



Brazil: closer than you think

WORDS: NICK CORBETT

Spend a day chasing the dream in South Africa and take a trip through Brazil without even knowing it.

Rio. The name is enough to conjure an image of a tall cooldrink involving a pineapple, a city immersed in football and the arms-open statue of Cristo Redentor bringing a city – nay, a country – together. It's enough to picture a blend of the high-life, dancing in the streets and one of the world's most colourful cultures. It's almost enough to make you book a plane ticket immediately.

The sun sets, you're more tanned than you've ever been and you're feeling at least three times cooler than the drink in your hand. You've spent all day soaking up some of the world's most famous sunrises, lazing on picturesque, white-sand beaches and, who knows, you may just pop into a night market or samba later. The world's biggest event, the 2014 Fifa World Cup, starts on 12 June. And the best news? You haven't even left South Africa.

Heading east

The sun glints sharply as you wake up underneath a fedora, a coconut palm or both. A lot has happened in the iconic Copacabana since it was named after the patron saint of Bolivia. But you're far from the Pão de Açúcar-bound beach, built from shipped-in Portuguese calcite and the timeless curl of the tide. Instead, you're actually in the Zulu kingdom of Durban, in the city of the sun.

Stop to take a deep breath. This is the land of sea and surf, wetland and forest, and more attractions than you ever knew possible. Hit the beachfront after brunch on Florida Road. Platter after platter of delectable street food isn't the only thing to appease your appetite here. For the eye-hungry, Durban offers a full-on feast of Art Deco buildings to match those seen along Rio's most famous beach. From Berea

through to the city centre, the restorative works of the Instituto Art Deco Brasil are rivalled by those of the Durban Art Deco Society. From Surrey Mansions, Manhattan Court and the Enterprise building, there's a lot more than just a beach to take in. While Brazil celebrates the works of the French art movement and the likes of its Marajoara culture, Durban offers its own little trip to architectural Paris.

Devour the coast on your way to Moses Mabhida Stadium, arguably the most iconic landmark to grace the east coast in years. It's Durban's own Estádio do Maracanã in Rio. Not long from now, kick off will begin like it did here four years ago.

Playing the midfield

The sun is at its peak, you're sweating through your shirt but you're not bothered by the heat. You're headed inland for a view like no other.

Thirty metres above the city of Rio towers Christos Redentor – Christ the Redeemer – his arms open in an eternally locked symbol of peace. Less than 20 minutes away, the Sugarloaf Mountain beckons hikers and the Dois Irmãos, better known as the Two Brothers, can be seen through the afternoon haze. Peace didn't always hover over the people of Rio. Up on a hill, with a view most would pay millions for, live the dwellers of the famed favelas. No colourful postcard could possibly tell the true story of the violence that could be found here during Brazil's military dictatorship in the sixties and seventies.

But you're nowhere near a favela. Your journey has taken you to the flatlands, to the glowing Free State, to the realm of open skies and orange fields. Just ahead, atop Naval Hill in Bloemfontein, towers a nine-metre statue of Madiba, his right arm raised in a symbol of triumph. It's a powerful piece of art and, much like in Rio, stands high above the city, guarding its people from a turbulent past into a peaceful future.

For any tourist, a 16-hour drive will take you inland towards the Brazilian Highlands to Brasília. The pitch is ready and kick off will start soon for 72 000 people in the Estádio Nacional Mané Garrincha. And while you take a turn into the province of Gauteng, to the city of Joburg, you'll see the lip of Soccer City, where you were one of 94 000. The City of Gold. The capital of wealth, fashion and metropolitan life that is as delicious and potent as any Brazilian rum. Travellers who head through São Paulo on their way north will

see the same preparations happening in the Arena de São Paulo. The mainland is as ready as the coast for kick off and the stadiums beckon, just as Nelspruit's iron giraffes welcomed the world to its green, lush bushland. If you have the pleasure of driving through, take in Mpumalanga for all it is – an untouched gem, a cradle of wildlife you could only hope to see in São Paulo's Museu de Zoologia.

Moving west

The sun is setting but the night is young. Porto Alegre is about as west as they come in Brazil, before you hit the border of Uruguay or maybe take a trip into Argentina. The sprawling urban seaside city is overrun with things to offer any football-seeking traveller. Clubs, bars, culture, fashion and the best cuisine in Brazil – nearly two million locals can't be wrong. Here is the surreal Estádio Beira-Rio, a near-twin to Cape Town's Green Point Stadium, where you find yourself standing now. You've travelled the length and breadth of the country – so much so, it feels like two. Play is about to kick off.

Green Point's famed samba and salsa bars await you post-match, as do plenty of night markets in the Cape offering boutique wear and designer food.

You can't say who will win the match tonight and you can't say where you'll wind up tomorrow. You may wake up safe in your bed, having watched the soccer on your TV with friends and family. Or you could find yourself underneath a coconut palm or even a fedora – maybe both – with the warm Cape sun glinting in your eyes, as you remember how you once again celebrated the beautiful game in one of the world's most beautiful cities. Smiling, you turn to the brightly lit Fifa screen.

You don't need to book your ticket to watch the waves play with the sand and the sun kiss the Copacabana surf. You don't need to be walking through neon, feathered streets, watching a samba swing by and sipping a caipirinha. Because you'll already be doing all this here at home. As the Brazil World Cup's older brother, we've seen the fun and lived the joy. Will Brazil be just as good? In the spirit of World Cup fever, you have to ask: is it a competition? Never. Not when there's a clear winner.

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