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Tantalising Brazil



Brazil is a huge and exciting country to explore, offering lively cities, mesmerising natural attractions and party spirit on a grand scale. Amy Baker reports.

Going to the beach, having percussion lessons, dancing lessons, surfing, diving, learning capoeira, trips to the islands or to some places around Salvador... Inge Weiser Carvalho, Director of Marketing at Idioma - Escola de Português in Salvador, Bahia lists some of the activities that students at her school like to undertake in their free time, underlining the tantalising mix of sporting and cultural options on offer in the hippest destination for learning Portuguese: Brazil.

The appeal of Brazil lies in its exoticism for many travellers, in its warm weather, red hot culture, exciting cities, biodiversity and its people's reputation for being welcoming and friendly. Students not only arrive in the country to learn Portuguese; as Carvalho points out, others are bound for university or business school, or want to learn the basics of the language before they undertake a volunteering placement.

Rio de Janeiro is synonymous with Brazil and one of the most famous cities in the world. While students may not choose to study here, most will plan to spend some time here, going to the famous Copacabana and Ipanema beach and the Christ figure on the Corcovado mountain, which stands overlooking the city. Carvalho says that most of the students at Idioma plan a longer trip around the country, often travelling alone.

Sheila Waksman at Basicalingua, also in Salvador, adds other reasons for students coming to Brazil. "People come because they are passionate about the music, the dancing, the history and the energy that all Brazilians have for life," she says. "It's very easy to travel in Brazil firstly because the

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Brazilians are very communicative – even if you don't speak the language they will try to help you. [And] the public transport system is comprehensive and of good quality."

A number of language schools are situated in Salvador, Brazil's oldest city (sometimes referred to as Salvador da Bahia, to differentiate it from other cities named Salvador), on the east coast, over 1,200 kilometres north of Rio. It is an epicentre for Afro-Brazilian customs and is renowned for its capoeira (Brazilian martial art) and native drumming customs. Music here has its origins in the slave trade and quilombos (communities of runaway slaves).

The city is spread over a hill and a bay, and areas are often referred to as being upper city or lower city. Waksman says, "Although Salvador is a big city, the most important cultural places are centrally located and there is a good infrastructure for travellers." She says she helps all students acclimatise to the area before they start language courses, which are limited to three people per class. Her students all stay with local host families.

"One of my students came for two weeks but loved the family that he was staying with so much that he ended up staying and eventually married one of the relatives of the family," relates Waksman. "Other students of mine come to Salvador and decide to stay and work as volunteers in local social projects."

As with other cities in Brazil, there is a lot of poverty and plenty of reminders of the social problems in the country. However, Salvador is said to be one of the safest cities in the country and that, coupled with its string of fantastic local beaches, strong indigenous culture and famous Carnival, can be a real draw for international travellers.

Another language school in the city is Dialogo, which has been teaching the Portuguese language to foreigners for 17 years, and offering an assortment of add-ons, such as samba, percussion or cooking classes. Damar Sandbrand at the school reports that students normally come from the USA and Europe, although Canadians and Japanese also enrol there. "The students come because they appreciate the Portuguese language, its melody and vibration," he says. "Also because Brazil is a tropical country with delightful beaches, friendly people, a rich cultural life and it's never been particularly expensive."

Farther north than Salvador is São Luís in Maranhão province, a truly diverse destination that, as Antonio Bacelar Junior from Via Mundo Intercambio Turismo explains, "has a unique ecosystem with water, desert, rivers, mangroves and forests in the same province". One of the most beautiful attractions of the area is the Parque dos Lençóis, a park of white sand dunes, where for three months of the year, crystal clear lakes appear, providing an idyllic setting for students to visit on a day trip.

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The city of São Luís itself was founded by the French rather than the Portuguese and retains a glorious colonial feel in the central city and a unique atmosphere in Brazil. One reason for this is the reggae culture in the city. Bacelar Junior says, "We are known as the Brazilian Jamaica due to the reggae bars and music we have spread throughout the [area]." Visitors might be interested to try the local soft drink, Jesus, which is not exported out of the state but is popular within it – pink in colour with a distinct flavour of bubblegum.

Via Mundo Intercambio Turismo offers school-to-school exchange, vacation courses and academic year or semester programmes for children of high school age. "We organise trips in the area, visits to museums [and] days at the beach," relates Bacelar Junior, who says that students particularly enjoy visiting the Lençóis National Park, fishing communities in the area, going to beach bars, reggae bars, discos, pubs and restaurants. Clearly, the area offers many socialising opportunities. "Most students socialise with the locals," he relates.

