



## Moon Brazil (Moon Handbooks)

By Michael Sommers

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**Moon Brazil (Moon Handbooks)** By Michael Sommers

Journalist Michael Sommers guides travelers to the best that Brazil has to offer, from surfing, hang gliding, and enjoying the sizzling nightlife in Rio to venturing into the Amazon to witness the Meeting of the Waters, where the Rio Negro and Rio Solimões join to form the world's mightiest river: the Amazon. Sommers also includes unique trip strategies like A Tale of Two Amazon Cities—which provides details on exploring the rainforest between Manaus and Belém—and Gastronomic Brazil, a mouthwatering tour of Brazil's cuisine. With expert advice on viewing popular attractions like Iguazu Falls and Corcovado, as well as escaping the crowds in less frequented places, like Bahia's rustic fishing villages, *Moon Brazil* gives travelers the tools they need to create a more personal and memorable experience.

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## Editorial Review

### About the Author

Born in Texas and raised in Toronto, Michael Sommers grew up with travel on the brain—the result of time spent in the backseat of Oldsmobiles, Mini Mokes, and Pan Am jets under the influence of his *Gourmet*-addicted mother and his father's roving zoom lens.

When Michael turned 18 he took flight, setting down temporary roots in cities such as Bordeaux, Paris, Montreal, New York, and Lisbon. During this time, he earned a BA in literature from McGill University and an MA in history and civilizations from the École des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, where his thesis was “The Image of Brazil and Brazilians in Hollywood Cinema.” He also worked as a writer and editor at magazines and newspapers and freelanced for publications such as *The New York Times*, *The International Herald Tribune*, and *The Globe and Mail*.

Michael first traveled to Brazil at the age of four. His first memory of Rio de Janeiro is that of being served a glistening orange wedge of papaya in the grand dining room at the Hotel Glória. Twenty years later, he returned to Brazil, where he fell in love with the colorful landscapes, rich cultures, and warm people he found there. Michael eventually settled down in Salvador, the baroque capital of Bahia, where he has worked as a writer and journalist for over a decade. He has yet to master the art of preparing *feijoada* (Brazil's national stew of beans and salted beef and pork), but he does make a mean *caipirinha*.

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### Author Q&A: Brazil Bound with Michael Sommers

#### 1. Brazil is a huge country. If you only have a week, what are the must-see attractions?

Brazil is actually more like a continent! Although roughly the same size as the continental U.S., due to transportation options and vast expanses of relatively undeveloped areas, getting around much of Brazil takes time. If I only had a week, I'd really focus on one area—or at the maximum, two.

Iconic tourist sites aside, Rio de Janeiro provides a wonderful introduction since it reunites much of its history as well as spectacular natural features and a unique and intense cultural life. If you add the surrounding attractions of Rio de Janeiro state (Petrópolis, Ilha Grande, Paraty), your week will be up in no time.

If you're ambitious, add a three-day trip to the states of either Minas Gerais or Bahia, both of which have richly distinctive cultures and histories. In Minas, I'd head to the charming colonial gold mining towns of Ouro Preto, Mariana or São João del Rei. Bahia is equally enticing. Its colonial capital of Salvador is a heady experience that combines exposure to Afro-Brazilian music, culture, and cuisine with access to some of Brazil's finest beaches.

#### 2. What is the difference between Brazil's high season vs. off season? What are the benefits to each?

Brazil's high season coincides with the Southern Hemisphere's summer and extends roughly from Christmas to the beginning of March. This is when most Brazilians take their vacations and you can expect crowded

beaches, high airfares and hotel rates, and hot weather. Brazilians take summer seriously and tend to let down their collective hair more than usual. This ensures an atmosphere that is both more relaxed and festive than other times of the year (it's no coincidence that Carnival marks the summer's climax). Mid-July to mid-August is also considered high season since it coincides with Brazilian students' winter break and the summer holidays of visitors from the Northern Hemisphere.

With the exception of long holiday weekends, the rest of the year is off season. Depending on when you travel and to what region, the weather might be rainy or even cold. However, you'll encounter a pace that is less frenetic and destinations (particularly beaches) that are less tourist-infested (and even, for better or for worse, quite isolated). Aside from the tranquility factor, off season is also the best time to travel if you're on a budget.

### **3. What is the best way to get around the country?**

In recent years, airfare has gotten a lot cheaper as more Brazilian charters have cropped up (recent upstarts include Webjet and Azul). For long or medium distances, flying is definitely the way to go. Bus service in Brazil is very extensive and quite good. The only problem is the time involved—long-distance hauls last for days while on seemingly short local routes, the number of stops really pile up. For this reason, if you want to hit secluded beaches or out-of-the-way rural spots, renting a car can be a very appealing alternative.

