

BETWEEN**THE**LINES

Bryson basks in Brazil's best

IN BRAZIL

Fran Bryson

Scribe, \$32.99

The best travel writing not only brings a sensory experience, it also gently educates about history, politics and culture.

Brazil offers rich pickings and one of the wonderful ways author Fran Bryson reveals the country is by contrasting it with aspects of her home on Tasmania's Flinders Island. She marvels as she parties in the street, South American-style, that she is dancing with more people than her island's entire population. It is unlikely she would have walked through the streets of Flinders in just her underwear, but she did in Brazil.

"So this is my Brazil," the former literary agent writes in her first book. "At once boisterous and mysterious, elusive and confounding, a total chameleon."

The book is structured by region. Bryson, who has visited

Brazil seven times, balances facts with observations. The people she encounters are related in an amusing manner.

The famous Carnival offers a fabulous opportunity to transgress – and a lot of wild costumes. She also visits some

bizarre manifestations of Brazilian Catholicism – which is regularly at odds with the Vatican about its theatrical manifestations – and World Heritage-listed towns. She takes

the hallucinogen ayahuasca as part of a ceremony of the religion of Santo Daime, visits sites of Candomble worship and

offers a fascinating explanation of the museum that is in the

home of prolific psychographer Chico Xavier who, by allegedly

channelling spirits, wrote more than 500 books.

Particularly intriguing are the stories about charismatic leader Neiva Chaves Zelaya and the Valley of the Dawn.

Tia

(Aunty) Neiva, as she was known, was not only notable among

Brazilian religious leaders for being a woman, but because

"she perfected 'soul flight' and spent her nights surfing the astral plane", or so Bryson is told. By 1969, she was a clairvoyant messianic leader of the Valley of the Dawn.

Bryson

also visits the Valley of Death.

Her compelling narrative style means stories from history

are gently incorporated in the text, often with vignettes of such obscure content that I am reminded of Eduardo Galeano's magnificent *Century of the Wind* trilogy and its

equally slow reveal of the history of Latin America.

Subjects Bryson has devoted time to include famous architect Oscar Niemeyer, the dictatorship of Getulio Vargas, and Chico Mendes, who was murdered as he sought to protect the Brazilian forests.

Bryson has read widely about Brazil and draws on many other writers who have delved into the country, deepening her understanding along with that of the readers. Nobel Laureate Mario Vargas Llosa and Peter Robb and his magnificent *Death in Brazil* are cited, as is Jorge Amado, one of Brazil's best-known novelists. Anthropologist Roberto DaMatta is often quoted, my favourite being: "It was not Brazil that invented Carnival,

but on the contrary, it was Carnival that invented Brazil."

Bryson writes intelligently and warmly, conveying place in a colourful, visceral manner and relaying a genuine passion for the country. She celebrates wonder, marvels at

cultural contrasts and brings many stories of Brazil to life for the armchair traveller. **RACHEL EDWARDS**

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