



THE DESERT DOWNWINDER

A BRAZILIAN SURF CHAMP, A FORMER NEW YORK INTERNET MARKETING EXEC AND A WAVE ROOKIE FROM COLORADO MAKE THE TRIP OF A LIFETIME ALONG 200 MILES OF BRAZILIAN COASTLINE. BY MICHAEL BEHAR
PHOTOS BY SANDY NESBITT

I JUST STEPPED OFF A RED-EYE FLIGHT from Miami to Fortaleza, Brazil's fourth largest city, and I need to crash hard. But my guides, Dave and Jessie Hassell — an American couple who ditched their Manhattan cubicles to become kiteboarding outfitters in Brazil — are determined to get me on the water.

"This is the hammock capital of the country," Jessie, 27, informs me as I haul my gear onto the beach in Cumbuco, a dusty burg 30 minutes from the airport and 1,700 miles from the throngs of Rio de Janeiro. "They call them *rede*, pronounced 'hedgy.'"

"I could really use a hedgy," I confess, about to wimp out in favor of a nap when a flash of red and blue whooshes past. It's a kiteboarder racing downwind. Watching him shred through the

flecked with whitecaps that shimmer in the equatorial sun like a bevy of swans cast adrift. The beach is virtually empty except for *jangadas*, 15-foot-long wooden rafts that fishermen sail up to 60 miles offshore — sometimes in gale-force winds — in search of their catch. Right now it's blowing 20 knots, fanning the sand into wisps of ankle-stinging punishment, a nuisance that herds beachgoers to the tiki bars. Wasting no time, I rig up my lines when a thunderous whooooo reminds me that the surf's up. I notice I'm getting queasy and my heart is thumping hard. Dashing into the surf for the first time is freaking me out. But that's why I'm here, right? I keep telling myself that as I launch my kite and charge into the sea.

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Two months earlier I'd read a blog about kiteboarding in northeastern Brazil. The author described mountainous sand dunes that flanked hundreds of miles of pristine coastline, 300 days of wind a year, bathtub-temperature seas, and swells that made for classic surf riding. Sufficiently enticed, I tracked down Dave and Jessie, whose company, Kite Adventures, does trips to Brazil, Vietnam, Thailand, the Greek Islands and Sardinia. Plunking down at a swanky resort and kiting from my beachside villa sounded OK, but after studying a map of Brazil I decided on



South Atlantic surf gets me fired up to ride. I live in Colorado, where my riding is confined to reservoirs and where, as you might guess, we don't get many waves. Ever since I started kiteboarding four years ago, I've fantasized about riding real, ass-kicking ocean waves, as opposed to the puny speed bumps spit out the back of a ski boat.

This part of Brazil is surprisingly arid, a stark contrast to the lush Amazonian forests and tropical lowlands enveloping the rest of the country. Incessantly hot and dry weather bakes the landscape nearly year-round. The blistering climate and unprotected coast — nothing stands between it and West Africa, 3,000 miles away — have blessed the region with two things kites desperately crave: extreme wind and big waves.

The ocean here is eye candy, a cosmos of translucent cobalt

Above: Local children at the ferry operator's hut in Caetanos. **Right:** Michael Behar, stoked to be shredding. **Opposite:** A fisherman derigs a *jangada* while watching Oswaldo de Mendonça soar over the surf.





Oswaldo de Mendonça catches big air, as usual. Above: Riding the river near Camocim at low tide. At high tide, the river rejoins the ocean. Right: Chow-ing down in Almofala.



something a bit more radical. I wanted to set sail with my kite from Cumbuco and head northwest, hugging the sandblasted shore of Ceará — one of six states bordering this sparsely populated slice of arid coast — and ride nearly 200 miles to Jericoacoara, known to locals as “Jeri,” a legendary windsurfing outpost entombed on three sides by an ocean of shifting dunes. Getting to Jeri entails a kidney-bashing buggy drive through the desert. I intended to reach it by sea.

I didn’t know whether this “kite expedition” was feasible, but over a crackling phone line from Brazil, Jessie assured me it was. “There are huge sections of the coast that we’ve never kited,” Jessie told me. “Now we’ll have an excuse to explore them.”

