

WHAT IT'S
LIKE TO...

LAND ON BRAZIL'S MOST COVETED OUTPOST

NEW WALKWAYS LEAD
TO BEACHES LIKE THIS,
BUT ONLY FOR THE
LUCKY FEW WHO CAN
STEP FOOT HERE.

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FEATURE PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY OF BRAZILIAN TOURISM BOARD
(EMBRAER) PHOTOGRAPHER ANDRÉ MACEIRA

On an island that allows only
246 visitors at one time,
Conceição Beach is considered
by locals to be crowded.

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ABOUT 220 MILES OFF THE NORTH-eastern coast of Brazil, the island heaves out of the central Atlantic like a black, volcanic barb. Fernando de Noronha is said to have some of South America's creamiest beaches, strung like lace between sea pillars, so picture-perfect that they're on the Internet often enough for armchair globetrotters to recognize the island. Few have seen it firsthand, though. A government-imposed limit on travel (the official number of visitors allowed daily is 246, but the number is fuzzy because it's hard to keep track) has also kept the island isolated. But in the lead-up to the 2016 Summer Olympics in Rio, Noronha is being promoted as a stopover for travelers. Armed with a rare invitation and a soft airport landing, I'm peeling back the curtain to see if it's ready.

On a cool, windy afternoon, I'm following a swarthy, tangle-haired Noronha guide named Tapioca down a dirt path and into the ocean. An early season storm has roiled the seas into a slate sheet and churned the sand of Praia do Sueste with a camouflage of seaweed. I'm not inspired to snorkel on this unsettled afternoon, but Tapioca is a local legend for sniffing out turtles and sharks. I follow him into the water and mention that the weather must be keeping everyone away.

"This is how it always is," Tapioca says. "It's almost like we're lost at sea."

Tapioca, who wears a surf cap with neoprene earflaps that makes him look like a baby seal, works as a guide for a company trying to push this hinterland onto the international market. The fact that I've been driving him around in a truck is a good indication that tourism is new. The conundrum of Noronha is that Americans have the means to visit but find it difficult to crack the daily entry list of 246. Brazilians have the desire to escape to Noronha but don't have the resources.

"I hear it's paradise," one hotelier on the mainland told me after finding out I was about to take the short flight out to Noronha. "Every Brazilian dreams of it, but very few of us can afford it."

My flights from Phoenix to the island totaled over \$3,300, five times what I'd have paid to go to Hawaii. And my hotel, a simple *pousada*, costs \$360 a night. The island has 4 miles of road and 3,600 permanent residents. What they possess beyond wealth is astounding. Several of Noronha's strands routinely make Brazil's "Best Beaches" lists, a feat in a country with 4,655 miles of coastline and spots as iconic as Ipanema and Copacabana. It's also referred to as the Galapagos of the Atlantic because, being so far off the coast, its waters are crystalline and boiling with marine life.

At Praia do Sueste, Tapioca and I fin out in search of animals, though with the water so turgid from the storm I doubt we can glimpse the seafloor. Tapioca gestures downward. When I stick my face into the drink, sure enough, a green sea turtle stares back at me as impassively as Yoda.

"Easy," Tapioca says. "That's life here."

Tapioca slithers up on half a dozen more turtles and a small, testy shark that leaves teeth marks on our pole-mounted GoPro. Later I watch the footage over and over. The video, like the island, is raw and obscure, and wild beyond expectation.

THERE IS NO ONE AT THE ROADSIDE snorkel-gear stand. My guide on this day is Carlos Santos, a wiry 43-year-old wearing a soccer jersey. I note that he picks up our gear and leaves no deposit.

"Everyone knows everyone here," Carlos says. "You can sleep on the beach if you want. It's *almost* the perfect place."

Almost, he tells me during the ride to Baía dos Golfinhos, because much of the infrastructure on Noronha is crumbling. Our taxi is a pickup truck. It veers drunkenly around potholes and occasionally hits them so hard that the snorkels and masks threaten to lob over the tailgate. "Sometimes we have no water," Carlos confides. Weeks before my visit, the island was running so low on drinking water, which is



IF YOU'RE CURIOUS

Noronha proper is a 10-square-mile speck, the only one of the archipelago's 21 islands that's inhabited. There are no farms, no full-service hotels, but one bank and dozens of family-run inns similar to bed-and-breakfasts, with meals in a dining room and lots of conversation in Portuguese.

