



Rio Carnival

BRAZIL



GETTING THERE

Fly from London Heathrow to Rio de Janeiro, via Lisbon, from about £550 return with TAP. (flytap.com)



The Carnival is no time to be shy

The biggest party on Earth

It's the craziest shindig you're ever likely to score an invite to. So how to make sure you have the time of your life? Simple. Read on

WORDS **JOHN MALATHRONAS**

The Rio Carnival is part Milan Fashion Week, part New Year's Eve, part Eurovision telethon and part gay-pride exuberance, flaunted in such exotic attire that nature itself might flinch at it. It uses oceans of paint, mountains of plumes and galaxies of glitter. It makes and breaks celebrities, furnishes Brazil's top ten tunes for weeks to come, and provides a pivot for the whole year: pre-Carnival anticipation gives way to post-Carnival hangovers that lead to debriefings for new Carnival designs and, finally, preparations for the next one.

Most importantly, however, Carnival is not a spectacle to be enjoyed passively; it demands your complete involvement and participation. Here's a practical guide so that you can enjoy it to the max.

Getting there

The cheapest flights to Rio are the ones with TAP via Lisbon, starting at about £550 (flytap.com). Even cheaper is arriving earlier, leaving later and making a longer holiday out of your trip. Another savings idea is to include Rio in a round-the-world ticket: you can get an RTW ticket to Australia or New Zealand, including Rio from just £1499 (roundtheworldflights.com). From Rio's Central Station (Estação Central do Brasil at Praça Cristiano Ottoni), Intercity and Interstate buses – cheap, comfortable and air-conditioned – can take you anywhere, while the easy-to-remember GOL airlines (voegol.com.br) is the Brazilian version of easyJet with a no-frills flying policy.

Where to stay

The bad news first: about 350,000 tourists descend on Rio during Carnival and accommodation prices double or, in some cases, triple. Hotels, hostels and pensões (B&Bs) require you book a minimum of seven days, whereas the Carnival only lasts for the five days leading to Ash Wednesday – this year, it's from February 17-21. You can minimise the price by reserving the room directly with some of the cheaper hotels involved (that normally insist on part-pre-payment). Rio Hostel Ipanema (riohostelipanema.com) is in an unbeatable location and good value for money; its sister in Santa Teresa (riohostel.com) is slightly away from the action but has amazing views. Medium-price hotels include the neo-classical

but noisy Hotel Imperial in Catete (imperialhotel.com.br) and Atlantis in Arpoador, popular with surfers (atlantishotel.com.br).

Finding the action

The good news is that once in Rio, you can get by for little. Beer in choperias (pubs) is cold and cheap, food in lanchonetes (snack bars) is plentiful, lying on the beach is free and relaxing, and you don't have to look out for entertainment: the action finds you.

Your hotel should be able to secure you tickets for the grand processions in the Sambódromo, an Oscar Niemeyer modernist creation that seats 60,000 screaming and dancing revellers every parade night. The marching 'samba schools' have nothing to do with educational institutions; they are large, competing organisations whose parades are graded by judges on precision, music, concept, attire, rhythm, choreography and a dozen other aspects of the spectacle. They are organised in two divisions: the lesser-known ones march on Friday and Saturday when tickets are cheaper, while the most popular form the Grupo Especial and march on Monday or Tuesday, when prices skyrocket.

Tickets

You can also buy tickets in any travel agency, but your best bet is to try in person at the Sambódromo Box Office itself for Friday or Saturday – even if you don't get in, the area around it quickly becomes festive by itself. The best tickets are those towards the end of the parade – especially Sector 9, which sells out quickly – while the cheapest are the Grandstand tickets which are high up and where seating is unallocated.

