Testing the Turquoise Waters of Paradise

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Directions: read the following information article and compare this setting to the story Through the Tunnel. Write an explanatory diagnostic essay that explains this setting and how it could possibly be the one described in the story. Use contextual evidence from the annotations and text read in class.

Brazil's Fernando de Noronha is fabled as an eco-wonderland and a beach-lovers' Shangri-la, where even the sharks are friendly. Mike Hodgkinson finds out if it lives up to the hype

 Fernando de Noronha, Brazil

 Fantasy island ... even the sharks are friendly on Fernando de Noronha, or so they say. Photograph: Herve Collart/Sygma/Corbis

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Mike Hodgkinson

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Ask about Fernando de Noronha when you're in Sao Paulo, and your enquiry will invariably meet with a combination of wonderment, national pride, jealousy and misinformation. Fernando de Noronha is an island – named after a 16th-century Portuguese nobleman who may never have actually set foot there – that exists in the Brazilian imagination somewhere not far from Shangri-la, Atlantis and paradise. People glaze over when you mention it: eyeballs tend to roll upwards in that universal gesture of delight.

 Fernando de Noronha, Brazil

 Photograph: Herve Collart/Sygma/Corbis

We were told by friends, acquaintances and strangers – none of whom had actually been to Fernando de Noronha – to expect the most spectacular beaches in all of Brazil. Some were certain that jet aircraft are barred from landing there; others warned that there is only one hotel and absolutely no internet. Naomi Campbell, we were reliably informed, goes there to unwind after Sao Paulo Fashion Week, but – far from being just a bolt-hole for the wealthy – it is also a fiercely protected eco-wonderland, favoured by naturalists and marine biologists. The island's luxuriously warm and unsullied emerald waters are, it was widely agreed, teeming with dolphins and turtles. What's more, the consensus assured us that every type of shark common to the area is, in fact, friendly.

Like most people from outside Latin American we had never heard of Fernando de Noronha, and because less than half of what we'd been told seemed even remotely plausible, we turned to Charles Darwin for supporting testimony. He stopped there in 1832, after one of his crew had harpooned a porpoise for supper (Darwin was evidently no Dr Dolittle), but spent only a day "wandering about the woods" before setting off in hopes of finding "greater wonders" elsewhere. His account – except for reports of "a conical hill, about one thousand feet high, the upper part of which is exceedingly steep" – is distinctly underwhelming. Would this living paradise, in reality, turn out to be little more than a product of mass exaggeration? Or would it live up to the hype?

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Fernando de Noronha is, strictly speaking, an archipelago made up of one 11-square-mile chunk of volcanic rock and 20 smaller islands, three degrees south of the equator, 220 miles from Brazil's north-eastern coast. The flight from Sao Paulo – on a modern passenger jet, for the record – pauses briefly in the seafront city of Recife before continuing out into the Atlantic, and touching down on an airstrip that occupies a large portion of the lush, green interior. From above, the promise of an outrageously attractive wonderland – glinting turquoise sea, pristine sand – is instantly made good.

After happily coughing up an Environment Protection Tax at the airport (seven days costs about £65 per person), we were taken by Land Rover to our hotel – the Pousada do Vale – a friendly place on a wooded lane near the island's first permanent settlement, the Vila dos Remédios. Within half an hour, we fully understood the basic climatic reality of life on Noronha during the rainy season (April to August) – bursts of blistering sunshine punctuated by torrential downpours. As a result, nature goes into overdrive: explosions of greenery; reptilian battalions of frogs and native, yellow-eyed mabuya lizards; and clouds of low-flying, almost invisible borrachudo mosquitoes that have a voracious appetite for human ankle flesh. Self-preservation quickly drove us to the most effective, but least environmentally friendly, of the two insect repellants offered by the pousada: not the ideal start on a Unesco World Heritage Site and designated maritime national park where swimming in sun-screen is, in places, forbidden lest the delicate eco-system be damaged.

