



Try the **Good Life**

***Explore the beaches, culture
and sport of Rio de Janeiro***

by Jim Duffy





LIFE IS A carnival in Rio de Janeiro—and not just during Carnival season. The annual Mardi Gras bash is the city's signature event, of course, a debaucherous affair that has been dubbed “The Biggest Party on Earth” for the way it fills two surreal and sleepless weeks of February with an astonishing array of dances, parades, concerts, costume balls and street festivals.



BUT RIO CAN be a revelation the rest of the year as well. Set between mountains and sea on Brazil's southeastern coast, this city of 6 million "cariocas" (as the locals call themselves) offers something for everyone. Like beaches? Here, you have 22 different stretches of sand to choose from, and that's just within city limits. Like music? Rio's night life swings to the beat of samba, bossa nova, reggae, jazz and more. Like sports? Surfing, climbing, fishing and sailing are all popular pastimes.

Nature lovers can hike in the rain forest one day and then stroll through impeccably designed urban parks the next. Culture lovers will find centuries-old neighborhoods dotted with gorgeous churches and interesting museums. Shoppers will discover a city famous for its adventurous fashion designers and unique jewelry shops.

So make no mistake: Come vacation time, Rio is the real deal, all year round.



Historical Highlights

Officially founded in 1567 by the Portuguese, Rio de Janeiro started life as an export center for sugar before growing into the financial and cultural powerhouse of the country. When Napoleon invaded Portugal in 1808, the Portuguese king fled to Rio and the city briefly served as the capital of the Portuguese empire. The city served as the capital of Brazil from independence in 1822 until the inland city of Brasilia was established in 1960.

Among the historical highlights on display in modern-day Rio are:

- the Mosteiro de Santo Antonio, a monastery that dates to 1608 and features a spectacular 18th-century church, Capela de Sao Francisco de Penitencia;
- the Praca Tiradentes, a public square where Tiradentes, Brazil's most famous revolutionary figure in colonial days, was hanged for plotting to win independence for the country;
- the Mosteiro de Sao Bento, a monastery that dates to 1663 and features extraordinary gold-leaf carvings;
- the Nossa Senhora do Carmo, a 1761 church that was the site of the coronations of the Brazilian emperors Pedro I and Pedro II;
- the Paco Imperial, a 1743 building that once housed Brazil's colonial-era governor generals and now serves as a cultural center.

The Wild Life

Rio's Carnival traditions date back a century. The famous Copacabana hotel kicked things off by holding a fancy-dress ball called "The High Life" in 1908. Two decades after that, the city's social calendar in Carnival season was crowded with more than a hundred such balls.

This year's festivities got under way in the first week of February and reached their crescendo during the weekend that stretches from the Friday through the Tuesday before Ash Wednesday. This sleepless sprint of days usually kicks off on Friday afternoon when the mayor of Rio crowns the festival's King Momo, a fat, happy, samba-stepping incarnation of the trickster god Momos of Greek mythology.

By that nightfall, streets throughout the city have been transformed into a backdrop for over-the-top costume balls, samba-school parades and raucous bandas, or street parties, in one neighborhood after another. (Overall, the best online guide to Carnival events is at www.rio-carnival.net.)

The balls vary from formal and expensive (\$500 U.S. a

ticket) to free outdoor neighborhood affairs such as the Cinelandia Ball, which draws tens of thousands of revelers into the downtown Centro district.

Bandas, too, are free, unless you count the \$8 or so it will set you back to buy a T-shirt of the right color and design that will allow you to join in with the throngs of street dancers showing off their samba steps. Some of these street parties can be outrageous affairs. Banda Carmen Miranda features dozens of men dressed as the “Brazilian bombshell” of Hollywood yore, complete with the fruit-laden hats she was so famous for. Quite a few of the dancers at Bloco das Carmelitas will be decked out as Carmelite nuns. The Banda de Ipanema is older and more traditional, but this is Rio at Carnival time, so it, too, features a generous count of drag queens and over-the-top costumes.

On Sunday and Monday nights, the city’s 14 best samba schools strut their stuff before paying crowds of 30,000 at the Sambodromo arena during shows running from 9 p.m. to 6 a.m. The phrase “samba school” might leave some thinking of drab dance recitals, but spectators here will see astonishingly elaborate floats (carros alegoricos) and costumes that feature gargantuan headdresses and soaring wings. The choreography is timed to music by drum corps that can run up to 400 members strong. Advance ticket purchases are the best way in, though scalpers are usually out in abundance as well.

The Good Life

Come Ash Wednesday, the city returns to normal – but normal in Rio is still something of a carnival. This is, after all, a city that got its name more than five centuries ago by way of a peculiar mistake. Venturing along the South American coast in 1502, the explorer Amerigo Vespucci entered a waterway that he dubbed with the Portuguese phrase meaning “January River,” perhaps not realizing that he wasn’t sailing on a river at all but rather in a bay the Indians called Guanabara.

The name stuck as the city grew over the centuries that followed from an obscure colonial trading outpost into a thoroughly modern metropolis that serves as the cultural capital of Brazil. Most guidebooks divide the city into three areas—Zona Sul (South), Zona Norte (North) and Centro (downtown). Tourists are likely to spend most of their time in Zona Sul, with its abundant hotels, vibrant night life and endless beaches.

