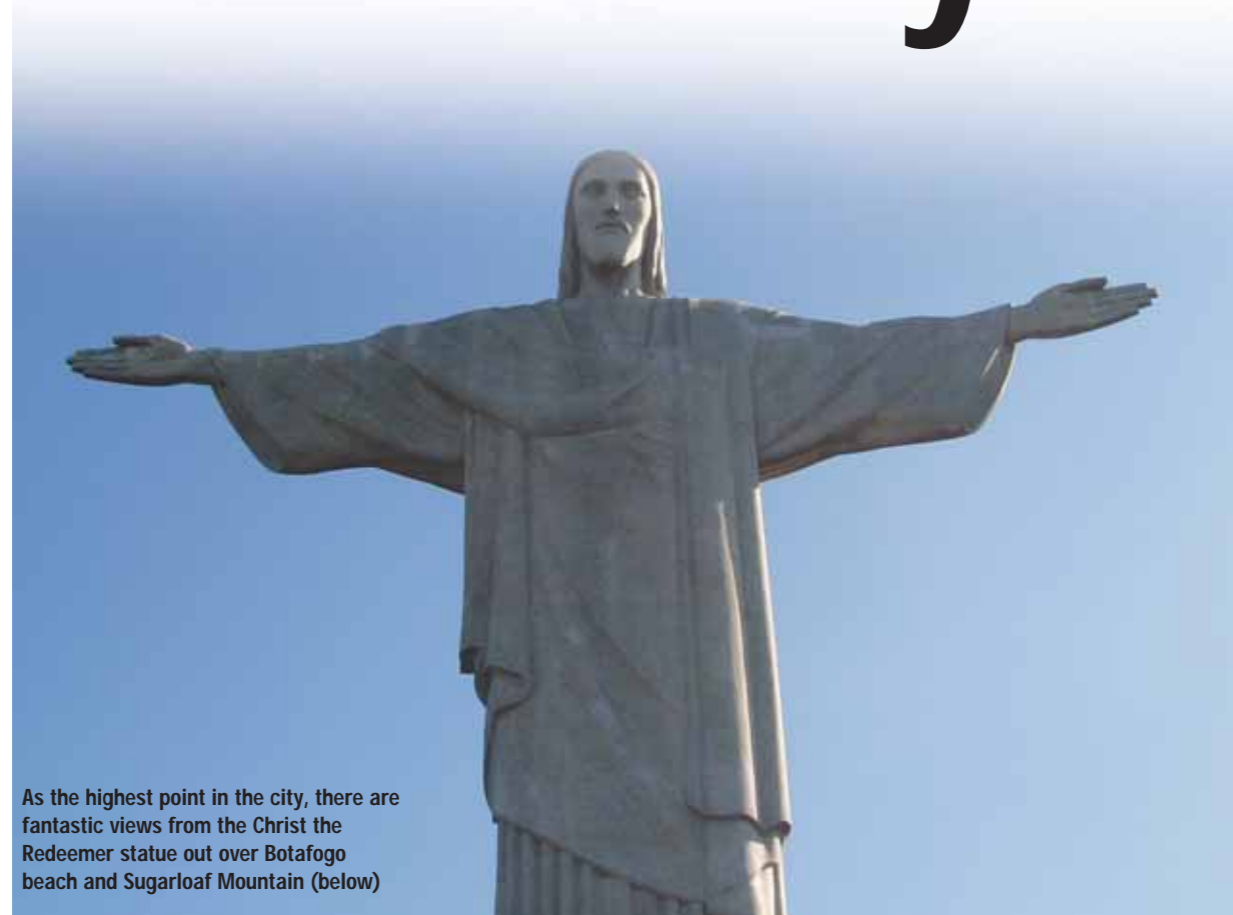


Latin America Rio de Janeiro

City with many redeeming features

Nowhere has more famous beaches – and beachwear – than fun-filled Rio de Janeiro. Philippa Jacks feels overdressed in what is officially the friendliest city in the world



As the highest point in the city, there are fantastic views from the Christ the Redeemer statue out over Botafogo beach and Sugarloaf Mountain (below)



Left: Coconut milk, straight out of the husk through a straw, is the most popular drink on Ipanema beach

A SEETHING mass of people in brightly coloured, tight costumes swayed to a catchy bossa nova rhythm. You could have been forgiven for thinking this was the spectacular Rio Carnival, but in fact this was just a normal sunny day on one of the world's most famous stretches of sand – the glorious Ipanema beach.

It was immortalised by Antonio Carlos Jobim and Vinicius de Moraes in their 1960s hit *The Girl from Ipanema*. They were inspired by a beautiful Rio girl who walked past on her way to the beach every day: "Tall and tan and young and lovely, the girl from Ipanema goes walking, and when she passes, each one she passes goes ahhhhh."

