

The Best of BRAZIL



WE FINALLY SPOTTED A JETTY IN THE DISTANCE AFTER THREE FLIGHTS, A CAR RIDE AND THEN A BOAT TRIP. AS WE APPROACHED, THE GENERAL MANAGER WAS READY TO GREET US WITH A FRIENDLY WELCOME AND TO OUR SURPRISE, HE PROCEEDED TO STRIP DOWN TO HIS SHORTS AND DIVE INTO THE RIVER. "WHEN YOU'VE SETTLED INTO YOUR BUNGALOW, COME JOIN ME FOR A SWIM."

By Jared Ruttenberg

“What about the piranhas?” I was quick to shoot back. “You shouldn’t believe everything you read Jared.”

Needless to say, we swam daily and survived to tell the tale, but I’m jumping the gun and the jetty here - first, why did I travel across the globe to Brazil? Truth be told, it was high school geography that first got me intrigued about Brazil. Rivers longer than countries, snaking through jungles so remote that sections were still unexplored, and then a city that knew how to party unlike any other in the world. After enough planning, a friend and I set off to take this all in over a three-week trip.

Rio in Carnival

Flanked by the foothills of the Brazilian Highlands Range, with ancient hills dressed in verdant rainforest occasionally revealing slivers of glistening granite - Rio de Janeiro might just be the world’s most beautifully situated metropolis (well narrowly after Cape Town perhaps).

Our visit was carefully timed to be there during Carnival - the annual Lenten festivity that marked its 300th celebration this year. For six days, over two million people take to the streets to party. The official highlight is the famous floats made by the various samba

schools - over 200 of these proudly parade the streets. The Sambadrome is the tiered spectator grandstand - tickets are pricey and need to be booked in advance, however, you can simply line the streets outside of the venue and watch the colourful floats pass by.

Unofficially, almost every suburb of the city has its own parties with Blocos (street bands) providing the pulse and rhythm. Simply wander the streets to enjoy the diversity; prepare to dance with strangers, negotiate cheap beers from the street vendors and enjoy the costumes (you can get masks and other Carnival regalia around every corner).

Rio is perhaps equally known for the magnificent 38m high statue of Christ that has stood with arms reaching over the city for 100 years. Seeing Christ the Redeemer, even for the non-religious, is a numinous experience. Combine the visit with an hour or two in the Jardim Botânico - Rio’s botanical gardens, from which you can catch the Corcovado cog train up to the statue.

Island Living on Ille Grande

Seeking a breather from the festivities, the nearby island of Ille Grande was our second stop. Even before the island’s 2019 designation as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, building restrictions kept development to a bare

INTERNATIONAL TRAVEL

minimum, leaving over 195km of pristine forest, mountains, and beaches to explore. From Rio, it's a three-hour bus ride to Mangaratiba, where several boats depart daily for the island.

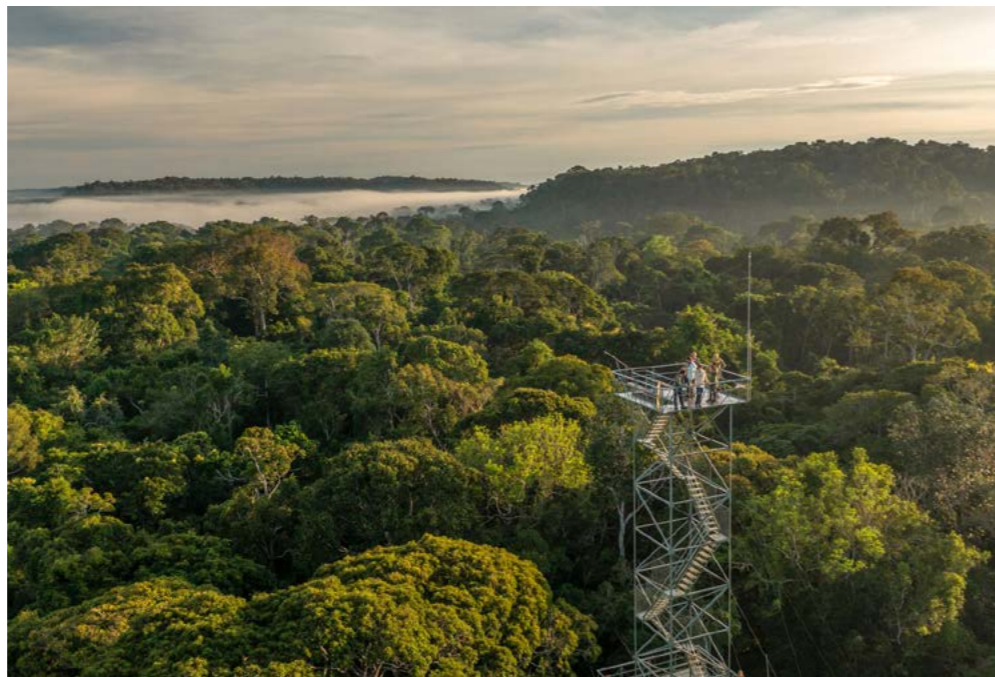
There are no roads or cars on the island, so prepare to explore on foot. Vila do Abraão is the largest of the villages on the island and its colourful streets are the perfect launchpad from which you can hike, explore, or join in the plethora of boat trips on offer. The rainforest on the island provides the first introduction to the country's famed biodiversity, with howler monkeys, sloths, and parrots among its inhabitants. For keen hikers, Pico da Pedra D'Água is worth a climb - reaching the same height as Table Mountain.

