

THE SUNDAY TIMES

travel

BE INFORMED. BE INSPIRED. BE THERE

SEPTEMBER 2007 £3.40

SPECIAL ISSUE

THE WORLD'S

100

BEST

PLACES
TO STAY

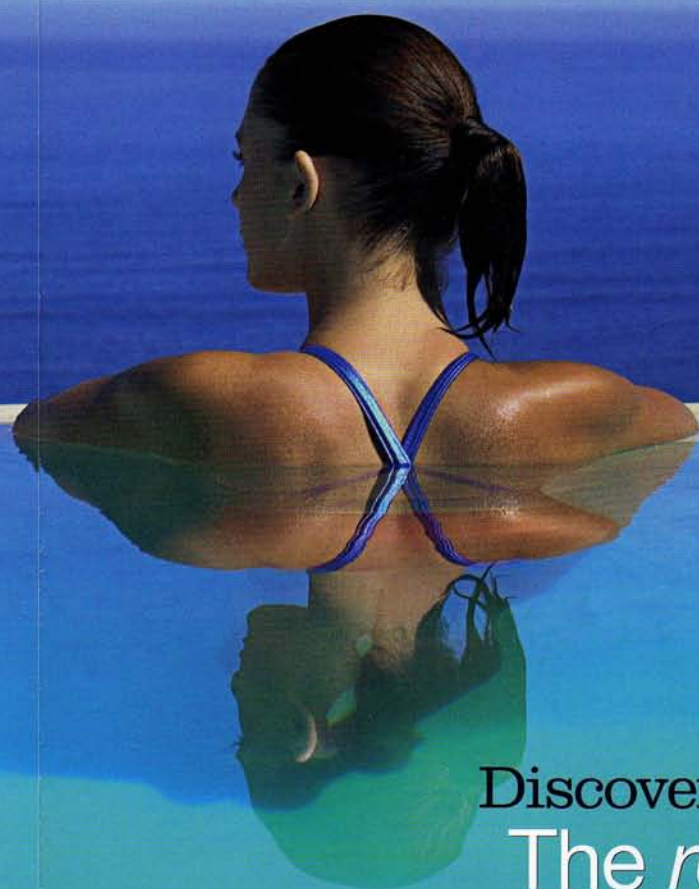
From castles to campsites

Fine food, brilliant beaches

SEASIDE BRITAIN

We've got the lot!