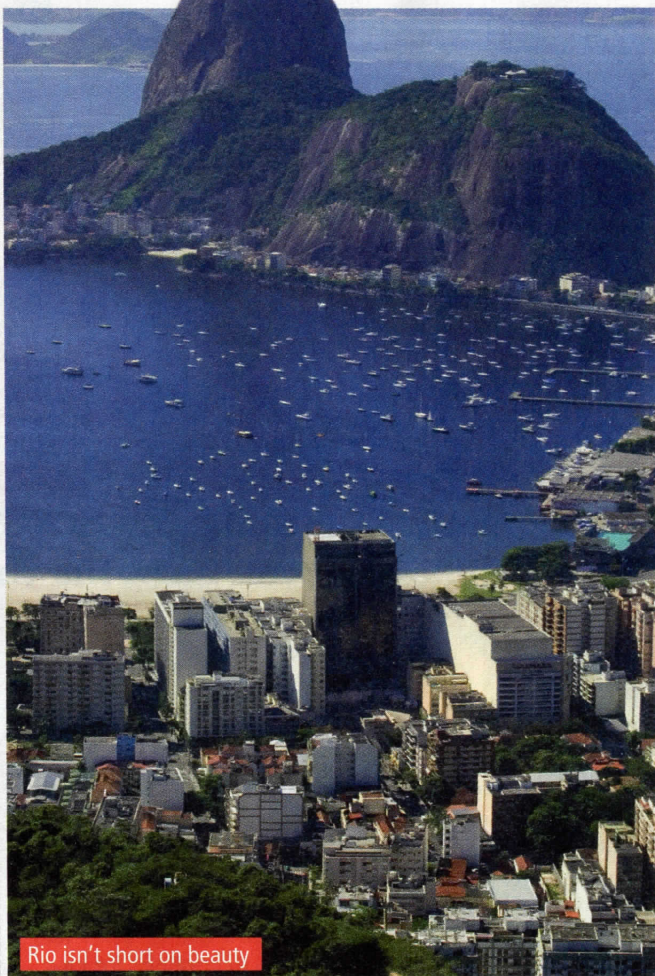
Parades

Sambódromo parades start at 9pm and each samba school takes exactly 75 minutes to cross the 700m of the parade ground: they have to; they lose points if they don't. However, if you are in Rio earlier you can watch the rehearsals for a pittance; these take place every weekend for at least one month leading to Carnival and are, unsurprisingly, followed by impromptu parties outside.

Yet the main, incomparable buzz of Carnival is found in »



See drag on Shrove Tuesday



Rio isn't short on beauty

full participation in these parades. You can choose the samba school you prefer (the 2011 winners were Beija Flor, but other top inclusive schools include Mocidade, Mangueira and Imperatriz), though you have to buy the set costume of your marching division, learn the basic dance movements and, if you are well advanced, chant their Carnival song. The easiest way is to view the available styles and buy via rio-carnival.net.

There are cheaper attractions, too. During Carnival there are free concerts, raves and street parties every night. That's where you can join in without having to buy expensive outfits, although dressing up will certainly improve your 'grim gringo' status. Start at 5pm every night at Praça Floriano in Cinelândia for a retro night with an older but still remarkably up-for-it crowd celebrating past Carnivals, continue at about 7pm in the Rua do Mercado with its al fresco dance nights, and finish under the Arches of Lapa, dancing to more contemporary Brazilian sounds from up-and-coming groups and DJs all through the night. Then, there are the blocos, where you can follow a moving sound system, can of beer in hand and gyrating hips at the ready, through a particular route. Bloco Céu da Terra at Santa Teresa kickstarts the party at 7am (!) and there are blocos in Copacabana and Ipanema every afternoon.

Nightlife

If you just want to hang around, any choperia by the beach will do, but make an effort to discover some of Rio's best: Bar Urca (barurca.com.br) is a small bar on the shady side of Sugarloaf mountain with amazing views towards Corcovado; Boteco Engarrafamento (Rua Prudente de Moraes 1838; +55 (21) 2529-6357) is popular, lively and good value; and if you

want to team up with other young gringos, try Shenanigans (shenanigans.com.br) – this is a corner of Rio that will be forever Irish.

As for clubbing, if you just want to drink and dance, nothing compares with Baronetti (baronneti.com.br), which opens at 10pm Wed-Sun, has a steep R\$100 (about £36) entrance fee but offers free drinks. Café del Mar (cafedelmarbrasil.com) is the city's prime chillout spot, which also encourages newcomers to DJ during the quiet periods (normally 6pm-10pm).



At the Copacabana: epicentre of prostitution

G-A-Y

Shrove Tuesday is gay day and Ipanema beach the place to be. In the morning, you can watch an ad hoc show-off of insanely muscular bodies with abs you can grate cheese on. In the afternoon, participate in the Banda de Ipanema bloco starting from Praça Osorio, where you bump into drag queens with extravagant hairstyles that would make a fruit-and-veg stand wilt with shame. The night finishes with the spectacular Scala Gay ball in Leblon – broadcast live on Brazilian TV – where even the most elaborately costumed transvestites take admiring pictures of each other. During the other Carnival nights, the place to go is Le Boy (leboy.com.br), a gay Rio institution that offers dazzling shows.

