

GENERAL INFORMATION - STATE OF MARANHÃO

A land for those in search of the best vacations, with several options for leisure, history, beaches and many festivals. That is what Maranhão is like. It has the second longest coastline among all the states in the country. And the historical center in its capital preserves more than three thousand buildings of the 18th and 19th centuries. There are also the rhythms that go from the folk performance of the Bumba-meu-boi to the reggae. One should not hesitate if invited by a maranhense to dance by day light in one of the parks spread throughout the city, surrounded by large old colonial style houses, or at the cafes by the beach. Accepting that invitation ensures a good time in this enchanted land. The capital of the state, São Luís, has the same name of the island where it is located, midway along the coastline of the state of Maranhão. The climate in the city is tropical, warm and semi-humid, with fresh and constant winds that blow from July to December. Heavy rainfalls the rest of the year make the temperature agreeable during the period which the maranhenses (the inhabitant of the state of Maranhão) call the winter. São Luís was founded in 1612 by the Frenchman Daniel de La Touche, the Senhor de La Ravardière. It was named after the Young King Louis XIII of France. The village was supposed to be a base for the Equinoctial France, but the dream did not last more than two years: Portugal expelled the invaders of the colony and recovered possession of the Grande Island, as it was known by the Tupinambá indians. Later, the Dutch also invaded the island but did not resist very long either.

ARQUITECTURE AND SHOPPING

Being a port by the river and the sea, the island has been an important farming, commercial, and export center during part of the 18th and 19th centuries. One of the strongest marks of that period can be seen in the urban and architecture characteristics, which have been preserved to this day as one of the main attractions of São Luís. Narrow slopes made of old cobblestone lead to alleys and squares where there are several old two-story houses decorated inside and outside with glazed tiles imported from Europe or Macau, the Portuguese colony in Asia. One of the districts that best represents São Luís is Praia Grande, in the lower section of the city. In that area the richest traders built their houses - the ground floor was a storage room for the dry and wet goods store. The market in Praia Grande, in front of the Largo do Comércio is a feast for good taste. There, one can find the tiquira, a strong and sweet brandy made of manioc, which is typical of Maranhão; dry fish that resemble codfish; a great variety of fruit such as the açaí (or juçara), the cupuaçu, the oil of babaçu palm, several desserts and regional liqueurs. The historical center of São Luís is occupied by private and public offices. The main shopping Street in the city is Rua Grande (Large Street). The largest department stores, however, are located down Praça João Lisboa (João Lisboa Park). In the district of Renascença, the new area of the town, the shopping malls offer elegant clothes, imported products, food and leisure. **BEACHES AND SIGHTSEEING**

The nearest beach to downtown São Luís, located four kilometers north of the city, is Ponta d'Areia, with the ruins of Saint Anthony Fortress dated in the 17th century and visited by the largest number of people. Youngsters and surfers prefer the São Marcos beach, where there are many cafes and restaurants. It was named after the fortress which has an old light that is still working up to this day. Calhau Beach, just like São Marcos, is located along Avenida Litorânea (Litoranea Avenue); it is known for its sand dunes and by the night options it offers. Those who enjoy practicing windcar take advantage of the strong winds in the area of Olho d'Água, which is a beach surrounded by dunes, hills and crags. Jet-skiing is practiced on Praia do Meio (Do Meio Beach) and the campers usually look for the beach called Caolho. A tour through the Capital of Maranhão includes fountains, parks, museums and churches. The metropolitan Cathedral or See Church was built in the 17th century in Baroque style. Its high altar has been declared a Historical Heritage. The church of São José do Desterro, built in that same century, was the first to be built in the state of Maranhão. During the Dutch invasion it was torn down but rebuilt later by the town residents. Those who go to the Igreja dos Remédios, an example of stylized gothic architecture, may take the opportunity to visit Gonçalves Dias Square, named after that important poet from Maranhão. The square is also known as Largo dos Amores, a place where lovers may meet to watch a beautiful landscape at sunset. The Deodoro Square is the stage for the artistic, political and religious movements of the city. Power is concentrated around Dom Pedro II Square, where the main public buildings are located: the City Hall, the Cathedral, The Episcopal Palace and the Palácio dos Leões (Lion's Palace), former seat of the state government and now a cultural center. The cultural symbol of São Luís is the Arthur Azevedo Theater, one of the oldest, most traditional and famous in the country. The ludovicenses (residents of the capital) are very proud of that theater, which was inaugurated in 1817 and called Teatro União, a reference to the inclusion of Brazil in the United Kingdom of Portugal and Algarves, in 1815. The present name was a homage paid to the playwright from Maranhão, Arthur Azevedo (1855-1908). After facing many crises, the theater was restored between 1991 and 1993. Historical survey, modernization of the stage, restoration of the area of the audience and construction of anexes have transformed the theater into an adequate space for opera shows, ballets and drama performances, comparable with the most important theaters in the world. There are 750 seats, a stage 15 meters deep by 12 meters of open scene, three elevators for scenic effects and orchestra, besides the most up-to-date technical resources. **FISH STEW AND MINIATURES**

