

Art and soul
Oscar Niemeyer's
Museum of
Contemporary
Art in Niterói

On our way to Rio

Rio de Janeiro has it all – a vibrant arts scene, seductive beaches and a talent for partying. **John Kampfner** raises a *caipirinha* to the host of the next Olympic Games and Paralympic Games

Alan Weintraub/Arcaid Images



Clockwise from this picture Instituto Moreira Salles; view of the city; young people on Copacabana Beach

For a few remarkable weeks, the eyes of the world will be on London. But as soon as the London 2012 Olympic Games and Paralympic Games are over, attention will turn to the beguiling city of Rio de Janeiro, which will play host to two great sporting events that follow – the World Cup of 2014 and the Olympic Games and Paralympic Games of 2016.

Such is Rio's confidence, it will take both challenges in its stride. The city of eternal beaches and parties or, as Brazilians call it, *cidade maravilhosa* (the remarkable city), will form the perfect backdrop for sporting celebration. It also provides an ideal base for a holiday, combining the metropolis, with its natural beauty and vibrant arts and music scene, with the quiet of the countryside to the northwest and the spectacular coastline to the east.

Our ten-day jaunt begins in Copacabana in the south of the city. It has personal memories for my wife and me, as it's where we began our honeymoon, 20 years ago this month – although this time we're accompanied by our 14-year-old daughter. The Copacabana Palace Hotel is a destination in itself. Built in 1923,

with its famous white stucco façade looking on to the beach, it is a place of glamour, secret liaisons and A-list tantrums (Ava Gardner, Orson Welles). Around the enormous outdoor swimming pool, Carioca (inhabitants of Rio) and foreigners alike congregate for cocktails or for Sunday brunch. This is Brazil as it used to be.

Down the road are the two famous beaches of Ipanema and Leblon. There is no shortage of high fashion and sushi in Leblon's main street, Rua Dias Ferreira, but I want to check out its bookshop-cum café, Argumento (livrariaargumento.com.br), which, during the rule of the generals, secretly stocked banned titles. Here I meet Maria Nepomuceno, one of Brazil's most exciting up-and-coming artists. She gives me the lowdown on what to see in Rio's burgeoning arts scene.

Rio has no shortage of globally renowned galleries, from the impressive National Museum of Fine Arts (mnba.gov.br) in the central district to the stunning Contemporary Art Museum (macniteroi.com.br) over the water in the satellite town of Niterói. Built by Oscar Niemeyer, and opened in 1996, its space-age cupola is one of the city's most iconoclastic landmarks. >



Beach chic

I check out some of the lesser known, but equally intriguing alternatives, too. One is the Instituto Moreira Salles in Gávea (<http://ims.uol.com.br>). This privately owned cultural centre epitomises cool Brazilian modernism and is housed in a striking 1950s white villa at the top of a hill. Walter Moreira Salles was a prominent banker who was fanatical about the arts, especially photography. My daughter is swept up by the temporary exhibition dedicated to the Italian film-maker Federico Fellini.

The School of Visual Arts (eavparquelage.rj.gov.br) is a mansion in the Parque Lage about half a mile from the Botanical Gardens (<http://jbrj.gov.br>). In the centre of the mansion there's a courtyard with a fountain and the rooms off it are full of art school types making sculptures, having life drawing classes or holding earnest discussions with their teachers. The café at one end of the courtyard sometimes has live music from a cello, flute and violin trio and is a popular venue for film crews. If you look up, you can see the statue of Christ the Redeemer high above your head.

Perhaps my favourite spot, on the other side of the Botanical Gardens, is the small district of Humaitá. The hilly cobbled side streets transport you into a tranquil world of stunningly beautiful and often understated private houses, where monkeys and snakes sneak their way along stone walls. For nightlife, one of

the places to go is Santa Teresa, where graffiti artists, musicians and writers congregate in the many bars and small restaurants. For fabulous views, chill-out music and fruit-flavoured *caipirinhas*, the Santa Teresa boutique hotel (santa-teresa-hotel.com), built on the site of a former coffee plantation, is hard to beat. For a more boho experience, order a drink at the Bar de Mineiro, and eavesdrop on earnest conversations about culture and politics.

But for the quintessential Carioca experience, you have to go to a football match. Our friend Tuninho gets us tickets for the local derby encounter between Flamengo and Vasco da Gama, two teams whose mutual animosity makes the Manchester or Milan rivals seem like pussycats. We pass the revered Maracanã football stadium (rdj4u.com/maracana-stadium-football-experience-p-471.html), which is being rebuilt for 2014, as we head for a temporary ground. Each set of supporters tries to outdo the other with their drumming and cheering, setting off flares whenever a goal is scored. The Vasco players, who had lost thanks to a controversial Ronaldinho penalty, start threatening the referee – not an uncommon occurrence, I'm told.

