

# TRAVEL TIPS FOR BRAZIL by Edwin Hong

## When to Go

High season runs from the week before Christmas to Carnival (February/March). New Year's Eve celebrations in Rio also guarantee higher prices. Other peak periods include Easter week and July. Try to visit Brazil in September or October for lower prices and better weather. Another good period is from the time after Carnival to May, but March and April are often rainy in southeastern Brazil. Brazilian winters have less humidity, cooler temperatures, and less rain in southeastern Brazil.

Fernando de Noronha is best visited during the dry season (August to November) for scuba diving and snorkeling, and September has the best visibility.

Brazil is in the southern hemisphere, so seasons are the opposite of those in the U.S.

Destination	Winter Temperatures (June-August)	Summer Temperatures (December-February)	Rainy Season
Recife	Max. 82°F Min. 70°F	Max. 86°F Min. 73°F	March to July
Rio de Janeiro	Max. 82°F Min. 64°F	Max. 88°F Min. 74°F	December to April
São Paulo	Max. 73°F Min. 53°F	Max. 81°F Min. 66°F	October to March

Source: INMET via the guidebook *Guia Unicard Unibanco Brasil*

## Flights to Brazil

There are no nonstop flights from Minneapolis/St. Paul to Brazil. However, only one change of planes is needed via an airline hub such as Atlanta, Houston, or Miami. Other gateways include Chicago, Dallas/Ft. Worth, New York/Newark, and Charlotte. In October 2010, Delta will inaugurate nonstop service between Detroit and São Paulo.

Note: Airport departure fees are included in the ticket prices.

## Tourist Visas and Fees

All American tourists must apply for tourist visas BEFORE arriving in Brazil. Minnesotans must apply through the Consulate General of Brazil in Chicago ([www.brazilconsulatechicago.org](http://www.brazilconsulatechicago.org)) first online and then by mail/in person. First of all, fill out the online visa application form as detailed and as complete as possible. Follow all their instructions to the letter; otherwise, your application will be rejected. There are,

for example, strict rules on acceptable photos for the tourist visa. The current tourist visa fee costs \$130 plus the \$20 handling fee for mailed applications. It must be paid by U.S. Postal Service Money Order. The Consulate General official will decide the duration of your visa on an individual basis. The longest visa allows multiple visits to Brazil within a five year period. Each visit cannot exceed 90 days. Allow enough time (at least 4 weeks) for the application process to be completed, especially for the months preceding peak travel times, such as New Year's Eve ("Réveillon") and Carnaval.

Upon arrival in Brazil, an immigration official will hand you an entry form called the "Cartão de Entrada/Saída." Don't lose it!! You have to hand this in when departing Brazil; otherwise, you'll risk a fine.

All tourists, upon arrival, must pay the Environmental Preservation Tax (In Brazil this is called the "Taxa de preservação ambiental" or the "TPA.") The tax is determined by the duration of your stay on the island. For 2010, the TPA for a one-day stay is R\$ 38.24. The TPA is R\$ 38.24 per day for up to four days and then a little less than that per day afterwards.

## Clothes & Packing

Blend in as much as possible. Observe what locals wear and buy similar clothes upon arrival. Reasonably priced clothing chains include Riachuelo and C&A. Avoid the "gringo" look. Don't wear white socks with sandals, for example. Also avoid souvenir T-shirts like "I Love Rio" and clothes that look too American, such as baseball caps, cargo shorts or American sports jerseys. Men usually don't tuck shirts into their pants. White socks go no higher than ankle level. American style swimwear, such as swimming trunks for men or one-piece bathing suits for women, aren't worn much in Brazil. Most men wear "sungas"--they are shaped like briefs--and most women prefer bikinis. Buy swimwear in Brazil to fit in better.

Most locals dress informally; however, shirts, shorts and pants should be neat and clean. Tennis shoes are fine to wear in Brazil.

You'll sweat a lot from the heat and humidity. Bring extra T-shirts and cool breathable clothes. In my opinion, jeans are too hot and impractical in Brazil's muggy weather.

Buy a pair of Brazilian flip-flops once you arrive in Brazil. They're very handy for visiting beaches and for visiting the tidal pools of Porto de Galinhas, for example.

The sun is very strong in Brazil. Sunscreen is essential. Unfortunately sunscreen is very expensive in Brazil. Consider bringing along sunglasses and a hat.

If you visit Fernando de Noronha, carry a small backpack/day pack to carry items such as your snorkeling mask, sunscreen, camera and bottled water. Although snorkeling masks can be rented in Brazil, it's better to bring your own to assure a good fit for the shape of your face.

## Money

The unit of currency in Brazil is the "real" (pronounced like "hay-OW") and the plural is "reais" ("hay-EYES"). The symbol is "R\$." As of May 19, 2010, US\$ 1 = R\$ 1,84 (Commas are used instead of decimal points in Brazil.)