At Yazigi Internexus in Vitória in the province of Espírito Santo – in between Salvador and Rio de Janeiro – Maura Leão paints a picture of a highly social experience for students too, who can choose between undertaking intensive language courses, language plus programmes or internships at one of three schools in the province. "Students enjoy the beaches and the boardwalk, boat tours, bars, nightclubs and barbecue parties," she relates, adding that the opportunities for ecological tourism also appeal. Largely, in their free time, students "visit tourist attractions, jog on the boardwalk, practise sports on the beach and go dancing", she recounts.

Another destination that is popular with travellers is Florianópolis, towards the south of Brazil, in Santa Catarina province. Half of the city is located on an island and half on the mainland. The whole area boasts some of the most beautiful beaches in Brazil and the region is popular with surfers and windsurfers. Sand boarding is also practised in Floripo, as the city is known, on the local white sand dunes. Boarders hire boards and a wax candle, which they use to "grease" their boards to make them go faster down the dunes.

Miguel Angelo Kieling of Step 1 Idiomas in the city adds that biking is very popular. "In Florianópolis we have simply the best biking path in the south of Brazil," he says. "It spreads along Beira-Mar Avenue, from Federal University to Hercilio Luz Bridge. It's cheap to buy a second-hand bike and at the end of a student's stay, we can sell it to another."

Martha Ghizzo at The Language Club in the city underlines that there are 42 beaches as well as several trails for hiking. "Nature is very beautiful here," she says. "It is also a safe area, good for both families and single people."

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As elsewhere in Brazil, poverty exists everywhere, and for those students interested in volunteering projects, Experimento runs a programme for volunteers interested in working in schools in deprived parts of the city. An English speaking coordinator checks up on the volunteers regularly and in the meantime, students' Portuguese improves as they interact with teachers and children. This is one of several volunteering options available throughout Brazil from Experimento.

Of course, for many students, Brazil means Rio de Janeiro or the Amazon primarily, and there are study options in Rio for students who want to experience a big city lifestyle. BridgeBrazil, previously known as Bridge-Linguattec, runs a variety of language classes in Rio as well as language plus courses that combine Portuguese with surfing, dance, business or volunteering. "Most of our students are from the US, but our courses are also very popular among Europeans," relates Ricardo Cavalini, Director at the school.

He lists the main attractions of the Sugar Loaf Mountain, Ipanema and Copacabana beaches, the statue of Christ the Redeemer and the Museum of Contemporary Art as important sites for students to see. Cavalini says that once they have settled in, students like to go to the beach, dance samba, hike at Tijuca National Forest and drink caipirinhas. Summing up the nature of any stay in Brazil, he adds, "Most students like to participate in Rio's lively festivals, celebrations and parties."

Sao Paulo is even bigger than Rio with a population of 19 million and Cristiane Pessuti from Melbourne Languages International, based in the city, describes it as the "Brazilian locomotive that drives the national economy". She adds that the local nightlife there is one of the "liveliest in the world, with its 12,000 restaurants of over 40 different world cuisines."

Agent viewpoint



"Brazil is still a minor destination for Japanese students, but most Japanese feel a sense of closeness to Brazil – it has Japanese towns that were built by a lot of Japanese immigrants. Pastimes, especially soccer, Jiu-Jitsu and the Bossa Nova type of music, are popular with young people in Japan. So I hope Brazil will be getting more popular as a destination."

Masato Watanabe, WorldWay Co., Japan

"Our Portuguese language course in Salvador has been running for more than 10 years, but the one in Maceio only

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since 2005. There are only a few students attending the courses per year, maybe 10. Some of them do it just for pleasure, they love Brazil and can afford to travel there just for fun, or they have friends or relatives in Brazil. But most of our students come from airlines that cater for the South American market and want to improve their career chances by learning Portuguese. For those customers there are also courses on offer in Frankfurt directly."

Thomas Gesang, DESR/Sprachtreff, Germany



"The main reason children and their parents choose Brazil as a study destination is for football training, because Brazil is a leading country in this sport and produces the world's best football players. We work with Sport-Exspo, the only Russian representative of the football academy, Instituto de Ensino Santa Anna, in Vinhedo near Sao Paulo. Minimum programme duration [for our clients aged between 12 and 18] is one month but many clients may stay for up to two years. This is because they like it there, see their progress and have the chance to compete in tournaments. Parents do not mind investing in their children if they see they have a talent for football."

Vladimir Mashkovsky, Odessa, Ukraine

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