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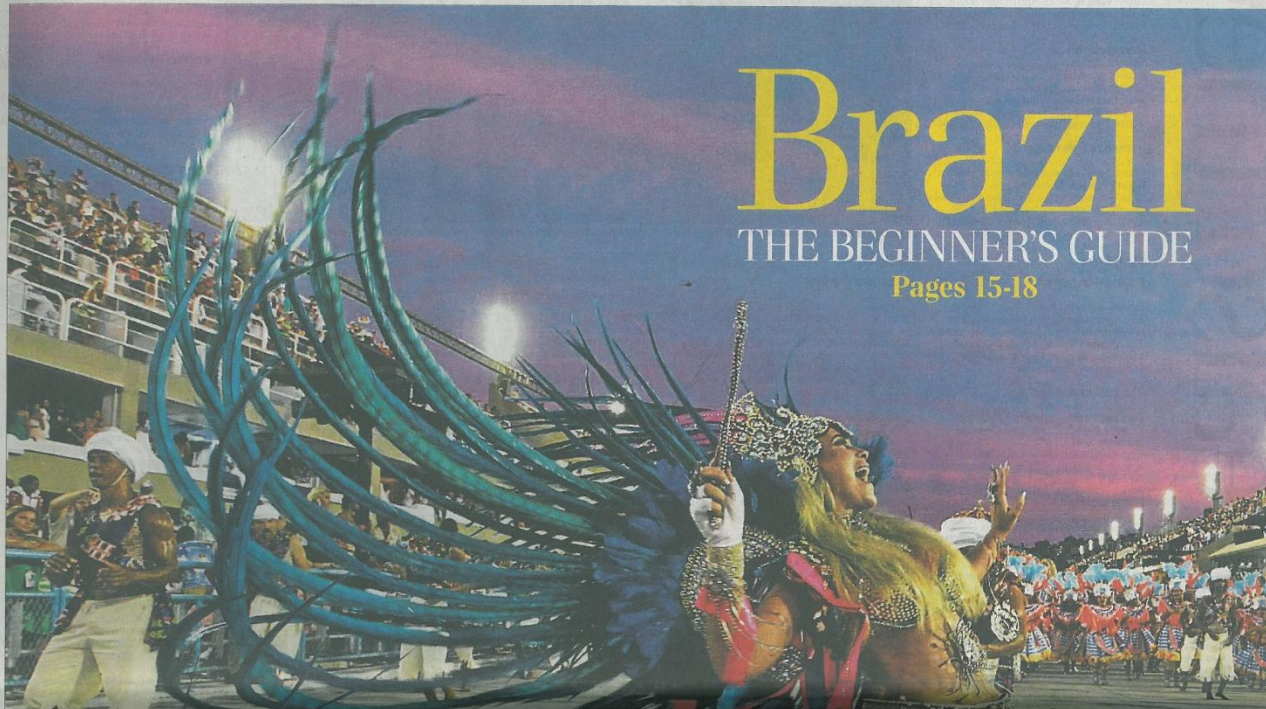


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Brazil for beginners

YOUR
FOUR-PAGE
GUIDE

There has never been a better time to visit the world's fifth-largest country. But where to start? Our expert provides a step-by-step guide for first-timers

Chris Moss



Now is a good time to plan a trip to Brazil – and not just because the World Cup will be held there in 2014 and the Olympic Games two years later. We'll get a chance to assess Brazil's capacity for organisation when the FIFA Confederations Cup kicks off in June in the new and newly refurbished stadiums. There is no doubt, though, that thanks to the growing strength of the economy, and the improved infrastructure required for those two later events, the country is safer and easier to travel around than ever before.

After decades of overselling a handful of tried and tested beach destinations, Brazil is now inviting travellers to explore further. Even the mildly adventurous tourist can get deep into the Pantanal, the immense wetlands of the south that rival the Amazon for biodiversity, or drive the coast roads of the north-east. Intrepid beach lovers can mingle with Brazilian travellers on the Costa Verde, in Fortaleza and in the resorts of Santa Catarina. City-hoppers can go to Brasília to see what futuristic architecture looked like in the Sixties, to São Paulo for some of South America's finest food, to Salvador da Bahia for Afro-Brazilian culture, and to Olinda or Ouro Preto for colonial treasures – though perhaps not all in one go, as distances are enormous.

The enduring favourites are there too: Rio (still unmissable), the Iguaçu Falls, the Amazon river and rainforest. In and around all of these, hotels, restaurants and services are greatly improved.