The plan was to arrange for two four-by-four pickup trucks — our sag wagons — to haul gear and provisions. The beaches are wide, with hard-packed sand, so the trucks could follow us the entire route. If we kited hard, we could do the distance in a week or less. And we’d bunk in whichever fishing village we happened upon each evening. Joining us would be Alberto Duarte, the Hassells’ 46-year-old Brazilian business partner; Marcos Oliveira, who would be our driver; American photographer Sandy Nesbitt; and Oswaldo de Mendonça, 35, a Brazilian surfer who won the Rio state championship in 1998. De Mendonça took up kiting in 2003, moved to Jeri and opened a kiting school. Two years later, he placed third in an international long-distance kite race, bagging 93 miles in a single day. Only three of the 12 racers finished. Duarte translates for de Mendonça: “By the end, half my skin came off from the waist harness chafing my hips.”



In Cumbuco that first afternoon, after navigating through the surf, I look northwest, where we’ll ride tomorrow, and wonder what I’ve gotten myself into: The desolate coastline vanishes into a haze of mist rising from what appears to be an endless gauntlet of roiling white water. The few palms sprouting from the dunes are permanently hunched in a leeward pose from winds so powerful and relentless that they actually manipulate biological evolution. Case in point: The “sleeping tree,” a type of hardwood, has genetically adapted to the limb-snapping winds by growing horizontally, its 3-foot-wide trunk and leafy branches splaying across the sand.

Earlier, Duarte told me: “Tomorrow we’ll do at least 25 kilometers.” I’m gung-ho to tackle the big surf, even though a voice



in my head screams, “You’ve never done this before. You’re gonna get munched!” And that’s when I learn the most important lesson of surf riding: Never lose focus. I inadvertently dip my kite too low. A wave clips its trailing edge, spins it backward, then corkscrews it into a tangled wad of lines and sailcloth. Before I get dragged under, I yank my “oh shit” handle. Out of nowhere, another kiter zooms up and yells for me to grab his harness. He loops his kite and tows us in. “I’m from Italy,” he shouts over his shoulder as another wave wallops us. “I’ve seen this happen before.” I’m chagrined to be pegged as a surf newbie, but it’s nice to get a lift — the swim would have been a quarter-mile. “Don’t worry,” he assures me. “You’ll get the hang of it.” After the Italian Debacle, I find the nearest bar and toss back several *caipirinhas* to restore my confidence. The potent cocktail is a blend of high-proof cane liquor, called *cachaça*, with muddled sugar and limes.

The next morning the wind is howling to 25 knots. Duarte greets me at breakfast with a big smile and announces, “I’ve got a big cooler full of beer in the truck for the end of the day.” Under a brilliant blue sky, I rig up with Jessie, Dave and de Mendonça. From this point we’ll have the ocean almost entirely to ourselves: Because of its proximity to the airport, few kites venture beyond Cumbuco. Our lunch spot is eight miles downwind. We take our time, making long tacks to play in the surf. I get the hang of it quickly, and soon I’m carving fat S-turns off the lips of waves as I make my way up the coast.

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The northeastern coast of Brazil is a remarkable wind magnet. To find out why it blows so hard and so often, I telephoned Alexandre Costa, a meteorologist based at the government forecasting office in Fortaleza. He told me that convection over the Amazon, to the south, pumps enormous amounts of heat into the atmosphere. To the north, trade winds colliding from above and below the equator force torrents of air upward in a region called the Intertropical Convergence Zone. Sandwiched in between is the Ceará coast. What goes up must come down: "All of the rising air eventually has to descend somewhere," Costa says. "That somewhere is right here, in Ceará."

It's hard to appreciate the brute strength of these remarkably steady winds until I'm harnessed to a kite and falling behind the group. Jessie, Dave and de Mendonça are at least a mile ahead, so I begin rhythmically diving my kite to gain speed. The trades blow parallel to the coast, from east to west, which in sailing translates to a dead run. For a kiter, it means you can blaze downwind. Our trucks are in hot pursuit, bounding over the dunes to keep up. I'm still accelerating when I see Duarte pumping his fist out the driver's-side window. At lunch, he tells me he clocked me at 32 miles per hour. Not bad — that's only 16 clicks shy of the world kiteboarding speed record.

