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Revelling in Rio, the magnet of Brazil

WHEN I first visited Rio de Janeiro in the early 1990s, Brazil's most hedonistic city was experiencing a sharp drop in tourism arrivals. The global recession of the time, the country's political turmoil and an increase in crime had dimmed its carefree Fred Astaire and Gingers Rogers *Flying Down to Rio* image. How times change. Today, this most beautiful of cities still has many blights but it pulled the rug from under Chicago's feet with its successful bid for the 2016 Summer Olympics. A flying visit to Copenhagen by President Obama to spruik for his adopted home of Chicago just wasn't enough to sway IOC voters from anointing Rio the winner.

The Girl from Ipanema, that immortal anthem of Rio's good life, still plays in elevators in supermarkets all over the world and the whispery lyrics of Astrud Gilberto fuel tourist fantasies as strongly as they ever did. The legendary white beach stretches out for nearly two kilometres under the two peaks of the Dois Irmaos, making a movie set background for beach soccer, girls in thong-style bikinis and wandering masseurs. The neighbourhood is still chic, too, and houses many of Rio's smart boutiques, restaurants and nightclubs.

Despite its glamorous image, a shortage of hotels to match has long been the downside of a visit to Rio. Hotel towers built in the 1970s line many of the city's beaches and the default booking was always the legendary Copacabana Palace, built in the 1920s and the home away from home of nearly every president, celebrity and world leader who landed at Rio's airport - a fast 40-minute drive away. It's easy to see why. The beach service, with complimentary water and fruits, the fabulous pool bar and the Hotel Cipriani restaurant, which serves some of the best Italian cuisine in Rio, keep the hotel feeling as swish as it ever was.

Back at Ipanema, though, the hangout of the beautiful people finally got the luxury hotel it deserved two years ago with the opening of the Hotel Fasano Rio de Janeiro (www.fasano.com.br). The handiwork of Brazilian restaurateur-hotelier Rogerio Fasano and avant-garde French designer, Philippe Starck, the 91 rooms are scattered with mid-20th century collectables that evoke one of Rio's golden eras - the '50s and '60s. "At that time," says Rogerio, "Rio was one of the best cities in the world to live in. Bossa nova

was coming, the new Brazilian architecture was coming, and it was very modern and upscale." Feel the beat again, so to speak, in the hotel's rooftop infinity pool and Fasano al Mare, the in-house restaurant which serves deeply delicious Italian seafood dishes. The wine list matches with many imported Italian wines, or go local with Chilean and Argentinian bottlings at the top of their game and price brackets.

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There's no need to hang around the hotel all day, as supermodel Naomi Campbell does when she stays at the Fasano. Ipanema is bloated with trendy restaurants and watering holes. Madonna and Sting have made the Satyricon a go-to eatery for its eclectic specialities, including the juiciest of whole fish cooked in rock salt. Rogerio Fasano also owns the Gero Rio, voted the best Italian restaurant in Rio, which is also a magnet for the city's high flyers for its pasta and seafood dishes.

If you think the tall blonde girl that just walked into the Bar d'Hotel looks like Gisele Bundchen, it could be the supermodel herself. Soccer demi-god Ronaldhino also drops by regularly for a cooling beer. If you fancy a late afternoon stroll, one of the best 'soft drink' outlets near the beach are the street stalls selling fresh coconut juice. The vendors simply slice off the top of coconuts with a machete and pop in a straw so there's no worries about hygiene.

Mingling with the surfers at Arpoador Beach, a rocky outcrop at the edge of Ipanema, could provide you with a crash course in Brazilian beers. Brazil is the world's fourth largest beer market, producing 9.8 billion litres each year. The market leader is AmBev with a 69 per cent market share through its Brahma, Antarctica, Bohemia and Skol brands. As keen observers of the world's brewing market know, AmBev merged with the Belgian brewer Interbrew

in 2004 to become InBev, the world's largest beer company. The other major beer name to remember in Brazil is Kaiser, which alludes to the fact that, as in most New World countries, Germans founded the national brewing industry.

