A Great Escape

Brazil offers plentiful twisties, good value and drivers who wave two-wheelers through

by Steve Larsen

Crystal clear, brisk spring mountain air supplies the perfect lens for the chalet rooftops dotting the hillside behind the Serra de Estrela hotel, with its traditional Swiss chalet style. Strolling along cobblestone streets after a hard day of mastering twisties and a draft of German dark beer served in traditional mugs in this Alpine-style village, you sigh, “Ah, European splendor!” But wait, it’s late May and it’s full— not spring—and not Switzerland—but Brazil. Campos do Jordão to be specific, a popular Swiss village high in the mountains of São Paulo State, on the other side of the equator where in May days get shorter and the air cools. This isn’t the first surprise on a trip to Brazil.

Davis Bales, the boyish 40-year-old owner/operator of Brazil Motorcycle Adventures, delights in surprising people with the unexpected in Brazil. One common misconception is about its size. The entire land area of the US is only slightly larger than Brazil—compare our 9,631,420 sq. km with Brazil’s 8,547,403 sq. km. And for the motorcyclist, Brazil offers the best surprise—some of the most incredible motorcycle roads on the planet.

History Lesson

As Bales will be more than happy to explain, in 1500, Portuguese navigator Pedro Alvares Cabral, on route to India, landed along the northeastern coastline, claiming the land for Portugal—and the 300-year Portuguese era began. Adventurers and fortune-seekers poured in. When Portugal took control in 1580, Brazil was generating significant profits from (slave labor) sugar plantations.

Coffee soon replaced sugar as the big money maker. Immigrants arrived from all over Europe, seduced by the lure of new land and the aroma of coffee. In the 1890s, the emperor fled from a coup financed by coffee growers. In 1985, the military regime ruling Brazil ceded its power to civilian rule—breaking free from a series of unpopular coups, corrupt leaders, and constant military intervention. Today Brazil is famous for the Amazon River, beaches such as Copacabana and Ipanema, Carnival in Rio, great soccer teams, and an amazing diversity that makes it one of the most significant and important countries in the world.

Roads in Brazil

Most endearing to motorcyclists on a tour with Davis Bales are the roads and the riding. As a cell phone tower site spotter, he toured thousands of miles of Brazilian roads for years. His extensive scouting and regular bike travel continues, resulting in fascinating destinations linked by extraordinary roads. On this trip, 80% to 85% of the roads would qualify as “twisties”—assuming your “twisty” definition includes high speed sweepers as well as hairpins. Our second day is a good example. We begin our 400km jaunt from the port village of Parati, settled in the 17th Century. The first 50km cover a very tight, super-technical two-lane blacktop. We wind up and down steep hills and pass lush vegetation and quaint farms. Road surface quality is top-notch. A single decreasing-radius turn comes as a surprise, but sharply pushing the big BMW 1150GS down proves it handles far greater lean angles than one would initially expect. Nevertheless it does get our hearts going on this early morning.

After crossing the green, tropical floor of two vast valleys, the road evolves into several hours of long sweeping turns. Following lunch we begin a 5000’ climb. We are on a divided highway in places, but more often a super wide four-lane highway, well-marked to guide the high-speed traffic amongst stunning peaks. Hang-gliding dare-devils drift above us, threatening to distract us from the task at hand. Several clicks later, stopped at an overlook, we look down on the gliders’ launch point. We arrive in Campos do Jordão, as a two-level boulevard lined with parks and businesses narrows to cobblestone streets that lead to our hotel. A typical day.

Surface Quality

Brazil’s road surfaces, on this tour, were on par with most two-lane blacktop roads in the US. This would put them slightly below the impeccable two-lane blacktop roads in New Zealand and sparsely populated states like Arizona, New Mexico, Utah and parts of Colorado, but much better than many roads in the north and central part of the United States. Roughly half the roads on this tour are in very good condition. Another 25% are older with plenty of blacktop patching, but still very drivable. Twenty percent are older still, with rougher patches and unexpected potholes of varying sizes that keep you on your toes. The remaining 5% are in towns, largely cobblestone or brick, with a wide range of quality, and often with greater grade changes than anywhere in the US, requiring the rider to go slowly and always be on guard.

Brazilian Road Manners

The attitudes and actions of those with whom you share the road always impact how much fun you’ll have on a ride. Here, Brazil was unbelievably good, at least outside of major cities. For the most part, car and truck drivers conduct themselves in a way an American motorcyclist can only dream about. Imagine exiting a small town and seeing 14 to 15 cars ahead of you, all stacked behind a slow-moving water truck as it begins its laborious, slow ascent up the side of a mountain. You know the roads are double yellow all the way to the top and with luck, three or four cars may make it around
Right: Cobblestone streets in Brazil’s cities closely follow the contours of the land, resulting in many San Francisco-steep streets.