There are no longer 1 centavo ("cent") coins. Although prices may be written as "R\$ 5,93" your change will be rounded to the nearest 5 centavos.

Not all Brazilian ATM's accept foreign cards. ATM's that accept foreign cards are usually found at the following banks: Banco do Brasil, Bradesco, and Banco Real. Many machines have English language instructions; however, they are not very detailed. For example, if the English directions tell you to insert and then pull out the card, don't do it rapidly. Otherwise, the transaction will be annulled. The Portuguese language directions, on the other hand, tell you to insert the card until you are told to withdraw the card. Be prepared to swipe your ATM card again after making your choices on the menu to confirm your identity. ATM's usually do not allow withdrawals between 10 p.m and 6 a.m. to avoid the risk of hold ups.

ATM's usually dispense bills with very large denominations, especially R\$ 100 banknotes. It is very difficult to change R\$ 50 and R\$ 100 banknotes into smaller denominations in stores, tourist attractions and some restaurants.

Whenever you exchange money, always ask for smaller banknotes. In Portuguese, for example, you could say, "Eu quero notas de dois, cinco e dez reais" (I want bills of two, five and ten reais.) or "Eu quero notas miúdas" (I want small bills.).

Fernando de Noronha has very few ATM's on the island. There are ATM's in the airport, and there is a bank in Vila dos Remédios. Bring along enough cash to last your entire stay on the island.

Like Japan and Italy, Brazil is very cash oriented. You may receive discounts when you pay cash for lodging, food and merchandise. Many merchants and owners of small inns prefer cash over credit cards because of the high credit card transaction fees they must pay.

Don't tip taxi drivers unless you round up. Most people tip porters in hotels and don't tip waiters.

## Language and Gestures

Most Brazilians speak only Portuguese. Learn a few key phrases and numbers in Portuguese before arriving. Try to avoid speaking Spanish, as many Brazilians don't speak or understand this language. Besides, speaking Spanish implies that Spanish is the same as Portuguese. They are not!

Do not use the American "OK" sign in Brazil. It is offensive, as it represents the anus. Instead, a "thumbs up" sign is used to indicate approval, to congratulate someone, to find out if someone is fine, to apologize to others.

## Food

The level of hygiene is very high in Brazil, so eating in restaurants and snack bars are safe. You will not have to worry about getting sick from raw vegetables or fruits. It is safe to drink the tap water; however, it doesn't taste good due to heavy chlorination. Buy bottled water.

Dining hours are late compared to English-speaking countries. Lunch is usually served between 11:30 a.m. and 1:30 p.m.; dinner, from 7 p.m. to 10 p.m. (or later).

Feijoada, Brazil's national dish, originated in Rio de Janeiro and is usually served on Saturdays.

Most restaurants tack on a live music fee or "couvert" onto your bill whenever there is a music performance during your meal.

Don't miss dining in a "churrascaria," a quintessential Brazilian experience. They feature lavish salad bars as well as various "all you can eat" grilled meats served "rodízio" style. That is, servers will meander the dining room with spits of meat to offer to diners. In Brazil, some Italian restaurants and Japanese restaurants, for example, also serve various dishes "rodízio" style--sushi, pizza, pasta.

Breakfasts are almost always included in the price of your lodging, no matter the type of accommodation. They're usually excellent and filling with offerings such as freshly squeezed tropical fruit juices, rolls called "pão francês," tropical fruit, coffee, cakes, cereal, milk, and so on.

For cheap snacks--in Brazil, "lanche" is a snack--try the ubiquitous "lanchonetes" (snack bars) or (especially in Rio) a "casa de sucos" (juice bar).

In Rio, try to visit a "Casas de sucos." They're juice bars at almost every major intersection in Rio. These fruit juice bars feature a litany of tropical juices, "vitaminas" (smoothies), sandwiches and healthy snacks.

I highly recommend trying "açai na tigela" ("açai in the bowl"), one of the highlights of a trip to Brazil! They are delicious and refreshing "smoothies" made of açai and guaraná syrup. You can also have sliced bananas, sliced strawberries, or granola placed on top of or blended in the "açai na tigela."

Buffet restaurants called "self service" are a great value and are everywhere. You pay by the kilo. After the employee weighs your plate of food, you will be given a consumption card on which he/she will record the price of drinks and of each trip to the buffet. Don't lose that card! You must present it to the cashier near the exit. Otherwise, you will have to pay a hefty penalty. Newer "self service" restaurants use a system of scanners and computerized bar codes.

Brazilians eat like Europeans. Don't transfer the knife between hands and keep the hands above the table. Sandwiches and finger foods are always eaten with a paper napkin to avoid direct contact with the skin. Eating with bare hands is bad manners in Brazil.