PLUS 50% off car hire
in 58 countries ➔



Discovered!
The *real*
real Spain

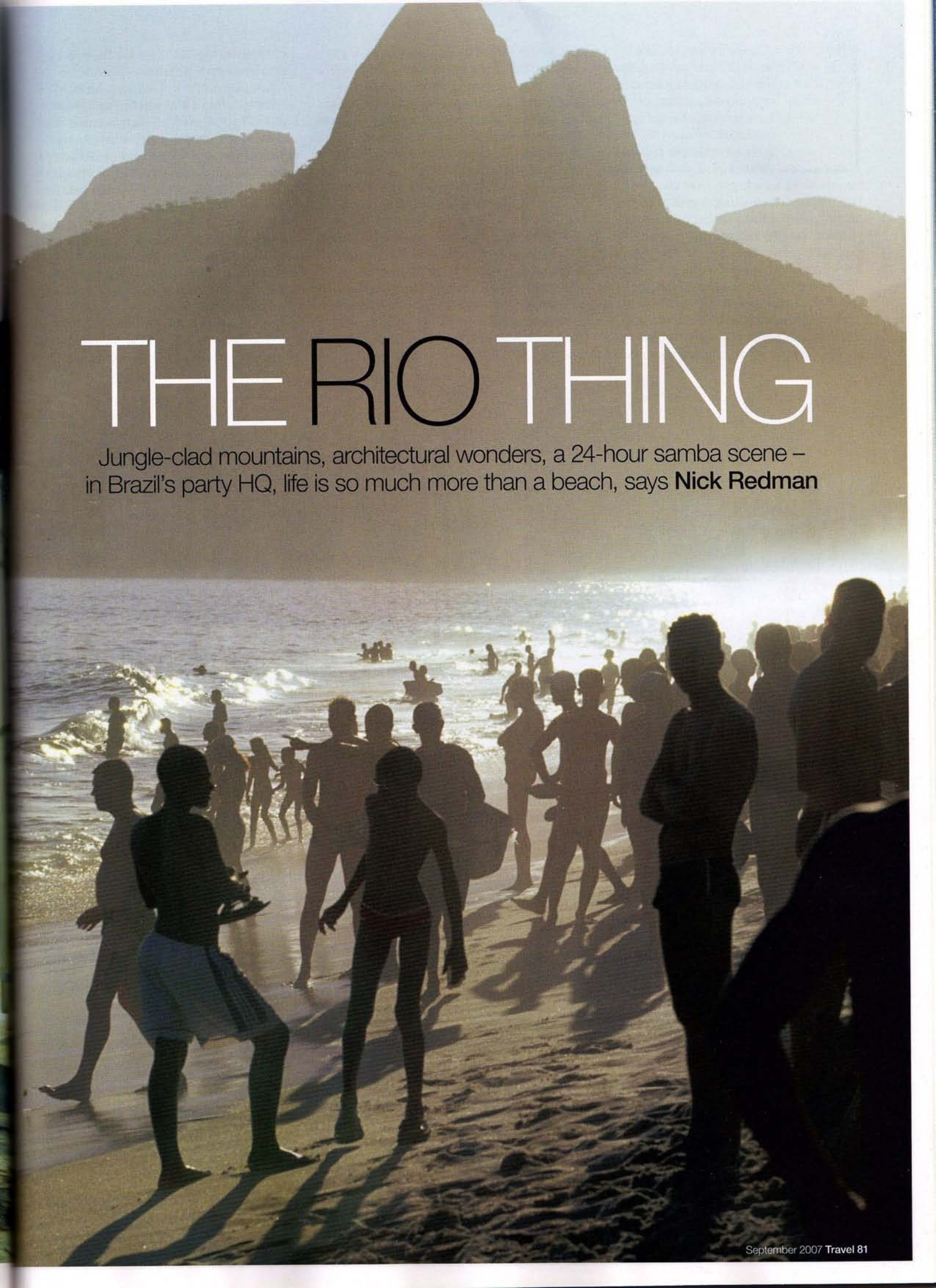
Uncovered!
Party time
in Brazil

€7.50 IN EUR/€8.00 IN FR. RETURN NI 5.09
www.sundaytimestravel.co.uk



Booty call – in Rio
the beach is hot, but
the action in the city
is even hotter





THE RIO THING

Jungle-clad mountains, architectural wonders, a 24-hour samba scene – in Brazil's party HQ, life is so much more than a beach, says **Nick Redman**

Like a heatwave, you could feel the hedonism coming off the high-heeled Friday tide coursing down Rua do Lavradio with advancing midnight: a swarm of carousers thin-shirted and short-skirted, slowing the taxi traffic to treacle pace past frangipani bursting from iron window grilles. Lapa might be one of Rio's seedier quarters – Hispanic facades cracked and peeling, gaping holes in red-tiled roofs, Twiglet-limbed prostitutes in full sail – but, come the weekend and the witching hour, it doesn't half rock. Or, rather, samba.

The line outside Rio Scenarium looked longer than a Soviet bread-shop queue but, once you finally made it in, you understood

the reason for the Godot-like wait: Lapa's landmark mansion is a fabulously shabby multi-storey mansion, hung with a chaotic rag-and-bone-man's decor of brollies, bicycles, broomsticks and battered jugs. An ocean of Rio revellers rolled wildly to the boom of the eight-piece samba band. 'Why should I cry if the sun is about to come up?' sang the sweaty frontman. 'Why should I suffer if the sun is about to come up? Why should I cry if there is a new love every morning?'

Even if you hadn't the foggiest idea what he was on about (and I didn't – even after an impromptu translation by a bystander), you had to admire his optimism. And so, it seemed, did the crowd, which contorted ever more crazily, helped by high-octane Caipirinhas passed in human chains from the bar. The cruise-ship tourists jumped up

and hopped around the mismatched sofas; a slim beauty whirled in her frock like a spinning top on the arm of her whiplash boyfriend; and an old man in a tight blue Lacoste T-shirt grooved jerkily – either that or he was putting out a very stubborn cigarette. In my virgin imaginings Rio de Janeiro couldn't possibly get hipper than Ipanema – the beach life, the pneumatic physiques, *that* song about the girl. Yet at the hottest joint in shabby Lapa, miles from the sea and the city's postcard legend, I found myself forced to reconsider.