The Cariocas (residents of Rio) who flock to the beaches at Ipanema and Copacabana are certainly a "tall and tan and young and lovely" bunch – and they don't mind flaunting it. At first, I found the Carioca choice of swimwear quite alarming. Us Brits are taught from an early age that Speedos should be worn only by Olympic swimmers, for whom streamlining is a genuine concern. But on the beaches of Brazil, they are de rigueur for men.

And the women are just as bad – skimpy bikini tops and bottoms that are neither thongs nor briefs, but a weird in-between shape which, in theory, shouldn't flatter a single buttock on the planet. Even those who could do with losing a few pounds flash the flesh in the same way, and nobody blinks an eyelid.

Anything goes on the beaches of Brazil – fat or thin, black or white, gay or straight. Everyone is comfortable in their own skin and before long I had settled nicely into the Carioca way of life, which mainly involved sipping coconut milk from a freshly hacked-open husk while I watched the bronzed bodies playing football, volleyball and "footvolley" (a Rio invention) all around me.

I soon realised that there is a certain honesty in everyone wearing such revealing beachwear all the time: at least when you are getting chatted up by a Carioca, you get to see the goods in advance.



High-rise favela communities on Rio de Janeiro's hillsides sit alongside luxury properties

Rio has always had a reputation as a friendly, party-loving city, but in 2003, a team of Californian social psychologists made it official. They spent six years dropping pens and feigning blindness in 23 cities around the world to research where locals were the most helpful, and Rio de Janeiro came out top.

This might come as a surprise to those who think of Rio as a crime-ridden city. It does have social problems and drug crime is rife in many parts of the city, while the slum areas, or favelas, are notoriously dangerous, and gringos (foreigners) are warned not to visit them alone.

There are several companies, however, which offer tourists the chance to visit a favela in the safety of an organised tour. I spent almost two weeks in Rio before I could be convinced to go on one, as I couldn't see how a minibus full of camera-toting tourists would be welcome in

a favela. But when I learned that the money raised was invested in a community school and computer facility, I came round to the idea.

The tours aim to challenge misconceptions about the favelas, and I must admit I had expected a miserable shanty town where everyone lived in fear of the drug lords. But I was wrong: the favela was a vibrant, sociable place, where people were laughing, talking on mobile phones and helping one another with jobs. I also learned that footballers Ronaldo and Romario, Walter Salles (who directed *The Motorcycle Diaries*) and award-winning author Paulo Coelho were born in Rio favelas.

I have no doubt that we were driven around only the safest, least destitute areas, but I was glad I had learned more about what is the normal way of life for a million people – a fifth of Rio's population.

It is only when you look down upon the city from an elevated position that you realise how close the richest and poorest districts are. Breathtaking views can be experienced by taking a cable car up Sugarloaf Mountain, almost 400 metres above sea level, or hanging off a platform 500 metres up Pedra Bonita mountain. But I made a beeline for the Christ the Redeemer statue, which stares down over the city from the peak of the 710-metre Corcovado mountain.

Although it was completed only in 1931, the 38-metre statue has already required several restoration projects. It was originally funded by donations from Rio's Catholic community, but has now become an icon for the whole city, not just a religious symbol. With its arms open wide, embracing all people, it seems a fitting representation of such a welcoming city.

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BOOK IT!

JOURNEY LATIN AMERICA offers seven nights' bed and breakfast at Rio's Ipanema Plaza hotel, on Ipanema beach, from £1,266 in January. The price includes return flights with Air France via Paris and transfers. www.journeylatinamerica.co.uk

KUONI features seven nights' bed and breakfast in a standard room at the Copacabana Mar Rio from £994 in December. The price, which is based on two sharing, includes flights with British Airways from Heathrow and transfers. www.kuoni.co.uk

BE WARNED – rates soar during the Rio Carnival, which takes place next year on February 17-20. A Journey Latin America package at the Ipanema Plaza rises from £1,266 to £1,755 during this period, and rooms sell out months in advance.

Ministry sets up trade office

BRAZIL'S Ministry of Tourism has set up a travel trade office in the UK to work alongside the tourist office at the country's embassy.

The aim is to build on increased interest in Brazil following the launch of charter flights, and joint events are planned with operators and agents.

Chris Fuzinato has taken on the role of director of the travel trade office. He previously worked for hotel wholesalers and the Italian tourist office.

"The tourist office used to represent the ministry, but now concentrates on the consumer," Fuzinato said.

"My main role is to contact operators wanting information or to develop programmes. Most operators concentrate on tailor-made, but with charters establishing themselves, there is great potential for growth."

There are plans to hold a Brazil evening in London this autumn, as well as workshops across the UK and Ireland.

Brazil has seen a rise in popularity with British holidaymakers over the last few years. The number of UK visitors increased from 125,600 in 1999 to 169,500 last year.

First Choice product manager Gemma Ives said: "Sales are going well and there have been some fantastic offers from hoteliers, which we have managed to pass on to customers."

The travel trade office can be contacted on 020 7396 5551 or ebt.uk@embratur.gov.br. www.braziltour.com



Playing ball sports in Speedos is how most Cariocas spend their weekends

"Brazil offers great potential for growth"

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