Brazil 1 - Buzius and Salvador

Brazil is one of those countries that have a very distinctive feel and a vivid image. Each one of us carries a detailed picture of Brazil in his mind, even without being there, that was molded by books, movies, pictures, and news: Lush jungles, tropical beaches, colorful population – a mixture of native Americans, Africans and Europeans, African rituals, Rio-Copacabana-Ipanema-Corcovado - poverty-favelas, Salvador-Bahia-Dona Flor-Jorge Amado, sensual food, amazing variety of tropical fruits, wildlife, natural wealth, corruption of unimaginable magnitudes, disorder, sense of freedom, sex, sexuality, sexiness and all other conjugations of that three letter word, and above everything – music, samba and carnival.

The fantastic thing is that upon arriving to Brazil, one finds out that the real Brazil matches the expectations and even exceeds them. The real Brazil – the people, the food, the landscape, the music, the poverty, the rhythm – still manages to amaze even the well-informed traveler. There’s nothing mild here, no understatements; welcome to the country that prefers edges over midpoints.

The trigger to this trip was LATIN – The Latin American conference of computer science theory. I served on the program committee of that conference that is the main venue for computer science theoreticians from Latin America. It is regarded a good (though not first class) conference that attracts researchers from all over the world. My colleague from the department at the Open University, Zeev, participated in that conference in order to present two papers of his. So we decided that as long as we both travel that far, we might as well stay a little bit longer and travel. It was my second visit in Brazil. In 1990 I was there for roughly 7 weeks during my South American trip.

The thread of this blog entry will be happy. This word reflects my mood during that trip, as it does Brazil's.

LATIN – Happy Conference

I have never attended a happier conference. The location, the organizer, the people – all helped making that conference a joyous occasion. Perhaps I should start with the organizer – Eduardo, or Professor Eduardo Laber for you – a boyish and always smiling Jewish professor from Rio whose good spirit seemed to have influenced all. I was never in a conference where the organizer was dressed in Bermuda shorts and colorful flip-flops, and the first invited speaker (the otherwise world-renowned Eva Tardos) appeared also in the flip-flops that were part of the welcome package. The location was the tempting Buzius – a peninsula of secluded tropical beaches that was "discovered" by Brigitte Bardot in the 1960s and became one of the hottest resorts in Brazil. All the people that we met, from all over the world, were extremely nice and in good mood. I think that everyone came to the boat ride and almost everyone jumped into the water in the superb bays where the boat stopped. And in the last night – it was a real party around the pool in the hotel and it continued downtown in a bar until after midnight, only after Eduardo begged everyone to promise to wake up early in the next morning for that day's invited talk. It was a conference of caipirinia, beaches, music, dancing, and some lectures in between. That’s how it should be.
Pictures from Buzius

(Note that in all batches of pictures, some pictures have comments. And for some reason they were uploaded from the last to first…. I didn’t have the energy to figure out how to reverse the order)

Salvador – Happy City

Salvador – the first capital of Brazil (in colonial times), was the place where we spent the carnival in 1990. The new encounter with the city was exciting. We checked into a quaint hotel in Pelourinho, the old quarter, and immediately went out to explore it. It felt like walking in a scene taken from Dona Flor. There seemed to be almost no other tourists (that usually come two months earlier for the carnival), as was also evident from the fact that every street vendor thought that if he did not sell us something he would go home empty-handed. The narrow cobbled streets were filled with locals that were hanging out, poor black curvaceous women were watching out from their house window, and people were sitting in restaurants and bars that put out their plastic chairs. In every corner there were baianas de acarajé (Bahian women dressed in white puffy dresses that sell Bahia’s fast-food – acarajés – “bread” made of mashed beans, deep-fried in dendé palm oil, and served with small sundried shrimps or other stuffing). The streets were also filled with cavalcades of batocada bands – groups of percussion players that play the samba beat. It seemed that no one told those people that it is already April and not February. It was an intense evening. Even our visits to the local artist ateliers were intense since their paintings matched the samba beat of the batocada and the smell of the spicy food with their fauvist primitive style (we loved them very much). The food that we ate that evening – shrimp moqueca (the dish whose preparation is depicted so vividly and alluringly in Dona Flor) – just added to the excitement. At some point Zeev, who declared the place as Africa in America, asked to return to the hotel since the sights, smells and sounds were too intense and there’s a limit to how much input one can take in such a short time. When we sat in the hotel porch overlooking the Baia de Todos os Santos (the bay of all saints), the sounds of batocadas filled the air from all over the city. There was no escaping from that carnival. As I said – that is a country that does not know the meaning of the word understatement.