Another eight-mile run after lunch lands us in Paracuru, a bustling fishing village where Dave and Jessie live during the windy season, which spans April to January (they're based in San Francisco the rest of the year). The two met online, at Friendster.com, in 2003. "We got engaged two years later," Jessie tells me as we guzzle pints of Nova Schin, a local pilsner, and scarf down escargot at a bistro run by a French expat. Both were slogging away in New York City: Jessie at an ad agency;

and Dave, who is 30, at an Internet marketing firm he founded in 1999. "I kept getting laid off," says Jessie. "It was as if the universe were conspiring to kick me out of New York."

Dave had met Duarte, who spent summers in New York working as a restaurant manager and waiting tables to feed his kiteboarding habit in Brazil. "He kept telling me he was into this kite surfing thing," Dave says. "At first I thought it was some sort of language barrier and he meant windsurfing." Dave began teaching himself how to kite at Liberty State Park in Jersey City with a skateboard and a small trainer kite. He persuaded Jessie to take up the sport, and together they made regular pilgrimages to Gilgo Beach on Long Island. They learned fast, and in 2004 Kite Adventures was born. "Now I have a different approach to life," Dave says. I don't take things too seriously, and I give myself plenty of time to relax."

Jessie nods in agreement, obviously pleased with their new



Above: Yup, it's windy!
Left: It's not whether you're going to get stuck — it's when. The crew helps stranded tourists. Opposite: De Mendonça, a former Brazilian surf champ, shows off in the waves.

gig. She is deeply bronzed from weeks on the water and bedecked in her favorite duds: white tank top, pink short-shorts and white flip-flops. Her toenails are painted pink; even her kite and board are pink. It would be easy to dismiss this sprightly fashionista as a poser. But don't let the skimpy outfit and color-coordinated gear fool you: This chick can rip. The next day — our biggest of the journey, a whopping 30-mile downwinder — she's catching huge air and landing back rolls off 6-foot swells. The rest of us don't fare as well: Dave has to ditch his kite in the surf when it crashes; de Mendonça gets the mother of all hip chafing (again); and I slice and dice my right foot on coral. One of the trucks takes a beating too: It vaults off a dune and shreds a tire after slamming into a rock concealed beneath the soft sand.

That night, however, we put the caipirinhas to work again, with added support from gargantuan platters of grilled fresh

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fish and heaps of marinated *lagostim* (like baby lobsters). We also sample acerola nectar, from a South American wild cherry said to hold more vitamin C in a single drop of its juice than an entire glass of OJ. As usual, the architect of our lavish meal is Duarte: When we're on the water, he drives ahead to the next village and orders food in advance of our arrival.

"They catch the fish right there," Duarte says, gesturing toward the sea, ablaze in orange and red from the setting sun. We're in Amontada, a tiny settlement nestled in an aquamarine bay. Our en masse arrival by kite earlier captivated a group of ecstatic children, who sprinted to greet us when we came ashore. They must have thought we had sailed all the way from Africa. Now those same kids are kicking around a half-inflated soccer ball on the beach at the high-water mark. "*Quatro mais caipirinhas*," Duarte calls to the waitress. My aching body thanks him.

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"Being here is not just about kiting," Duarte tells me. "It's about seeing the culture, how people live, the poverty and the misery, but also the simple life." Indeed, those I meet seem as tough and

resilient as they are easygoing and carefree. Homes and shops are adorned with whimsical murals depicting the life aquatic, and happy hour often begins after lunch. "This is a place where the winds change the coastline every year," Duarte continues. "Some of the towns have to move to avoid the dunes."

It's true that the white sand is very fine and easily plied by the slightest breeze. But it's hard to believe it could engulf a small town until we make the first of three river crossings near the village of Caetanos. About 300 yards wide, the river snakes toward the sea through mile-long dunes. But because of the wind, its sandy banks are always on the march: An oxbow can appear one day and vanish the next. In some spots dunes will cut off a river at its mouth, forming a temporary lagoon.

