

Minas Gerais



Geographically close to Rio and São Paulo, but with a culture entirely its own, Minas Gerais is easy to reach and hard to leave behind. The people are among Brazil's friendliest, the food is great, the natural setting is spectacular and there's more beautiful historical architecture per square kilometer than any other place in Brazil.

In the early 18th century, colonial towns like Ouro Prêto, Mariana and Diamantina sprang up along the gold road linking Minas to the coast. Built on Minas's mineral wealth, they soon developed a cultural and architectural wealth all their own. Minas was the birthplace of Tiradentes, leader of Brazil's first great independence movement, and Aleijadinho, the country's finest baroque artist.

Although Minas's natural wonders get less press than the Amazon or the Pantanal, the state is home to some magnificent scenery and wildlife. In 2005 the Serra do Espinhaço, a rocky spine running the length of the state, was recognized for its remarkable biodiversity as Brazil's newest Unesco Biosphere Reserve. Parks throughout Minas provide critical habitat for endangered species such as the northern muriqui.

Lacking beaches, Mineiros (residents of Minas) compensate with fabulous food and drink. Minas cheese and *cachaça* (a high-proof sugarcane alcohol) are considered the best in Brazil. Meals are often cooked on the *fogão à lenha* – a traditional wood-burning stove – and local hospitality is as abundant as the food.

Rich as it is in history, Minas is also a forward-looking state, as epitomized in its capital, Belo Horizonte. Built in the 1890s as Brazil's first planned city, Belo's ongoing openness to innovation is evidenced by Oscar Niemeyer's audacious 1940s building designs and today's burgeoning arts scene.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Wander the picturesque cobblestone streets and marvel at the baroque architectural wonders of **Ouro Prêto** (p242)
- Cruise from one colonial town to the next on Minas's historic **Maria-Fumaça** (p257) steam trains
- Climb Brazil's third-tallest mountain, 2892m Pico da Bandeira in **Parque Nacional de Caparaó** (p270)
- Wait by starlight for the maned wolves to appear at the old monastery at **Parque Natural do Caraça** (p269)
- Check out the nine galleries of contemporary international art and the fabulous gardens at **Centro de Arte Contemporânea Inhotim** (p240), near Brumadinho



■ POPULATION: 15 MILLION

■ AREA: 43,910 SQ KM

History

In the late 1600s gold was discovered in Minas. It didn't take long for the word to get out, and Brazilians flocked to Minas, while Portuguese flocked to Brazil. Slaves were brought from Bahia's sugar fields and the savannas of Angola, as few Whites did their own mining. Until the last quarter of the 18th century, the slaves of Minas Gerais were digging up half the world's gold.

Minas set the gold-rush standard – crazy, wild and violent – more than 100 years before the Californian and Australian gold rushes. Disease and famine were rampant, and the mine towns were known for their licentiousness. Minas's gold was siphoned off to Portugal; among the few lasting benefits to Brazil was the creation of the beautiful, church-clad mining cities that dot the hills of Minas Gerais.

As Minas enters the 21st century, the old Estrada Real (Royal Rd) connecting the colonial mining towns has become one of Brazil's prime tourist draws. The government has invested heavily in promoting the route, inviting visitors to rediscover the country's past through a modern lens.

National Parks

Parque Nacional Serra do Cipó – forming the heart of Unesco's brand-new Serra do Espinhaço Biosphere Reserve – is Belo Horizonte's backyard wilderness area. Its vast mountain and river landscapes lie just 100km from the city center. Parque Nacional Aparoaá, on Minas's eastern border with Espírito Santo, is home to waterfalls, spectacular vistas and Brazil's third-highest peak. Both parks offer excellent hiking opportunities.

Climate

Minas is a moody place. Drab fogs drift in and out amid almost daily showers (of short duration) from October through February. It's warm, so you only really need an umbrella for protection from the wet. From July to September, the dry season, things can get frostier and a light jacket is sometimes called for, particularly at night.

Getting There & Around

Capital city Belo Horizonte is the arrival point for most travelers. Pampulha and Tancredo Neves/Confins airports handle domestic and international flights, while the large downtown bus station serves as a hub for

ground transport (see p240). Direct buses from Rio and São Paulo also serve some of the historic towns.

BELO HORIZONTE

☎ 0xx31 / pop 2.5 million / elevation 858m

Known to locals as Bay-Agah (that's Portuguese for BH), Belo Horizonte was named for its beautiful view of nearby mountains. If you climb into the hills south of town at sunset and survey the vast checkerboard of streets below, the city can still be strikingly beautiful. Still, many people give Belo a miss altogether, based on reports that it's smoggy and overdeveloped. There's some truth there, but the city has considerable other charms.

The longer you stay in Belo, the more it grows on you. Walk down the buzzing cosmopolitan streets of the Savassi neighborhood on a Saturday evening, eat at one of the fine restaurants in Lourdes, stroll through the densely packed market stalls at the Mercado Central, attend a concert at the Palácio das Artes, or visit the brand-new Inhotim art museum west of the city, and you'll see that Belo has countless dimensions. Add to all this the friendly, welcoming nature of Belo's people and you've got a winning combination. Stick around a few days – you might grow fond of the place.

History

In the late 19th century, as the Brazilian Republic was coming into its own, Mineiros began planning a new capital to replace hard-to-reach Ouro Preto, which had fallen out of favor as a symbol of colonialism. Belo Horizonte sprang up as an art-nouveau city, influenced by the spirit of *Ordem e Progresso* (Order and Progress), the new slogan on the Brazilian flag.

In the 1940s, Belo expanded northward. Then-mayor Juscelino Kubitschek commissioned young architectural-school graduate Oscar Niemeyer to design the brand-new Pampulha district. These two men are largely responsible for the wide avenues, large lakes, parks and jutting skylines that characterize the city today.

More than 100 years after its founding, Belo still has the young, contagious energy of a community reinventing itself. Plans are currently underway to move a complex of government ministries north of the center, onto the road to Confins airport, liberating