

## Maranhão

Nervous glances were passed in silence as the all-terrain jeep's mighty engine sputtered and failed beneath three feet of tea-colored water. After more than three hours of traversing impossibly steep and barren dunes and fording lakes, rivers and ocean tides, it seemed that our trusty 4 wheel drive had finally met its match in the muddy bottom of this vegetated lake. The middle of nowhere in which our tour group found ourselves was actually the middle of the Parque Nacional dos Lençoes Maranhenses, a federally protected park of sand dunes in the Northern Brazilian state of Maranhão. We were on our way to visit a community of 12 families that lived within the park, Queimada dos Britos, the first stop on a two week socio-environmental tour de force of the state. One by one, we descended from the vehicle with our packs held over our heads, watching our bodies disappear waste-deep past a shallow point of visibility into unrevealing darkness. The water was colored dark by tannins, an astringent compound leached from plant material and most commonly associated with the puckery aftertaste of a good glass of red wine.

Fortunately we were not far out from our destination so we continued by foot across the endless expanse of white dunes, sculpted into perfect geometric ridges and valleys by daily wind and nightly rain. The terrain quickly became more hospitable with dense, fruit laden vegetation sprouting up around the rainwater lakes in the sand. Before long, we arrived at the home of our gracious hosts, Dona Juana and Senhor Raimundo. This dynamic couple, parents to 8 children, defied any preconceptions one might hold about a community 3-4 hours by car across shifting, unpaved dunes. The guest book they keep religiously revealed somewhat of a pilgrimage to this community lost in the sand- over 1,000 guests in only the last 5 years! With the natural beauty of the voyage, the death defying hotsauce of Dona Juana, and the breathtaking vision of a million stars glittering above our hammocks, such a record was not hard to understand. D. Joana was proud to display an autographed poster from the cast of 'House of Sand', an award winning Brazilian independent film shot in the near vicinity of Queimadas dos Britos.

The community was only 40 years old, and was initially a settlement involved in prospecting for oil by Petrobras. The company moved on when they found only natural gas reserves beneath the fine white dunes, but their workers chose to stay and fought for the rights to do so. The legacy of the company's presence was immortalized in the rusty iron pipes that now formed the structure of houses thatched with fronds of the buriti palm. Being in the middle of a National Park, all activity and modification required an IBAM seal of approval. Now many walked hours to the ocean to fish, although Sr. Raimundo recalled the thousands of cattle that had roamed these lands under his father's tenure. In the changing tide, cattle had to be swapped for tourists roaming the dunes, but this community had taken it all in stride. Powered by a recently installed solar panel, the household now enjoyed lights, a television and even a special hut containing a community bar and pool table. I struggled to imagine a jeep traversing dunes and lakes under the weight of a billiard table. Nothing can be conceived of as too far or too remote in this

increasingly linked world, as even the ocean tides remind us. Before we left, one of D. Joana's sons brought us a scroll made from two sheets of paper he had found in a sealed bottle that washed upon the beach while he was fishing- in it, a typewritten letter translated in English and German describing a 7-year-old German schoolboy's 'message in a bottle' project. Attached was a crayola illustration of the little boy's home town, with colorful cars and traffic lights, another *lembrança* of friends around the world to be hung between fading photographs on the inside of the palm-thatched hut.

