

Paraíba & Rio Grande do Norte



The region's highlights may not roll off the tongue with quite the same international recognition as some of the country's more idealized destinations, but the northeastern corner of Brazil, made up of the states of Paraíba and Rio Grande do Norte, is no worse for wear. Here you'll find kilometer upon kilometer of spectacular scenery, much of which is largely unexplored by intrepid globe trekkers. Glorious beaches, some of them small palm-lined bays, others 20km long and backed by huge dune fields piled up by the coastal winds, dominate this pristine stretch of coastline, but inland treasures abound as well for those willing to forgo the breezy beach-blanket Babylon.

The region's main gateways, the largely sedate cities of Natal and João Pessoa, are more well known for their quality of life than tourist draw, though both are perfectly enjoyable places for a layover on your way to the region's more stunning attractions, and the latter boasts a little-known historic side that's worth a glimpse. The hip international beach town of Praia da Pipa, a good-time 'global village' south of Natal, lures the bulk of travelers, but beaches less traveled such as São Miguel do Gostoso and Galinhos, both north of Natal, are emerging stretches of sands of equal beauty and far more tranquility.

A different type of adventure awaits those willing to venture inland. The parched interior is home to dramatic landscapes and some of Brazil's most spectacular ancient remains, from remarkably preserved rock art many millennia old to eerie, otherworldly stone formations.

Though short on major allure itself, Natal does cut loose when it comes to festival time – its famous out-of-season carnival, Carnatal, in December, is Brazil's best.

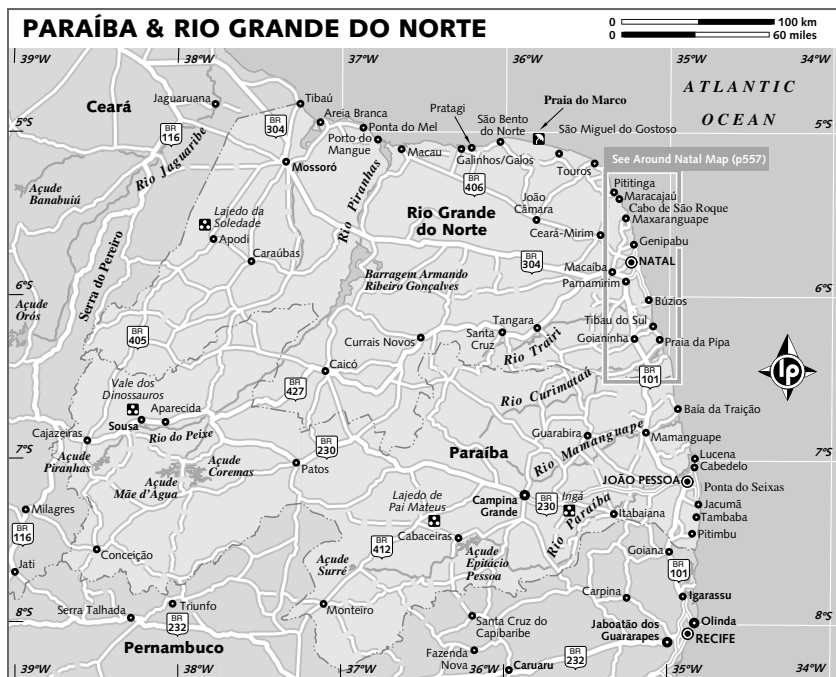
HIGHLIGHTS

- Take in the river sunset saxophone spectacle set to Ravel's *Bolero* at **Praia do Jacaré** (p551) in João Pessoa
- Enjoy the stylish but unpretentious international scene of beautiful **Praia da Pipa** (p560)
- Send your adrenaline into the red on a spectacular dune ride by buggy in **Genipabu** (p556)
- Dig your toes into sands less traveled in **São Miguel do Gostoso** (p562)
- Unwind at the remote beach village of **Galinhos** (p563)



■ POPULATION: 6.9 MILLION

■ AREA: 109,240 SQ KM



History

This area of Brazil was a hotly contested colonial property, with both the French and Dutch vying for control against the Portuguese. French brazilwood traders had a decent foothold in Rio Grande do Norte until the Portuguese sent a fleet from Paraíba to kick them out in 1597. Natal was lost again to the Dutch from 1633 to 1654 before being retaken by the Portuguese.

Thereafter, the states of Paraíba and Rio Grande do Norte largely languished in obscurity until the early 20th century. Paraíba made a name for itself as the home state of João Pessoa, who allied himself with Getúlio Vargas in 1929 in a bid for the vice-presidency. Judging by the sheer number of João Pessoa tributes in the state, it seems that not much has happened since.

In 1935 rioting in Natal led to the declaration of a short-lived communist government in Rio Grande do Norte. The communist movement was suppressed and before long Rio Grande do Norte's strategic location as Brazil's closest point to Africa saw it become a supply base for the US in WWII. The injection

of military money spurred significant development in the region. Today, the region's fabulous beaches bring in major income from tourism, especially in Rio Grande do Norte.

Climate

Although this area is no hotter than neighboring states, Rio Grande do Norte in particular is really dry and the sun can be very strong in the almost-always-clear skies. Temperatures in both states can top 40°C (104°F) in January and February. Although the weather is nice year-round, some find it the most pleasant in the slightly cooler months of June to August.

Getting There & Away

Natal has direct and indirect flights from every major Brazilian city and Lisbon (Portugal). It has seen an increasing number of European charter flights and, once in a while, a US charter flight. João Pessoa's airport also has a few European charters, plus domestic flights.

Both state capitals, Natal and João Pessoa, are served by buses from the main Northeastern cities. Natal also has direct connections from Rio.