every conceivable type of animal was on display in all its gory glory. Outside the meat market a jaunty little lad was straining every muscle to push a wheelbarrow in which were the seeping decapitated heads of two enormous cows.

After taking *Mina*² up river to the village of Maraú, which as it was a Sunday was absolutely deserted, we motored 10nm back to a perfect anchorage between two idyllic palm fringed islands. The only people were a handful of fisherman drifting past casting nets from dugout canoes. When we weighed anchor and headed out of the river back into the Atlantic the sky was beginning to lighten. As dawn approached, the sky turned every hue of red and orange in a spectacular sunrise. Magical.

The early start was to get the 34nm to our next destination, Itacaré, before high water at 1030. The river entrance is almost blocked off by a large sand spit and there is a narrow not very deep gap between a rocky headland and a spit.



High seas out of Abrolhos

The impossible dream: *Mina*²'s Brazilian cruise

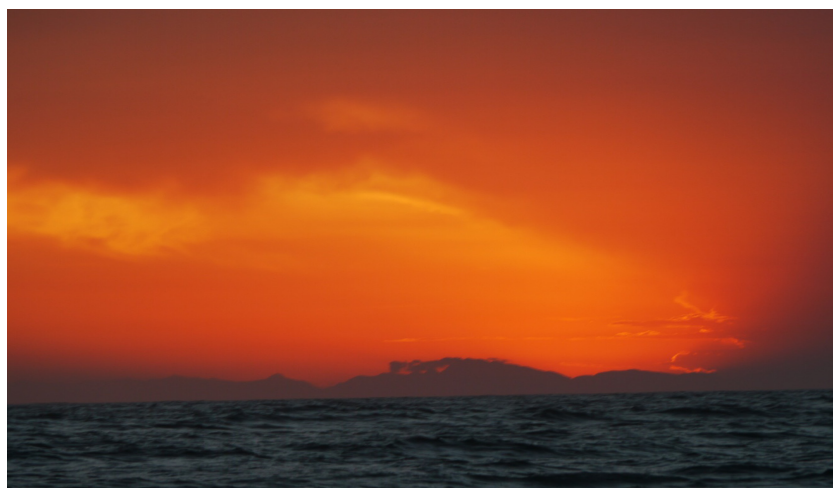
So when a local fishing boat beckoned us to follow him in, we willingly accepted the offer. The difficulties of getting in were more than rewarded. Some of the best beaches in the world are along this coast and Itacaré has developed into a lovely laid-back resort, popular particularly amongst young surfers.

If we thought the entrance was interesting, it wasn't half as interesting as our exit. We wanted to get to Ilhéus in good time but couldn't leave Itacaré until there was sufficient water over the shallows. I thought we could probably get away with it shortly before half tide. We couldn't. The water got shallower and shallower until we felt the old familiar sensation of the boat rocking forward as *terra firma* gripped our keel like a vice.

I was waiting for the tide to rise further to a background murmur from the DS of 'Well that's a lesson learned. Now we're stuck for good,' when a guardian angel came to our aid: a local fisherman showed us where the deeper water was. I gunned the engine and ploughed our way through the sand until we scraped over the bar into open and deeper water.

We had to motor a good part of the 32nm to Ilhéus, where we were joined by Christine, Fernando and Michael, friends from Buenos Aires, for ten days on our passages down to Rio, some 600nm south. Christine was prone to sea-sickness but had been persuaded by her family to arm herself with every sea-sickness remedy known to man and go for it, for this would be the experience of a lifetime.

Despite the light airs, the sea on the 185nm passage down to the Abrolhos Islands was lumpy. During the course of the voyage, and notwithstanding all precautions, Christine became quieter and quieter and greener and



Spectacular sunrise off Camamu

Tim Barker

greener. Her relief at reaching the anchorage was shattered when she discovered that the swell curling into the bay made the boat roll and pitch almost as much as it had been on passage. Everyone knows that the instant cure for sea-sickness is to sit under a tree, but no luck there either.

The Ilhas Abrolhos is a Brazilian naval base as well as a national park and landing on the islands is forbidden and enforced. The look on Christine's face was one of tragic misery. The archipelago of four small islands, about 1.5 miles across, 30nm off the mainland, was a bit of a disappointment after Brazil's lush jungle-like vegetation down the entire coast.

