

A Memento from Brazil's Sunset Coast

Our Huckberry traveler brings home the best sandy souvenirs

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There's a spot in northern Brazil called Jericoacoara that I'd been wanting to visit ever since my friend Paul Haddad, who produces documentaries for National Geographic Channel and Discovery Networks, showed me a clip of the place. It is only accessible via dune buggy or 4WD. Unlike some hard-to-get-to places that seem someone forgetting, this one seemed both remote and inviting: a beach party town surrounded by huge dunes.

Here's something you've heard before: take only photographs, leave only footprints. That's good advice for any nature-loving adventures. But when visiting a coastal area I do take something away: a handful of sand for my collection. Here are my steps for collecting your own unique souvenirs.



FIND A BOTTLE

From California I flew to Fortaleza, a coastal city in the northern Brazilian state of Ceará. My travel companion was my friend Tom, who I'd met rafting in Patagonia a few years ago. Tom's a Vietnam veteran, having served with the 1st Battalion 9th Marines and does the Mud Run each year, so he's a handy guy to have around. Whenever he travels, Tom brings his coxy for his beer can, just as you and I always pack a toothbrush. Enough said.



Each afternoon in Fortaleza, market stalls line the beach walk, selling trinkets, cashews, embroidered linens, coconuts, and T-shirts. I bought a couple of miniature bottles of cachaca. The label shows the mostly fun, slightly crazy looking girl who's the Rapariga brand trademark. (No, I'm not going to explain what rapariga means in Brazilian Portuguese. That's what Urban Dictionary is for.)



After a couple of days in Fortaleza we headed four and a half hours up the coast to Praia, a beach hamlet that's all about kitesurfing, where we took a cabin at a posada called Kite Brasil. Dani and Hacky who run the place have put a lot of thought into the details. Outside each cabin are two hammocks, which made for lazy evenings smoking cigars and looking up at the stars.

EMPTY THE BOTTLE



The plan for our time in Praia? Kitesurfing lessons. Over the course of two days, we go from zero to hero, doing one-handed power body dragging. It was time for a caipirinha, the Brazilian national drink.

I bummed some ice from Dani and assembled my supplies (limes I'd picked up en route, the little bottles of cachaca, a couple of sugar packets, my pocket knife and the ratty wooden stir sticks I had kept from our Fortaleza restaurant dinner. (As a friend who lived in São Paulo once said, "There's a lot of stirring involved in drinking a caipirinha.")



A small digression — here's a tip to making caipirinhas that you won't learn from your local urban hipster bartender, but every Brazilian human knows. After you've cut the lime in quarters but before you've cut it into eighths, remove the white center pith so that its bitter taste doesn't get muddled into the drink when you're mashing the limes.

I squeezed the limes with the sugar, emptied the cachaca bottles into our glasses, and we toasted the day and our friendship. Tom was disappointed we weren't quite yet up on boards, but I'm more Zen, just happy to have moved the game forward.



FILL THE BOTTLE WITH SAND

For the next stage in our journey, we head eight miles further up the coast via dune buggy to Jericoacoara. You know the song that goes, "They paved paradise and put up a parking lot?" Well that song's not about Jeri.

Here, there are no paved streets. We had sand in our toes as we spent our days wandering through town, eating fish for lunch and pizza for dinner, counting the Bob Marley wannabes and watching windsurfers wipeout and recover around a rocky head. The energy is all Brazilian-happy here.



Windsurfing is as popular in Jericoacoara as kiting is in Praia, but the really big thing in Jeri is sunset. Everyone climbs the huge dune on the west side of town to watch the day's end, then they cheer and the party continues. So at sunset we climbed. And cheered.

There at the top of the dune I reached in my pocket and pulled out my empty cachaca bottle. I scooped in a handful of sand, then screwed the top back on. In the distance one lone kitesurfer remained on the water.



BRING THE BOTTLE HOME

After eight days of swimming, hiking, exploring, and eating papays for breakfast, Tom and I parted with great memories and hopes of another shared journey someday. (Colombia seems to be calling in both.)

For years I've kept my sand collection in my bathroom medicine cabinet, each bottle labeled with a Sharpie: the crushed-shell gravel of St. Kitts, the golden brown powder of Piste del Este, the black Oreo cookie crumbs of Hana Maui. Back home I added my newest treasure to my stash. I expect it will always have the power to transport me back to the top of a dune at the northern edge of a continent, gazing toward sunset.



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