

Jewish Heritage in Brazil

A brief history

Jewish history in Brazil dates back to the time of the discovery. Gaspar da Gama, a Jew by birth, but later kidnaped and forcibly baptized, accompanied Portuguese admiral Pedro Alvares Cabral when, in the 1500, he landed in what is now Brazil beginning a more than 500-year presence in the New World. During the time of the inquisition, most Jews arrived in Brazil primarily as New Christians but secretly practiced Judaism.

Despite continued persecution by the Portuguese Inquisition, the New Christians successfully established sugar plantations and mills and in the beginning of the seventeen century. Approximately 50,000 Europeans lived in Brazil, with New Christians making up a significant percentage. In 1624 Dutch forces conquered a portion of northeastern Brazil. Dutch tolerance allowed for Jewish migration and the open practice of religion, and in 1636, the first synagogue in the Americas, Kahal Zur was built in the Dutch capital of Recife, in the state of Pernambuco. The synagogue records show a well-organized community with high participation, including a Talmud Torah (school), a Tzedakah fund and an overseeing executive committee. In 1654 the Dutch were expelled from Brazil and Portuguese anti-Jewish persecution led to a mass immigration to places like Curacao and New York. In 1655 the Kahal Zur synagogue was closed, only to be reopened 347 years later in 2001.

A new wave immigration would happen almost 200 years later, in 1822 when Brazil became independent from Portugal. Attracted by the rubber boom and a promise of a better life, families of Moroccan Jews immigrated to the Amazon area concentrating in the cities of Belem, capital of Para; and Manaus, in the state of Amazonas. By World War I, approximately 7,000 Jews lived in Brazil. However, it was only between 1920 and 1929 that Brazil saw a massive immigration with the arrival of close to 30,000 Jews coming from Western European countries, followed by almost 20,000 who came in the 1930s. In the late 1950s, another wave of Jewish immigration brought more than 3,500 North African Jews to Brazil. By the 1960s, the Brazilian Jewry was thriving. Jews were elected as state legislatures and municipal councils. There were 33 Jewish schools and approximately 140,000 Jews lived in Brazil, mostly in large cities like Sao Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, Porto Alegre, Belo Horizonte, Recife and Belem.

Today, Brazil's rich cultural life includes several Jewish publications as well as a weekly Jewish television program. Museums exhibit Jewish history and art and efforts to preserve Brazil's Jewish history are under way. The Center for Jewish Studies of the University of Sao Paulo, the Federal and State Universities in Rio de Janeiro and the Marc Chagall Institute in Porto Alegre sponsor lectures, conferences and academic courses of Jewish interest. Within Brazil's Jewish community are several organizations, youth groups, and social clubs. Like in many other countries, Brazil's religious spectrum encompasses liberal to orthodox and Sephardi and Ashkenazi influences. In addition, the Chabad-Lubavich movement has been growing in the recent years opening synagogues and schools in major cities.

Our program will give you an inside look of the current life of the Brazilian Jewish society in 3 major cities incorporating sites that will show you the highlights of each destination.