A mark in the cookery of Maranhão is the abundance and the variety of the fish and mollusks found mainly in the dish called peixada maranhense and in the shrimp stew. The most typical dish is the arroz de cuxá (cuxá rice), eaten with fried fish, shrimp pie or mollusks. It is usually eaten with vinegar cruet, ginger and fine dried flour. The boiled and stewed dishes are prepared by the cook from Maranhão with ingredients that give an African and Indian touch to the meals: okra, sweet potato, oil and milk from the babassu palm, taioba (variety of taro with edible leaves), and many others. Porridges, farofas (Brazilian dish made with manioc flour) and rice with bacon are some of the most common side dishes. Here vatapa and caruru, two popular typical dishes made with seafood, originally from Bahia, are also popular, but were incorporated to the menu in Maranhão with some differences, mainly that of being less spicy. Bacury, banana, murici, guava and other kinds of fruit give origin to candied desserts, which are very popular. The sorbets, tapioca cakes,

manioc, corn, rice, and others are also important part of the menu in Maranhão. The creativity of the cookery in the state also pleases those who appreciate alcoholic drinks: there are liqueurs of a thousand kinds, wines to drink with the fish and the meat, as well as the tiquira, the brandy made of manioc. From the restaurants to the craft shops the maranhense continues to show creativity and skill. The naval art, which goes from one generation to another in the state, also appears in small pieces of art that reproduce the typical kinds of boats used, following the minimum details in order to achieve perfection. The miniatures pay homage to the tradition of the Bumba-meu-boi, with all the different characters of the festival wearing their typical costumes and playing their part in the performance. The stores in the historical center as well as the Ceprama market (center for supporting the artisans) are located in the building of an old fabric plant called São Luís. They offer Assorian lacework, cotton hammocks and different kinds of objects that include domestic articles and war instruments of Indian groups such as Canelas, Guajajaras and Krikatís. **BOL AND REGGAE**

June is the month of festivals in the state of Maranhão and in almost every part of the country. Here, the ox is the main attraction. Fun and superstition mingle in an old festival with characteristics which are similar to those of the short medieval plays. The Bumba-meu-boi is as popular as the Carnival and involves hundreds of groups that have in common the devotion to São João (Saint John). They use different rhythms, clothes and instruments. They are also divided into three different accents, depending on the influences, the dances, the type and the beat of the drums and the wind instruments they use. The original play describes an ox that had its tongue cut by an anxious father who wanted to satisfy his wife's wish. She was pregnant for the first time. Nowadays, the jokes tend to be satirical and show protest with improvised tunes on religion and ecology. However, all participants repeat old songs that all maranhenses know by heart. Despite having the same force it had in older times as a popular manifestation, today the Bumba-meu-boi has to share the attention of the population with the reggae that came to stay in Maranhão. In the mid-seventies this rhythm became very popular among the black population in the outskirts of São Luís. Today, the music spread all over the state, has its own costumes and characteristic dialect, being present in all sophisticated night clubs or at simple dancing cafes with cement floors. The reggae has a weekly calendar in the capital and attracts lots of people on different nights, in the cafes of the historical center and of the district of São Francisco. Even during the day, as people go in and out of the water at the beach, the bathers dance at the clubs by the seashore. The Tribo de Jah, a band formed almost entirely by blind men, was one of the main groups responsible for the dissemination of the Jamaican music in the different classes and locations in Maranhão.

ALCÂNTARA AND LENÇÓIS

Masses, litanies, processions, and a lot of music, including the reggae, mark another traditional celebration in Maranhão: the Festival of Divino Espírito Santo (Divine Holy Spirit), in the city of Alcântara. The Festival lasts ten days in May, from the day before Ascension Day to Pentecost Sunday. It includes rituals such as the lifting of the flagpole, the ruffle of boxes, solemn singing and many others. In August it is time for the black people of the region to celebrate São Benedito (Saint Benedict), predominantly to the sound of the tambor de crioula, a kind of drum typical of Maranhão. These two festivals offer a great opportunity to get to know Alcântara. However, there are also other strong reasons for visiting the town. From São Luís one has to cross the Bay of Saint Mark, which takes about one hour by boat. The city is a rich architectural monument, spread among 370 buildings, ten streets, and some parks or by-streets paved with black stones. The rhythm of life in Alcântara is slow and silent, as if one were making a trip back in time. History takes us to Tapuitapera, a small indian village of the Tupinambás, which became a town - Santo Antonio de Alcântara - in the 17th century. Then came the sugar mills, the European way of life brought by the Sons of the barons who returned from their schools in the Old Continent, and, finally, the decadence around the middle of the 19th century. Registered by the Historical Patrimony, due to its strategic position, Alcântara was chosen the site of a satellite launching base. This, however, does not interfere with the every day life of residents and tourists in the city. However, it meant better infrastructure - restaurants, hotels - and a touch of future that contrasts gently with the environment of historical tourism. Maranhão also has one of the most interesting geological phenomena in the country. The Parque Nacional dos Lençóis Maranhenses (National Park of Lençois Maranhenses) was created in 1981 to protect 155 thousand hectares - area equivalent to that of the city of São Paulo - of a desert formed by dunes and lagoons of fresh and clear waters. One of the main entrances to the park is the town of Barreirinhas, 370 kilometers away from São Luís, at the Baixada Oriental Maranhense (Eastern Lowland of Maranhão). The visitor can stay in rustic houses and, as one goes down the Preguiças River, cranes, seagulls and red crabs can be observed in the area. The best time of the year to visit the park is from March to September. That is when the rainfall period is over and the lagoons are full, alternating with dunes about 50 meters high to make a beautiful landscape.