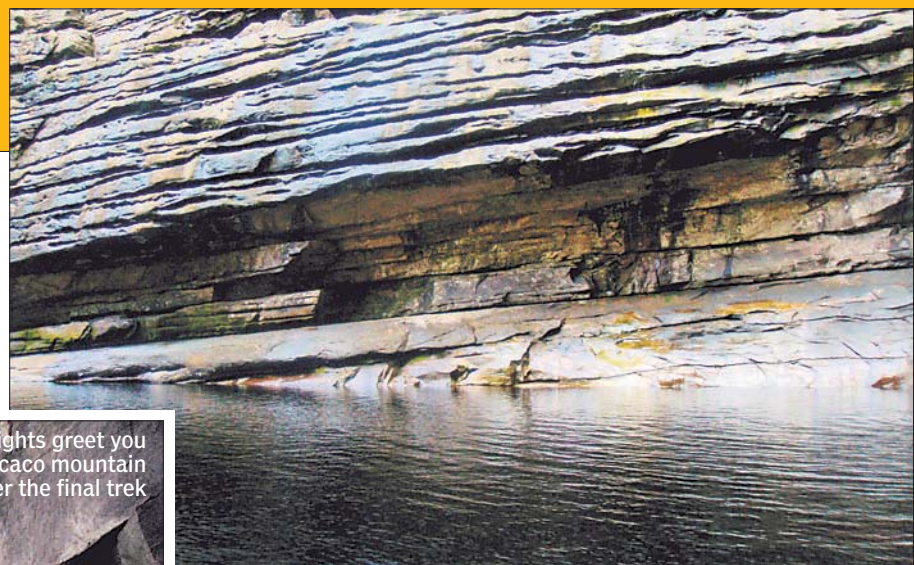
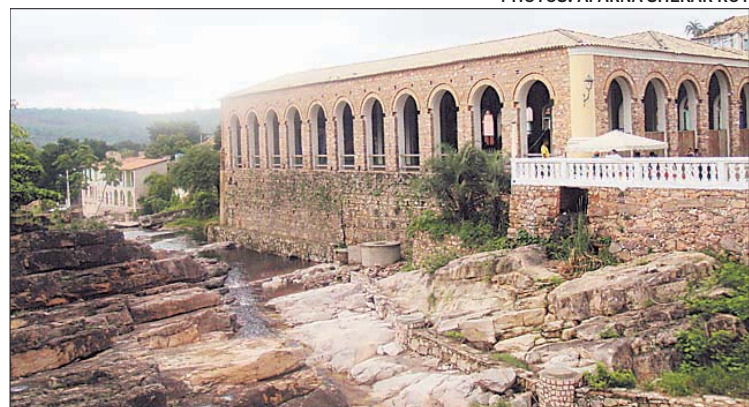


Brazil's lost world



PHOTOS: APARNA SHEKAR ROY



Fantastic sights greet you atop Macaco mountain after the final trek



Trekking in the Chapada Diamantina National Park makes for the most exciting part of a South American adventure

SALVADOR, BAHIA

BRAZIL



GETTING THERE

From Mumbai, Air India, Air France, and British Airways among other carriers, fly to Rio De Janeiro, from where there are daily flights to Salvador, Bahia. Lençóis, the principle town in Chapada Diamantina National Park is a six-hour bus journey from Salvador.

WHERE TO STAY

Pousada and Camping Lumiar is a good option. Double rooms cost \$20 (Rs 1,033) per night. Camping costs \$5 (Rs 258) per night.

TREKKING OPTIONS

These include a beginner's trek, an intensive 36-km three-day trek or an intensive 100-km 10-day trek.

TREK ORGANISERS

H2O Expedition, Dois Irmaos and Lentur conduct tours from Pousada dos Duendes.



