

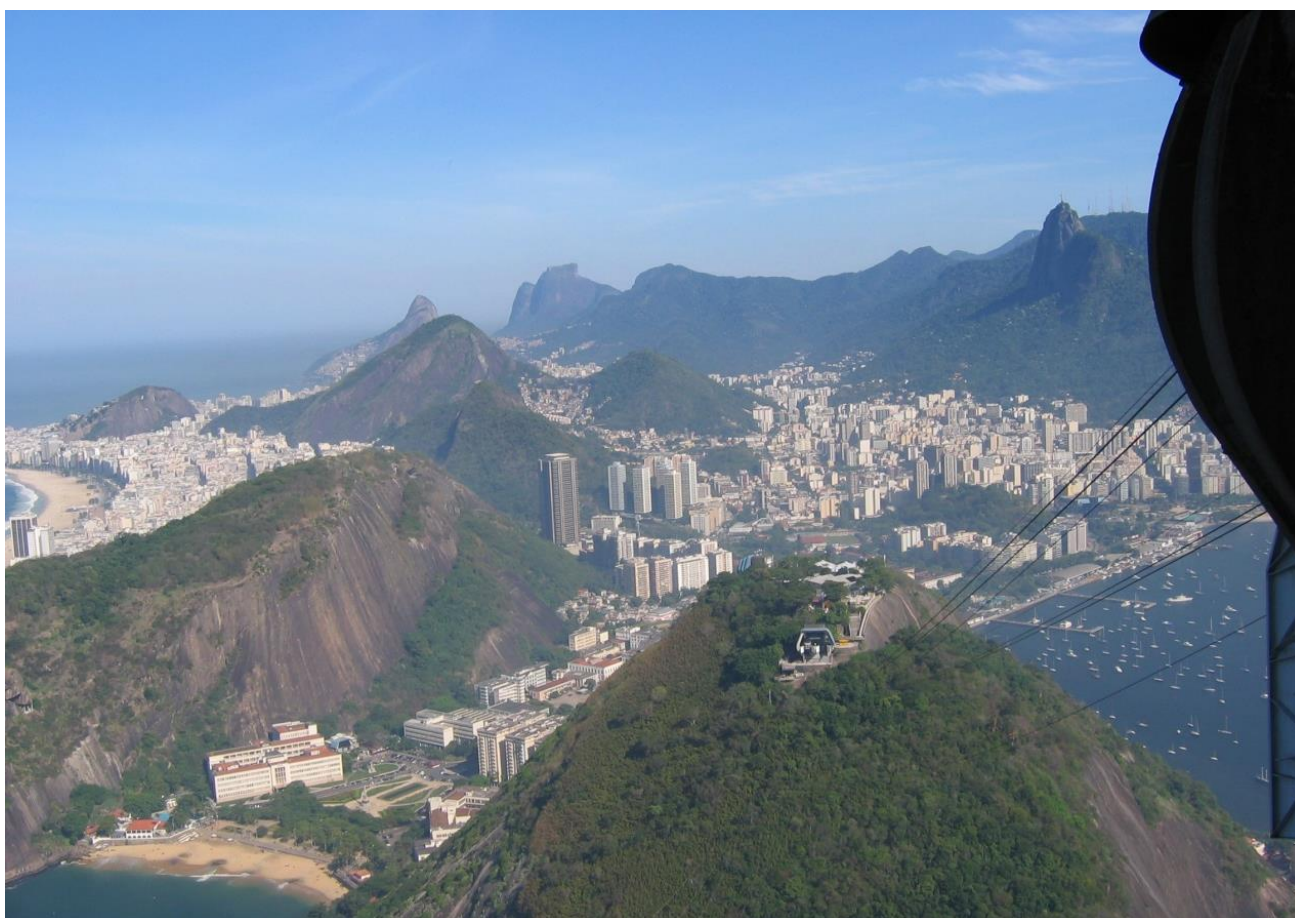
Rio de Janeiro, Brazil - May 2007

We flew into Rio de Janeiro at night when it looked like a fairy land from the sky. However, once out of the airport and into a taxi, we were confronted by yet another big city. Having spent four days surrounded by forest and rivers in a small town, it was a bit of a change from being relaxed in rural surroundings near Iguazu. We also went back to having a window which looked out onto a brick wall.

We stayed at the *Hotel California* in *Copacabana*, near *Ipanema* in Rio.....all of which have songs written about them.

Copacabana beach is about 4km long and has lots of hotels and magnificent clean sand which is graded every night. In the evening, when we left our hotel, we were confronted with masses of people; walking, walking their dogs, jogging, playing soccer or volley ball on the beach, drinking, dining, and hawkers selling beach towels, sarongs, baseball hats, bags and a variety of souvenirs. In the day time, it is reminiscent of Australian beaches in the 1960s, hardly anyone wears sunglasses, there are a few baseball caps but no other hats and most people aim to expose as much skin as possible. We were decidedly over dressed in our hats and shirts with sleeves.