Rio’s beaches are its biggest tourism draw outside of the Carnival festivities. The best known is Copacabana, a three-mile stretch of curving oceanfront that first earned its renown in the 1940s as a playground for Hollywood luminaries on the order of Lana Turner and Orson Welles. The surrounding neighborhood of the same name was a gambling mecca back then. It went into decline in the 1960s, but today the Copacabana oceanfront is lined once again with thriving, upscale hotels. A stroll along the beach leads through a fascinating series of distinct neighborhoods on the



Rio de Janeiro is known for pristine beaches and beautiful people. Perhaps its best-known beach, Ipanema, is where the most beautiful bodies congregate.

sand—soccer-playing kids in one stretch, then tourists, then older retirees and then local fishermen.

The hippest of Rio’s beaches lie farther south and take their names from the surrounding neighborhoods of Ipanema and Leblon. The water is cleaner here, and so is the sand. The stretch of Ipanema known as Garota de Ipanema is where Rio’s most beautiful bodies gather daily to show off their glorious tans and impeccable taste in skimpy beachwear. Elsewhere on the sands of Ipanema and Leblon, the sporting life takes center stage with games of soccer, volleyball and frescobol (a sort of beach racquetball invented in Brazil) unfolding at every turn. (Swimmers here need to be careful of the undertow; ipanema is an Indian word meaning “bad, dangerous waters.”)

At the eastern end of these linked beaches is an area called Arpoador, which offers the best surfing in Rio thanks to a range of incoming waves fit for everyone from beginner to expert. Beginners should sign up for classes, of course; experts may also want to head to the less crowded Saquarema, about 60 miles outside the city, where the waves are even better.

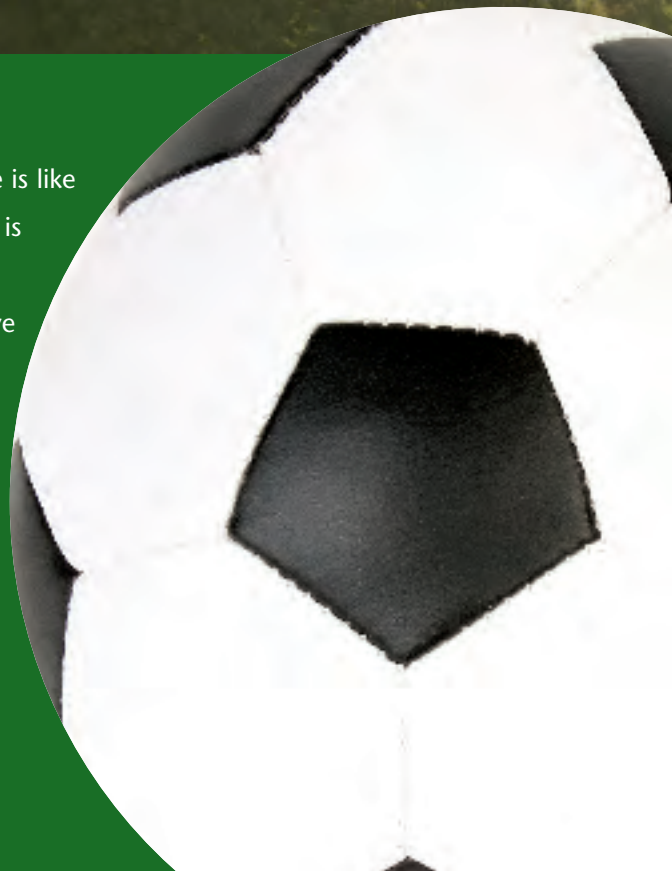
Rio’s night life is a vibrant, seven-day-a-week affair that runs the gamut from opera and ballet in lush old theaters to throbbing samba and hip-hop in darkened clubs. The city’s musical scene is booming these days. While best known for the homegrown samba and bossa nova styles, Rio also boasts an abundance of reggae, rock, jazz and hip-hop music.



Futebol Fever

A traveler to Rio said “To visit Brazil without taking in a soccer game is like seeing Paris without seeing the Eiffel Tower.” Soccer, or futebol as it is called here, is the passion of many Brazilians; Brazil has long been a force in the world soccer arena, taking the FIFA World Cup home five times, the last in 2002.

Rio’s Maracana Stadium is one of the largest in the world and is worth a look just to say you’ve been there. But what better way to experience it than with thousands of true Brazilian futebol fans cheering on their team? There’s no calm applause here—revelers are known to turn cartwheels and throw drinks and other objects from the upper decks in moments of frustration and exhilaration. Admission costs about \$5 and, unless it’s a championship match, tickets are readily available.





Side Trips

Rio may be Brazil's cultural capital, but it's hardly the country's only notable destination. Wilderness adventures abound here, and travelers can head into the rain forest along the storied Amazon River basin in the north, explore the spectacular Pantanal wildlife preserve in the western reaches of the country, and gawk at some of the world's most spectacular waterfalls at Iguacu in the south.