The best time to visit Rio is during Carnival in February, one of the grandest shows on Earth. The action takes place in Rio's Sambodrome, which has two vast grandstands that seat 70,000 people and was designed in 1984 by Brazilian architect Oscar Niemeyer. Rio's top 16 samba schools compete and each school of 3000 to 5000 members present a different song and theme each year. It's a sight and feeling not easily forgotten.

Many travellers spend their entire time in Rio on the beach. In a word: don't. On a clear, sunny day, Rio is best viewed from the landmark Christ the Redeemer statue atop the 710m Corcovado mountain. Over 300,000 visitors a year make their way to this iconic spot every year by taxi or funicular. If the \$US28 fare is too steep, you can hike to the top but you should be pretty fit and allow two hours for the climb. Another amazing spot is the Tijuca National Forest, a 32 square kilometre expanse that surrounds the famous statue and which lays claim to the title of largest urban forest in the world. Known as the green lungs of Rio, it's where locals come to walk the hiking trails and picnic on a giant granite slab called Mesa do Imperador (Emperor's Table).

If you want to see the life of a colonial aristocrat, head for the Villa Riso (www.villariso.com.br), a gorgeously restored 19th century home and gardens. Originally a sugar cane plantation, it is open daily but the best day to visit is Sunday for the legendary lunch buffet. A jazz ensemble and staff dressed in colonial garb accompany an extravagant buffet of Brazil's national dish, the hearty pork and black bean feijoada, rich coconut-flavoured prawns, salads, half a continent of tropical fruits and Portuguese inspired sugar and egg desserts.

Much of Rio's nightlife is concentrated in Lapa, once the city's main transvestite beat. The trannies are still there, but a host of new bars and restaurants have opened up. The more popular ones feature live samba music and there's always a long line of tourists at the more popular venues such as Carioca da Gema and Rio Scenarium. There are plenty of street vendors flogging beer

on the streets of Lapa, though, if you want to stick to a tight budget. Hangover 'treatments' of acai berries with toasted muesli are available from the city's ubiquitous juice bars, where you can also cure a morning thirst with a wide choice of exotic, freshly squeezed juices.

Cachaca, a rum-style liquor made from sugar cane, is still one of the most popular drinks in Brazil. If authenticity is your drinking style, head for the Bar do Gomes in Santa Teresa, a nicotine-stained drinking den where the decor hasn't changed since it opened in 1919. It's perfectly respectable, though, and frequented by grandmothers, artists and businessmen drawn to its 100-variety cachaca collection and 'stupidly cold' beers. Nearby is one of the neighbourhood's best restaurants - Espirito Santo - where chef Natacha Fink serves up cozinha amazonica, a modern take on traditional Brazilian cooking. If you're game, start with piranha soup (they are dead) with coconut milk and spices. But a must-have is the feijoada rolo - rice rolls filled with black beans and meat.

As in most South American countries, meat is king at the dining table in Brazil. Don't eat anything else on the day of a visit to Porcao. Part of a churrascaria chain with locations scattered throughout Rio, the one in Ipanema is considered the best. The name means 'big pig', which should prepare you for a meat lover's bounty of pork, chicken, several cuts of beef and sides of black beans, cheese balls and more delivered to your table. Fruit and alcohol cocktails are served to 'cut' the richness of the meat, but follow the advice of local doctors and go swimming for a week after a meal here. I'm only kidding, but it is wise to stay out of the water for a day as your body weight will have certainly increased.

The inhabitants of Rio are very helpful and charming, but it still pays to take extra care. Stay on well-lit streets and public places and don't wear expensive watches and jewellery or carry MP3 players or the latest cameras. Don't take more money with you than you need, either. You don't want carelessness to mar one of the best overseas trips ever.

Getting there: Two of the easiest ways to fly to Rio from Australia are with Qantas in conjunction with LAN Airlines and Aerolineas Argentinas in conjunction with Emirates. Return economy airfares range between \$1500 and \$2200. Go to jetabroad.com.au for more information and bookings. 🍷

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