The next day we wandered the streets of Salvador from Pelourinho, down to the markets of the lower city (the city has two parts that are connected by Elevador Lacerda) and then up again, making our way along Avenida Sete de Setembro all the way down to Barra and the beach. It was a nice (and a very long) tour from the old colonial part, through the commercial center (that was intense in its own way), to Barra which is a more modern and more relaxed neighborhood that I remembered from my 1990 visit since that is where we stayed back then during the carnival. In the evening we went to a jazz performance that took place in the wide square of the museum of modern art that is located just by the sea. That was an unforgettable evening. It began with soft quiet jazz; but then, as the place began to get crowded, the music took off to surprising heights. There was a group of players that were on stage all time, but they kept inviting other guest performers, and the result was a great jazz concert with a Brazilian twist. The place was full with people of all ages and all races. There were rich people as well as others that looked very much not so. Mixed couples
and also gay couples were kissing and hugging and it did not seem to be unusual. Some people were listening to the music, while others were there just to meet friends and drink beer. A sign behind the stage of the ministry of culture said "Brazil – Pais de Todos". Indeed.

On my way back to the hotel (Zeev caved in much earlier) I was passing by a house where a samba party took place. I was invited to join. The joy, the music, the dancing, the sweat, the heat, the ceiling fans, the devoutness to the rhythm... It was all there. For some reason, it looked like a scene from a club in Havana, Cuba, but the music and the dances were samba alright, not salsa. That was one of the events that any traveller dreams of – randomly finding himself part of a great and unexpected event. (And no, I refuse to use the word serendipity; it lost its charm.)

The next day was our final day in Salvador. Our tour of the city took us to places where we need not be (as said one of the locals who saw us checking the map with confusion). Zeev, that was hungry, decided that this is the place to eat. We sat down in a local eatery. It didn’t take long for some of the locals to approach us. The first asked for the bottle of water that we just bought. He got it. Next came a 18-year old girl, in her third trimester (pregnancy, not school) and a serious vein thrombosis (please forgive my pretentious diagnosis) and begged for money. I proposed to go with her to the grocery store next door and let her buy whatever she needed. That benevolence earned me two new friends (she, who turned perky, and the boy behind the counter that seemed to be very pleased by my act and kept smiling at me with warm bright eyes). When I returned to Zeev, who was already eating his huge meal (well, he did order the Jumbo Combo), a poor 25 year old (that looked 50) with serious troubles of his own, came sitting near our table. Realizing that I was the Mother Therese du jour, I served him half of Zeev’s meal and poured him water from the new bottle that I had just bought. He felt so comfortable that he kept asking Zeev whether he was going to eat some of the stuff that I was kind enough to leave on Zeev’s plate. He also kept putting some sauce on his food from the bowl on the table, while telling me his life story. Do you think that his friend that was watching from a distance did not join us eventually? Later on, when I bought my meal somewhere else – an empanada and suco de caju (cashew juice) – an old man came to me and asked me with an embarrassed smile to buy him an empanada. It was my pleasure and he was greatful and happy. Except for the first thirsty guy, that looked quite miserable, they all put on a happy face – the girl, the two diners, and that old man. Despite the hardship, those people (and their fellows from the batocada groups or the samba party that come from the same background) seem to preserve their capability to be happy.

That afternoon we took the bus to Lencois in eastern Bahia. Chapada Diamantina was next.

Pictures from Salvador