

BRAZI L Minas Gerais

Minas Gerais is a treasure trove of culture, history, and enlightenment that will reward those who make the extra effort to explore the heart of Brazil. Written & Photographed by ELYSE GLICKMAN

A Gem Worth Discovering

razil is unquestionably one of Latin America's most complete travel destinations. While its beaches and fashion sensibilities entice lifestyle-driven travelers, it also draws active and athletic types with its many jumpingoff points for adventure travel and eco-tourism. Thanks to its intercontinental culinary heritage extending back a few centuries, its cities are hotbeds for innovation in gastronomy and mixology. Families will appreciate the many museums, parks, and attractions that present history, science, environmental concerns, and art with a sense of fun and playfulness.

That said, Brazil's complex identity and character, shaped by European, African, and indigenous influences, present beautifully within the state of Minas Gerais (General Mines) in the country's southeast region. Although the Brazilian heartland may be overlooked because of its land-locked location, English translations of the names of Minas Gerais' most essential cities provide clues about what this area offers. Capital Belo Horizonte (Beautiful Horizon) and colonial city Ouro Preto (Black Gold) assert that the state holds many historic and artistic treasures as well as a new understanding of Brazil waiting to be un-mined and shown off.

• Expanding one's horizons:

Belo Horizonte & vicinity

Although Belo Horizonte was established in 1897 as one of Brazil's first modern planned cities (BH, pronounced 'bay-ah-gah' by residents), the discovery of gold and precious elements drove the economy and growth of the region 200 years leading up to it. On my first visit in 2015, I viewed it through the lens of a native Chicagoan and Los Angeles resident, rooting for it to become as prominent and inviting as Rio de Janeiro and Sao Paulo on a Brazil travel itinerary. Eight years later, the construction sites I visited are now working museums and engaging attractions. More upwardlymobile neighborhoods, eclectic shopping areas, and restaurant districts have emerged, adding glamour often associated with Rio.

The city's Sunday morning "Feira Hippie" is not only a must for fashion and street food enthusiasts, but an opportunity to experience downtown BH as locals do while encountering up-andcoming designers and artists. Meanwhile, the Mercado Central de Belo Horizonte is another colorful place to mix with locals and support small businesses. While it has undergone several upgrades since 2015, it was nice to see that it remains a place of essential provisions shopping for residents and a go-to for souvenir shopping and quick, inexpensive bites. With so many raw and packaged regional ingredients on display, it's an excellent primer for dishes served at both traditional and contemporary chef-driven restaurants. The just-opened Centro de Referência do Queijo Artesanal (queijoecultura.com.br, opposite an outlet mall along one of the city's major freeways) is not easy to get to, but worth the effort. While the cheerful displays and discourse spell out Minas Gerais' cherished cheese production and traditions, visiting also supports the center's greater mission to provide cultural and vocational education to local kids and teens.

Praça da Liberdade (Liberty Square) is a perfect starting point for museum exploration, as the buildings and their interior design are as interesting as the content. This district doesn't just sit inside the heart of downtown Belo Horizonte. You could think of it as a necklace adorned with architectural jewels from the late 19th and 20th centuries placed on a bed of green velvet (the square's nicely maintained grass and gardens). These former government buildings, in turn, are upcycled into elegant but easy-to-navigate cultural enclaves, where each one tells a different part of the state's story through permanent and temporary installations, live performances, and interactive presentations.



Belo Horizonte Fashion Museum (MUMO) is housed in a historic 1914 building, hosting film screenings, talks, and exhibitions, all exploring the rich history of fashion. The recent free exhibition, "Alceu Penna – Inventando a Moda do Brasil," artistically showcased the talented miner's creative odyssey.

The Centro Cultural Banco do Brasil Belo Horizonte, built into a 1930s office building and fully renovated in 2009, features exhibits on film, music and design, as well as classes and workshops across six floors and 12,000 meters. The Museu das Minas e do Metal not only contains numerous displays of precious gems, minerals, crystals, and metals but weaves in elements of science, economics, and history to tell a more complete story about how mining defines the identity of the state and its people. The Memorial Minas Gerais Vale makes use of interactive technology, sensory environment, and educational activities to further define the culture, art, and history as they took shape between the 18th century and present day. The ornate Palácio da Liberdade, which housed governors until the mid-20th century, completes the museum circuit and reflects how outside influences from Europe shaped Brazilian tastes.