It's tricky to separate Rio from its exotic shores, immortalised in the halcyon years of air travel. Somehow you always picture it in those classic Art-Deco posters: a 1930s Pan American Airways plane circling the coconut breast of Sugar Loaf mountain.



Naturally, Hollywood helped, choosing the city as a backdrop for starry-eyed couples: Bette Davis and Paul Henreid, chain-smoking their way towards the harbour and hot desire in *Now, Voyager*. Fred and Ginger, *Flying Down to Rio* in 1933 (even if the city was faked at RKO Studios). Then there was Tinseltown's fruitiest beauty, Carmen Miranda: the 'Brazilian bombshell' herself, gyrating through the '40s, with bananas in her turban – when not lurking behind the blinds of her Copacabana Palace suite, privately mired in depression.

Like any screen siren when the cameras aren't rolling, there's more – moody, messy, mad – to Rio than meets the moviegoer's eye. The real deal blossoms beyond the scenic shores, the further you travel back from the beach. You'll find it in the jungly

glamour of upmarket Leblon, among the drunkenly leaning palms and Italian ice-cream parlours, where hanging mangoes are brushed by buses, and popcorn-sellers scent the warm evening streets. It inhabits the dirt-poor no-go neighbourhood *favelas* – shanty towns whose residents clean the Art-Deco apartments of Ipanema, some dreaming of film-star fame, others gaining it. And it parties like nowhere else in hilly Santa Teresa and Lapa, where the city's boho samba scene carries the torch behind the withered Neoclassical facades.

Riding to the stomach-lurching summit of Sugar Loaf on arrival, I first grasped the bigger picture – a perspective somehow lent height and dizziness when seen through the plunging wires of the cable car that brought me, fanning out as they plummeted back

down into the void. Vultures and frigates wheeled against the foreground curve of Copacabana, curling seductively from the south, its cappuccino-coloured sands frothed by a gentle Atlantic, with Ipanema beyond. I clicked open a frosty can of Bohemia beer and in the time it took me to look down and pour, then look up, clouds had shrouded the giant statue of Christ the Redeemer. But below, scattered clearly among the Flintstones-bouldery mountains, lay Rio, an infinite Allsorts clutter. In one direction you could pick out Santa Teresa quarter, distantly marooned on its summit like a sultry tropical Lisbon; in the other, the *favela* slum of Vidigal tumbled down a hillside, a faint blur on the skyline like broken bricks from a tipped skip, merging with the squillion-dollar apartments below. >





This page, everybody samba: the party spills into the streets of Lapa district. Previous page, the bigger picture

In Vidigal, light years from the Rio of Hollywood legend, director Fernando Meirelles found 70 per cent of the actors for his 2002 cinematic triumph *City of God*, the acclaimed tale of life, death, guns and drugs in Rio's slums. It's an impressive dollop of talent – something about the *favela* you'd probably never know if you didn't go. And you wouldn't go without someone in the know. But with a little organisation, I found, it's possible, and not in a tour-bus voyeuristic way (see Travel Brief). The police won't infiltrate Vidigal because it's too labyrinthine, the outlaw grip too vice-like. But the controlling drug lords have, paradoxically, adopted a tough approach to lawlessness and for 20 years former actor Guti Fraga and his team have managed to direct a theatre group here, Nós do Morro ('We of the Hillside'). It's a Rio eye-opener.

On a clammy afternoon under grey skies, accompanied by Martin, the good-looking go-between, we followed the tour co-ordinator's car slowly, below inky boulder peaks and right into the *favela*, up steep ways into the tightly wound, rubbishy heart. There we found Fraga in his lair: a boxy office lined with hardback spines. 'We live in a *favela* and there are so many stereotypes – drug traffickers, down-and-outs,' he drawled, as we talked via an interpreter. 'But I knew if we did something of the highest order we could break those stereotypes.' And he has – not only in cinema, but also in international theatre. Last autumn, Fraga took the group to Stratford-upon-Avon to perform *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*: Brazilian kids from one of the world's most appalling slums acting out Shakespeare in the playwright's birthplace. Fraga picked a card from a shelf. It was a note of thanks from Greg Doran, chief associate director of the Royal Shakespeare Company, bearing a simple hand-written message: 'Dreaming is a universal thing'.

