



Getting Away From it All: in Northern Brazil

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Even with the best-laid holiday plans, it's increasingly difficult to *truly* get away from it all – anywhere – it seems. Luckily, I scored not once but twice, finding that elusive experience in two very different parts of northern Brazil: the rocky hiking trails, waterfalls and caves of Chapada Diamantina National Park in Bahia and the rolling sand dunes of remote Jericoacoara Beach on the north coastline of Ceará.



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PHOTO

Entrance to the caves of Chapada Diamantina National Park



One afternoon, while hiking the trails near the village of Lençóis in the state of Bahia, a happy little stray dog latched onto us. She was our unofficial tour guide, following us over rocks, through caves and around the pools and waterfalls that skirt this small town; once the nucleus of the diamond mining industry that flourished here about 150 years ago.

Lençóis (population 5,000) has the feel of a 19th century European village plopped down in the middle of a big park. With the last mine closing 20 years ago, it is now a hiker's paradise; the vegetation slowly reclaiming the surrounding hills, rivers, streams, pools and caves. July to November is the best time to visit.

My friends and I swam in the red-tinged, iron-rich pools, letting waterfalls crash over us, and hiked through green valleys surrounded by sharp cliffs. Our little dog was still at our ankles when we walked up to Middle River, where water cascades down a huge sheet of sloping rock, forming a sort of natural waterslide that had us sliding down it at

break-neck speed. Though it was a little hard on the rear, it was worth it. On the way back, our canine guide ditched us to play with a couple of little pigs.

Lençóis has a real café vibe at night; the tourists mixing with the locals around the squares and cafés, families out for an ice cream treat after supper. Bahia has a laid-back reputation, which they use to their benefit.

Jumping in a van the next day and heading into Chapada Diamantina National Park, my intrepid travellers and I stopped for a swim in mineral-rich Devil's Pool. It is particularly popular on the weekends when the locals join the tourists for a thrill on the zip lines, which take you from the top of the ridge right into the pool. A nearby outdoor bar is built into the side of the hill, in the style of the old diamond miner's homes.

Afterward, we wandered through the incredibly spacious, almost cathedral-sized Gruta da Lapinha Doce, the Cave of the Sweet Water, known for its incredible crystalline stalagmite and stalactite rock

formations. Midway through, we switched off our flashlights for a minute or two of complete silence and darkness, working in a minute or two of eyes-open meditation.

Our group stopped briefly at Gruta Do Lago Azul, where the late-afternoon sunshine played tricks on us; the calcium carbonate and magnesium in the crystal-clear water at the edge of the cave turns the pool an almost supernatural colour of blue in the direct sunlight. Not only that, the refraction leads you to think the water is maybe a metre deep, when in reality the depth is 17 metres.

We finished the day with a trek to the top of Pai Inacio Hill to watch the sun go down, with a truly breathtaking 360-degree view of the nearby cliffs and canyons. We could see for miles – with the sunlight hitting the adjacent cliffsides just perfectly, the cool wind whipping our windbreakers. Once the sun dips, we head back down before the failing light makes it difficult to see the steep trail.

Later, our little canine buddy makes an appearance again, chasing cars in the village square and trying to bite the feet of the motorcyclists. Saucy girl! She had forgotten all about us, of course, but she is the star of most of our photographs.

A few days later and a little further north, we made our way to the dune-covered landscape around Jericoacoara, a mecca for wind- and kite-surfing on Brazil's north coast. Here, wild donkeys grazed away in small herds, minding their own business as they made their way through the gorgeous scenery. Once pack animals for the fishermen who lived there, they were turned loose dozens of years ago and now roam free. How I envied this freedom.

The tiny beach town, more commonly known as Jeri Beach, sprang up over the last 20 years and is reachable only by 4x4 – or by helicopter. It is about a six-hour drive from the city of Fortaleza, with the last 45 minutes of the journey through sand dunes. Jeri seemed to appear out of nowhere as we wound



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through mounds of sand, skirting the donkeys, supply trucks and tricked-out dune buggies. What was once a sleepy fishing village with no electricity is now a relaxed tourist town, big with weekend visitors, surfers, honeymooners and groups of college kids.

There's not much to do – but that's the point. After the requisite photo op at the famous rocky arch at the shoreline, you can rent a dune buggy and driver for about \$50 for a half-day and trip around the sand, stopping at the local lagoons for a swim. Surfing lessons? Not a problem. September and October see the crowds swell considerably with wind- and kite-surfing championships that take place when the winds pick up. Accommodations range from the sparse to the luxurious, with many points in between.

PHOTOS

1. Dune buggies at Jericoacoara
2. Cachoeira, Chapada Diamantina National Park
3. Brazilian bar at Jeri Beach

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Sitting in hammocks in the water at Paradise Beach, a freshwater lagoon about 20 minutes by 4x4 from Jeri, I lazed the afternoon away, sharing big bottles of Brahma beer with my travelling companions and ordering basket after basket of cassava fries, chill-out music washing over us from nearby speakers propped in the sand. This is a true beach vibe: not expensive, not really commercial; a sort of unfussy hipness that the Brazilians are famous for.

People congregate at the Sunset Dune each day to watch the sun sink into the ocean. This is one of the only places in the world where, on a good day, you get that green flash of light the moment the sun drops below the horizon. Then everybody wanders back into the town for caipirinha cocktails and steaks. You will be hard-pressed to think of a more perfect way to end the day.