By morning the swell had diminished and everyone was feeling more human. Donning masks and snorkels, we slipped into the warm water and entered another world. Surrounded by turtles and extraordinary fish of every brilliant colour, shape and size, it was a tropical aquarium. The air was also full of exotica. Magnificent frigate birds, tropic birds and brown booby glided majestically overhead whilst their young squatted on the barren slopes of the islands waiting for doting parents to bring back a morsel of regurgitated fish.

Our next leg was 200nm south to Guarapari. With forecasts of light to moderate winds from behind us for the whole duration, we were surprised to find ourselves battling into S7, bouncing off 4m waves. We had two options: struggle on for another 36 hours or turn tail to seek shelter in Caravelas 85nm to the north. We would be there in less than 12 hours. The choice was simple. We arrived in Caravelas at dawn and holed up for a week as a couple of deep depressions made their way north.

After the trauma of her first two offshore passages, Christine was now agreeing with her family that this was indeed the experience of a lifetime, and a particularly ghastly one at that. But there are worse places to be holed up: Caravelas turned out to be a small town with considerable charm with the streets lined with pretty brightly painted houses and local buses to nearby towns and beaches. By Sunday, Christine and Fernando had run out of time, with her ambition of sailing into Rio harbour unfulfilled.

At last the forecasts moderated. A week after our first attempt we swung out of the river into the ocean. At 1530 next day we anchored off Ilhéu do Espírito Santo in Vitoria, which we had been expecting to be rundown and industrial. But set amongst attractive green hills reminiscent of Rio de Janeiro, Vitoria is a modern wealthy thriving city, with enormous skyscrapers and streets lined with upmarket shops and restaurants, in contrast to the subsistence existence of the Brazil we had seen so far.

After a day sightseeing we left at first light for the 195nm passage to the fashionable resort of Búzios. The wind was light, not sailable, so we motored, and motored, and motored, the whole way apart from half an hour of bliss in the middle of the night. At 1000 the following morning

The impossible dream: *Mina*²³'s Brazilian cruise



The barren Ilhas Abrolhos

we picked up a mooring belonging to the Iate Clube Armação de Búzios. The club has a novel policy about visiting yachts using their moorings and facilities: no charge is made on condition that you spend at least R\$25 (£10) per day per head in the restaurant and bar. As the food was excellent, and the *caipirinhas* were large and potent, this didn't represent any problem.

Búzios, about two hours drive from Rio de Janeiro, is a popular weekend and holiday beach resort for the smart set of Rio. Once a small but picturesque fishing village, it was transformed in the 1960s when it was adopted by Brigitte Bardot as her holiday location of choice. So grateful are the locals at the instant swelling of their coffers that the whole place



Fishing port near Caravelas

Tim Barker

is Bardot obsessed. Restaurant Brigitte, Bar BB, Rua Bardot, shops full of Bardot T-shirts and shopping baskets. Tourists queue to be photographed snuggling up to a life-size bronze statue of the divine heroine.

After the poverty-stricken subsistence communities which had been our sole visiting places since leaving Salvador a month before, Vitoria and Búzios were the little bit of sophistication that the Downstairs Skipper had been yearning for. Pretty as a picture, surrounded by numerous little coves with perfect beaches, it was a delightful change.

Michael had been wonderful company, when we saw him. He's like a dormouse and was seemingly capable of sleeping 18 hours a day, waking briefly to entertain us with a succession of corny jokes. Living off water and dried biscuits he was also cheap to maintain. After he left, the DS and I stayed in Búzios for a further day.

Our next great mission was to sail to Rio de Janeiro, but to avoid a night passage (which the DS is not keen on when we're on our own) we broke the journey at a small anchorage 25nm south at Cabo Frio.

Cabo Frio (Cape Cold) is a large peninsular jutting five miles out into the South Atlantic Ocean and consisting of high steep-sided mountains. The anchorage, reached by passing through a narrow gash in the rock, was according to the pilot book safe and secluded off a sandy white beach. Sounds idyllic. After a moderate wind on our 25nm trip from Búzios, we were surprised to squeeze through the gap to find a gale of wind blasting out. We could hardly stand on the deck to let the anchor go as the boat bucketed in a steep chop. We let out a great deal of chain to ensure we didn't drag if the already appalling conditions got worse. The idea of swimming to the perfect sandy beach was laughable.



Off for a day's fishing

The impossible dream: *Mina*²'s Brazilian cruise

As darkness fell, a number of fishing boats entered the bay to shelter from the developing storm. Soon, our secluded anchorage was like Newtown Creek on a bank holiday weekend. One boat anchored, I thought, unnecessarily close. Lightning was flickering all round us. Anticipating an early start we turned in at about 2100.

