

CITY
LIFE

Rio de Janeiro

Flamboyant and fearless, Rio is the life and soul of the party — and on the cusp of the 2016 Olympics, there's never been a better time to embrace the energy of the hedonistic host city

WORDS: Laura Holt

“We are part African slaves, part white Portuguese and part native indigenous,” explains Simone Almeida, a vivacious and beautiful local chef who encapsulates everything it is to be a modern Brazilian. I’m standing in an unassuming room, just off Copacabana beach, learning how to cook *feijoada*, the rich local stew that brings Rio’s residents together for a hearty brunch every Saturday. “We’re proud to be mixed,” Simone continues. “It’s part of our history, our music, our dance and, of course, our food. We have the best of everyone.”

From the endless beaches of Copacabana, Ipanema and Leblon, to the undulating, rainforested humps of Sugarloaf and Corcovado mountains, the ‘*Cidade Maravilhosa*’ (Marvellous City) seduces repeat visitors as much as it leaves first-time travellers with a burning desire to return.

For artists and bohemians, the crumbling 19th-century mansions and colourful street art of hilly Santa Teresa is a must, while night owls indulge in the samba clubs and sticky bars of graffiti-strewn Lapa. But there are sanctuaries to be found in this bustling metropolis of more than six million people — the tropical refuge of Sítio Roberto Burle Marx, Brazil’s foremost landscape gardener, being a top choice.

Today, however, Rio’s attention is turning to the 2016 Olympic Games. Much of the focus is on Barra, a seafront enclave to the west of the city centre, that’s likened by locals to Miami Beach. Playing host to the athletes’ village and the main Olympic Park, it’s one of four key ‘Games Zones’ across Rio. Elsewhere, there will be equestrian events, biking and rugby in Deodoro; beach volleyball on Copacabana; and the opening and closing ceremonies in the recently-renovated Maracanã, football’s spiritual home.

So if you’ve got yourself a ticket, it’s time to plan the ultimate escape and get set for the party of a lifetime in this kaleidoscopic city of many faces. ➤

IMAGE: GETTY

Banda de Ipanema street party



LIKE A LOCAL

Urca: There aren't many tourist attractions in Urca — the gateway to Sugarloaf — but that's sort of the point. This smart residential *bairro* (district) of charming colonial houses and tree-lined streets is great for an afternoon stroll and an al fresco drink at waterside Bar Urca. barurca.com.br

Snacking: From the delicious *salgados* (salty snacks) seen at counters around the city, to the somewhat healthier coconut water you can drink from husks at kiosks along the beach, residents of Rio like to take regular refuelling stops. Try açai — made using the Brazilian super-berry and in this instance, frozen into a cooling dessert — at the Copacabana branch of Bibi Sucos, R\$6.90 (£1.40). bibisucos.com.br

Arpoador: As the day draws to a close, locals head to this rocky outcrop, jutting out between Copacabana and Ipanema beaches to watch the sun set. Afterwards, cram into the cool, tiled interior of Bar Astor. barastor.com.br

EAT

Confeitaria Colombo: Two of the best branches of this 19th-century restaurant and confectioner in the city are the Downtown outlet at Rua Gonçalves Dias — where ornate interiors abound — and the informal cafe at Fort Copacabana, great for watching paddleboarders skimming the water. confeitariacolombo.com.br

Aprazível: Hidden away at the top of Santa Teresa, this romantic restaurant features secluded tables, scattered up a tree-strewn hillside. The lighting is atmospheric and the food isn't half bad, either. Try the excellent slow-roasted lamb shoulder, which comes in at R\$92 (£18.90). aprazivel.com.br

Sushi Leblon: After a long day on the sand, there's only one place Rio's young and beautiful go for an after-sun snack. Sushi Leblon is set back from the beach, on Rua Dias Ferreira. Japanese cuisine is big in Rio and this place is regarded as one of the city's best. sushileblon.com

Did you know? When the Rolling Stones played in Rio in 2006, a purpose-built walkway was built across Avenida Atlantica, linking their hotel, the Copacabana Palace, directly with their stage on the beach

SEE & DO

The beaches: In Rio, there seems to be a different beach for every day of the week. Praia de Fora is where the city was founded; little Vermelha is known for its red sands; bustling Copacabana was made famous by Bardot; but Ipanema and Leblon steal the limelight. Rent a bike from Rio Electric at the north end of Copacabana and cycle down to Leblon. Daily hire R\$60 (£12.35). riolectric.com.br
Santa Teresa: After a period of decline, artists, writers and bohemians are reclaiming this hilltop neighbourhood, transforming its once-grand former mansions back into lavish private

Clockwise from top left: Nino, the parrot, at Villa No. 174; Copacabana beach; Cota 200 restaurant; dish at Cota 200; World Cup graffiti in Santa Teresa

homes or boutique hotels. Take in the street art, explore the restaurants around Largo do Guimarães and visit the Museu da Chácara do Céu and park — former home to the wealthy Castro Maya family. Museum R\$2 (40p); park free. museuscstromaya.com.br

Lapa: To feel the rhythm at the heart of Rio, stroll the streets around Lapa. By day, you can admire the graffiti murals, gaze at the 18th-century aqueduct and walk the Escadaria Selarón — an elaborately-tiled staircase, created by Chilean artist Jorge Selarón. As nightfall descends, the streets come alive as bars around Mem de Sá and Lavradio spread their chairs onto the pavements and samba music sings.