It's tempting to kite the rivers — the buttery flat water is ideal for practicing tricks. At Caetanos, though, freaky downbursts of wind cascade over a large dune and produce gnarly clusters of whitecaps in the center of the river. It's enough to deter all of us except Duarte, who wants to ride across. We travel aboard a single-car "ferry" not much bigger than Huck's raft. We're about midway when Duarte launches his kite. It hovers for a second, then gets whacked with a powerful downdraft that

THE DRIVE TAKES US THROUGH the tallest dunes we've seen, barren hills of white meringue that rise over 400 feet.



Alberto Duarte kites across the river at Caetanos.



From left: Jessie and Dave Hassell toast the trip with writer Michael Behar. Capoeiristas battle as the sun goes down.

slams it into the water, barely missing our midjet ferry. "The wind is weird," he yells to us. "If I make one mistake, I'm in real trouble." A large caracara, or king vulture, circles above, hoping for a meal. But Duarte's second try is successful.

On the opposite riverbank, the rest of us snatch our gear from the trucks and rig up. I ride fast through the white water and beyond the outside break. I make a few tacks upwind just as a big set rolls in. I swoop around the backside of the swell and drop onto a perfect wave. I carve across a clean barrel, whip a 180-degree bottom turn, then edge toeside up the wave face and blast off its lip, popping a few feet of air before landing in time for the next set. Catching my breath, I realize I'd been whooping and yelling.

At breakfast the next morning, Duarte reports that yesterday's swell was the largest yet, perhaps 7 feet high. Four days ago that would have terrified me; now I'm jonesing to go bigger. But I'll have to wait: From here to Jericoacoara, another day's ride away, the surf gets progressively smaller. I'm secretly relieved, because my body is hammered from the 150-plus miles we've ridden already.

On our last leg, as we near Jeri, the winds turn offshore, so we pile into the trucks for the final few miles to town. The drive takes us through the tallest dunes we've seen, barren hills of white meringue that rise over 400 feet. "You can see these on Google Earth," Duarte says. At one point the trucks get bogged down and it takes us 20 minutes to dig ourselves free. We arrive in Jeri at dusk. The small town of 2,000 people lies within a national park, where paved roads are banned and the streets are inch-deep with silky golden sand. There are swanky posadas and stylish restaurants

and bars, giving the place an upscale feel but with a barefoot-and-board-shorts dress code. After kiting almost 200 miles, I've landed in a dreamy oasis — Aspen's Rastafarian stepbrother.

I wander toward the water, where several folding tables are propped in the sand, heaped with fresh fruit — pineapples, guavas, papayas — and bottles of liquor. A stocky man waves me toward his stand. I point to a ripe passion fruit, which he splits and juices, then shakes with ice and what appears to be about five shots of Russian vodka. With drink in hand, I climb a steep dune at the edge of town to watch the sunset. On my way up, two kids plummet past me riding sand boards.

From the top I can see a *capoeira* troupe sparring on the beach. In the 16th century, African slaves in Brazil created the martial art, disguised as a form of dance, to facilitate escape. The performers leap, kick and twirl to the rhythmic twang of the *berimbau*, a single-string bow used for percussion. Beyond them, the dune-fringed coast unfolds toward Preá, Moitas, Taiba and the dozen other villages we rode through during our journey north to Jeri from Cumbuco. Later, we dine on marinated pork and beef grilled over an open fire in the backyard of a Brazilian couple who run a newly opened kite school here. While feasting on the smoky meat and sipping icy beer, I suddenly feel like I'm listing from side to side. I shut my eyes and see figure eights — visual relics from days of kiting. Above me the palms rustle loudly, a final reminder of the mighty winds that carried me so far. I savor the moment, knowing that tomorrow I head home. ●



GOTTA GET THERE?

If your kite crew is dying to downwind, kiteadventures.com can set you up with a seven-day (\$1,299) or 10-day (\$1,799) Ceará coast excursion. The windy season is July through January, with August, September and October being the least-crowded months. Tours can include four to 10 people. Look for direct flights to Fortaleza from Miami International Airport.

Michael Behar is a former editor for *Wired* magazine, and contributes to *Men's Journal*, *Outside* and *Popular Science*.