As night fell like a cosh, the island's split-personality began to reveal itself. All the evidence so far had marked out Noronha as a dream destination for tropic-hardened biologists, but the appearance of several smartly dressed couples, picking their way gingerly over rain-slicked cobblestones, confirmed its bread-and-butter identity as a magnet for well-heeled honeymooners. Their shoes were muddied, and their lower legs were – like ours – borrachudo'd, but they had paid good money for romance in paradise and no extremes of nature were going to take that from them. The remoteness of the island – and its perceived value as the perfect holiday destination – keeps prices (food, lodging) perennially high, on a par with pricier quarters of Sao Paulo, enhancing its exclusivity and mystique.

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The evening, spent over several cans of lager at a bar called Tom Marrom, surrendered a colourful procession of diverse characters: a local teenager rode past on a horse, followed by a man in a dune buggy who appeared to be modelling himself after Steve McQueen's Thomas Crown. The dune buggy turns out to be the island's most common form of transportation: not exactly the environmentalist's first choice, but practical given a road system structured largely around the pot-hole, the gully and the rut. The bar's waitresses wore fake pig-tails and painted-on freckles, and danced – between deliveries of food – to the live forró band. Forró is an accordion-based type of folk-dance music particular to the north-east of Brazil, with an intoxicating and swampy feel to it. One band member traditionally plays the triangle, which we assumed was the least-taxing, most Bez-like role, until our trianglist started to sing, very well, and instantly shot up in our estimation.

After a night spent under the watchful eye of several mabuyas, we set about discovering that the best of Noronha is to be found on and under the water. A three-hour round trip by boat from the island's small harbour is as good an introduction to the island as any, and features a 40-minute snorkelling stop at the astoundingly pretty Baia do Sancho. En route we were shown rock formations that (sort of) resemble a dog, an Egyptian mummy and King Kong, caught passing glimpses of flying fish, a stray turtle and several javelin-shaped barracuda. The big draw, though, was the resident spinner dolphins – so-called because they jump clear of the water in acrobatic spirals – that turn up in their hundreds on a daily basis. You just can't argue with wild dolphins en masse: some would insist they're worth the hefty price of admission to Noronha alone.

We could neither confirm nor deny the rumoured friendliness of the local sharks – the lemon shark, nurse shark and Caribbean reef shark are the most common – because we didn't see any, but we can state that there have been no reported attacks (touch wood). In marked contrast to the mainland coast near Recife, where environmental disruption has provoked a dramatic rise in fatal shark encounters, the protected marine eco-system around Noronha appears to offer the creatures all the sustenance they require.

Other nature-based highlights included the walking route to Baia do Sancho, which involves negotiating two ladders on a sheer cliff-face and feels moderately adventurous, until you realise that it's regularly tackled by old ladies in flip-flops; and a lunch of freshly caught barracuda at Bar do Meio on the Praia do Meio, frigate birds circling overhead. Away from the beaches, the ruins of a prison offers a hint of life on Noronha before the modern tourist era. Gypsies (in 1739) and capoeira fighters (in 1890) were incarcerated there, unaware that their living hell would one day morph into a high-end eco-destination.

Fish night back at the Pousada do Vale – during which the hand-delivered catch is wrapped in banana leaves and grilled – is free for guests on Thursdays. The hotel's two-storey "bungalows" have balconies with hammocks, and it was in one of them that we weighed up our thoughts on the island. Had Noronha lived up to the hype? No question about it, the place is gorgeous – whatever nature had taken away by sending deluges of Atlantic rain and vindictive insects, it had given back in spades with stunning marine life, dramatic rock formations and priceless sunsets. But there was still the sneaking suspicion that Fernando de Noronha has something of an identity crisis. By selling itself as both a strictly patrolled eco-paradise and a dream destination for the well-off – where bicycles are out-muscled by petrol-chugging buggies, and much of the food is flown in – the island comes across as confused. The price-tag for a holiday there is likely to deter many, but for honeymooning scuba divers who aren't short of a bob or two, Fernando de Noronha is a live contender.

Getting there

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When to go: Dry/high season (from September up to March) and rainy/low season (from April up to August)

Specialist operator: Tim Best Travel; +44 (0)20 7591 0300; timbesttravel.com; info@timbesttravel.com