Barra: Rio's answer to Miami Beach is currently a construction site ahead of the Games, with stadia and hotels being built around the area's 11-mile beach. Don't miss the tranquil Sítio Roberto

Burle Marx, former home and life's work of Brazil's leading landscape architect, who also designed the wave motif on Rio's pavements. Pre-booked 90-minute tours at 9.30am and 1.30pm daily. sitioburlemarx.blogspot.co.uk

Lagoa: The Rodrigo de Freitas Lagoon — or 'Lagoa' — is an inland body of water, set back from Ipanema and Leblon beaches. Surrounded by upmarket neighbourhoods, it's a fine place to cycle, run and walk, or indulge in some open-air dining at The Lagoon — a new complex of sleek waterside restaurants and bars. lagoon.com.br

Sugarloaf: This iconic bluff is accessed via a glass-sided cable car from Avenida Pasteur 520, taking you first to little Morro da Urca, before reaching the peak. Tickets from R\$62 (£12.80). To linger a little longer, reserve a table at Cota 200, a new fine-dining restaurant at the top. cota200restaurante.com.br

IMAGES: AWL IMAGES; CORBIS COTA 200; VILLA NO. 174; GUSTAVO WITTICH



SHOP

Feira do Rio Antigo: On the first Saturday of every month, Rua do Lavradio in Lapa explodes with its lively open-air antiques market. Although you may not be able to squeeze a life-sized statue of Christ or a giant gramophone into your luggage, go for the live music, street food and unmissable atmosphere. novorioantigo.com.br

Hippie Fair: For more conventional souvenirs and curiosities, head to Praça General Osório in Ipanema on Sundays from 7am-7pm for the FERIA de Arte or 'Hippie Fair'. You'll find jewellery, clothing and creative gifts, plus stalls selling delicious snacks and super-strong caipirinhas. feirahippieipanema.com

Galeria River: This parade of shops on the beach near Arpoador is the place to pick up Brazilian beachwear, grab a burger and rent a surf (or stand-up paddle) board. galeriariver.com.br

AFTER HOURS

Rio Scenarium: What started out as an antiques store supplying props to Brazil's *novelas* (soap operas), has transformed into one of Rio's best-loved clubs. Located in Lapa, it features three floors jam-packed with curios, antiques and oddities. It's perfect for dipping your toe into Lapa's late-night scene. rioscenarium.com.br

Downtown bars: In the area around Rua do Ouvidor, tables and chairs spill out on to the streets beneath colourful colonial buildings. It has the feel of Covent Garden in summertime as locals gather for an after-work *chope* (draft beer). Check out Cais's greenhouse-style interiors. caisgourmet.com.br

Skylab: For a more sedate after-dinner drink, aim for the 30th floor of the Othon Palace Hotel on the seafront promenade overlooking Copacabana for fantastic views of the twinkling city at night. restauranteskyllab.com.br ►



Lounge of Villa No 174

SLEEP

£ Hotel de Lapa: This new design-minded hotel in the buzzing bairro of Lapa opened in July. Its cool, quadruple-height lobby is littered with art murals and eye-catching furniture, while upstairs there's a series of boutique-style bunk rooms and private suites. dalapahotel.com

££ Villa No 174: Breathtaking views make a stay at this art-filled B&B in Santa Teresa a real experience. There are just four rooms, three of which have balconies overlooking the city, with hammocks for lazy afternoons. Downstairs, there's a chic communal pool and a resident macaw named Nino. villa174.com

£££ Fasano: Pitched between Arpoador and Ipanema beach, this pricey hotel in a prime location is where the jet-set stay. With interiors by Philippe Starck, it features an open-air infinity pool and oceanfront rooms, along with a highly-regarded Italian restaurant and cocktail bar where DJs play nightly. fasano.com.br



ESSENTIALS

Rio de Janeiro

GETTING THERE

British Airways flies direct from Heathrow. ba.com
Average flight time: 11h

GETTING AROUND

Rio's metro has two lines and construction is underway to link the Olympic site of Barra with the beaches of Leblon, Ipanema and beyond. The website has maps, including one highlighting different attractions – single tickets R\$3,70 (75p). metrorio.com.br Alternatively, taxis (hailed and metered) are cheap and preferable at night.

WHEN TO GO

Peak season (December-March) brings crowds and +40C heat. Visit instead from May-October, when temperatures rest in the 20Cs.

NEED TO KNOW

Currency: Reals (R\$).
 £1 = £4.87.
International dial code:
 00 55.
Time difference: GMT -4.

MORE INFO

rioguaoficial.com.br

HOW TO DO IT

Wild Frontiers offers five nights' B&B at Mama Ruisa with tours, airport transfers and flights from £1,949 per person. wildfrontiertravel.com A local guide can be invaluable here. **Inspire Travel** offers customised tours, such as the cooking class with Simone Almeida and excursions to Sítio Roberto Burle Marx. Daily from \$525 (£329) per person, including a private driver and guide. inspiretravel.com.br 