

# African Heritage: Brazil in the New Light

Brazil is known throughout the world for many things: sandy beaches, great football, samba schools that perform every year in the famous and colorful Rio Carnival, and for one of the most iconic images that makes its way into the media every so often, the statue of Christ the Redeemer, towering over Rio de Janeiro with its arms wide open.

While all of the above are staples of Brazilian society and culture, another important aspect is often overlooked, even though it influenced the others throughout the course of history – Brazil's African heritage.



## Afro-Brazilians Make up Half of the Country's Population

People from around the world may be more familiar with the history of African Americans, mostly due to media coverage and the influx of U.S. produced movies and television series. However, at the same time in which slave traders sailed their ships back to North America, the same was done for the south, with many of those ships setting anchor on the eastern shores of Brazil.

Since the country abolished slavery rather late, in 1888, a large number of African natives kept being brought across the ocean, a fact that considerably influenced Brazil's contemporary ethnic make-up. Afro-Brazilians now represent almost half of the country's inhabitants, making them the majority when it comes to ethnic groups.

In recent years, Brazilians, both government and proactive individuals have tried to increase awareness in regards to their ethnicity and how African heritage managed to influence their culture. A worthwhile and commendable endeavor, considering the fact that Brazil has the highest number of inhabitants of African descendants besides Africa itself.



## **African Heritage in Brazilian Culture**

Samba, the most popular dance in this South American country and its many styles are nothing but Brazilian. At least that's the notion many still have about what makes the Rio Carnival so glamorous. While in current times it is certainly something that's closely tied to their national identity as a whole, samba itself originated from Africa. It is most popular in the northeastern and southeastern regions of the country, both inhabited by a large number of Afro-Brazilians.

The same can be said about capoeira, a style of martial arts that is more dance than fighting with a series of flashy acrobatic moves that may be more pleasing to the eye than effective in combat. Although one of the most famous masters in capoeira, Mark Dacascos is nowhere near an Afro-Brazilian, the style itself has its roots on the Dark Continent.

When it comes to cuisine, African slaves came up with a recipe that is now also a Brazilian staple, the feijoada, a stew containing pork, beef and beans. The same stew is considered a traditional dish in countries like Mozambique and Angola.

## **African Heritage and Places to Visit**

There is no better place to explore African impact on Brazilian culture than the city of Salvador, located in the northeastern state of Bahia. The city itself was the capital of the country until the middle of the 18th century and the port that received the largest number of African natives during the slave-trade years. There is no way to give an exact estimate but the figure revolves around millions. This led to this particular Brazilian state having over 73 percent of its residents of African descent in recent years.



Here, tourists are able to experience all facets of Afro-Brazilian culture and influences, from the artwork displayed on the city streets and not only, to the capoeira exhibitions in its central plazas, to the specific food and religions that remained deeply rooted in eastern Brazil, even if the majority of Afro-Brazilians are currently Catholics.

Tourists who wish to escape a rather cold and rainy month in the northern hemisphere can venture to Bahia in November. There is no better time to witness a most original blend between elements of both, African and Brazilian culture as the residents in Salvador celebrate Black Consciousness, an event meant to mark Afro-Brazilian heritage and raise awareness towards, not only their identity, but also the plights of their forefathers.

While there is nothing wrong with simply enjoying the sights while on a visit to Brazil, keeping in mind that African culture had shaped and formed much of how Brazil is today can give tourists a new outlook and a more profound experience, though certainly with the same amount of fun.

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