For a great book on Brazilian cuisine, read *Eat Smart in Brazil* by Joan Peterson.

## Lodging

For budget lodgings, consider hostels and pousadas (bed and breakfasts). In small budget lodgings, a proof of deposit in a bank account may be required, something that foreigners can't do. This is done to avoid the high fees associated with credit cards. Some owners will allow you to pay once you arrive, some won't. Many hostels and pousadas require you to pay up to 50% of the total cost if you book online. You pay the remainder upon checking in.

Some hotels charge a 5% "I.S.S." fee ("Imposto sobre serviços"). This usually covers services such as room cleaning and other hotel services. Most people tip the porters. There is also a 10% "Taxa de serviço" (service tax) tacked onto hotel bills.

If you stay longer than a week at a hotel, try asking for a discount.

Reserve lodging in advance for Fernando de Noronha. There aren't a lot of cheap options, and they are often booked way in advance. You will have to provide your lodging information upon arrival when filling out the entry forms. Consider packages combining flight, lodging and various activities to save money.

## Getting Around Brazil

Intercity buses are clean, inexpensive and efficient. Make reservations for long distance buses at least a day in advance, especially during peak travel times, such as weekends, holidays, and the period from December to February.

Brazil is larger than the contiguous United States, so flying saves valuable time. Foreign tourists have a choice among three airpasses:

### **Gol Brazil Airpass**

*Requirements:* Any roundtrip ticket to Brazil.

*Duration:* The pass lasts 30 days and starts on the first day you use the airpass.

*Number of Destinations ("Coupons") Allowed:* 1-9

Price:

<b>Number of Coupons</b>	<b>Price (US Dollars)</b>
1-4	532
5	672
6	792
7	912
8	1032
9	1152

### **Gol Northeast Airpass**

This pass covers 15 destinations in Northeastern Brazil and excludes Fernando de Noronha. Major destinations include São Luís, Fortaleza, Recife, Salvador and Porto Seguro.

*Requirements:* Any round trip ticket to Brazil

*Duration:* 30 days starting from the date of the first day of the airpass.

*Number of Destinations ("Coupons") Allowed:* 3-6

Price:

<b>Number of Coupons</b>	<b>Price (US Dollars)</b>
3	390
4	490
5	590
6	690

## TAM Brazil Airpass

*Requirements:* a round trip ticket to Brazil. This pass is cheaper for tourists who fly TAM Airlines to Brazil.

*Duration:* 30 days starting from the first day of the airpass

*Number of Destinations ("Coupons") Allowed:* 1-9

The pricing is rather complicated. The price of the pass depends on the category of your ticket. That said, the cheapest price for the pass is for 1-4 destinations and is as follows: US\$ 532 for tourists who fly TAM Airlines to Brazil, US\$ 639 for those who fly other airlines to Brazil.

Note: Fernando de Noronha is not covered by this pass.

## Transport Within Cities

Buses are very frequent; you will not need a timetable. Buses will not stop unless you signal the bus driver. Extend your right arm and point your index and middle fingers toward the street and move the wrist up and down to flag the bus driver to stop.

Every bus will have an employee near the turnstile known as a "trocador." You pay the bus fare to him/her. They make change; however, banknotes in small denominations are preferred. After paying, proceed through the turnstile. Always have enough change with you in case you need to use the bus.

The subways in São Paulo and in Rio are excellent and are called the "Metrô." Try to stay in a place that is near a subway station.

In São Paulo, a useful time and money saver is the "Bilhete único." This scannable plastic card allows you to store money onto it and allows you to ride the city buses and subways. You can buy them in a "Lotérica" near subway stations, for example. (A "lotérica" is a place that sells lottery tickets.)

A "radiotáxi" (You call in advance for these.) is preferred over a taxi that you flag. Ride taxis at night.

## Safety and Crime

Carry photocopies of your passport (preferably notarized) with you. Keep the real passport in a safe.

Carry small amounts of money with you when out and about, especially in cities with high crime rates (São Paulo, Rio, Salvador and Recife) and when on the beach.

Pay more for lodging in safer neighborhoods of cities with high crime rates. For example, stay near Avenida Paulista or in an upper middle class/wealthy area in São Paulo. For Rio de Janeiro, I recommend staying in Ipanema. If you're in the Recife area, stay in the Boa Viagem neighborhood of Recife or in Olinda.

Although more expensive, try to use a "radiotáxi". You must call this taxi in advance. They are safer, more honest, and less prone to cheating tourists, especially in touristy cities like Rio. Take taxis at night and avoid city buses at night if possible.

Hide your camera in a cheap local plastic shopping bag to avoid attracting thieves.