After a glorious four-day assault on the senses, it is time to seek quieter climes. The drive out of Rio is a nerve-wracking mix of poor road signs and juggernauts, but once we turn off >

Sands of time

Ipanema Beach –
an integral part
of Carioca life





Dance across the Rio Grande Samba dancers rehearse for the Carnival parade; the Mauá hills (below), near Pousada Pedra Selada



STAY

COPACABANA PALACE HOTEL

Overlooking the famous Copacabana Beach, this glamorous Orient-Express hotel has been welcoming the rich and famous since it opened in 1923. Doubles from £202. copacabanapalace.com

POUSADA PEDRA SELADA

A gorgeous country house hotel in the Mauá Hills, the views are breathtaking and

the ambience cosy – plus there's a natural swimming pool to cool off in. Doubles from £125 per couple, all-inclusive. pedraselada.com.br

CASAS BRANCAS BOUTIQUE HOTEL & SPA

A chic whitewashed hotel on the waterfront at Búzios, just two hours south of Rio, with stylish rooms and lovely terraces overlooking the sea. Doubles from £139. casasbrancas.com.br

the main São Paulo highway we are transported into verdant alpine pastures. We are on our way to Pousada Pedra Selada, a luxury guesthouse that bears the name of a craggy mountain loved by Cariocas coming to walk, climb or breathe the fresh air.

On arrival, Sérgio Venancio de Almeida greets us, pouring out glasses of refreshing *cachaça* from a small wooden cask. Sérgio was once hairdresser to the stars in Rio before discovering the mountains and building a house on this spot more than 30 years ago. He and local workmen started digging a well to extract natural water, and then realised the hole they had created was far too large. So he built a giant swimming pool instead out of the local black stone. Then, he concluded, he might as well turn his land into a small hotel. He has been fashioning it ever since, with beds made of the local eucalyptus wood, and paintings and rugs and furniture made by artisans and villagers. The exquisite food comes from his vegetable plot and local farms.

Wherever you go in Pedra Selada, the horses follow, roaming across the estate, chomping away with desultory disdain for the new arrivals. Sérgio's colleague, Ricardo, who combines running the stables with doing odd jobs and serving at table, takes me for a test canter in the field, before setting off for a hack. The riding here is one-hand, American style. The ten horses are selected to cater for all abilities, from the frightened novice to the seasoned jumper. I enjoy several rides with Ricardo, as we crisscross the three states – Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo and Minas Gerais – and the River Preto.

Other activities include canoeing along the river, mountain climbing and tennis. But much of the joy of this pousada lies in doing nothing – reading on the verandah, by the pool, sauna or jacuzzi, or on the hammock by our exquisite room next to the river. Most of the guests are Brazilian, but the pousada has also been discovered by a foreign clientele that >

returns year after year to savour the tranquillity, the air and Sérgio's ever-creative design style.

From the seclusion and cooler climes of the west, we head back to the east, 100 miles down the coast to Búzios. Once the preserve of slave traders and pirates, the resort was made famous by Brigitte Bardot in the 1960s and is hugely popular with the Carioca in-crowd who descend from the city at weekends. Its two dozen beaches, perched on either side of the peninsula, are varied enough to provide escape even at busy periods.

Our sense of calm is helped by staying at Casas Brancas, a sophisticated but also understated boutique hotel. Where better to watch the sun set than on its verandah overlooking the beach, sipping a *caipirinha*? The town centre is small enough to navigate, including a disconcertingly high proportion of bikini shops. The action takes place along the promenade, the Rua das Pedras (Street of Stones), where Brazilians and foreigners pose against bronze statues of Bardot and of a very casual-looking former president, Juscelino Kubitschek, waving blithely.

On one day we drive to the neighbouring resort of Arraial do Cabo for a morning's diving off adjacent islands. Arraial is an unprepossessing small town, but its outlying beaches are pristine. The next day we hire a fisherman from Búzios harbour, who takes us snorkelling off his rickety boat. This gives us a better sense of the topography of the area.

Of the beaches, three stand out – João Fernandinho, which is easily walkable from the town, the gloriously secluded horseshoe-shaped Ferradurinha in the south, and crowning glory, Praia Brava, with the ever-popular Rocka beach lounge (rockafish.com). Run by Santiago Bebbiano, a man apparently rarely out of the glossy magazines, this place exudes low-key chic. You have to book early to secure one of the pristine white loungers-

cum-beds perched on the sand, from where you can spend the day eating sumptuous seafood. Mid-conversation, Santiago suddenly disappears, next seen paddling out to sea on his surfboard. He heads for a fishermen's boat, from where he emerges, string sack on his back, with freshly caught lobster, octopus and turbot ready to cook. A few minutes later the fishermen pop in. Bottles of beer in hand, they relax and chat as bossa nova tracks play in the background.

As the sun disappears, on my final day, I am already pondering my return to Brazil, a country growing confident in its increasing influence around the world. With 2014 around the corner, there will be no shortage of excuses. ■

WAY TO GO

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When the boat comes in... Evening falls over Praia da Armação in Búzios

