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TRAVELS WITH LONELY PLANET: BRAZIL

But where do the Brazilians go when they want to samba?

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Lonely Planet



JOHN MAIER JR./LONELY PLANET IMAGES

ILHA SANTA CATARINA: The island packs in nearly all that is good about Brazil -- with a few bonuses thrown in.

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The world dreams of escaping to Rio de Janeiro, but what about Rio natives themselves? Ask the boys and girls of Ipanema (or many other Brazilians), and you'll find that Ilha de Santa Catarina, an island just off Brazil's southern coast, tops most lists.

Brazilians speak of Ilha Santa Catarina with wistfulness, as if the few hundred yards that separate it from the mainland are a world away from their busy lives. Yet they need sacrifice little for their journey, because in just over 400 square kilometers, the island packs in nearly all that is good about Brazil -- with a few bonuses thrown in.

Famously picky about their beaches, Brazilians reserve high praise for many of Santa Catarina's 42 strands, which range from cliff-hugging prayer rugs to miles-long arcs of sand.

A spine of mountains, luxuriant with the flora and fauna of the Mata Atlântica (Atlantic rain forest), runs the length of the island. Near the island's center, the peaks drop precipitously to the stunning, saltwater Lagoa da Conceição -- a Swiss lake transported to warmer climes.

Just to the north of the lagoon begins a miles-long forest of rare, protected pines, while to the east sand dunes -- some of them hundreds of feet high -- create an almost lunar landscape. And on the western shores, whitewashed fishing villages seem to have been imported wholesale from the Azores Islands.

Thanks to shallow bays, the northern half of the island is eminently family-friendly, with numerous hotels and teeming summer crowds. Think South Florida with a hilly backdrop. Lagoa da Conceição -- the island's navel -- also grows thick with motorboats and holidaymakers. Both are more than pleasant, but not the kinds of places that you'd travel great distances to see.

ON THE WILD SIDE

But the wilder southern half of the island is another story. Outside the summer holidays, fishermen outnumber travelers, and there are still beaches that, at the price of a vigorous hike, you can have entirely to yourself. With narrower roads, higher peaks and more challenging surf, the south has largely been overlooked by developers -- at least for now.

Things are bound to change, however, as plans are laid to build a new road connecting the southern half of the island with Florianopolis (the provincial capital that sits on the island's eastern shore) and its international airport. Developers are, needless to say, salivating at the prospects. If you want to enjoy the still largely unspoiled pleasures of southern Ilha Santa Catarina, the time to go is now.

So what is there to see? The long, curving Praia da Armazém is a surfer's delight, though currents can be relentless.

On the green jut of land at the southern end of the beach, you can catch a boat to Ilha do Campeche, an ecological reserve with a paradisiacal beach, good snorkeling and Stone Age etchings.

A GOOD WALK

Most extraordinary, though, are hikes to the stunning beaches that can only be reached by foot, including Lagoinha do Leste, Saquinho and, at the very tip of the island, Naufragados.

Even after the new road is built, these beaches will, fortunately, remain only for the determined, if not the intrepid.

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VISITING BRAZIL

- **Getting there and around:** Florianopolis has an airport with good domestic and some international service. There is reliable bus service around the island, but consider renting a car, as roads are good and sights dispersed.

WHERE TO EAT

- Right on the beach in Pantano do Sul, **Bar do Arante** (011-55-48- 3237-7022) serves fine, ocean-fresh seafood. From April to June try the local tainha, or gray mullet. Its prized white flesh manages to be both rich and light, mild and distinctly flavored.

- Along the northeast coast in the town of Rio Vermelho, **Chez Altamiro** (011-55-48-9971-3387) stars Altamiro as chef, waiter, maitre d' and sommelier. You will see him run outside to pick fresh herbs as he whips up, then serves, classic French cordon bleu dishes. Complete meal, \$25 per person.