The Great Amazon

Saving the best for last, it was finally time to board a flight for the Amazon. Seeking a unique experience, we left the stream of tourists heading to Manaus (the Northern gateway to the Amazon,) and boarded a flight with locals heading to the Alta Floresta in the far South. Here lodges are very few and far between, with Cristalino Lodge being the prime choice.

Deep in the jungle, the eco-lodge offers spacious bungalows (bigger than my home apartment at 75m each), with amenities by Costa Brazil (made from forest ingredients) and private gardens with outdoor showers for a cleanse in the wild. Dinners were a festive affair with the chef serving up tempting platters of local dishes - the Brigadeiro Cake is an overly decadent chocolate offering that will have you returning for seconds.

The evening dining room overflows with conversations and stories among guests from the day's activities, with the most important question always asked upfront: "Did you see a Jaguar?" Sadly we didn't, but you must leave something for the next visit. Throughout our sojourn through Brazil, we met solo travellers, families, and couples - all a reminder that the country's tourism offerings are



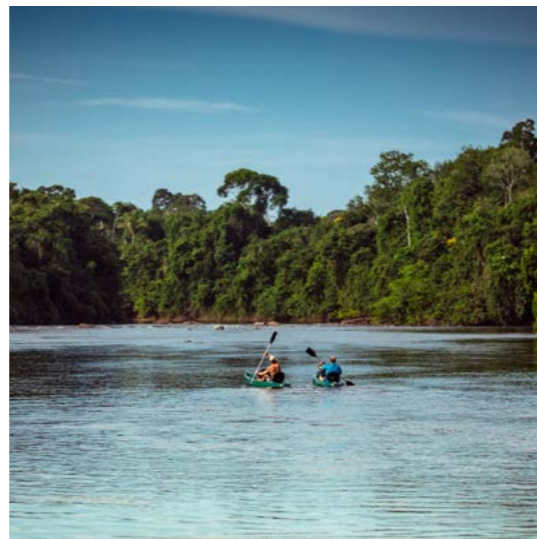
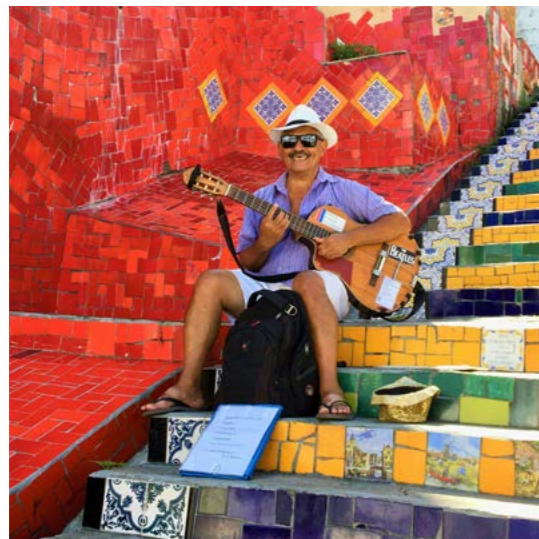
ISLAND TALES

PIRATES, PRISONS AND PARTIES ON
Ilha Grande

Ilha Grande, the Brazilian gem discovered in 1500, has seen it all - from pirate invasions to leper colonies and even a sneaky hideout called the Bat Mansion. Picture Sir Thomas Cavendish, the ultimate pirate, causing a stir in 1629. Enter Juan Lorenzo and the legendary brick hideout. Ilha Grande was a hotbed for the African

slave trade until 1888 and later transformed into a restricted zone with hospitals, prisons and limited tourist access. Fast forward to the 20th century, where Japanese migrants traded fishing nets for hostel keys, throwing an annual July bash to celebrate their island legacy. Ahoy, adventure!

INTERNATIONAL TRAVEL



for all - and hospitality truly as warm as that in South Africa.

The guided boat trips and walks through the forest are laden with wild encounters, but what is striking is the sheer life constantly happening above you. The canopy reaches a staggering 45 meters high - which brings me to the lodge's hero feature. Two 50m high towers have been constructed, allowing guests to experience canopy life unlike anywhere else in the Amazon.

I asked our guide if, on our last morning at the lodge, we could climb one of the towers and watch the sunrise. He warned it would be an early start, but I was determined. Around 5 am we set out through

the jungle, and reaching the tower began spiralling our way up.

Arriving at the top my heart was beating in overdrive, from both the climb up and anticipation of the experience. Within minutes, a magnificent orchestra of the wild began to play. Flocks of macaws, parakeets and parrots flew overhead. Spider monkeys performed daring acrobatics from tree to tree, and the emerging rays of the sun performed a dazzling light show, flooding the moist pockets of jungle haze. Some may call this an average morning in the Amazon, but I'll always remember it as the most sensational sunrise of my life. ●

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