A fire that killed more than 200 at a nightclub in Santa Maria in the southern state of Rio Grande do Sul, in January was a reminder that safety in Brazil is never guaranteed. In Rio de Janeiro, a special police squad is still kept busy by drug gangs, murderers and armed robbers. In general, however, increased security has helped revive not only Rio but other once crime-ridden cities; most observers agree there is a link between increased prosperity and falling crime.



It's too early to say whether the boom will share out the wealth in a way that will transform Brazil for good. But this is a nation on the rise, and it will be interesting to see how economic and political power meld or compete with the national passions – for music and culture, for football and sports, for carnival and the carnal, for having a good time, come what may. For travellers, it is unquestionably an exciting time to be visiting South America's most diverse and most seductive country.

When to go

There's no "best season" in a country that stretches from the Guianas to Uruguay and from the Atlantic to the sub-Andean foothills of Peru. Broadly speaking, the north

is always warm, and the weather is humid or rainy, especially inland.

The Amazon basin dominates Brazil and the heaviest rains fall between December and May. If you go when the forests are flooded, you will see primates, plenty of bird life, caymans and river dolphins. If you go when the water level is lower you will see the same creatures adapting to less water and more competition.

The coast from Belém to Rio is generally sunny. On the northernmost beaches, it can be hot: in Fortaleza the average is 79-82F (26-28C). Rainfall is greatest in December and lowest in July. South of Rio, in the subtropics, there are seasons. The southern winter runs from July until September and temperatures in Florianópolis can fall as low as 50F (10C) in July.

Unmissable - and unforgettable - Rio de Janeiro, overlooked by the Christ the Redeemer statue

Getting there

The flight time from London to São Paulo is about 11 hours 30 minutes. Fares between Britain and Brazil vary sharply depending on your choice of day in any given week, so as well as price-comparison sites (Opodo, Skyscanner, Momondo and so on) it is worth checking airline websites, which show the lowest fares over a given week. Flights can be expensive during and around Carnival (Feb 28-March 4 2014; Feb 13-17 2015; Feb 5-9 2016). The same will probably be true at the time of this summer's Confederations Cup (June 15-30), next year's World Cup (June 12-July 13 2014) and the Olympic and Paralympic Games (August and September, 2016).

Non-stop flights

TAM (020 8741 2005; tamairlines.com) flies daily from Heathrow direct to São Paulo, and three times a week direct to Rio de Janeiro. From São Paulo and Rio there are connecting TAM flights to 40 destinations in Brazil. Return fares to Rio cost from about £600 in economy, including taxes. The price of TAM's Brazil Airpass, for non-Brazilians and Brazilian citizens living outside Brazil, is linked to the cost of the international ticket and the number of destinations, which cannot exceed nine. A four-stop pass costs US\$532 (£352), a nine-stop one costs \$1,152 (£762). British Airways (0844 493 0787; ba.com) flies daily, non-stop, to both São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro.

Brazil

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architecture – and particularly his masterpiece, Brasília – has been. The Brazilian capital is one of the most remarkable cities in South America. Niemeyer's fondness for poured concrete, sensual curves and plain, white-grey surfaces and his daring use of space have given Brasília's civic quarter an almost alienating harmoniousness. As the seat of government – the stylish presidential residence, the Palácio da Alvorada, has no protective walls and can be ogled from close by – the city is full of politicians and power brokers. Consequently it is quite expensive, but is worth a stop en route to somewhere less urban.

Encircling the federal district is the state of Goiás, containing the Paranaíba Headwaters and Chapada dos Veadeiros national parks (part of a Unesco World Heritage Site). The former, the world's largest area of protected dry tropical forest, is home to maned wolf, capuchin monkeys and macaw; the latter has pampas, marsh deer and jaguar, plus hundreds of bird species.

South of Brasília is the hilly state of Minas Gerais. Its capital, Belo Horizonte, is a prosperous city with a mountainous setting, outstanding modern architecture (such as the striking St Francis of Assisi church) and the excellent Museu Mineiro, notable for its colonial-era religious art. There's a scenic rail trip to Vitória (13 hours each way), the state capital of neighbouring Espírito Santo, which has popular beaches, a few colonial buildings and a 16th-century fortified convent.

About 60 miles south-east of Belo Horizonte is Ouro Preto, named after the "black gold" (gold mixed with alluvial iron ore) that generated a rush in the late 17th century. From 1720 until 1897 Ouro Preto was the capital of Minas Gerais, and the mansions, churches and civic buildings built by the city's fathers has made it one of the loveliest urban centres in Brazil. Tourism is big business there, but don't let that put you off.