Rio: city of golden dreams. In 1586 – centuries before Carmen Miranda – Benedictines arrived, invited down from Salvador, Brazil's first capital, to improve the locals' lot. In the heart of Downtown, where traffic bowls along transatlantic-looking avenues with mountains blue in the hazy distance, stands the Mosteiro de São Bento (Saint Benedict), its church a repository of perhaps the best 17th- and 18th-century art in the country. Begun in 1633, it is still a place of pottering monks, and echoes sporadically with ghostly Gregorian chants. It's biscuit-plain on the outside, which merely fuels the gilded bonfire of Brazilian Baroque within. Gold bound for Europe via Rio from the mines of Minas Gerais state was siphoned >



Butiquim BECO do RATO

RESISTÊNCIA CULTURAL



AS A STEAK-RED
SUN DEEPENED
OVER IPANEMA,
THE ACTION
WAS ALREADY
SPILLING INTO
THE SIDEWALKS

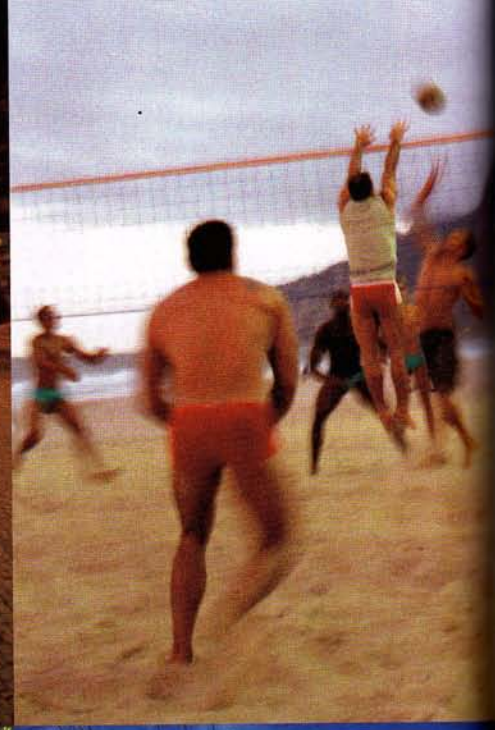
off and co-opted into its flanks, and these ripple with altars resembling wrinkly 24-carat grottoes. Elsewhere there are torch-bearing angels and solid silver lamps from Peru and Bolivia. I would have gladly idled away a whole day marvelling at the stage-set beauty but eventually, heavy with guilt, I moved on. Only to find, close by, the most ornate cafe in the city: the Confeitaria Colombo. A rush-inducing *pastel de Belém* (butter-rich custard tart) and a powerful bullet of black coffee, and I could have sworn I was in Paris: knicker-frilly glass lamps, dizzying floor tiles and soaring stained-glass ceilings way above.

