



Ceará, Piauí & Maranhão

POP 19 MILLION

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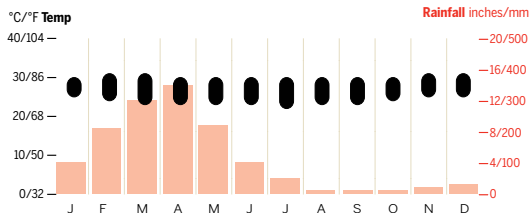
Why Go?

These three Northeastern states stretch along Brazil's only north-facing coast and deep into the arid interior. The main draw for visitors, the beaches of Ceará, are arrayed for hundreds of glorious kilometers either side of Fortaleza, the fun-loving biggest city. These are some of the very best beaches in Brazil, some supporting growing resort towns, others with at most a small, traditional fishing village. The hip travelers' hangout Jericoacoara, uniquely located inside a dune-swept national park, is the jewel of Ceará's gorgeous coastline.

An adventurous coastal route leads west from Jericoacoara to the scenic, wildlife-rich Delta do Parnaíba and the vast expanse of high dunes and clear lagoons known as the Lençóis Maranhenses, one of Brazil's highlights. The Lençóis' beauty will floor you. Further west still are two of Brazil's most picturesque, intriguing colonial gems: half-decayed, half-restored São Luís, with its markedly Afro-Brazilian culture, and its perfect sleepy neighbor Alcântara.

When to Go

Fortaleza



Jun São Luís erupts with color, music and dance in its Bumba Meu Boi festival.

Jul–Aug The Lençóis Maranhenses are at their most spectacular.

Jul–Jan Constant strong breezes make the coast one of the world's premier kitesurfing destinations.

History

The Portuguese were slow off the mark in occupying these distant northern lands, and it was the French who founded São Luís, the capital of Maranhão (in 1612), and the Dutch who founded Fortaleza, 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 it was cattle ranching that dominated their economies, as it still does to a large extent today. Until 1774 Maranhão was governed together with Pará to its west as a separate entity from the rest of Brazil, with their capital at São Luís. 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 century so that it could enjoy the benefits of a coastline. Piauí still has the lowest population density of any Brazilian state.

Fortaleza, with its commerce and tourism, is the region's economic powerhouse. Some large industrial projects have been sited near São Luís in recent decades, but all three states are still among Brazil's poorest.

i Getting There & Around

Fortaleza has an international airport with flights from Europe as well as many Brazilian cities. São Luís and Teresina are served by domestic flights.

Fortaleza, Teresina and São Luís have bus connections with Natal and Recife to the east, and cities to the south such as Brasília, Rio and São Paulo. There are also buses from the main cities to Belém at the mouth of the Amazon, but the stretch between São Luís and Belém has a history of bus robberies, so it's an idea to consider flying that stretch – which can in fact be cheaper than buses if booked ahead. In general, flying into or out of the region is often cheaper than a long bus trip.

Buses link pretty much every town and village in this region. Road quality has improved a lot, though access to a few coastal villages including Jericoacoara is partly unpaved. Beach buggies and 4WDs with drivers provide trips along the coasts and dunes. A hire car is useful if you plan to visit some smaller places with limited bus service, but you should research road conditions first as some less-traveled routes require 4WD – notably the stretch between Paulino Neves and Barreirinhas on the route between Parnaíba and the Lençóis Maranhenses. Fortaleza is the easiest place to get a rental vehicle.

CEARÁ

In a country of glorious coastlines, Ceará has one of the most glorious of all – nearly 600km of beautiful and varied beaches, from idyllic little palm-fringed bays to 20km strips washed by ocean breakers. From the busy urban beaches of Fortaleza to hip Jericoacoara to the smallest of fishing villages where people still sail *jangadas* (triangular-sailed fishing boats) and live in thatched-roof homes, Ceará has everything you could wish for in terms of beach ambience. Much of the coast is backed by large expanses of high, white dunes, lending a starkly elemental touch to the landscape, while the waves and winds provide some of the world's best conditions for kitesurfing, surfing and wind-surfing.

Fortaleza

i 085 / POP 2.5 MILLION (METROPOLITAN AREA 3.6 MILLION)

Considering its isolation on the Brazilian map, Fortaleza is a surprisingly large and sprawling place. It's one of Brazil's biggest cities and an economic magnet for people from Ceará and beyond. It's also a magnet for tourists from Brazil and overseas, who come for the beaches, the party atmosphere and the spectacular smaller beach spots, rolling dunes and fishing villages they can get to from here. Some city beaches are reasonably attractive and the nightlife is definitely a lot of fun.

The city stretches 20km along the coast and up to 10km inland. Centro is the oldest part of town and is a lively area to wander round by day, with many busy streets full of small stores, though it lacks any specific attractions of note. The bus station is 4km south of Centro and the airport is 2km further south. The main areas of interest are east