

Minas Gerais



Geographically close to Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, but with a culture entirely its own, Minas Gerais (Minas) is easy to reach and hard to leave. The people are among Brazil's friendliest, the food is great, the natural setting is spectacular and there's more beautiful historical architecture per square kilometer here than in any other place in Brazil.

In the early 18th century, colonial towns such as Ouro Prêto, Mariana and Diamantina sprang up along the gold road linking Minas to the coast. Built on Minas' mineral wealth, they soon developed a cultural and architectural wealth all their own. Minas was the birthplace of Tiradentes, leader of Brazil's first great independence movement, and Aleijadinho, the country's finest baroque artist. Built in the 1890s as Brazil's first planned city, Belo Horizonte's ongoing openness to innovation is evidenced by Oscar Niemeyer's audacious 1940s building designs and today's burgeoning arts scene.

Although Minas's natural wonders don't get much press, the state is home to some magnificent scenery and wildlife. In 2005 the Serra do Espinhaço, a rocky spine running the length of the state, was recognized for its remarkable biodiversity as Brazil's newest Unesco Biosphere Reserve. Parks throughout Minas provide critical habitat for endangered species such as the northern *muriqui* (woolly spider monkey). Lacking beaches, Mineiros (residents of Minas Gerais) compensate with fabulous food and drink. Minas cheese and *cachaça* (a sugarcane alcohol) are considered the best in Brazil. Meals are often cooked on the *fogão à lenha* – a traditional wood-burning stove – and local hospitality is as abundant as the food.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Wander the picturesque cobblestone streets and marvel at the baroque architectural wonders of **Ouro Prêto** (p244)
- Take a ride on a historic **Maria-Fumaça** (p257) steam train from Tiradentes
- Climb Brazil's third-tallest mountain, 2892m Pico da Bandeira in **Parque Nacional de Caparaó** (p271)
- Wait by starlight for the maned wolves to appear at the old monastery at **Parque Natural do Caraça** (p267)
- Check out the 16 galleries of contemporary art at **Centro de Arte Contemporânea Inhotim** (p241), near Brumadinho



■ POPULATION: 20 MILLION

■ AREA: 586,528 SQ KM