Although Rio de Janeiro is most associated with Brazilian fashion, the Belo Horizonte Fashion Museum (MUMO), built into an Edwardian-era church, treats fashion as a cultural asset through an intriguing collection of photographs, patterns, magazine spreads, illustrations, miniature clothing prototypes, and complete, original outflis. It is fitting that a current exhibition about Minas Geraisnative Alceu Penna is reminiscent of installations at the Christian Dior Museum in Paris. Like his French counterpart, he took on many roles as a fashion innovator, including graphic designer, journalist, illustrator, costume designer, stylist, and advertising specialist. Alongside the city's Central Station, the Arts and Labor Museum chronicles how the city, state, and overall economy were built through a collection of more than 2,500 pieces used from the pre-industrial period forward.





Xapuri sits at the confluence of the Xapuri and Acre Rivers, named after the Indian word "Chapury" for "river meeting." Located 12 kilometers northwest of BR-317, the town features quaint wooden houses and broad streets.

Although traffic makes it a challenge for visitors to travel into Belo Horizonte's residential areas, the Serra do Curral mountains and lush greenery not only enhance the many bike and hiking trails but also provide a dramatic backdrop enhancing several immersive and thought-provoking art experiences. A swath of areas within the Pampulha area showcase the work of architect Oscar Niemeyer, whose UNESCO heritage buildings (Museu de Arte da Pampulha, Saint Francis of Assisi Church, Dance House, and Iate Clube) became key city landmarks and brought it international attention during the 1940s and 50s. Restaurante Xapuri, tailor-made for a first-day meal, provides a flavorful and bold introduction to Minas Gerais cuisine, including grilled meats, stews, and sweets.

About 37 miles up the road, art and nature lovers will find paradise by way of the Inhotim Institute in Brumadinho. Installations are scattered

around 5,000-acre grounds and accessible through walking paths and shuttles around the park. The green spaces integrate the best aspects of wild and landscaped gardens, and given Inhotim's size and scope, some may want to commit two days to the park. Much of the exhibits are family-friendly and interactive, including a trio of now-iconic multicolored Volkswagens and the Sonic Pavilion, bringing the sound of middle earth to the surface. Some of the more provocative installations, especially those from Brazilian artists Cildo Meireles, Tunga, and photographer Claudia Andujar stir important conversation on environmental protection and human rights that transcend social changes in Brazil.

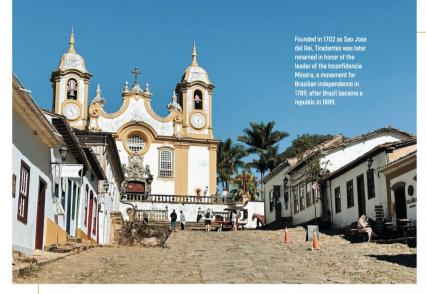
• The road to a

National and natural identity

When driving to and from Ouro Prêto, you have no choice but to take the scenic route through hills, ravines, and mountain ranges because of the historic and natural treasures the roads roll past. Congonhas do Campo is home to the Church of Our Lady of the Rosary, and UNESCO World Heritage site Santuário do Bom Jesus de Matosinhos. Other small towns worth a stop include Mariana (the oldest in the state) and Diamantina, also rich in 18th-century architecture and ornate churches with baroque and rococo features. Tiradentes, meanwhile, merits an overnight stay. While its colonial town center also exudes tradition and charm, it feeds into the artists' community of Bichinho. The roads linking the two towns are lined with art galleries, boutiques, showrooms with hand-crafted furniture and home goods and quirky public art venues (like Casa Torta). However, an absolute can't-miss in Tiradentes is the gallery of renowned contemporary artist Oscar Araripe, who was prepping for a major exhibition launching in November 2023 at press time.

Bearing its own UNESCO World Heritage status, Ouro Prêto is often described as a "living museum," and lives up to that reputation through its fantastic jewelry stores, crystal shops, and many more opulent 18th-century churches (such as São Francisco de Assis). However, a visit to the Museum of the Inconfidência will put everything else you may learn about Minas Gerais into perspective. The building itself is an interesting paradox, as it served as a foundry, treasury, and a prison for members of the Inconfidência who led a failed rebellion for Brazilian independence from the Portuguese crown. Beyond the sweeping views of Ouro Prêto's landscape, the museum is curated to juxtapose the ambitions of the crown in the "New World" with the prisoners' sacrifices.

Like a hearty Brazilian stew, Minas Gerais' foundation is rich in minerals (gold, diamonds, iron, precious and semi-precious stones) and the contributions of the diverse populations that nourished the growth of the country. Although political turmoil, wars, and human rights issues color Brazilian history, the way Minas Gerais' cultural institutions and natural marvels are presented add up to a fresh new way to look at Brazil...as well as compelling parallels to California's own Gold Rush history.









Tiradentes and his men were betrayed and executed even before their mission began. Today, the town remains a peaceful place, adorned with cobbled streets and splendid colonial architecture.

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