

## Latin America: Wild at heart

By Katie McGonagle | 21 May 2015 at 15.44 GMT [0 Comments](#)



*Image credit Lucy Piper, Intrepid Travel*

***Rio isn't the only place to let loose in Brazil, finds Katie McGonagle***

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"Just sit back, let go and let nature do the work," says my charismatic guide Tiago, as I teeter at the top of what he calls a "natural waterslide" in northeast Brazil's Chapada Diamantina national park.

There isn't a plastic flume or a rubber ring in sight – this is nature's water park, where the gentle stream of a waterfall has carved its own path down the rock and into the deep waters below.

I'm anticipating a bumpy ride, but I decide chilled-out Tiago – who is so laid-back as to be practically supine – has the right idea, so I let go and find myself zipping smoothly down the rapids, with lush green scenery passing by in a blur until I hit the water with a satisfying splash.

This is northeast Brazil in a nutshell: fun, carefree, full of natural beauty and easygoing charm. It's a far cry from party-central Rio de Janeiro, host of next year's Olympic Games, which is why adventure tour operator Intrepid Travel has created Northern Brazil as its newest itinerary, marrying soft adventure, city sightseeing and some of the country's best – but most remote – beaches.

It's a good alternative for travellers inspired by the Olympics but less keen to crowd onto Copacabana or join the hordes trooping up to Iguaçu Falls, so I tested out the new route to see what they have in store.

## Walk on the Wild Side

Chapada Diamantina is a region in Bahia state, 250 miles inland from Salvador, and takes its name from the black diamonds discovered here in 1844.

Within a year, this area became a mining hub, with small towns like Lençóis – now a gateway for hikers to access the national park – springing up in a fever of new-found prosperity, as emeralds, quartz and iron were discovered in the surrounding hills.

Today, Lençóis is a likeable town, full of cobbled streets, colourful weather-beaten buildings, and a square that always seems to be teeming with people having a beer at its outdoor bars or watching impromptu displays of capoeira, the uniquely Brazilian pursuit that is half-dance and half-martial art.

But the real reason people come is trekking: within half-an-hour's walk of the town, hikers find themselves ensconced in an other-worldly landscape of waterfalls and pools coloured a curious shade of red from the iron oxide and tannins in the groundwater.



*Image credit Lucy Piper, Intrepid Travel*

The “natural waterslide” – better known as Ribeirão do Meio – is an easy hour-long hike out of town along level ground, with a handily-placed coconut stall en route. Even if you’re not thirsty, it’s worth stopping just to see the dreadlocked barman slash the top off the coconut with a machete then stick a straw in to capture that sweet coconut water.

But for more of a challenge, Serrano Municipal Park (part of the Chapada Diamantina region, but just outside the bounds of the national park) offers tougher uphill hikes which require a local guide.

That extra effort is well-rewarded with stops to swim in its deep red pools or for a spot of natural hydrotherapy under the forceful jets of Primavera Waterfall – I defy anyone to stay under its powerful stream for long – before finishing at its highest point for tranquil 360-degree views.

## Feel the Rush

One of this area's greatest assets is its stillness – hike to its lofty lookout points or float weightlessly in its natural pools and the sense of tranquillity is evident – but that doesn't mean they don't know how to have fun (and I'm not just talking about the work-hard, play-hard vibe of late-night Lencois).

That becomes abundantly clear as I line up to take the plunge at Gruta Pratinha, where a zipline stretches down into the clear waters of the lagoon below.

Yet this is nothing to the excitement of the extraordinary natural phenomena clustered around this area, just north of the national park.

First there are the waters in Gruta Azul, which glow bright turquoise when the sun hits them at just the right angle in the early afternoon. Scientifically speaking, it's down to high levels of magnesium and calcium carbonates in the 17m-deep water, but that doesn't make it any less mystical.

That's as true at Lapa Doce, a cave so huge our torchlight barely makes a dent. It feels more like a set from Indiana Jones or Jurassic Park than something that could occur in nature – I half-expect to stumble over dinosaur bones or a forgotten treasure trove – with stalactites and stalagmites forming gargoyle-like shapes and gradually edging towards each other like God reaching out to Adam in the Sistine Chapel.

## Down Time

If Rio is the party girl and Lencois the rugged, outdoorsy older brother, then beach resort Jericoacoara is their shy but stunningly beautiful little sister. Pronounced Jeri-qua-quara (like the quack of a duck), but often shortened to Jeri, this resort is only accessible with a five-hour four-wheel drive across the sand dunes from Fortaleza.