The Iguacu Falls and the gaúcho lands

When it comes to ranching, eating steak and general cowboy stuff, people tend to think of Argentina, and maybe Uruguay. But in the southern states of Santa Catarina and Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil has its own gaúcho traditions, which have flourished since the 16th century in a landscape that resembles the pampas to the south.

As well as ranches (*fazendas*) open to the public, Rio Grande offers visitors an opportunity to see some of Germany's most far-flung outposts, at Gramado and Canela. The Alpine setting, the *wurst* and *sauerkraut* and the Pomeranian dialects might trick you into

thinking you are back in the Old World – especially during one of the beer festivals.

Another very different Argentine connection is to be found along the coast. In January and February, middle-class families from Buenos Aires and beyond fly or drive to the resorts of Florianópolis and Ilha de Santa Catarina to enjoy the sandy beaches and swim in the waters of the South Atlantic. The setting of leafy hillsides, small coves and smart villas is enticing, and there are good restaurants, hotels and watersports operators.

Finally, the Iguacu waterfalls lie on the Brazil/Argentina border (and Paraguay is a half-hour bus-ride away if you're ticking off passport stamps). The Brazilian side affords a panoramic view of hundreds of falls of all sizes, including the thundering chasm of the Devil's Throat. In the surrounding national park the flora is exceptionally diverse, and you can either walk or take small electric vehicles to observe orchids, bromeliads, ferns and some very tall, old trees; there are also several felines (hard to see) and raccoon-like coati (easy) in the park.

The nearby city of Foz de Iguacu (the name of the Brazilian airport for the falls) is a big, ugly place and the Hotel das Cataratas, beside the falls, is the best hotel in the area. If you travel there, consider visiting Argentina, where you will see all the falls up closer and be able to spend a night in Puerto Iguazú, a smaller, more pleasant town.

Where to stay

Brazil's major cities are full of big, established hotels as well as glitzier boutique properties. On the coast, the choice is often between pricey resorts and smaller, probably scruffier budget hotels.

Where international tourism is established, in Bahia and the Costa Verde and in beach cities such as Maceió and São Luis, there are lovely small and medium-sized hotels, old and new, from budget to high-roller (as much as £1,700 a night in a São Paulo suite). In the countryside and on the main rivers, you can find *fazendas* and jungle lodges; and across the Amazon region you can sleep on smart – or basic – riverboats.

Many hotels have good, English-language websites. Book direct and you will probably get the same rate as a tour operator, but watch out for "rack rates" (in other words, the highest rate) at the big chain hotels. Brazilian hotels compete fiercely when it comes to breakfast. It's sometimes truly lavish, so make sure it is included in your room rate.

◦ Copacabana Palace, Rio de Janeiro (0845 077 2222; copacabanapalace.com) This



grand wedding cake of a hotel, opened in 1923, has long drawn royalty and the rich. It reopened in November 2012 after a six-month refurbishment and has two great restaurants and two swinging bars. If you can afford the £650-a-night rates, book a deluxe beach-view room.

◦ Unique, São Paulo (0055 11 3055 4710; hotelunique.com.br). A visually arresting, contemporary, bunker-style hotel in the heart of Jardins and the Ibirapuera park.

◦ Casa do Amarelo, Salvador (71 3266 8550; casadoamarelo.com). In the historic centre, this 10-room hotel occupies a restored 19th-century mansion. Most rooms have bay views and the decor reflects Salvador's African heritage.

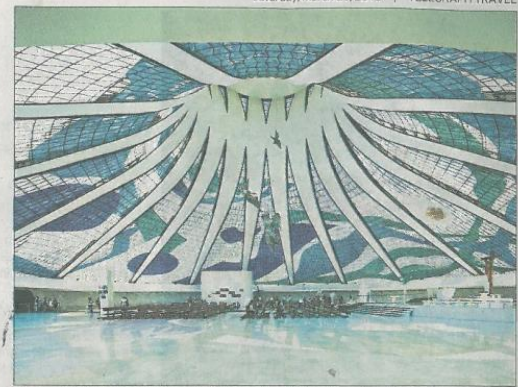
◦ Pousada Picinguaba, Costa Verde (12 3836 9105; picinguaba.com). This charming, French-owned guesthouse sits on a peaceful bay in a nature reserve. There are nine rooms, including a honeymoon

suite with a Jacuzzi. The same company operates an 1850s *fazenda*, Catuqaba, inland.

