

JUNGLE FEVER

All eyes may be on Rio de Janeiro as it gears up to be the first South American country to host the Summer Olympics this August. If you want a more serene Brazilian experience, however, head north to Chapada Diamantina, National Park.

BY DOUG WALLACE
PHOTOS BY DOUG WALLACE

Brazil may be best known for Carnival, hot nights, beach bodies, and soccer. However, at its core, Brazil is really about the rainforests. It contains almost 60 per cent of the Amazon rainforest, and has numerous national parks to trek and explore. At the top of the must-see list is Chapada Diamantina. Here are nine ways to experience a feet-on-the-ground, head-in-the-clouds adventure.

1. Take to the waters

A happy little stray dog latched onto us one afternoon hiking the trails near the village of Lençóis (population 5,000) in the state of Bahia, Brazil. She was our unofficial tour guide, following us over rocks, through caves, and around the pools and waterfalls that skirt this small town that was once the nucleus of the diamond mining industry that flourished here about 150 years ago.



Chapada Diamantina is the land of caves and waterfalls.

2. Follow the rivers

Just a short flight from Salvador, Lençóis 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. It's this transition that lends Chapada some of its magic, as the various fauna return as well: beetles, tarantulas, squirrel monkeys, foxes, and jaguars.

SALVADOR IS THE QUINTESSENCE OF BRAZILIAN CULTURE.

3. Read the rocks

The Chapada Diamantina region is comprised primarily of sandstone, pelites, and diamond-bearing conglomerates. The many trails, once used by miners in their search for diamonds, makes it one of the best destinations in the country for hiking. Following the Lençóis River, visitors swim in the red-tinged pools, letting the Primavera Waterfall crash over them, and hike through green valleys surrounded by sharp cliffs. The red colour of the water is due to organic matter from the forest floor. The Saloon of Colourful Sands is a geologist's dream, the sediment evidence of the millions of years of movement and sandstone erosion.

4. Release your inner child

Our little dog was still at our ankles when we walked along Mucugezinho River, then 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, but the excitement was worth it. On the way back, our canine guide ditched us to play with a couple of little pigs.

5. Dip and zip

Jumping in a van the next day and heading into Chapada Diamantina National Park, my intrepid travellers and I stopped for a swim in Devil's Pool, so named because it is said to be a site where diamond mine slaves were tortured. This pool and its 18-metre-high Devil's Falls is popular with the locals on the weekends who come to get their thrills on the zip lines. Conveniently, a bar is built into the side of the mountain, in the style of the old miner houses.

6. Explore the underground

The Diamantina caves need to be seen to be believed, and are part of an environmental protection area. Gruta Lapa Doce, the Cave of the Sweet Water, is one of the most popular due to the incredible stalagmite and stalactite rock formations inside, sculpted by water circulation, dripping, condensation, and other processes. Midway through, we switched off our

flashlights for a minute or two of complete silence and darkness — a moment of eyes-open meditation. Nearby Gruta Pratinha is good for more zip lining, as well as for snorkelling down an underground river.

7. Keep an eye on your watch

For a short span of time in the late afternoon, the sunshine plays tricks at Gruta Azul: the calcium carbonate and magnesium in the crystal-clear water at the edge of the cave turns the pool a supernatural shade 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 more than 15 metres.

8. Head for the hills

We finished the day with a trek to the top of Pai Inacio Hill to watch the sun go down, with a breathtaking 360-degree view of the cliffs and canyons.

CAVES CHANGE COLOUR AT CERTAIN TIMES.

9. Go with the in-crowd

Our little canine buddy made an appearance back in Lençóis, chasing cars in the village. She had forgotten all about us, of course, but she is the star of most of our photographs. **ISW**

GETTING THERE

Visiting off-season is best, from July to November. December to March is the busiest time. Intrepid Travel offers a guided tour to Chapada Diamantina within a 14-day Northern Brazil carbon-offset experience from Rio de Janeiro, ending in Fortaleza. Visit IntrepidTravel.com for details.



The land of gold and diamonds is a hiker's paradise.