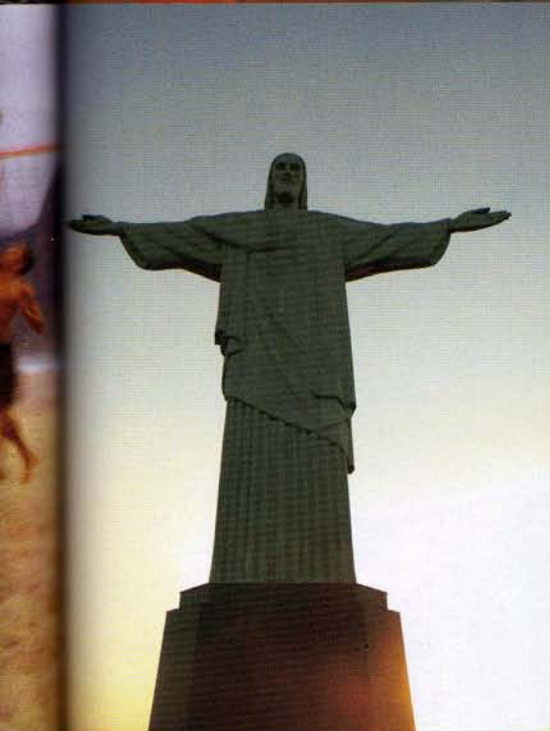
The French way was in vogue long before the oceanfront became *le dernier cri* and the Copacabana Palace threw off its wraps to reveal a creamy 1920s homage to the grand Negresco and Carlton hotels of the Côte d'Azur. In the artistically French-enriched decades leading up to the 20th century, the wealthy moved up into the city's airy heights, creating with their coffee-plantation money the 'Montmartre of South America' in steep and cobbled Santa Teresa. It maintains a golden lifeline to the city below: a sunshine-yellow sardine-can tram that negotiates the rattling ascent. On a Sunday I disembarked in a filmy morning light to discover another Rio altogether: all manner of architectural conceits, including Gothic-turreted fantasies with outstanding King-of-the-Castle views over the city. Most are so dilapidated they'd deter Leonard Rossiter in Rigsby mode, but they are compelling abodes, all the same, some even rentable for a peppercorn nightly rate (see Travel Brief). A weekend here is a wardrobe walk-through into a Tennessee Williams world, where the palms and ferns are Triffid-size, the shutters blistered, and the day liable to dissolve at whim into a steamy silver shower. A least it did on this visit, and so I ducked into the bohemian Bar do Mineiro among the shabby-sexy studenty figures who have made the district home. I felt I could have started life anew up here – just like Ronnie Biggs did.

When I descended again, I found distance lending romantic dusk enhancement to the Vidigal *favela*: it glittered into life on the horizon like a small galaxy against its dark slopes. As a steak-red sunset deepened above Ipanema, the action was already spilling into the sidewalks in the blocks back from the Atlantic, shore submitting to city: the scantily clad barefoot and invariably beautiful. Ambling into town, they seemed blithely unaware of the strange juxtaposition they presented, of semi-nudity with big-city grind. At some point in Rio you realise just how little it resembles the beach fantasy we have been filmically fed. >



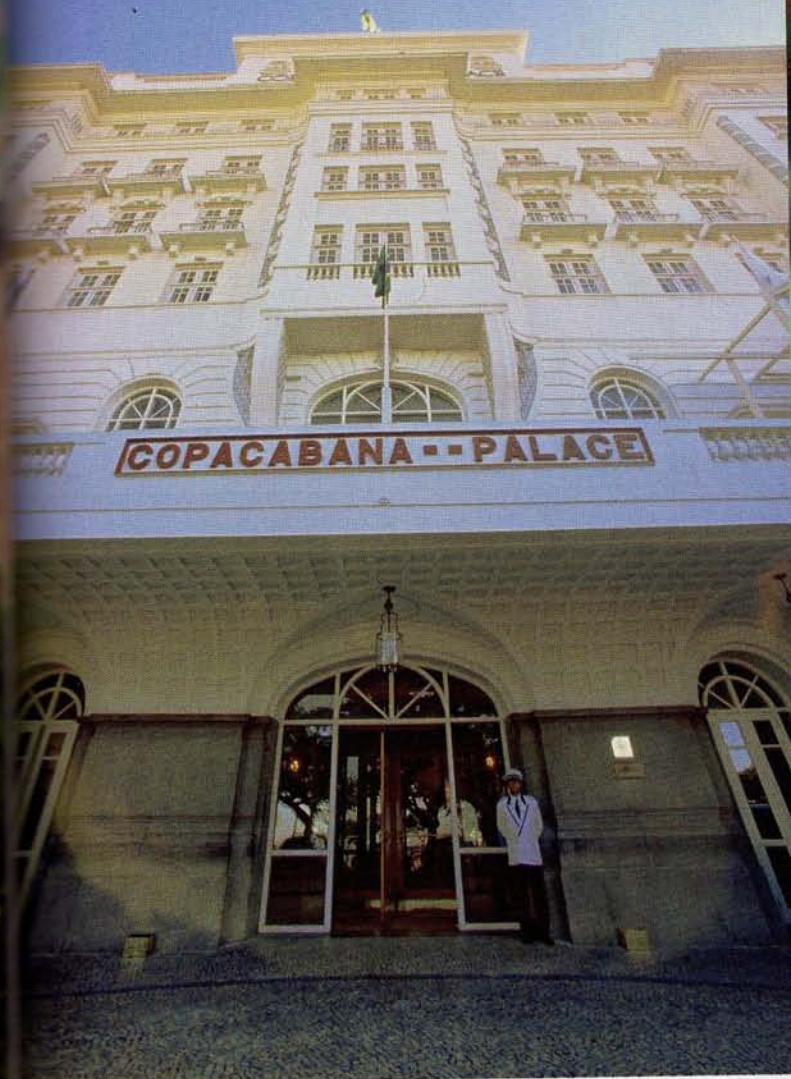
Musclemen and fishermen – Rio's beaches are shared by posers, lazars and workers



