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## GAME ON - BRAZIL BECKONS

I FIRST visited Brazil, a country that makes up half of South America, on a crackpot week-long itinerary that included daily flights ranging from three to five hours. Brazil's geography isn't an opt-out choice. Twelve of its major cities were showcased during the FIFA World Cup and getting around the sprawling nation - 825,000 square kilometres larger than Australia - is easier and more seductive than ever. If you are sorry you missed the final match at Rio's Maracana stadium, you still have two years up your sleeve to explore Brazil's amazing diversity, food and wine scene before the crowds descend again for the 2016 Olympics.

Beaches, Carnaval, cariocas and samba give Rio one of the most fantasy-soaked brand images in the world. Even though many of the hillside favelas have been "pacified", it's a smart strategy to stay in the posh Zona Sul district, including world-famous Copacabana and Ipanema beaches. Packed with bars and restaurants, notably in Lapa, Rio is also a magnet for extreme sport enthusiasts. Most tourists take the cable car to the peaks of Sugarloaf Mountain and Corcovado, topped by the iconic statue of Christ the Redeemer, but hundreds of rock climbers prefer to get to the summits the hard way.

Sao Paulo is the biggest city in South America and boasts a similar population to Australia - 22 million. The economic capital of Brazil, Sao Paulo is packed with cool bars and is the centre of New Brazilian cuisine. Wealth also buys culture (art exhibitions, theatres and concerts) and open space (dozens of parks).

Brazil's first capital city, Salvador, is as famous for its surrounding bay - Todos os Santos - as Rio. The capital of the state of Bahia, the city's World Heritage-listed old town pulls in the crowds. But South and North Americans also flock here to enjoy the longest stretch of coastline in Brazil, punctuated by the Costa do Sauipe, one of the most luxurious coastal resorts on the continent. The vibrant African-influenced cuisine is known

as *baianas de acaraje* and the signature dish is *moqueca* - a spicy seafood stew.

Like Sydney, Recife is an ocean-loving city of four million and the 9km long Boa Viagem beach is the longest urban seafront in Brazil. It's best to dive into the upmarket bars lining the crowded strip because shark attacks are frequent - more than double the global average. Recife Antigo (old town) is a safer bet, too, with all-hours bars and restaurants tucked into Dutch and Portuguese colonial buildings. The chef's name to note is Rivandro Franca of *Cozinhando Escondidinho*, who specialises in modern updates of the local cuisine based on yucca, goat and sun-dried meat.

Hemmed in by three of Brazil's greatest natural wonders - the Pantanal wetlands,

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the Amazon rainforest and the Cerrado savannah - Cuiaba is known as the Southern gate to the Amazon. Its relative isolation has preserved its Amerindian heritage, in spite of a booming economy which has studded the cityscape with shopping malls and office buildings. The local bars all claim they make the best *caipirinhas* in the country but *Chopao* is the place for *Rodizio de Escaldado* - a chicken and egg soup famed for its ability to soak up alcohol.

Like any planned city, Brasilia has attracted a lot of snide criticism. But, as locals constantly remind you, Brazil's capital is the only city built in the 20th century with a World Heritage listing. It's not a knee-jerk defence; much of the soaring architecture of the major government buildings is the work of Brazil's legendary star architect, Oscar Niemeyer, and resembles the set of a sci-fi movie. Grab

a \$2 chopp (beer) in the web of bars near the main uni or head for an upscale dinner in the Asa Sul district.

Most tourists come to Curitiba, the "Green Capital of Brazil", to board the Serra Verde Express train through the Atlantic rainforest. Polish, Italian and Japanese immigrants came here to avoid the heat and humidity of the coast. Several open-air markets filled with food stalls reflect the city's mixed European heritage and serve as feeding stations for the city's army of joggers.

With its large German-speaking community, the state of Rio Grande do Sul has a rich, upholstered feel. It's the spiritual home of Brazil's *gauchos* - so steak is mandatory. So is the beer, naturally, and the local *Coruja* brews are rated among Brazil's finest amber drops. A few hours from Porto Alegre is the Vale dos Vinhedos, the most prestigious wine-growing region in the country, and the Aparados da Serra national park, bisected by the spectacular *Itaimbezinho* Canyon.

Industrial strength mizzie repellent is a non-negotiable for a trip to Manaus. Once nicknamed the gaudiest city in the world for the mad spending sprees of its 19th century rubber barons, the no-expense-spared *Teatro Amazonas* opera house is a lasting legacy of the days when horses were "watered" with champagne. Located at the meeting point of two major tributaries of the Amazon River - the Rio Negro and Solimoes - Manaus is the jump-off spot for eco-tours up the largest blackwater river in the world by canoe or expensive clipper boat.

Book-ended by beaches, including the picture postcard *Ponta Negra* and *Genibapu*, Natal is a reef diver's paradise. The closest landfall to Europe, the capital of Rio Grande do Norte is enjoying a major tourist boom and is currently building the largest international airport in South America. Officially ranked as the safest city in Brazil, American tourists are also much in evidence. *Ponta Negra* is one long bar and restaurant crawl for people of all ages to enjoy live music performances from samba to *forro*.