

Ceará, Piauí & Maranhão



The Northeast's three northernmost states stretch along Brazil's only north-facing coast and deep into the arid interior. While Ceará in the east is mostly caatinga (semi-arid land), the west of Maranhão is on the fringe of the Amazonian rain forest. The main draw for visitors, the beaches of Ceará, stretch either side of Fortaleza, the region's biggest city. Fortaleza itself, while not big on culture or charm, is a fun-loving beach town where you can dance to *forró* (popular music of the Northeast) and other beats. From here are arrayed hundreds of kilometers of some of the best beaches in Brazil, some supporting growing resort towns, others with at most a small, traditional fishing village. Super-relaxed Jericoacoara, with its unique location inside a dune-swept national park, is the jewel of Ceará's gorgeous coastline.

In Piauí, tranquil Parnaíba is the gateway to the large and intriguing Delta do Parnaíba. An adventurous coastal route leads west from here to the enormous expanses of high dunes and clear lagoons known as the Lençóis Maranhenses, one of Brazil's highlights. Its beauty will floor you. Further west still is the half-decayed, half-restored colonial city of São Luís, and its perfect sleepy neighbor Alcântara, two of Brazil's most picturesque colonial gems.

The region's interior, known as the *sertão*, is a land where life has never been easy for its predominantly agricultural and ranching inhabitants, who suffer periodic horrific droughts. But there is spectacular country to explore here, with the bonus of fascinating rock art and archaeological remains in the Serra da Capivara and Sete Cidades national parks.

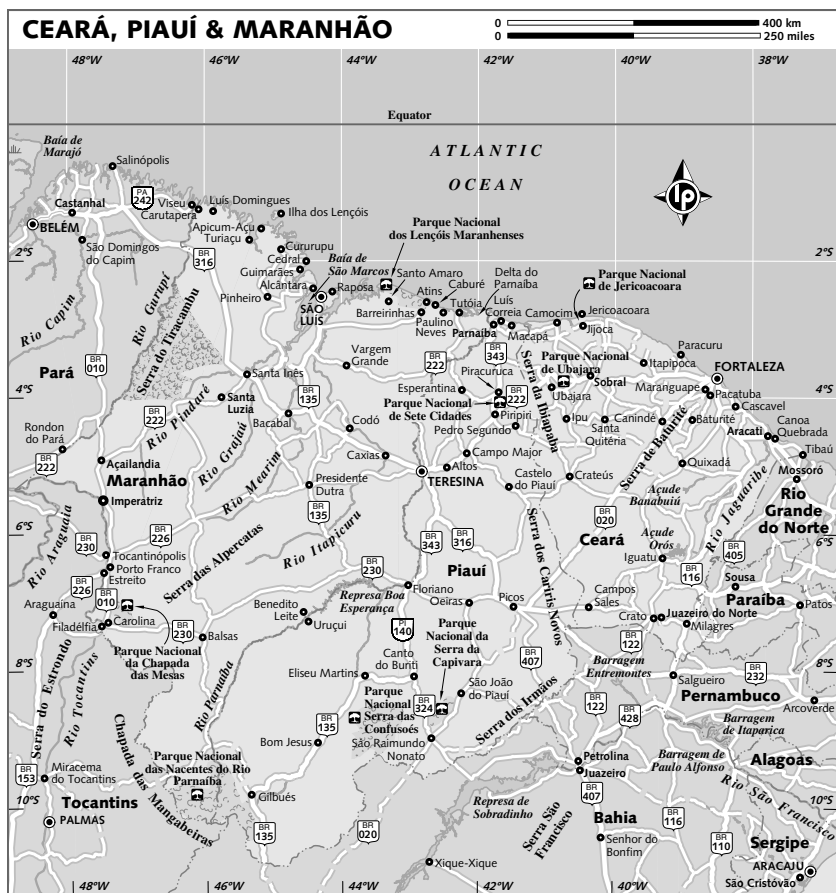
HIGHLIGHTS

- Gawk at spectacular sunsets from towering dunes in the remote backpacker village of **Jericoacoara** (p578)
- Step back in time and admire the red ibis in the stunning colonial town of **Alcântara** (p596)
- Monkey-spot in small canoes along narrow tributaries of the wildlife-rich **Delta do Parnaíba** (p586)
- Ponder quirky rock formations and ancient graffiti in the Unesco-designated inland **Parque Nacional da Serra da Capivara** (p589)
- Dip into pristine lagoons surrounded by endless dunes in Maranhão's surreal **Lençóis Maranhenses** (p597)



■ POPULATION: 18 MILLION

■ AREA: 732,340 SQ KM



History

The Portuguese were slow off the mark in occupying these distant northern parts of Brazil, and it was the French who founded São Luís, the capital of Maranhão (in 1612), and the Dutch who founded Fortaleza, the capital of Ceará (in 1637). These incursions spurred the Portuguese into action and they expelled both rival colonial powers within a few years. The main settlers in Ceará were from Portugal's Azores islands. Colonial sugar and cotton plantations, worked by slave labor, were developed in both states but cattle ranching dominated their economies, as it still does to a large extent today.

Initially Maranhão was governed together with Pará to its west as a separate entity from

the rest of Brazil, with their capital at São Luís. They were placed under the same administration as the rest of Brazil in 1774. Piauí, between Ceará and Maranhão, was first settled inland by poor cattle herders moving westwards from Ceará and north from São Paulo in the 17th and 18th centuries.

Despite resistance, the indigenous population of all three states was subdued by the 18th century. Once the wars ended, the colonists in the interior were faced with serious droughts. As many as two million people died in droughts in Ceará in the 1870s, with survivors streaming into Fortaleza. Neighboring Piauí was initially landlocked but eventually a land swap was arranged with Ceará in the 19th