Far right: Coffee and chocolate aficionados will love Brazil. Here are coffee beans several steps before being served at your local Starbucks (inset).

the truck in the next 20 miles, much less you getting a shot to pass. But as you approach the slow-moving tail of the snake, the end car suddenly pulls to the right, as does the car in front of it, making way for you to squeeze by on the left without crossing the double-yellow centerline. As you begin to pull past, other cars do the same, and in minutes you are at the rear of the truck, who after a bit, flips on its right turning signal, indicating even though you can’t see around, it is safe to pass. This happens in Brazil. Cars routinely see you approaching in their mirrors and pull right, often driving on the shoulder so you can pass.

There is an overtaking or passing “implicit contract” in place, where all participants conspire to keep everyone moving—most convenient when you want to get around a slow-moving car or truck. This also means that you need not freak out if someone in the oncoming lane pulls out to take a peek, sees that it’s only you (a narrow motorcycle) and pulls out into “your” lane to pass. They trust you to move over a smidgen (or to momentarily travel on the shoulder) so as to let them get by.

It’s not as hard as it sounds, and the “rights” in this contract do not seem to be taken inappropriately or without consideration. Someone will not pull instantly in front of you, giving you no room to figure out what to do. When someone took my lane, it was always well ahead of me, giving me plenty of time to plan what to do.

**Attitude Adjustment**

Brazilians (drivers and police) have a different attitude toward traffic laws from Americans. While they drive on the same side of the road as in the US, speed limits are looked on as suggestions or guidelines, versus “laws” which, if broken, result in a fine or other penalty.

While police may write you a ticket for speeding in the countryside, it seems highly unlikely. They appear most interested in keeping speeds down around cities where there is the most traffic and potential for accidents, vehicular damage, and worse, hurt pedestrians.

**Speed ‘traps’**

In-city “slow down” efforts are not radar traps or threats of fines. Brazil makes extensive use of speed bumps, referred to as *bustas da suspensão*—suspension busters. But there are no tricks; each speed bump is marked with a large yellow sign with the graphic of a speed bump and a large arrow pointing at it. The bump is often painted with bright yellow stripes and occasionally there will be signs leading up to it at 500m, 200m and 100m, with the same yellow warning sign. The practical effect is everyone tip toes through towns at modest speeds.

Once out of city limits, they drive like hell. Well, that’s a bit strong. People drive as fast as they can—given conditions. Those conditions include their vehicle, the weather, the posted “suggested” speed limit, driving ability, and vehicle capabilities. In addition, in the country, cars and trucks, for the most part, realize motorcycles are going to be faster, so the attitude seems to be, “let’s help and not hinder the natural order of things.”

**Dogs and DNA**

Bales speculates that the motorcycle chasing gene was bred out of Brazilian dogs. Brazil, like many other non-US countries, do not insist that dogs all belong on leashes. But this is not a problem. Dogs in Brazil do not even look up to see motorcycles, or cars, for that matter. Early in Brazil’s history, nearly all bikes came equipped with crash bars called *mata cachorros* to protect the engine. Protruding out either side of the bike, they had a rather devastating impact on a dog running at a motorcycle. It appears to me Bales may be right.

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**Tour of Brazil**

**Approximate Tour Distance:**

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<th>0km</th>
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<th>400km</th>
<th>600km</th>
<th>800km</th>
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**Day 1:** Rio de Janeiro Arrive in Rio. Rest and sightseeing. Stayed at the Ipanema Plaza Hotel and dined at a famous Rio restaurant featuring non-stop, all you can eat, meat of every variety.

**Day 2:** Parati, 260km Leaving Rio we hug the coast, spectacular views. End at the port village of Parati; settled in the 17th Century and a UNESCO World Heritage site with dinner in the historic village.

**Day 3:** Campos do Jordão, 560km More scenic coastal riding. Afterward, we begin the ascent to an Alps-style village situated at 5000 feet. Though the region boasts no Germanic heritage, the architecture suggests otherwise.

**Day 4:** Tiradentes, 965km We cross São Paulo state’s most breathtaking mountain region into the neighboring state of Minas Gerais. Fun, twisty riding to the 18th Century town of Tiradentes, perhaps Brazil’s most charming and well-preserved historic village.
**Food and Sleep**

Brazll is filled with natural beauty. It has verdant forests, towering mountains and awe-inspiring beaches. Accommodations on this Brazil Motorcycle Adventures tour were more than adequate for my tastes and, most of the time, absolutely incredible. Most nights we stayed in higher-end hotels and resorts, each with unique character. On two occasions, we stayed off the beaten path at sites of major historic significance, with smallish rooms and tiny baths. Those accustomed to nothing but five-star luxury might pause, but for me and everyone on this trip, they were delightful.

One of the most attractive aspects of riding in Brazil is the seasons are reversed from the northern hemisphere. My ride in late May/early June was during Brazil’s fall. We had sunshine every day and only about an hour of light rain in eight days of riding—hardly enough to get wet. The air was clear and refreshing, the leaves were turning, and the days were getting shorter. So, when it’s stormy and cold in the northern part of the US, book a ride in Brazil and you should be in heaven.

Brazil is two to four hours ahead of Mountain Time most of the year. It’s a rough nine-hour flight from Houston or Miami on Continental or American. My coach fare was $950 (plus fees) roundtrip from San Francisco as of this writing. You do need to get a visa in advance, which is pretty straightforward. It costs $65.