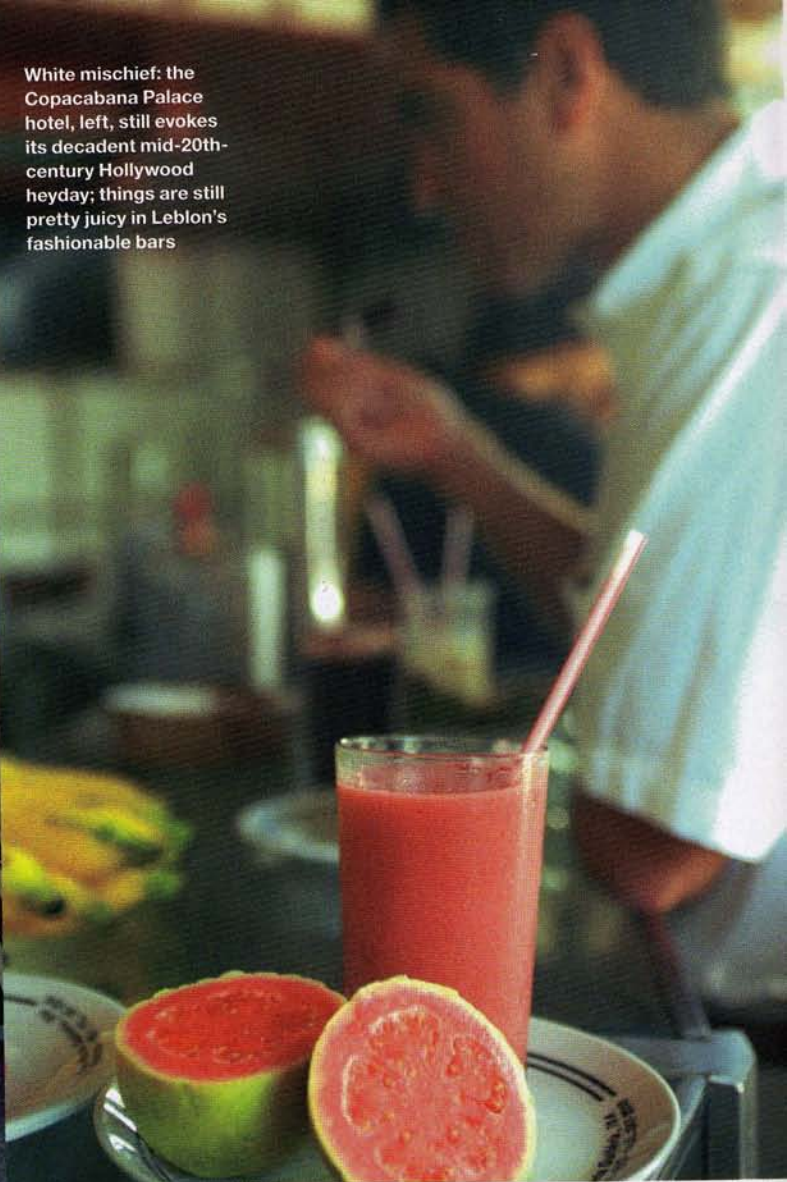


A SCULPTED
JOGGER
TOWED A
SKATEBOARD
GIRL IN ITSY-
BITSY WHITE
SHORTS
THROUGH THE
COPACABANA
TRAFFIC





White mischief: the Copacabana Palace hotel, left, still evokes its decadent mid-20th-century Hollywood heyday; things are still pretty juicy in Leblon's fashionable bars



The sands themselves are far from the waiter-served, rosé-rinsed idyll of French Riviera sophistication. Rather they're some vast snaking urban park welded onto the city's edge, a domain for posers, dog-walkers, beer drinkers at plastic tables, and frenetic volleyball teams. A sculpted jogger towed a skateboard girl in itsy-bitsy white shorts through the Copacabana traffic. At a central gay bar they clinked beers, still clothed in no more than trunks, and as a glass toppled over, a flawless teak torso flexed involuntarily with a wave to the buttoned-up staff for a cloth. Not for no reason has Rio long appealed to the sensuous.