The teeming metropolis of Sao Paulo, located along the Atlantic coast below Rio, now ranks as the world's third largest city, with 18 million residents. Host to the Brazilian Grand Prix Formula One auto race, it's also within striking distance of numerous resorts along the coast or up in the nearby mountains.

Afro-Brazilian culture takes center stage in Salvador, the capital of the state of Bahia. Marked by winding, hilly streets with pastel-painted buildings and elaborate churches, this coastal city is constantly alive with street music. It's renowned for its seafood as well.

Inland lies Minas Gerais, the state that was founded after hordes of Brazilians arrived in the gold rush of the 1700s. Quaint, small colonial cities dot the landscape here—Ouro Preto, Tiradentes and Diamantina among them.

Brasilia, the country's capital, features a number of important architectural sites. It's also close to innumerable natural wonders, including the virgin forests and expansive deserts of Tocantins and the Emas National Park, a great place to catch a glimpse of the maned wolf and the jaguar, among other exotic creatures.



The Sporting Life

By day, Rio is a city of endless diversions. The active life here isn't simply a matter of abundant bicycle trails and jogging paths. There are more than 300 rock-climbing options within a short drive and a number of outfitters and guides available to choose from. One of the more intriguing climbs is tackling Pao de Acucar. While most tourists take a cable car to this summit to take in spectacular views of the city, some opt to sign on for a six-hour hiking and climbing excursion (open to beginners) organized by an outfit called Animus Kon-Tikis. Don't bother with climbing in the summer months, however, as the rocks tend to get ridiculously hot under the Brazilian sun.

Hang gliding is another option for the daring adventurer. The most popular route for beginners takes off from the 1,600-foot-tall Pedro Bonita and heads down onto the Pepino beach below. Experienced gliders can take excursions run by any of half a dozen reputable clubs and companies that arrange trips for tourists. Several scuba diving outfitters are available as well. Anglers looking to do some deep-sea fishing can rent their own boat or take one of the guided trips offered by Universidade de Pesca.



When You Go

Climate: Rio is a tropical city. The months between December and February are hot and humid, with highs often reaching 100 degrees Fahrenheit. The rest of the year, daytime temperatures tend to be in the 70s and 80s.

Accommodations and Transportation: Hotel rooms in Rio run the gamut from luxurious to rough-and-tumble. A nice double room with bath in a quality hotel will likely run \$100 U.S. a night or more. The rates will double during Carnival and around the New Year's holiday. Rooms at Rio's most famous hotel, the Copacabana Palace, can run upward of \$500 U.S. a night.

Traffic in Rio is a confusing, congested nightmare, so it's probably best to rely on the city's public transportation system. Two main subway lines run until midnight six days a week and until 11 p.m. on Sundays. (Needless to say, they run 24 hours a day during Carnival.) The city's numerous bus lines are reasonably safe by day but should be avoided in favor of taxis at night. Taxi riders should make an effort to understand fare structures in advance, as some drivers are known to inflate rates for tourists.

Spectator sports also abound in Rio. Soccer fans should keep their eye on the local futebol schedules in order to take in a match at the magnificent Maracana Stadium in Zona Norte, which accommodates rowdy crowds of more than 100,000. (See Futebol Fever on page 27.) Auto racing is big in Rio as well; more Brazilians have won Formula One world championships than any other nationality. Check on the race schedule at the Autodromo Nelson Piquet in Zona Sul. Olympic-style sports will take center stage in Rio during July of 2007 when the city hosts the quadrennial Pan American Games (www.rio2007.org.br).

Sports-minded travelers also would do well to get a taste of capoeira, the martial art form invented centuries ago by Brazilian slaves. After its practice was outlawed by slave-owners, capoeira went underground, eventually emerging again as a dance form accompanied by drums and tambores. Imagine putting a fight from a martial arts film to a rhythm of drums and having the combatants narrowly miss each other with every kick and punch—that'll give you an idea of this uniquely Brazilian mix of sports and art. The Fiera Nordestina fair and marketplace held every weekend in the Sao Cristovao neighborhood west of the Centro busi-

ness district often features capoeira displays.

As renowned as Rio is for its fast-paced night life and sporting diversions, the city is also something of a strollers' paradise as well. It's loaded with notable museums, lovely gardens, gorgeous churches and quaint streetscapes. The streets through the expansive Parque do Flamengo in the Flamengo neighborhood are closed on Sundays, making way for waves of cyclists, rollerbladers and joggers; the park was designed by Burle Marx, a Brazilian landscape architect famous the world over.

Perhaps Rio's most intriguing natural destination is the Floresta da Tijuca, a sliver of rain forest located just 15 minutes away from the city. It's got well-marked trails, several waterfalls and caves, abundant iguanas and monkeys—and even a restaurant.

Finally, no trip to Rio would be complete without a visit to the top of Corcovado (Hunchback Mountain). There, arms outstretched over the city, stands the famous statue of Cristo Redentor (Christ the Redeemer), shown above. Trains climbing the mountain leave every 30 minutes from the Cosme Velho neighborhood not far from Copacabana. The statue, which rises to 125 feet tall, is a symbol of Rio known the world over. ■