◦ Pousada Portas da Amazônia, São Luis (98 3222 9937; portasdaamazonia.com.br). A beautiful 29-room property spread over two tall, connecting timber-framed 1830s town houses, reinvented with decorative touches using *capô* (a creeper), wicker and bamboo.

◦ Cristalino Lodge, Southern Amazon (66 3521 1396; cristalino lodge.com.br). Guests can choose between wood-framed bungalows and slightly smaller rooms. All are smartly decorated and fitted with eco-friendly water and heating systems. The lodge has a nature reserve and is adjacent to two protected areas.

◦ Pousada Colonial, Penedo (82 3551 2355; pousadacolonialpedeno.com.br). The early 18th-century facade is smarter than the interior, but this lovely hotel is atmospheric



The Cathedral of Brasília, one of many buildings there by Oscar Niemeyer

and on the banks of the Rio São Francisco.

◦ Pousada do Amparo, Olinda (81 3429 6889; pousadadoamparo.com.br). Competition for the cosiest/tweest/oldest property is fierce in picture-postcard Olinda, but this town house beats most for originality, combining a quirky, art-filled interior with lush gardens.

◦ Etnia, Trancoso (0055 73 3668 1137; etnibrasil.com.br). This hyper-designed hotel, with decor in the eight rooms inspired by African, Asian and other non-Brazilian cultures, is popular for fashion shoots. It fits this resort, which is frequented by fashionistas, media types and moneyed *paulistas*.

◦ Hotel das Cataratas, Iguacu (45 2102 7000; hoteldascataratas.com). The only hotel on the Brazilian side of the national park, this grand but warmly decorated colonial property has spacious suites, plus a spa, grill, fine-dining restaurant and bar.

◦ Anavilhanas Lodge, Rio Negro (92 3622 8996; anavilhanaslodge.com). On the banks of the Negro, this lodge has 20 chalets set amid dense foliage, a pool and a fabulous restaurant; transfers to and from Manaus (112 miles away) by minibus or floatplane. The lodge can arrange excursions into the river's floating islands.

Tour operators

To help you plan, see the official site visitbrazil.com. You can find tour operators on the website of the Latin American Travel Association (lata.org). The companies below are LATA members.

◦ Audley Travel (01993 838610; audleytravel.com) operates tailor-made tours covering Brazil's highlights as well as some lesser-known destinations. You might combine a visit to Rio's *favelas* (shanty towns) and Tijuca rainforest with a self-drive itinerary along the Costa Verde, with beach stops around Ilha Grande and Paraty.

◦ Exodus (0845 817 9601; exodustravels.com) takes groups of up to 12 on a range of itineraries. This year the company introduced a new week-long introduction to the Rio Carnival and an eight-day "best of" trip to Argentina and Brazil. Exodus is also a specialist in photographic safaris, ideal for trips into the Pantanal or Amazon.

◦ Journey Latin America (020 8747 8315; journeylatinamerica.co.uk), with more than 30 years' experience, is the leading British tour operator in terms of booking numbers and range of trips. As well as tours of Brazil's highlights (bespoke and small group tours), it can organise off-the-beaten-track adventures and trips to beaches. A 15-day Wildlife Safari combines the Pantanal with the private Cristalino reserve, plus a few days in Iguacu and Rio de Janeiro; it's a popular honeymoon package.

◦ Last Frontiers (01296 653000; lastfrontiers.com) knows Brazil backwards; its founder, Edward Paine, used to farm there. Tailor-made itineraries range from a classic Amazon/Rio Negro riverboat cruise to a 4x4 trip along the deserted beaches of the north-east ending at the fishing village of Jericoacoara. The company has an (evolving) guide to the 2016 Olympics, available on request.

◦ Naturetrek (01962 733051; naturetrek.co.uk), a wildlife-holiday specialist, claims to operate more Pantanal tours than any other firm. New for 2013 is the 17-day South America's Big Five tour, a chance to tick off jaguars, giant river otters, tapirs, giant anteaters and maned wolves.

◦ Other companies with Latin American/Brazil teams include Bespoke Brazil (01603 340680; bespokebrazil.com), Select Latin America (020 7407 1478; selectlatinamerica.co.uk), Sunvil Traveller (020 8758 4774; sunviltravel.com), and Wexas Travel (020 7590 0610; wexas.com).

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