But after a couple of hours the DS woke me to report a boat was rapidly approaching. It was the fishing boat anchored close to us. The wind had gone through 180° and had died to almost nothing - most of the time. About every 5 minutes, a katabatic wind - a williwaw - came screaming down the steep mountain in front of us and hit with the force of a runaway train - from 3 to 50 knots in half a second, lasted about a quarter of a minute, then was just as suddenly calm again. In these conditions the boats were slewing all over the place, causing the fishing boat to career towards us before being brought up short by his anchor rope. It was clear that a vicious cold front was passing over us and with cold fronts come rain. And rain it did - torrentially.

If williwaw sledgehammers, tropical rainstorms and out-of-control fishing boats weren't enough to cope with, a deep swell started to make its way into the anchorage. The boat started trying to roll its mast out. Probably swinging 35° each way, down below it was like being in a washing machine. Trying to get some much-needed sleep ahead of our long passage the following day, the DS and I were doing impersonations of star fish, spread-eagled on the bed to stop ourselves from being tossed round like rag dolls. It didn't make for a comfortable relaxed night.

By 0500 there was just enough light to make our way out and, without looking back, we left to fulfil the ambition of a lifetime - to sail our own yacht into the most spectacular harbour in the world, Rio de Janeiro.

Just after the Downstairs Skipper and I got married, 31 years and a lifetime ago, we visited Rio de Janeiro, and I dreamed that one day I would sail my own yacht into the *Cidade Maravilhosa*, the Marvellous City. With tears in my eyes, with my best friend, wife and DS (all the same person) at my side, accompanied by Andy Williams belting out 'The Impossible Dream', *Mina*² sailed my dream into reality as we coasted into Rio harbour.

The dream was dampened a little not only by the torrential rain that had fallen solidly for the last two days, but also by Rio's marina facilities. On the city side of the bay there are two marinas. The late Clube de Rio de Janeiro, the Brazilian equivalent of a combination of the Royal Yacht Squadron and the Hurlingham Club, is luxurious with every possible amenity and in a prime position in the shadow of the Sugarloaf Mountain. It is also very exclusive, and does not welcome visiting yachts. Which leaves Marina Da Gloria. And glorious it ain't, with visitors' berths



The Downstairs Skipper on Paradise Beach

attached to a rickety pontoon, an overpowering smell of raw sewage, and rats, the live ones running round eying up access routes to the boat, the dead ones bloated, rotting and floating round the boat. Apart from loos and showers there are almost no facilities, not even a bar to sit in front of. Making up for the weather and marina facilities, we enjoyed a socialising and sightseeing whirlwind with friends and relatives living in Rio.

But it was time to move on. We sailed from the harbour to a delightful anchorage off a small fishing village, Itaipu, about 7nm away. As we arrived, a man in a canoe circled us like a shark. Once the anchor was down he introduced himself as Bruno from the beach side restaurant Pli Onboard. We'd heard of Bruno. A cheerful and highly entrepreneurial young man who ran an excellent restaurant, and provided visiting yachts with anything from supermarket shopping to fuel, ice, drinks - whatever you wanted. He gave us a menu to peruse and we later called him to order an excellent lunch of fried *lula* (squid) and beautifully light deep-fried cheese pasties, delivered once again by canoe.

Our entire 60nm passage from Itaipu to Ilha Grande was under motor. The most wind was 7 knots, hardly enough to move us through the water let alone get us to our destination with enough sunlight to see it. But the sea was smooth, the sun was hot, and we were close enough to the shore the whole way to be pleasantly distracted. We arrived in Saco de Ceu on the north side of the island mid-afternoon and found ourselves in a paradise bay. The landscape is hilly verging on mountainous, and amongst the lush jungle a few picturesque houses nestled on the shore of the bay surrounded by palm trees. Turning a blind eye to the palm trees it was reminiscent of the prettiest islands in the northern Aegean in Greece.

The impossible dream: *Mina*²'s Brazilian cruise

The Bahia da Ilha Grande is an enormous partially enclosed bay between Rio De Janeiro and Sao Paulo, 45 miles by 20 miles. Surrounded by steeply forested hills, it consists of numerous islands with hundreds of anchorages - there are said to be one for every day of the year. The water is clear and warm and the rocky islands are perfect for snorkelling. The best cruising ground in the whole east coast of South America, you could spend six months there and still leave with plenty of anchorages undiscovered.

