

EXCURSIONS

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EXCURSIONS

Although most travelers have a hard time tearing themselves away from Rio, fabulous beaches, mountain getaways and rain-forest-covered islands are just a short drive from town. Whether you seek adventure or an idyllic retreat, you'll find countless options in the relatively small state of Rio de Janeiro.

On sunny weekends, Cariocas (residents of Rio) craving a relaxing beach holiday head east to Búzios (p209). Once a remote fishing village, the town lies on a peninsula with pretty beaches and scores of elegant *pousadas* (guesthouses), top-notch restaurants and a lively bar scene. Surfers and those wanting a more sedate experience might detour to Saquarema or the sleepy beach town of Arraial do Cabo.

West of Rio lies the beautiful coastline of the Costa Verde (Green Coast), where lush mountains meet the sea, with hundreds of islands and beaches in the area. The star attraction here is peaceful Paraty (p204), an old gold-mining town with handsomely preserved cobblestone streets and jewel-box churches. Antique-filled *pousadas* now occupy some of the colonial buildings, with an assortment of spots for fine dining. It's particularly popular with couples seeking a romantic getaway.

This coastline is also home to Ilha Grande (p207), a hilly car-free island, with dozens of beaches and more than 100km of hiking trails amid Mata Atlântica (Atlantic rain forest). The seaside town of Vila do Abraão, with its mellow vibe, is an excellent intro to island life.

Cariocas with a yearning for the mountains have a few options. Just north of Rio stands the imperial city of Petrópolis (p211). Its palaces, cathedral, and European-style gardens and boulevards lie beneath the jagged mountains of Serra dos Órgãos, one of the great climbing meccas of Rio. In addition to rock climbing, visitors can raft in mountain streams and hike through the nearby national park.

Further out, in the northwest corner of the state, is Brazil's oldest national park, the Parque Nacional de Itatiaia, where stark high-country plateaus and rocky spires intermingle with lush, low-country jungle. Bordering the park, the towns of Visconde de Mauá (p213) welcome visitors with rustic cabins, rushing streams and fresh-grilled trout.

BEACHES & ISLANDS

Though no longer the 'undiscovered' paradise that it was in the 1960s, Búzios (p209) still has gorgeous beaches. Some are easy to reach, while others require a hike. By night, the bayside promenade offers plenty of nightlife diversions with its outdoor restaurants and bars. Scenic beaches also lie near Paraty (p204), while Arraial do Cabo (p210) and surfer-favorite Saquarema (p210) draw their share of visitors. Ilha Grande (p207) also has striking beaches, several of which rank among Brazil's prettiest.

NATIONAL PARKS

Breathe in the fresh mountain air and hike the trails of Rio state's untamed national parks. North of Rio, the peaks of the Parque Nacional da Serra dos Órgãos (p213) make an impressive backdrop to treks in the area. Four hours north-west of Rio, the Parque Nacional de Itatiaia (p214) is packed with waterfalls, clear blue lakes and dramatic peaks.

TOWNS

In a cool mountain climate, Petrópolis (p211), with its canals, landscaped parks and city squares, has a European air. Its palaces and museums are good places to discover Brazil's imperial epoch. For a window into Brazil's early settlement days, strike out for Paraty (p204), a perfectly preserved colonial town, with much history hidden inside its churches and 18th-century townhouses. Northwest of Rio, the villages of Visconde de Mauá (p213) and its surroundings are set in a lush alpine area, with idyllic streams, waterfalls, and cozy chalets scattered along country lanes.

DRIVES

The Costa Verde (accessible via BR 101 west) provides the setting for one of the country's most spectacular drives. The panoramic road hugs the coast's edge as it winds its way past lush peaks, beaches and colonial settlements. The prettiest stretches run some 150km from