
Aquiraz, a Brazilian Beach Far Away from This Mad World

Contributed by Ernest Barteldes
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As a former resident of the state of Ceará, I have fond memories of my visits to the beautiful, cleaner beaches of Aquiraz, a small city located a few miles from Fortaleza, the state's capital, the place I called home for ten years, and where I still have deep roots, as half of my family heritage hails from its beaches, dunes and history (the other half being the far less glamorous state of Kansas, which only gets me creepy impersonations of Dorothy as a reaction).

My eldest aunt, Telma, still owns a house there, and I recall spending several fun weekends there throughout my lifetime. When I finally purchased my first car, a 1978 blue VW Beetle (in 1995!), it was to Aquiraz that my girlfriend (who I would later marry and acrimoniously divorce three years later) and I drove when we wanted to decompress from the city.

As life gets more and more modern, Aquiraz still retains a lot of that small-town simplicity that characterizes a more laid-back lifestyle. There are no beach restaurants with loud stereo systems blaring the latest fashion in music. You can buy a tasty batch of stewed caranguejo (hard-shell crabs) for only a few bucks.

Outside the holiday season, the beach in Prainha is the place to be - for it has not yet, like the nearby Iguape, been discovered by the dollar-thirsty tourism industry. It was over its dunes that I experienced one of the most incredible intimate moments of my life, which occurred after my girlfriend and I had had enough caipirinhas to rid ourselves of any inhibitions.

For the more demanding visitor, Porto das Dunas, which is also part of the municipality of Aquiraz, offers a lot of luxurious comforts - Caesar Park Hotel has a resort there, and it is on its shores that Beach Park, one of the world's largest water resorts, was established during the 1990s.

That part of the city has been used as location for many of Brazil's famous novelas and feature films. They do charge premium prices there, so the area attracts mostly well-to-do city types and wealthy tourists. It is also a place for high-maintenance dates ("my boyfriend took me to Porto das Dunas last weekend" is sure to impress girlfriends on Monday morning), so the budget-conscious visitor pretty much stays away.

The city is also rich for its history. Founded in 1699, it was the capital of Ceará until they decided to move it to Fortaleza in 1726. The church of São José de Ribamar, erected in the late 18th century, is one of the oldest Catholic churches in the state and it is still in use. Visitors can also see the Meat Market, also built over 200 years ago, and The Captain's House, which was once called "The Capital's Palace".

Being the tourist magnet that it is, the city uses its resources quite well. Under the leadership of mayor Ritelza Cabral, who was in New York to meet with several non-governmental organizations (such as Doctors Without Borders), they have directed resources to help its low-income populace by hosting an international team of surgeons who performed - at no cost to the patients - a number of surgeries for the low-income populace of the town (whose residents are mostly

fishermen and low-wage workers).

The team included plastic surgeons, orthopedists and other specialties who performed interventions to correct birth defects and help those afflicted with deformations caused by burns and other accidents.

"(The City of Aquiraz) has become the Brazilian capital of Volunteerism", wrote Rosa Sá for Fortaleza's O Povo, the state's major metropolitan daily. "The administration has given the medical missions incredible support". More visiting medics are expected to visit the city in the coming months, thanks to a partnership that the city worked out with Fundamed, a Brazilian charity foundation.

Many of the surgical interventions conducted there were done on patients who had been on waiting lists for months in the Fortaleza's state-owned hospitals, who simply cannot meet the demand. Private hospitals are out of the reach of the more impoverished populace - few people in the state of Ceará can afford private medical insurance (something we mostly take for granted in the US), and the services rendered by INAMPS, Brazil's socialized medical services, are notoriously below par.

Aquiraz is an example of the little town that could - by using its natural resources and the income that they render responsibly, they have been able to give back to its 65,000 residents without selling out.

Yes, they have a simple life, and they are proud of it. It is time for the American traveler to discover this and many of the other great places the northeast of Brazil has to offer.

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