The only downside from a sailor's point of view is that there is rarely any wind. Well, not the only downside - there are the biting insects as well. Not dengue fever-carrying mosquitoes (the DS is always on the lookout for them), but *borachudos*, midge-like creatures that you neither see nor hear but they bite, drawing blood. The itch is five times worse than a mosquito bite and lasts five times as long. They appear to be unaffected by Deet, spirals or the DS's disapproval. But we found a bottle of a natural green deterrent of almond and vanilla oil in a chemist and rubbed oil into each other all evening. The effect was dramatic. It probably doesn't keep the midges away, but I enjoyed it enormously.

After making arrangements to leave *Mina*² for six months on a secure pontoon up a river in a protected condominium, we discovered that not only was this forbidden - you can only leave your boat in a public marina - but that the river where the condominium was had silted up and there was not enough depth. To cut a tedious story short, we found a secure winter berth at Bracuhy Marina at the top of the Bahia de Ilha Grande.

For Easter weekend, rich Brazil came out to play, flying in by helicopter, filling the fabulous shore-side houses and re-commissioning the enormous number of motor yachts filling the marinas.

Having negotiated *Mina*²'s winter home and with all the documentation in place, we were free to enjoy our last 36 hours. First stop were the Ilhas Botinas, a couple of postcard-pretty tiny islands each with a few perfectly positioned palm trees and surrounded by clear warm water, corals and an abundance of tropical fish. As it was 0730 when we arrived, we were the only boat. Perfect. Down with the dinghy for a Kodak moment, on with the snorkels to swim in the tropical aquarium, then back onto the boat.

The DS has a passion for beaches and had been complaining that in the country with some of the best beaches in the world, she had enjoyed remarkably few. The hot one in the area is Praia do Dentista (Dentist Beach) on the south side of Ilha Gipoia. At 0900 when we dropped the anchor there were only three other boats there. We swam ashore, and the DS was happy walking down the deserted palm-fringed beach for a while. A couple of motor boats approached the bay, anchored, got their noisy Scoobidoo's down and started shooting round the anchorage. The DS was now unhappy: 'How are we going to swim back to the boat without

Tim Barker

being run down? Haven't they anchored too close to us? Can't they see the anchorage is almost full? '

Remarkably we managed to swim back to the boat with all our limbs intact. Within minutes the horizon was filled with the bow waves of motor yachts converging on the anchorage. One by one they winkled their way in, set their anchors, broke out the beers and cranked up their stereos. Having persuaded the DS that with no wind and no tide, no one was going to drag and cause irreparable damage, we settled down to a morning of people-watching. By lunchtime, there were more than 100 boats - you could almost walk across the bay on the decks of plastic. Any boat over 10ft long had at least one professional crew. By the time you got up to 50ft, there were half a dozen of them rushing around doing goodness knows what. On *Mina*², with two Skippers on board, no one does anything.

Before we got hemmed in for the night we decided to move on. But as we went from one anchorage to another, we found them all full to bursting. Moving round to the north side of Ilha Gipóia, remarkably we found a delightful anchorage with no one else there at all. This was the last night of our cruise and we were all alone, at anchor in a romantic setting.

Two hundred yards down the coast was a restaurant with a pontoon for water-borne guests. As darkness fell, its lights were switched on - bright, garish greens and reds, and a searchlight which described patterns across the sky. After a romantic dinner on board, cooked to perfection by the Skipper, and washed down with an excellent bottle of wine, we retired at 2245 for our last night at anchor.

The searchlight was an indicator we had missed. At 2300 the 'music' hit us like a sledgehammer. The owners had invested enormous amounts of money on the best and loudest sound system in Brazil. It could be heard in Angra, four miles away. From 200 yards it had a physical impact.

Just as the DS and I were debating whether this was Garage Music or HipHop, the first of the rocket-fuelled revellers arrived in their rocket-fuelled boats, which only have two speeds - flat out and stop. As the constant procession passed us to anchor off the club and get ferried ashore, their wash caused *Mina*² to start rocking and rolling with her stern, right beneath our berth in the aft cabin, crashing up and down in the waves. As the last of the revellers arrived at 0300, the first of the revellers started to leave, so the bucketing was continuous. My guess was that more than 100 stink boats (not one sailing yacht) were anchored off the club.

The purgatory didn't end until 0800 when, groggy from lack of sleep, we returned to Bracuhy and the end of our cruise. Leaving *Mina*² in Brazil, it was time to return home to what some people refer to as 'the real world'.

In a year, Mina2 had sailed 10,000nm in four continents and ten countries.