

Brazil

HIGHLIGHTS

- **Rio de Janeiro** (p258) Succumb to the fever of the *cidade maravilhosa* (marvelous city): wild samba clubs, sizzling sands, soaring peaks and sexy sundowns.
- **Salvador** (p317) Revel in the distinctive smells, addictive percussion and thriving Afro-Brazilian culture of the beachside capital of Bahia.
- **Ouro Preto** (p290) Meander along history-oozing cobblestones and over hillsides topped with stunning baroque churches in one of South America's dramatic colonial towns.
- **Pantanal** (p311) Commune with caimans in the Americas' largest wetland, where toucans and macaws fill the skies and jaguars prowl behind the scenes.
- **Off the Beaten Track** (p367) Head deep inland to Acre's riverfront capital Rio Branco, a launchpad for visiting the house of martyred environmentalist Chico Mendes.
- **Best Journey** (see boxed text, p350) Hug the coast through buttock-bruising potholes and spectacular dunes on a 4WD truck between Tutoia and Parque Nacional dos Lençóis Maranhenses.

FAST FACTS

- **Area:** 8,456,510 sq km (about the size of the continental United States)
- **Budget:** US\$45 to US\$50 a day
- **Capital:** Brasília
- **Costs:** double room in a comfy *pousada* (hotel) US\$40 to US\$60, per-kilo lunch US\$6 to US\$8, bus ride from Rio to Ouro Preto US\$48
- **Country Code:** ☎ 55
- **Languages:** Portuguese and 180 indigenous languages
- **Money:** US\$1 = R\$1.76 (*reais* or reales)
- **Population:** 199 million
- **Seasons:** high (December to Carnival, July to August), low (April to May)
- **Time:** GMT minus three to five hours, depending on the region



TRAVEL HINT

There's no heartier cheap meal than those offered at Brazil's ubiquitous per-kilo restaurants.

OVERLAND ROUTES

Brazil's many border crossings include Oiapoque (French Guiana); Bonfim (Guyana); Boa Vista (Venezuela); Tabatinga (Colombia and Peru); Brasília, Guajará-Mirim, Cáceres and Corumbá (Bolivia); Ponta Porã (Paraguay); Foz do Iguazu (Paraguay and Argentina) and Chuí (Uruguay).

Brazil is a tale of contrasts – a fairy tale for some, the tail end of a hard-knock life for others; but its cerulean shores and pristine beaches, its enchanting colonial towns and rugged natural landscapes, its pristine rainforests and dense jungles have all enthralled visitors for centuries, despite often being lost on many of its own socially ill-fated inhabitants. Brazil offers much to the visitor: count 7500km of powdery white-sand beaches giving way to deep blue Atlantic waters; visit stuck-in-time colonial towns, music-filled metropolises and idyllic tropical islands; see majestic waterfalls, crystal-clear rivers, rugged mountains, red-rock canyons and unspoiled jungle. It's all here in dramatic abundance.

Opportunities for adventures are endless (kayaking, rafting, trekking, snorkeling and surfing are just a few ways to spend a sun-drenched afternoon in nearly any region in Brazil), as are prospects for doing little beyond digging your toes into warm sands and sucking down a parade of *caipirinhas*, Brazil's national cocktail.

Though Brazil's most famous celebration, Carnaval, storms through the country's cities and towns like a best-of Blitzkrieg of hip-shaking samba, dazzling costume and carefree lust for life, the Brazilians hardly regulate their passion for revelry to a few weeks of the year – this is, after all, a country where, 'Have a good beach!' is not only something uttered regularly but also practically part of the national anthem! Spend a little time here and the Brazilian Way – *O Jeito Brasileiro* – will seize you in its sensational clutches.

CURRENT EVENTS

After Brazil paid off its debts to the UN and the IMF *ahead* of schedule in 2006, fat pockets abound for a blossoming middle class. But the prosperous news didn't end there for the World Bank's eighth-largest economy – a massive underwater oil field was discovered by Brazil's state-owned Petrobras off the coast in 2007, potentially catapulting the country overnight into one of the world's largest oil exporters. Just two years after becoming both energy independent and the largest consumer of plant-based biofuels in the world – a long-harnessed dream dating back to the 1970s – suddenly Brazil had won an audience among the world's oil mafia.

Despite weathering the recent economic recession better than other developing nations, Brazil's two biggest nemeses remain: the economic disparity between rich and poor still lingers nationwide; and violent crime still dominates the headlines (though actual statistics put Brazil's crime rate on par with that of the US and Japan). Elsewhere, an aviation crisis broke out in 2007 after two high profile crashes just 10 months apart put Brazil's airline infrastructure issues front and center. The country's defense minister, in charge of civil aviation, was fired.

Though Brazil's national soccer team has stumbled short of expectations in the last few years, their Confederations Cup triumph in 2009 could prove a prelude to redemption: Brazil was announced as the host nation for the 2014 FIFA World Cup. If they don't win, heads will roll. But the world spotlight won't stop there: Rio de Janeiro will host the 2016 Olympic Games just two years later.

HISTORY

The Tribal Peoples

Little is known of Brazil's first inhabitants, but from the few fragments left behind (mostly pottery, trash mounds and skeletons), archeologists estimate that the first humans may have arrived 50,000 years ago, predating any other estimates in the whole American continent.

The population at the time of the Portuguese landing in 1500 is also a mystery, and estimates range from two to six million. There were likely over 1000 tribes living as nomadic hunter-gatherers or in more settled, agricultural societies. Life was punctuated by frequent tribal warfare and at times, captured enemies were ceremonially killed and eaten after battle.

When the Portuguese first arrived, they had little interest in the natives, who were viewed as a Stone Age people; and the heavily forested land offered nothing for the European market. All that changed when Portuguese merchants expressed interest in the red dye from brazilwood (which later gave the colony its name), and slowly colonists arrived to harvest the land.

The natural choice for the work, of course, was the indigenous people. Initially the natives welcomed the strange, smelly foreigners and offered them their labor, their food and their women in exchange for the awe-inspiring metal tools and the fascinating Portuguese liquor. But soon the newcomers abused their customs, took their best land and ultimately enslaved them.