Rio de Janeiro (which means River of January) is not actually on a river at all, but the explorers who named it thought that it was. Rather, it is on the corner of a huge bay and is made up of several smaller bays (two of which are Copacabana and Ipanema). The bays are separated by rock outcrops and behind the bays are a series of hills / rocks formed by volcanic action many years ago. So, apart from the sea front (much of which is reclaimed land), it is very hilly. The two main vantage points to view the area are Sugar Loaf Mountain and Corcovado which has a 38m tall statue of Christ the Redeemer on the top of it.



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We had a full tour on our first day which included catching two cable cars to the top of Sugar Loaf Mountain to get a great perspective of where everything was, and then driving up some very winding, very narrow streets in a full size bus to get up Corcovado. Corcovado means *The Hunchback*. We were unsure that we would get around some of the corners in the large bus, especially when there were cars parked on the side of the road. For the last part of the trip we had to swap to a smaller bus; then go up a lift and then some stairs to get to the base of the statue. The statue is an amazing feat of engineering and an impressive sight. While up there we encountered the constant buzz of helicopters flying tourists over the city, especially around the statue.



The tour also took us to see Rio's new cathedral; most unusual architecture. Then we saw some of the costumes from the carnivals and the area where the parade takes place and got a feel of where things were around the city. On our second day, we walked to the end of Copacabana beach to an old fort (from 1914) which also has a small military museum and then went shopping. We found that most things here were about the same price as Australia but there are a few bargains if you look out for them, Graham got a new pair of plain black leather shoes for 75 reals (about \$45), a lot cheaper than Australia for similar quality.

We also found a cheap place for lunch; I ordered a cheese and salad sandwich (3.50 reals = \$2.10) and I got two slices of bread with grilled cheese, one with two slices of ham, the other with a fried egg and with lettuce and tomato on the side, much more than I had bargained for. I also had a large glass of freshly squeezed, thick mango juice; the tropical fruits are lovely.

The Brazilians, like the Argentinians, love their meat, especially beef, which features prominently in most restaurants. They usually supply toothpicks, but one restaurant even had a dental floss dispenser in the toilets. Something I had never seen before.

We also took in a dinner and show. The costumes were either very skimpy or completely over the top, I have never seen so many sequins and feathers, mostly ostrich and peacock feathers but dyed all different colours. They sang and danced up a storm and put on a good show.

The last day we caught the underground train into the city and went hunting for the National Museum. We had three maps which all had slightly different information and we had found that our 2004 version of the Lonely Planet was out of date. Anyway we finally found the museum only to find that it was closed, with no signs of any sort to say what the opening hours were or why it was closed. However, the museum was across the road from a main highway which was raised and under this we found a huge market (at least a kilometre long) of preloved / second hand / antique goods. It was fascinating to see the array of goods that people had to sell. Graham looked at a few old radios but they were asking too much for them and weren't interested when we offered a lower price. It certainly wasn't how we planned the morning but it was most interesting and certainly wouldn't appear in the tourist brochures.

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From there we went to the only tram left in Rio (there used to be a lot more) which goes up very steep, narrow winding roads to some of the suburbs. It is used as local transport but is fascinating just to ride it to the end and back again. All for a total of 2.40 reais (\$1.40) for both of us. The tram only has one carriage and no doors or windows, extra people stand on the running board and hang on which is interesting when the tram is going past buses in the narrow streets. Although this did not seem to bother the lad that used the tram to pull him up the hill on his bike, he just held on to the handles and enjoyed the ride.



From the tram we could see the local shops:



And the favelas:



It seems that Rio is not as dangerous as it has been in previous years, but people rarely wear jewellery or watches in the street and tourists are told not to carry too much money with them or carry big cameras. The police are very evident.

On our last night in Rio it rained heavily and the busy streets were soon empty of people and the floodlights on the beaches were all turned off. We thought it was easier just to have dinner at the hotel we were staying in, but it turned out to be just like an episode out of *Fawlty Towers*; we dubbed the waiter Manuel. They have an extensive drinks menu but it did not include any wine; we tried to order a bottle of red wine but were told they didn't have any. We pointed out that there were bottles of red wine on display. The reply: "but they are not cold". It seems that Brazilians don't drink much wine. We assured the waiter that it was OK, we were more than happy that our red wine was not cold! The ordering of the meal was probably the most difficult of the journey and it took nearly two hours for the meal to come, we passed the time chatting to a couple from Seattle. An interesting night.