Use ATM's in banks, airports and shopping centers during daytime hours if possible.

## Telephone

Public phones require phone cards. You can buy these cards at newspaper stands, for example. Certain cyber cafés have phone booths where you pay after making your call.

## Sightseeing

In cities with high crime rates, book a walking tour with a local who knows the city well.

São Paulo offers a menu of free walking tours on Saturdays and Sundays called “TurisMetrô.” They meet at the Sé subway station. If there are enough English speaking tourists, they will form a separate tour group with an English-speaking guide on the spot. Visit Ibirapuera Park on weekends to people watch and to see the park come alive.

In Rio, visit Tijuca National Park on weekends and the “Centro” (downtown) on weekdays, as there are more people around and thus safer at those times. Visit Corcovado and Sugar Loaf around sunset on a clear day for fewer crowds and for spectacular views. Mornings tend to be overrun with tour groups, and the sun is very strong. Have flexible plans, since many attractions depend on good weather.

Destination	Priority	Minimum Stay
Fernando de Noronha	★★★★★	Four days. One full day for the “Ilhatur” (a tour of all the beaches of the island), one day for the boat tour that includes snorkeling while towed by a boat, a half day for the hike and for snorkeling at Atalaia Bay, one early morning to observe dolphins at the Bay of Dolphins. The rest of the time can be spent visiting beaches, scuba diving, or hiking.
Recife	★★★	One full day
Olinda	★★★★★	One full day
São Paulo	★★★	Three days. One day for central São Paulo. The second day to visit museums. The third day to visit Ibirapuera Park.
Rio de Janeiro	★★★★★	At least one week. Rio has too many things to see and do.

## Photography

Many parts of Brazil are hot and humid, so damaging condensation may form inside your camera when entering air conditioned rooms. To minimize this, place your camera in a sealed bag containing silica gel packets to “soak up” excess moisture.

Because of the risk of crime in the biggest cities, I recommend bringing a point-and-shoot camera instead of an SLR camera.

## Toilets

Do not put used toilet paper into the toilet. The plumbing cannot handle paper in the pipes. Put it in a trash can next to the toilet.

## Health

Please see the CDC website ([www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov)) for the most up to date travelers' health recommendations for Brazil.

The closer you are to the Equator, the stronger the sun will be and the higher the risk of sunburns. You will burn more easily in Brazil than in Minnesota. Sunscreen is essential and is much more expensive in beach resort areas like Porto de Galinhas or on islands such as Fernando de Noronha.

Brazilians take showers more than once a day due to the heat and humidity. Having a clean appearance and smelling good are of prime importance.

## People

Try to smile and laugh more in Brazil. Brazilians are some of the friendliest and warmest people in the world. Brazilians are very tactile and tend to touch each other's arm or back while conversing, for example. Body space is much closer between people in Brazil than in the United States. In addition, people tend to hug and kiss more often than Americans do. Unlike Uruguayans, Brazilian men do not kiss each other's cheeks, a gesture done between men and women or between women.

Try not to get angry. Brazilians are very laid back and love to smile. Getting angry is very bad form. You'll be treated much worse.

The "thumbs up" gesture is ubiquitous in Brazil. It means "OK." Don't use the American "OK" sign in Brazil; it is very offensive.

Read as much about Brazilian history, culture, music, society and government before visiting Brazil. There IS such a thing as a dumb question. Brazilians, for example, don't like people who confuse tango or salsa for Brazilian dances, who think that the national language of Brazil is Spanish, who think that the capital of Brazil is Buenos Aires, etc.

Brazilians are thrilled when you make an effort to communicate in Portuguese. Try to avoid speaking in Spanish if possible, as it implies that Portuguese and Spanish are the same languages. They are not! Besides, few Brazilians speak Spanish or English.

## Time Zones

Brazil has four time zones. Generally northern Brazil does not observe Daylight Savings Time, since it is near the Equator and has the same number of daylight hours each day of the year.

Here are the times for the destinations covered in my talk:

Note: UTC = Universal Time Coordinated = Greenwich Mean Time

<b>Destination</b>	<b>Standard Time (usually March-October)</b>	<b>Daylight Savings Time (usually from the 3rd Sunday in October to the 3rd Sunday in February)</b>
Fernando de Noronha	UTC-2 hours	not observed
Recife	UTC-3 hours	not observed
Rio de Janeiro	UTC-3 hours	UTC-2 hours
São Paulo	UTC-3 hours	UTC-2 hours

Note: Minneapolis/St. Paul's Central Standard Time (usually November to March) is UTC-6 hours; Central Daylight Time (March to October) is UTC-5 hours. As a result, São Paulo and Rio are two hours ahead of Minneapolis/St. Paul from March to October, and four hours ahead of Minneapolis/St. Paul from October to March.