IF YOU'RE SERIOUS

The cost of coming here would keep tourist traffic down even without the government restrictions on visitors. A flight from the U.S. is in the \$3,000 range, a rental "buggy" \$80 a day (no roof and no doors is the local version of air conditioning), and you pay a "stay tax" of \$20 to \$50 per person per day for the privilege of visiting this World Heritage site.



Buggies (or "boogies") dot the island's 4-mile road. A guide named Tapioca and new ladders lead the way to footprint-free beaches like Praia do Sancho.



The island is safe now, but its history as a prison in the 1800s only adds to its mystery.

shipped from the mainland, that the government almost suspended tourist flights.

Yet at Baía dos Golfinhos, a brand-new boardwalk leads to the lookout over the bay where spinner dolphins come to play. Farther east along the forest promenade, shiny ladders and stairs have replaced the rope scramble that, until a year ago, was the only way to reach Baía do Sancho, a cliff-shielded crescent of sand that recently topped Trip Advisor's Ultimate Beach in the World list. Carlos tells me the improvements are courtesy of a new management company, which won the concession for Noronha two years ago.

"Local people were not happy," Carlos says. "Suddenly they had to pay to go to places they'd been going all their lives."

This illustrates the dilemma on Noronha, where people know they need to modernize to attract travelers but are also loathe to embrace the reality, and the result, of change. I feel it too because part of what makes Noronha worth visiting is that, well, nobody else does. The worn roads and buildings add ... character.

For now we're alone at the point, which serves as a fork between past and present.

"There's a lemon shark," Carlos says, nonchalantly pointing to the bay. A few people sit beneath the black cliffs on a beach straight out of a brochure. It's the perfect spot for drinking coconut water, striking up a game of *fôtevolei* — that Brazilian hybrid of volleyball and soccer played with the feet — and napping in a hammock.

"I have another place for you," Carlos says. He knows that Americans, like Brazilians, want beaches. So we head by truck to Cacimba do Padre, where a surfing festival is going on. Tent speakers pipe in samba. Brazilian women as bronzed as statues mill on the beach. On Noronha this is the closest thing to the frenetic waterfront scene for which mainland Brazil is renowned.

Tapioca shows up in his seal disguise and carrying a surfboard. Carlos and I drink caipirinhas, the national drink made with a sugar-cane distillation called cachaça, lime, mint and heaps of sugar. "See?" Carlos asks. "You ask why I want to live here."

"THE WHOLE WORLD HAS FORGOTTEN US," SAYS CARLOS. "I DON'T KNOW, MAYBE IT'S BETTER THAT WAY."

The easygoing vibe draws me into the water for a swim. But the surf is massive, and eventually one huge wave flattens me like a developer grading a beach. Another wave hits me, then another. I'm a pale rag doll on spin cycle in the balmy south Atlantic. What could be more relaxing?

CARLOS CATCHES ME OFF GUARD. At a sunset overlook called Forte de São Pedro do Boldró, he hands me a quarter-size lapel pin shaped like a green sea turtle. The animals are Noronha's totem. "I hope you won't forget us," Carlos tells me.

"Why would I forget you?" I ask.

"The whole world has forgotten us. I don't know, maybe it's better that way."

Actually, the world hasn't forgotten what it's never known. And I can't help thinking that yes, maybe it *is* better that way. Fact is, looking out over the twin peaks of Ilha Dois Irmãos, with the occasional spear of late sunshine stabbing through the clouds and bouncing off the water in dramatic platinum sparkles, I like the island just the way it is. Noronha is still the sort of place where you day-dream of washing up and secreting away forever. Eat fish indefinitely. Sleep on the beach. And return the snorkel gear later.

Maybe what Noronha needs isn't more traffic and investment, but less. In a world jam-packed with manicured islands and big, shiny resorts, a place like Noronha doesn't really need any polish. Its moldering infrastructure, family-owned pousadas and low-key attitude make for the type of paradise that is increasingly difficult to find — a real one. As Carlos says, "We're just a pile of rocks in the ocean."

Yes, but it's a pile of rocks with new ladders down to the beaches. Really, could any island be more blessed than that?

☐ 25 BEST SNORKEL SPOTS: islands.com