

Paraíba & Rio Grande do Norte



This northeastern corner of Brazil has one huge advantage in life – kilometer upon kilometer of glorious beaches, some of them small palm-lined bays, others 20km long and backed by huge dune fields piled up by the coastal winds. Settlements along the shore vary from the large-ish, somewhat bland cities of Natal and João Pessoa to tiny undeveloped fishing villages, with an assortment of intermediate-size beach towns with varying degrees of tourism in between. João Pessoa and, especially, Natal serve as touristic entry points and bases for exploring the coasts to their north and south, either in day trips or – better, if you have the independence to travel freely – in lengthier explorations. For many travelers the hip international beach town of Praia da Pipa, a kind of ‘global village’ south of Natal, is the highlight of the region. For others it’s the adventure of traveling itself that excites most, and it’s even possible to make your way right along the coast all the way from Natal to Fortaleza in Ceará by beach buggy.

A different type of adventure awaits those willing to venture inland. The parched, drought-prone interior is home to dramatic landscapes and some of Brazil’s most spectacular ancient remains, from fossilized dinosaur footprints to rock art many millennia old. The ideal months to head inland are June and July, when temperatures are less extreme.

The relatively sedate cities of João Pessoa and Natal do cut loose when it comes to festival time – especially in Natal’s famous out-of-season carnival, Carnatal, in December.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Enjoy the stylish but unpretentious international scene of beautiful **Praia da Pipa** (p561)
- Cruise the spectacular, dune-lined coasts at **Genipabu** (p563) by buggy
- Explore the dramatic landscapes and intriguing archaeological remains of the arid interior at **Lajedo de Pai Mateus** (p554) and **Vale dos Dinossauros** (p554)
- Take to the streets for **Carnatal** (p558), Natal’s lively out-of-season Carnaval
- Unwind at the remote beach village of **Galinhos** (p563)



■ POPULATION: 15 MILLION

■ AREA: 43,910 SQ KM

History

This area of Brazil was a hotly contested colonial property, with both the French and Dutch vying for control against the Portuguese. French brazilwood traders had a decent foothold in Rio Grande do Norte until the Portuguese sent a fleet from Paraíba to kick them out in 1597. Natal was lost again to the Dutch from 1633 to 1654 before being retaken by the Portuguese.

Thereafter, the states of Paraíba and Rio Grande do Norte largely languished in obscurity until the early 20th century. Paraíba made a name for itself as the home state of João Pessoa, who allied himself with Getúlio Vargas in 1929 in a bid for the vice-presidency. Judging by the sheer number of João Pessoa tributes in the state, it seems that not much has happened since.

In 1935 rioting in Natal led to the declaration of a short-lived communist government in Rio Grande do Norte. The communist movement was suppressed and before long Rio Grande do Norte's strategic location as Brazil's closest point to Africa saw it become a supply base for the US in WWII. The in-

jection of military money spurred significant development in the region. Today, the region's fabulous beaches bring in major income from tourism, especially in Rio Grande do Norte.

Climate

Although this area is no hotter than neighboring states, Rio Grande do Norte in particular is really dry and the sun can be very strong in the almost-always-clear skies. Temperatures in both states can top 40°C (104°F) in January and February. Although the weather is nice year-round, some find it the most pleasant in the slightly cooler months of June to August.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Natal has direct and indirect flights from every major Brazilian city and Lisbon (Portugal). It has seen an increasing number of European charter flights and, once in a while, an American charter flight. João Pessoa's airport also has a few European charters, plus domestic flights.