**Who Should Go**

As much as I’d like to recommend Brazil for novice riders, I can’t, at least not this particular route. Bales tells me he can and does tailor routes for less experienced or less intense riders, but this one is not it. While the riding itself is not particularly difficult, there are several technical aspects (one lasting nearly two hours) where a high degree of concentration must be maintained constantly. There are also a couple of days with over 400km of riding. You ride every day and total mileage topped 2300km by my calculations. Moreover, occasional (mostly in town) hazards (like wet cobblestones at night or sharing narrow pedestrian bridges with foot traffic) at the end of a long ride would stress novice riders. However, if you are confident in your riding skills and have pushed yourself on successive long days, I can’t think of better riding anywhere.

**Value for the Real (Brazilian dollar)**

Compared with other vacation options, however, this one is a significant value. Eight full days of riding are, included in this “Taste of Brazil” package. The $4000 price tag includes nine nights of hotel (single occupancy) with breakfasts, nine dinners, airport transportation and bike rental with full insurance. You also have a chase van that carries luggage, spare parts and an extra bike. Included in the price is an extremely personable and knowledgeable tour guide, with a group. Gasoline and tolls, including entrance fees to the national parks and Corcovado (Christ Mountain)

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### Itinerary

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<tr>
<th>Day</th>
<th>Distance</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Day 5</td>
<td>Ouro Preto, 1150km</td>
<td>A short fun ride to the 18th Century city of Ouro Preto with a lunch stop at an 18th Century Basilica. Our hotel in Ouro Preto, a historic home converted into an inn, overlooks a beautiful church.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Day 6</td>
<td>Monerath, 1580km</td>
<td>The ride takes us winding across the mountains of Minas Gerais and into the greener mountains and coffee plantations of the state of Rio de Janeiro. We spend the night and dine on a small horse farm along the route called Rancho Meyer.</td>
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<td>Day 7</td>
<td>Armação de Búzios, 1860km</td>
<td>We ride among spectacular mountain rock formations and end at sea level. We pass Macae, Brazil’s petroleum capital with abundant offshore oil reserves. We stay in Búzios, Brazil’s most famous beach resort, thanks to Brigitte Bardot.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Day 8</td>
<td>Ituapava, 2200km</td>
<td>We start at sea level for the first third of the day, then climb the mountains again. The last third of the ride takes us through the “Switzerland of Brazil” and the most awesome twists of the trip. We spend the night in Ituapava.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Day 9</td>
<td>Rio de Janeiro, 2320km</td>
<td>Returning to Rio, we visit Petropolis, built in the 19th Century as the summer residence of the royal family. We arrive back in Rio early enough to enjoy the famous beaches, the recreation of choice.</td>
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**The Fine Print**

Pricing: Depends on model. BMW F650GS is $4000 per person/single occupancy, an R1150GS/RS is $4200 per person/single occupancy, and an R1150RT is $4400 per person/single occupancy. Passenger sharing a room with a rider is $1200.

Pre-trip deposit: $1500 per rider and $400 per passenger in advance. Balance due on arrival.

Included: Nine nights hotel with breakfasts, nine dinners, airport transfers, tour guide on motorcycle and support/chase vehicle with trailer, motorcycle use with full insurance ($30000 deposit for damage deductible), gasoline, tolls, daily and full route maps, Corcovado (Christ Mountain) and Sugar Loaf park entrance fees, shirts and gift bags.

Not included: Airfare, personal travel protection insurance, lunches, snacks, drinks (both alcoholic and non-alcoholic), tips, and any traffic violations incurred.


are also included. You also get a terrific gift bag which you’ll want to use to carry gear forever and a shirt commemorating the tour.

Comparing this with other vacation options is difficult. The all-inclusive nature of a motorcycle tour makes a cruise ship vacation a close cost comparison target. A typical cruise will run between $400 to $500 per day, although optional excursions quickly push you well beyond your starting price—and this motorcycle vacation. The per-day cost of this Brazilian adventure is $440 per person, double occupancy. Bringing a passenger adds just $1200, or a $133 per-day bump. At the higher end, a 10-night Radisson Seven Seas cruise, mid-class accommodations, runs $5595 or about $100 more per day than the Brazil motorcycle trip. If you take the “best fare” for the first person, there is no discount for the second passenger, so now the cruise is substantially more expensive. In both instances you pay for your own airfare, alcoholic drinks and tips.

Brazil is a terrific destination and I especially recommend rounding up a few friends to make it a group ride. Brazil Motorcycle Adventures features a variety of late model, low-mileage BMW motorcycles, well-suited to the riding styles and experience of their clients and the roads of Brazil. Groups are typically small, no more than seven or eight riders, on great roads with superb accommodations and excellent food. Davis Bales arguably knows more about Brazilian roads and how that relates to motorcyclists than anyone else on the planet. Combine that with his passion for the history, food, and people of Brazil, and it’s hard not to move this one high up on your “must ride before you die” list.