Vice

Making friends with the locals is never difficult during Carnival, although ensuring that any pick-up is genuine can be beyond the most streetwise of visitors. It is quite common for men to chat up girls in a street party, buy them a drink and invite them over to their hotel for the night – only to discover that money has to be exchanged once the room door is closed. (And that is before you can check that the girl you were smooching with is, indeed, of the female persuasion.) The epicentre of overt – or covert – prostitution is the illustrious arc of Copacabana beach. This has traditionally been the hub of tourist activity and, as a result, has attracted hustlers with a rich panoply of scams. In fact, hotel receptions in the area have taken a stand against sex-for-hire, and you may find that you won't be allowed to bring anyone to your room, even if you accidentally bumped into your long-lost great-aunt Edna.

As for drugs – forget it. Drug taking has not penetrated the middle classes in the way it has in the West; however respectable and friendly your dealer appears to be, he or she is most definitely a member of a favela gang who are watching your every move, gun trigger at the ready.

Safety first

Finally, on to safety: there are very few rules, but they are worth repeating. Keep up with the crowds and

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The Insider's guide

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Rio is quite expensive this time of year. What tips do you have for someone on a shoestring budget?

Do you remember that Brazilian you used to work with and now he's back in Brazil? Well, Facebook him! Or try your luck at Airbnb (airbnb.com).

How do you like to party during Carnival?

I usually find the blocos close to where I'm staying and stick with them. Orquestra Voadora at Flamengo Park is a must-see.

Whereabouts would you take your Aussie friends during Carnival?

If I'm lucky enough to get tickets, I would definitely take them to the Sambódromo.

What places in Rio give travellers a more 'authentic' experience in the city?

If you are in Rio before Carnival, try to go to a rehearsal at Salgueiro School of Samba. You will never forget the experience.

Despite the obvious attractions of Rio, public impressions have been formed by films like *City Of God* and newspaper reports about violence. How do you allay the fears of the first-time visitor? The pacification of the favelas and the preparations for the World Cup and Olympics are giving a more safe feeling to the city and creating a very positive vibe.

And finally, what about sex? What advice would you give to our young, hot-blooded readers?

Well, this time every year the Federal Government distributes millions of condoms for free. Nuff said.

don't stray into dimly lit cul-de-sacs; don't make a big show of parading expensive jewellery, cameras or watches; don't take valuables to the beach; only use call-out taxis; hang out with friends; and don't accept open drinks from strangers. That's it – have a great Carnival in 2012! ■

John Malathronas is the author of *Brazil: Life Blood Soul, Wildlife Guide To Brazil* and co-author of the *Michelin Green Guide To Rio*.
malathronas.com; rioguiaoficial.com.br/en

BRAZIL BEYOND RIO

If you want to recover from the Carnival experience and work off that added alcohol fuel, your best bet is to escape to the dazzling National Park of Itatiaia. The park is divided into the Lower Itatiaia: exotic, tropical and brimming with animal life; and the Andean-looking Upper Itatiaia: cool, relatively bare and a hiker's dream. Only four hours by bus from Rio on the Dutra Highway to São Paulo lies the eponymous village of Itatiaia, where there is plenty of cheap accommodation. Alternatively, you may decide to stay inside the park (R\$180, or £65, per double) at hoteldoype.com.br or itatiaia.tur.br. Maps for trails and guides are available locally; see ecoralph.com for hikes.



ONCE THERE, DON'T MISS:

Birdlife: Itatiaia is particularly famous for its many species of hummingbirds. If you stay inside the park, check out the feeders hanging in the verandas, specially designed for these buzzing, bumble-bee-sized birds.

Vista do Último Adeus: At 2km, the shortest trail from the entrance leads to a great panoramic viewpoint over the Rio Campo Belo; word has it that it's the best view you can hope to see before you die.

Cachoeira Veu de Noiva: Only 45-minute walk away from the entrance, find a stunning 40-metre waterfall whose hugging of the rocks gives us the impression of a satin bridal veil.

Itaporani: Half an hour walk away from Veu de Noiva, a junction of three small waterfalls forms a lake with crystal-clear waters, where you can dip in and enjoy a cool, refreshing swim after your hike.

Pico das Agulhas Negras: At 2791m, this spiky peak (the 'Black Needles') in Upper Itatiaia is the fifth highest in Brazil, and the most accessible. The three-hour hike up is easy-to-medium and highly rewarding, as you will be staring down on the cloud forest below.



Dressing up is essential – and nothing is too weird



Ipanema beach: free raves every night of Carnival



Shake your bon-bon

NEXT WEEK

South Africa:
Exploring the wild north of the country

Photos: Getty, Thinkstock