### **4. If you're staying in Rio de Janeiro, which are the best beaches to visit?**

Aside from their physical allure, Rio's beaches are small microcosms unto themselves. Despite over development and certain tacky elements, Copacabana's sweeping crescent of white sand is iconic, and a leisurely walk along its boardwalk around sunset is enchanting. Narrower than Copacabana, eternally hip Ipanema is imperative for those who want to soak up the quintessential Carioca beach scene. Aside from dreamy looking people, you're surrounded by great restaurants, bars, and boutiques. Two current hot spots for young Carioca beach-lovers are Urca's Praia Vermelha, a tiny but picturesque beach that lies in the shadow of Sugar Loaf, and the secluded Praia da Joá (that can be reached only by car or taxi). For an idyllic getaway, head to the far-flung Prainha and Grumari; favored by surfers, both are set against jungle covered mountains. While they fill up on weekends, during the week they're quite secluded.

### **5. What is your favorite Brazilian cuisine and where do you find it?**

Due to its strong African roots, Bahia boasts one of Brazil's most unique and recognized regional cuisines. Key ingredients include palm oil (dendê), coconut milk, dried shrimp, cilantro and pimenta (hot pepper). You'll find all of the above (minus the dried shrimp) in moqueca, a stew made with crab, shrimp and/or fish along with tomatoes, onions, and green peppers. If prepared well, this fragrant dish is delicious, and is comparatively lighter than other typical Brazilian recipes. As an adopted baiano, I admit to occasional cravings for acarajé; deep fried fritters made of a fluffy bean puree that are traditionally stuffed with dried shrimp. Acarajés are made and sold by Afro-Bahian women on the streets of Salvador and go down nicely with an icy Coca Cola.

### **6. What's the best way to explore the Amazon?**

People tend to have a lot of misconceptions about the Amazon. The biggest one is that you'll show up and instantly be surrounded by virgin rainforest and exotic creatures. These days, virgin forest and larger beasts are hard to come by. Your best and most sustainable bet is to fly into Manaus and get as far away from the city as possible by heading (usually by boat) to a jungle lodge. Jungle lodges are strategically located on

rivers such as the Rio Negro or Rio Solimões and make ideal bases for venturing along narrow tributaries—usually in a canoe, accompanied by a guide—and through flooded forests where you’ll view creatures such as pink dolphins, piranhas, and sloths. If you’re very lucky you may even spot a jaguar or the rare, red-faced uakari monkey. The most radically “eco” of them all, the Pousada Uacari, involves a 2-day boat trip (or 1-hour flight) from Manaus, but is ideally situated in the Mamirauá Sustainable Development Reserve, the largest protected patch of flooded rainforest in Brazil.

### **7. Brazil is host to many *festas* (festivals), including Carnaval. Describe your three favorite lesser-known *festas*.**

Salvador, where I live, is famed throughout Brazil for its many *festas*. My personal favorite is the one that kicks off the season—the Festa de Santa Barbara (held on December 4). Like many Bahian *festas*, it honors both a Catholic saint (Santa Barbara), patron saint of firemen and a Candomblé orixá (Iansã), a feisty female divinity associated with thunder and fire. The proceedings take place in Salvador’s colonial center. The best part is the number of devotees who show up dressed in the orixá’s colors of red and white, transforming the narrow streets into a sea of crimson.

For a combination of music and pageantry, it’s hard to surpass Bumba-Meu-Boi. Variations of this popular *festa* take place throughout the Northeast, but the most fabulous of all is held in Maranhão’s beautiful colonial capital of São Luís. Drawing on indigenous, African, and Portuguese folk elements, Bumba-Meu-Boi consists of a series of theatrical dances performed over several nights in late June. The performers create spectacularly embroidered costumes—including that of an enormous boi (bull)—that would put a Parisian couturier to shame, and the music, anchored by deep, pulsing bumba drums is so hypnotic that it’s impossible not to join in the dancing in the streets.

Meanwhile, a truly unusual *festa* is the Festa do Divino Espírito Santo, held in Pirenópolis, a historic gold mining town not far from Brasília. The Festa do Divino is held in many places throughout Brazil, but this one features As Cavalhadas, an event in which horsemen, dressed to represent medieval Moors and Christians, recreate a battle fought by Charlemagne during the Crusades (the Moors, of course, are defeated). The overall effect is very surreal and strangely anachronistic, but, once again, the costumes are sumptuous, and the small town gets terrifically festive.

### **8. Where is the best place to stay for a budget-conscious traveler?**

Aside from hotels, Brazil has thousands of *pousadas* (*pousar* means to stop or rest), which are generally small, family-run inns or guesthouses. Most boast a home-like atmosphere and friendly service that is a welcome departure from more impersonal hotels. If you plan to stay for a few days or more, you can always negotiate a special price (particularly if you pay in cash). Most often, you’ll find *pousadas* in small and medium-sized towns, but more and more have been cropping up in large cities.

Traditionally, Brazilian hostels tended towards barracks-style lodgings for college-age backpackers. However, a new generation of hostels has recently emerged featuring simple, but stylish decorative schemes, lots of amenities, and hang-out spaces such as gardens and rooftop lounges. Many also have private double or triple rooms—ideal for couples or families—that are much cheaper than comparable hotel accommodations. Like *pousadas*, you’ll find quite a few are located in renovated old homes.

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