We moved on from our hospitable hosts in Queimada dos Britos to a quilombo called Mamona, located an hour's drive from the historic city of Alcântara across a red dirt road pocked by ditches and dikes. Modern quilombos in Brazil refer to communities descended from settlements created by fugitive slaves. This particular quilombo was named for the oily seed of the castor bean, Mamona, from which the residents extract oil. The women there are known as quebradeiras because they make a living off of the extraction of oil from the oil rich seeds of the babaçu palm as well as the castor bean. The system of production involves a lot of cooperative participation as the women alternate breaking open the palm husks on different people's property. Helpers are paid a wage for their work and the property owner keeps the profits from selling the oil. The oil goes for R\$5 a liter (about \$2.2USD) and the women return the favor of working for those who have helped them process their own harvest. Babaçu is something of a national treasure in Maranhão. Over 400,000 quebradeiras make their living exclusively off of the palm and are recognized as a traditional population. Conflicts have recently arisen as Pig Iron factories that have discovered the caloric value of charcoal made from babaçu husks. Now some many are seeking access to the same stands of palms that quebradeiras have claimed usufruct rights to for centuries. Pig Iron factories use charcoal to smelt iron ore into chips destined to become steel, arriving finally in the United States via cars produced by GM, Ford and Toyota. Iron represents a sizeable 23% of Maranhão's exports and thus a considerable political power in a notoriously corrupt state, although numerous NGO groups have arisen in defense of the quebradeiras of Maranhão.

Shortly after our arrival, Maria Jesus, a loquacious and amiable individual, took us on a walk to the beach. As we waited for rest of the group to arise from the hammocks in which they were napping, Maria Jesus passionately discussed the values of a tight-knit community, and the obligations they all had to help each other. Her lecture was punctuated by brief explanations that she loved to talk and would continue to do so. The men sat silently in the shade of a prehistorically large mango tree, swinging on hammocks recycled from discarded fishing nets that had washed upon their shore along with Japanese glass fishing floats among other trash and treasure. The creativity of the craftsmanship I had seen all around Maranhão was astounding- plastic bottles cut and warped into a bouquet of flowers or a cascading door curtain; 2 liter bottles upside down along a sand walkway that created a pattern of translucent green flowers underfoot; purses and belts made just as artfully by weaving aluminum coca cola tabs together with palm fibers. This

artisanal edge was partly driven by necessity, as many areas of rural Maranhão lack a system of garbage disposal besides burning the trash, plastics and all. At last the group gathered, and we made our way to the sea. Walking down the dirt path, Maria Jesus's described the many useful and medicinal paths on all sides of the trail- latex saps for inflammation, roots for kidney pain, and most potent of all, the pomengranate tree. 'Every part of it is useful', she explained. When at last we arrived at the beach, it was a vast and vacant scene of cascading waves separated from red cliff faces by a carpet of white sand. No one wasted time running into the waves except for myself, staying back to chase ghost crabs and flick clams out from the sand with a giggling troupe of little girls. Most of the men and boys in the community make a living through fishing, and many of the young women leave to study in the cities. That night in Mamona, Dona Fatema cooked us a delicious meal of peixe frita (fried fish) cooked in the aromatic oil of babaçu, the flavorful efforts of that day's extractive activities.

After just 2 weeks, it was difficult to leave Maranhão. The unrivaled blend of land, resources and people all folded together into a richly interactive narrative of nature and culture. I marveled that such a similar historical plight across Brazil- the common legacies of colonialism, slavery, agrarian expansion and urbanization- could manifest such regional diversity. But don't just take my word- grab a jeep and see for yourself!

### **Maranhão Overview**

Maranhão, the Eastern gate of the legal Amazon, is a state teeming with rich natural and cultural resources. Amazonia's Tropical moist forests seep across the Northwest or the state, trickling into the Maranhão babaçu forests, a transition zone between the wet forests and the vast shrubland. The shorelines are armored with Brazil's greatest intact network of Mangrove species, providing habitat for a number of stunning creatures like the pink plumed Guará and the languid manatee. To the East of São Luis, the capital city island, mangroves and all else are rubbed out beneath 1000 square kilometers of sprawling white dunes, home to the Lençois Maranhenses National Park. The natural resources are only matched by the cultural ones- Maranhão's unique blend of afro-brazilian syncretism contains indigenous influences as well, and are manifest in a number of colorful and lively traditions, including Tambor de crioula, and bomba meu boi. Despite this wealth of resources, Maranhão remains one of the poorest states in all of Brazil, sharing in less than 1% of the Country's economy. Nevertheless, tourism is quickly growing as foreigners and Brazilians alike discover the unique sights and activities of the state.