

river deep MOUNTAIN HIGH

Once the centre of Brazil's diamond-mining region, Chapada Diamantina National Park, with its underground caves, soaring plateaus and diverse ecosystems, is now on the travel radar. Get there before everyone else does, writes **John Malathronas**.

Photography by **John Malathronas**

Caption Lapa Doce

Sometimes you can count biodiversity by the roadkill. Within the first hour our bus out of Salvador swerves to avoid hitting the carcass of a small rhea, followed soon by what I guess are the remains of a margay. Discounting a couple of armadillos and a creepy vampire bat that lies dead by the snack bar at Itaberaba where we break up the journey, what raises the biggest roar is the maned wolf lying by the side of the road after Seabrá. At least the black urubu vultures circling above had prepared us for the sight.

It's six long hours from Salvador to Chapada Diamantina, the Diamond Highlands of Brazil, and roadkill breaks the monotony of the featureless Brazilian *sertão* (hinterland). Occasionally, we encounter the odd farmhouse with concrete walls and a corrugated roof. Dogs bark while chickens cackle loudly and avoid our bus just in time. They must have clocked what happened to their less-nimble brethren.

I'm heading to Lençóis, the gateway to the Chapada Diamantina National Park, whose remoteness and lack of infrastructure are its biggest assets. Backpackers are slowly discovering this forgotten corner of the world and the adventure operators who have sprung up can't find enough tour leaders to cope.

When I arrive, I immediately seek out Esmeraldo, a veteran with shoulder-long white hair and one of the most experienced Chapada guides. He shares with me a few beers on my first night out in Lençóis.

"Three days?" he says and shakes his head when he hears how long I plan to stay. "It takes three days to hike to the valley of Capão! You can go trekking, canyoning, climbing, biking, caving, swimming – but you have to stay for a week or so."

He teams me up with Nils, a sensible, sociable Swede who is snacking on cassava chips a few tables back. He's here for three days, too.

The next day Nils and I are up early for a jeep ride with Esmeraldo to pick up the trail to Lapa Doce, the third largest cave in Brazil. Not only does the landscape change after every turn, but so, it seems, does the ecosystem. We leave the shadow of the last vestiges of the thick Atlantic rainforest and enter the distinctive woodland savanna of the Cerrado. Here canopy cover is patchy and the sun hits us like a rock.

Esmeraldo points at trees we haven't heard of before: this one here with the large trunk is a mulungu, whose bark has been used for centuries as a sedative. That one is an aroeira – its resin smells of soap and the essential oil is used in cosmetics. As for the one over yonder whose leaves form a tuft at the top – that's an amburana honey tree, whose seeds are crushed to give tobacco a sweet perfume.

"As for this one," Esmeraldo says touching a strong, sturdy tree, "this one is a *braúna*. The best hardwood you'll find. Used in construction everywhere in Brazil, 'cos it's termite-resistant."

When we finally reach the cave entrance, Esmeraldo dons a dust mask. Why? Because, unlike most caves, Lapa Doce is not wet, slippery and cool, but dry, sandy and warm. Its floor is covered with fine silica particles that float when disturbed.

Nils is, not unreasonably, worried.

"You're both OK," says Esmeraldo. "It's us guides who come here frequently that need protection. The dust can cause lung problems."

But he still gives us a form to sign our rights away.

Despite being dry, the cave has stalactites, formed during the wet season that lasts for six months. They are thin and slightly crooked because of a faint-yet-permanent breeze we can only just perceive on our skin. The dimensions are staggering: you could fit a cruise boat in the first chamber and still have space to turn it around. The soft floor muffles our steps and magnifies the pervading stillness. Deep in the cave's innards, rusty irrigation water from the farmland above

has caused its most memorable sight: a curtain of stalactites white on one side and dark red on the other, like a bleeding wound.

East of Lapa Doce, a new ecosystem merges with the Cerrado: the Caatinga, which brings to mind the chaparral of the American West. The vegetation is arid lowland scrub, while the soil is poor and acidic, giving rise to

oases whose waters are as transparent as cellophane. Seven or so kilometres later, we reach Pratinha (Little Silver). It's not really a lake but the mouth of a submerged river flowing out of a cavern decorated by xique-xique cacti, shaded by lianas and framed by water lilies. The river continues inside the cavern where you can snorkel underground, following a guide boat through a narrow channel. It costs extra, but it would, wouldn't it?

Nils opts for snorkelling, while I lie in the sun outdoors and refresh myself in the lake. When he emerges, his skin full of goosebumps the size of my nipples, I know I made the correct decision.

"The water is icy cold and dark – you can't see a thing," he says with a disappointed expression. "But I've learned something interesting." He dives in the lake and emerges with a handful of sediment. "Look closer," he tells me.