It has a laid-back surfer vibe, with buggies and quad bikes for hire, and shacks selling nothing but Havaiana flip-flops and brightly coloured beachwear.

Its few sandy streets all lead towards the beach, where people party or enjoy world-class windsurfing and kitesurfing along its Atlantic coastline then, come 5pm, crowd onto Por do Sol dune to watch the sunset from one of Brazil's only west-facing beaches.

Jeri is nothing like as busy as Brazil's better-known beaches, but if the presence of a few fruit stalls and cocktail carts doesn't capture that get-away-from-it-all feel, the golden sands of nearby Lagoa do Paraíso should do the trick.

Here, a hammock by the beach isn't quite relaxing enough, so instead they string up hammocks in the water itself – and it really doesn't get more chilled-out than that.

On the way back from the lagoon, we spot Jeri's iconic 'lazy tree', which doesn't grow vertically but spreads horizontally along the dunes, proving that here you really can be as laid-back as you like.





*Image credit Lucy Piper, Intrepid Travel*

So it turns out Tiago's advice was right: just sit back, relax and let nature do the work.

**Book it:** Intrepid Travel's 14 day Northern Brazil trip starts in Rio de Janeiro, visiting Chapada Diamantina, Jericoacoara and Fortaleza. Prices start at £1,825 with twin-share accommodation, transport, some meals and activities, and a local guide, with departures starting June 20.

[intrepidtravel.com](http://intrepidtravel.com)

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## Salvador Sights

Salvador is the most African city outside Africa, and it feels it. The city pulses to its own rhythm, with bare-chested men performing capoeira in the streets to the beat of a conga drum, and saints' day celebrations which owe as much to the traditional African beliefs of the Umbanda religion as their Roman Catholic origins.

Many of its 365 churches bring these beliefs together. Mass at Nossa Senhora do Rosarios (Our Lady of the Rosary) is accompanied by African drums, and worshippers tie ribbons to the railings to make a wish before the Catholic priest blesses them.

And at Sao Francisco Church – its 2,000lbs of elaborate gold decoration one of the best examples of Portuguese gilt work – the first African saint, Benedict, takes pride of place.

Salvador's historic centre is no less notable. As the first colonial capital of Brazil, dubbed Porta Segura or Safe Harbour by the Portuguese in 1549, it is home to a Unesco-listed Old Town of cobbled streets, wrought iron balconies and slightly shabby pastel-hued buildings.

If the sight of Michael Jackson standing on a balcony overlooking the main square makes visitors do a double take, don't worry – it's a cardboard cut-out commemorating the video for the singer's 1996 release *They Don't Care About Us*, which used this colourful city as its setting.

Salvador isn't without its issues – like much of Brazil, there's a marked division between rich and poor – but it is a city with bags of character that deserves to be better-known.



*Image credit Lucy Piper, Intrepid Travel*

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## News from Latin America

**Travel 2** has added a 14-day Costa Rica & Panama Discovery tour this year, with highlights including the Panama Canal and meeting the indigenous Embera Drua community in Chagres National Park. Prices start at £3,099 including flights.

[travel2.com](http://travel2.com)

**Latam Airlines Group** has opened a VIP Lounge in Arturo Merino Benitez International airport in Santiago, Chile, with sleeping rooms, showers and business facilities. The lounge is open 22 hours a day for Premium Business passengers on Lan, Tam and any Oneworld alliance airline, or those in Lan's premium economy class.

[tamairlines.com](http://tamairlines.com)

Colombian carrier **Avianca** plans to increase its London-Bogota flights from four a week to seven, following a 28% surge in UK visitor numbers last year. Flights will depart daily on A330 planes from July.

[avianca.com](http://avianca.com)

**Los Cabos** resort One&Only Palmilla has reopened following a refurbishment, with a new steakhouse, renovated rooms and suites, spa and fitness centre and lounge areas.

[oneandonlyresorts.com](http://oneandonlyresorts.com)

**Journey Latin America** has reintroduced the Train to the Clouds in northern Argentina as an add-on to tours of Salta and the northwest. The iconic train will operate every Saturday from April-December and Wednesdays from July. Prices start at £625 for a full-day train journey, private transfers, accommodation in Purmamarca and private excursion to Tilcara and Humahuaca.

[journeylatinamerica.co.uk](http://journeylatinamerica.co.uk)

**Inkaterra** has a new 12-room eco-lodge in Peru's Sacred Valley of the Incas, between Ollantaytambo and Cusco. Inkaterra Hacienda Urubamba (pictured) starts at £362 a night for a superior deluxe room, with another 24 casitas to open in summer and a spa early next year.

[inkaterra.com](http://inkaterra.com)

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