APARNA SHEKAR ROY

We heard English music as our bus pulled over near the main square of a quaint little town called Lençóis. Lençóis sits in the heart of one of the most beautiful national parks, the Chapada Diamantina, in the state of Bahia in Brazil. Once a diamond mining area, the park is now known for its lush green mountainous terrain with waterfalls, caves, and rivers, and is among Brazil's prime trekking destinations.

I went to Chapada for an intensive three-day trek with four friends. Mary and Pedro from the United States, Victoria from the UK and Paco from Spain. Having met in Salvador, Brazil, through an internet travel community, our group decided to head to the National Park together. We were craving a break from our sun burns on the beaches of Brazil and were fiercely determined to trek.

Jimmy's song

We were a little surprised to hear the tunes of *Stairway to Heaven* in place of good old Brazilian Samba. Apparently, Jimmy Page, the lead guitarist of the band Led Zeppelin, owns a house in Lençóis and there have been many impromptu performances when Jimmy would just stroll

down the cobble stoned streets with his guitar. I am dead sure Jimmy never really did the trek in Chapada Diamantina. If he had, we would all be singing 'Stairway to Hell'.

A true Indian bargain

Our first day in Chapada Diamantina, I bargained with the guides for a cheaper trek, in broken Portuguese peppered with highly emotional sign language. Tired with negotiations, albeit with the sweet satisfaction of getting a cheap deal, we spent the rest of the day swimming in a waterhole outside Lençóis. Knowing that the next three days would be spent in the wild, we all drank Caipirinhas and ate rich, cheesy tapioca pancakes before hitting the sack.



The charming village of Capão

Early next morning, we headed to the main square with our daypacks. The promised additional guide did not show up. We were headed on the most intensive trek in Brazil with one guide called Sen, who looked a little like the actor Chris Rock, but spoke absolutely no English.

Back-breaking climb

The 36-km three-day trek covers the distance between Lençóis and Capão, passing through Cachoeira da Fumaça, the Smoke Waterfall. The distance may not seem like much, but the trek's well-kept secret is the uphill climb on rocky paths with cactus eating into your skin. On day one, we climbed what they call 'The Venom Hill', which kills you even before you reach the top. The scorching sun and lack of water on the trail didn't help either. After six hours of treacherous climbing, we reached a beautiful waterfall, Cachoeira do Capivari, with a reddish golden pool of water. Some of us were so tired that we jumped straight into the water in our trekking clothes. We cooled off while Sen prepared a delicious lunch of tuna sandwiches for us.

Our campsite for the first night, amidst dark cliffs, a thick green cover, and a mini waterfall was perfect. We fell asleep under a million stars

with scores of glowing fireflies around us.

It gets easier

Day two was actually a cakewalk as we only had to walk on flat terrain. We walked along a river and reached the base of Smoke Waterfall. With the group chemistry at its peak after two days of arduous trekking, we swam, ate and enjoyed the beautiful view of the waterfall.

The biggest nightmare

A good day is always followed by a terrible night. The campsite on day two really took the cake. It was a dark cave populated by bats, lizards and bugs and had the most uneven and horribly damp ground. We crawled into the little space, feeling like Uma Thurman from *Kill Bill*, buried alive in a coffin. The lashing water from the heavy rain at night made sure we woke up on the last day with the crankiest mood ever.

The trek up Macaco Mountain (Monkey Mountain) was a sheer nightmare. None of us were in a mood to talk. We just focused on every stone that we stepped on, walking in fury till we reached the top of Smoke Waterfall. The only thing that kept me going was knowing that in a few hours, we would be in the little village of Capão, drinking ice cold beer.

Reaching the top, we celebrated by taking pictures on the edge and screaming Spanish swear words that we had learnt from Paco. As they echoed through the valley stretched out splendidly in front of us, a rainbow appeared out of nowhere near the waterfall, which made us feel that the pain was totally worth it. Moments like these do not come by easily. And as I ran down the hill towards Capão, I learnt something that every shoestring traveller has to live with. Cheap is expensive. But, it is certainly more precious.

Aparna is a freelance writer who loves to travel