I rub my fingers in the sand. It's white and brittle.

"It's dead mollusc shells," he explains. "They live so far inside that

“Deep in the cave’s innards, rusty irrigation water from the farmland above has caused its most memorable sight: a curtain of stalactites white on one side and dark red on the other, like a bleeding wound.”



The short but strenuous climb to the top of Pai Inácio.



The view from the top of Pai Inácio.



Lencóis, Chapada Diamantina's gateway city, after dark.



Caption Chapada trekking



Natural jacuzzi action
at Serrano waterholes.

“Here the Sincorá range that forms the backbone of the park ends in solitary wind-eroded outcrops, each one an island with its own ecosystem. Indeed, nature has built a veritable Japanese rock garden at our feet.”

no one has ever found a live one yet. They're washed out of the depths of the cave when they die.”

The next day's hike is at the northern tip of the park. Around us are large craggy domes. We are aiming for the peak of Pai Inácio, the picture-postcard of the Chapada.

It's a short and strenuous near-vertical climb to the top, but the eagle's-eye view from the summit is worth it. The Sincorá range that forms the backbone of the park ends in solitary wind-eroded outcrops, each one an island with its own ecosystem. Indeed, nature has built a veritable Japanese rock garden at our feet. Each boulder is mottled with multi-coloured lichen, while bromeliads have taken

shelter in every crack and depression. Plants here have waxy leaves to reduce evaporation and hardy roots that make the best out of the thinnest topsoil imaginable.

The careful hike down takes longer than the trek up. Sweaty and thirsty, we order juice at a mobile canteen. The trees of the Cerrado are thin and frequently stunted, their leaves slight and plentiful, and their fruit undersized and tart. There are the old supermarket faithfuls: mango, banana, coconut and papaya. But umbú? The size of a kiwi and with the skin of a smooth lime, this fruit has greenish-yellow juice that tastes like a sweeter version of grapefruit. I imagine it mixed with gin and order a second one.

We pick up the trail by Rio Mucugezinho, a river that crosses the park, with water the colour of tea. There is no trail other than the riverbank, necessitating climbing over large boulders, jumping across rocky slabs and negotiating tricky bogs under a gallery forest. We are followed by the screeches of a marmoset family we hear more than see. Every upwards glance is a sign for them to scamper quickly to the canopy. When we reach a bathing spot with a sizeable crowd of swimmers they disappear. But no, it's not because they're afraid of people. As Esmeraldo explains, this lucrative location is the home of a rival marmoset clan. These guys are much less circumspect, hanging from the branches of the trees trying to spot discarded biscuits.

Another 20 minutes and we reach the Poço do Diabo (Devil's Pool) where the Rio Mucugezinho forms a small cascade – if 20 metres is small for you. Nils and I jump in feet first, swim to the falls and let the current thump our shoulders for an environmentally friendly hydromassage. The water is cold and works wonders on our aching muscles. We are tired with satisfaction fatigue, for our bodies are responding to exertion with a heavy dose of adrenaline.

That night, exhausted, I drink Nils under the table. Months later, I find out that I made him miss his early bus to Salvador.

I spend my last day in Lençóis walking around the town, taking in its imposing, diamond-baron palaces, many of them now neglected and decomposing under the tropical sun. I end up making the short trek to the Serrano waterholes – shallow rock pools where the constant swirling movement of the Lençóis River turns them into natural jacuzzis. I am the only gringo there, but have visions of a future spa right by that copse of trees on my left. It's going to call itself an ecolodge because it will be built from local, termite-resistant braúna tree. But make sure you beat the spa there. ☒



GET THERE

LAN Airlines flies to Salvador from Sydney via Santiago and São Paulo with prices starting from AU\$2640 return. www.lan.com

Azul has flights between Salvador and Lençóis three times a week, with fares starting at AU\$110 return.

voeazul.com.br

Alternatively, Real Expresso runs four buses a day to Lençóis from AU\$30 return.

www.realexpresso.com.br



STAY THERE

There is a wide range of accommodation at Lençóis, although the hostels are rather basic. The Swiss-owned and managed Vila Serrano lies on a small hill overlooking Lençóis and offers quiet, superbly furnished doubles from about AU\$125.

www.vilaserrano.com.br

A cheaper alternative closer to the centre is Pousada Raio do Sol, with doubles from about AU\$70.

www.pousadaraioadesollencois.com.br



TOUR THERE

The number of adventure companies in Chapada Diamantina is increasing by the year, but Esmeraldo's agency, Vertical Trip Adventures, is one of the oldest and most reliable in town. www.verticaltrip.com.br

For hardened hikers, Extreme EcoAdventure offers some exclusive treks, including the 'Big Six' waterfalls hike, to the more remote areas of the park.

www.extremeecoventure.com.br

