

Ceará, Piauí & Maranhão



The Northwest's three northernmost states stretch along Brazil's only north-facing coast and deep into the arid interior. While Ceará in the east is mostly caatinga (semiarid land) country, the west of Maranhão is on the fringe of the Amazonian rain forest. For many visitors, this part of Brazil primarily means the beaches of Ceará, stretching either side of Fortaleza, easily the region's biggest city. Fortaleza itself, while not big on culture or charm, is a fun-loving beach town where you can dance to *forró* (popular music of the Northeast), electronic and other beats any night of the week. To its east and west stretch hundreds of kilometers of some of the best beaches in Brazil, some supporting growing resort towns, others with at most a small, traditional fishing village. Canoa Quebrada, with its weekend party atmosphere, and super-relaxed Jericoacoara are the places most travelers head for.

Further west, in Piauí, tranquil Parnaíba is the gateway to the large and intriguing Delta do Parnaíba. An adventurous coastal route leads west from here to the enormous expanses of high dunes and clear lagoons known as the Lençóis Maranhenses. Further west still is the half-decayed, half-restored colonial gem of São Luís, one of Brazil's most picturesque cities that also happens to be the country's reggae capital and home to one of its most extraordinary annual festivals, the Bumba Meu Boi.

The interior of all these states, known as the *sertão*, is a land where life has never been easy for its predominantly agricultural and ranching inhabitants, who suffer periodic horrific droughts. But there is spectacular country to explore here, with the bonus of fascinating rock art and archaeological remains in the Serra da Capivara and Sete Cidades national parks.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Forget the world in the remote backpacker village of **Jericoacoara** (p578)
- Soak up the tropical colonial ambience and dance to reggae in historical **São Luís** (p589)
- Take the adventurous coastal route from Jericoacoara to the endless dunes and pristine lakes of the **Lençóis Maranhenses** (p597)
- Surf, windsurf or kitesurf at **Fortaleza** (p570) and many other spots along the breezy Ceará Coast
- Explore the spectacular inland national park of **Serra da Capivara** (p588)



■ POPULATION: 15 MILLION

■ AREA: 43,910 SQ KM

History

The Portuguese were slow off the mark in occupying these distant northern parts of Brazil, and it was the French who founded São Luís, the capital of Maranhão (in 1612), and the Dutch who founded Fortaleza, the capital of Ceará (in 1637). These incursions spurred the Portuguese into action and they expelled both rival colonial powers within a few years. The main settlers in Ceará were from Portugal's Azores islands. Colonial sugar and cotton plantations, worked by slave labor, were developed in both states but cattle ranching dominated their economies, as it still does to a large extent today.

Initially Maranhão was governed together with Pará to its west as a separate entity from the rest of Brazil, with their capital at São Luís. They were placed under the same administration as the rest of Brazil in 1774. Piauí, between Ceará and Maranhão, was first settled inland, by poor cattle herders moving westwards from Ceará and north from São Paulo in the 17th and 18th centuries.

Despite resistance, the indigenous population of all three states was subdued by the 18th century. Once the wars ended, the colonists in the interior were faced with serious droughts. As many as two million people died in droughts in Ceará in the 1870s, with survivors flooding into Fortaleza. Neighboring Piauí was initially landlocked but eventually arranged a land swap with Ceará in the 19th century so that it could enjoy the benefits of a coastline. Piauí still has the lowest population density of any Brazilian state.

The city of Fortaleza, with its commerce and tourism, is the region's economic powerhouse. Some large industrial projects have been sited near São Luís in the last couple of decades in an effort to boost its economy. But all three states are still among Brazil's poorest.

Climate

These states are warm year-round and experience a rainier season, with some tropical downpours, from about December to March in the west (Maranhão) and February to May in the east (Ceará). Temperatures are higher in the interior as the coast receives ocean breezes off the ocean. Nowhere in this region does it ever get particularly cold or rainy, and the interior of Piauí claims to be the hottest part of the country. The interior is slightly less broiling in June and July.

National Parks

Lençóis Maranhenses (p597), east of São Luís, is one of the highlights of the region, a vast expanse of high sand dunes only interrupted by clear pools of water.

In deep southern Piauí, **Serra da Capivara** (p588) contains 128 visitable archaeological sites and 30,000 prehistoric rock paintings, in a dramatic rocky landscape. It is a Unesco World Heritage site and well worth the trip if you have time.

Nearer the coast, **Sete Cidades** (p587) contains bizarre rock formations that resemble seven cities, and hundreds more prehistoric rock paintings.

The small **Ubajara** (p582) is famous for its vast caves, accessed on foot or by cable car. It also contains lush forests and impressive waterfalls.

Chapada das Mesas (p600) is a zone of impressive rocky bluffs and gorgeous waterfalls near Carolina in southern Maranhão.

Nascentes do Rio Parnaíba (p588), straddling the far south of Piauí and Maranhão as well as bits of Tocantins and Bahia states, is a superb wildlife-viewing location for those who can get there. It's famed for its beautiful hyacinth macaws and ultra-intelligent capuchin monkeys.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Fortaleza has an international airport with flights from Europe, the US and most Brazilian cities. São Luís and Teresina are served by domestic flights.

BUS

You can get to Fortaleza by bus from Brasília, Rio or São Paulo to the south, Natal or Recife to the east, or Belém to the west. For the longest trips, airfares can be little more expensive than buses. Teresina and São Luís receive buses from Fortaleza, Belém, Brasília, Rio and São Paulo.

Getting Around

Buses link pretty much every town and village in this region. Road quality is steadily improving, though much of the São Luís–Belém road within Maranhão is in poor shape, and access to some coastal villages including Jericoacoara is partly unpaved. Beach buggies and 4WDs with drivers provide trips along the coasts and dunes. A hire