Five hundred years ago, in a letter to Manuel I, King of Portugal, history scribe Pêro Vaz de Caminha extolled the beautiful and willing women, one small reason so many sailors jumped ship and settled. Today, Rio's main seduction is the sunset hour, bikini-topped and surf-shorted: prime time for a juice bar or, perhaps, a *botequim*, one of the teeming taverns typical across town. Perfect city snapshots, most veer towards the unfancy, though some display designer DNA, refined by trends from São Paulo, Rio's competitive sister to the west. At newcomer Devassa, where Rua Prudente de Moraes meets Farma de Armoedo, you can see out the day on a cool wooden deck below a spreading tree. Better still is nearby Bar Bracarense, which heaves with exotic terrace life – I shared space with a Great Dane/Dalmatian hybrid taller than its seated owner. *Botequim* food is served tapas-style, and the *bolinho de aipim com camarão* (prawn and cream-cheese puff balls made of manioc flour) grew more delicious with each draft Brahma, as lovers canoodled, gearing up for the night.

Later, following a reliable recommendation, I stopped by to see Teresa Cristina live at Carioca da Gema, the brick-walled black hole that packs them in from the streets of Lapa. 'She's the number-one most important samba singer of the new generation,' a well-informed admirer yelled in my ear as she wove her magic. 'There's been a vacuum of 30 years since the last samba legends Beth Carvalho and Clara Nunes.' Ms Teresa has hit CDs to her name, and if this were London or New York, you could reckon on some red-rope distance between star and audience. But there she stood, inches from the crowd, bird-like and be-turbaned on a stage the size of a pallet. I'd never have pictured such superstar modesty in the Rio of my imaginings but as she sang – booming note-beautiful, roping the adoring onlookers in as if with a lasso – I was ready to change my tune. ■

See overleaf for Travel Brief

THE CROWD
CONTORTED
EVER MORE
CRAZILY,
HELPED BY
HIGH-OCTANE
CAIPIRINHAS
PASSED IN
HUMAN CHAINS
FROM THE BAR



No rush: 2am – and the clubs of Lapa are just getting going

travel brief



GETTING THERE

There are no direct flights from the UK to Rio de Janeiro. **British Airways** (0870 850 9850, www.ba.com) flies to Rio three times a week from Heathrow, via São Paulo, from £774. **TAM** (020 8897 0005, www.tam.com.br) flies to Rio from Heathrow, via São Paulo, seven times a week; from £648. **Iberia** (0870 609 0500, www.iberia.com) flies via Madrid five times a week from Heathrow, from £588. **Trailfinders** (0845 050 5892, www.trailfinders.com) has deals on Air France, from Edinburgh, Birmingham or Manchester via Paris, from £651.

WHERE TO STAY

Copacabana Palace (020 7960 0500, www.orient-express.com; doubles from £307, room only) is a mighty white, stuccoed grande dame facing the Atlantic at Copacabana. Worth the expense for the poolside Caipirinhas and the ocean views. **Hotel Marina Palace** (00 55 21 2172 1000, www.hoteismarina.com.br; doubles from £100, B&B) is set among

the high-rises of beachy Leblon. Rooms are spacious, and views – towards the summit – outstanding. In Santa Teresa, try **Relais Solar** (00 55 21 2221 2117, www.solar-desanta.com; doubles from £40, B&B); a slice of boutique chic. For more characterful bargains in the neighbourhood, contact B&B specialist **Cama e Café** (00 55 21 2224 5689, www.camaecafe.com).

TOUR OPERATORS

Exsus Travel (020 7292 5060, www.exsus.com) has seven nights at the Copacabana Palace from £1,850pp, B&B, in a deluxe ocean-view room, including Heathrow flights. Regional flight add-ons available on request. Or try **Veloso Tours** (020 8762 0616, www.veloso.com); a week at Relais Solar in Santa Teresa, costs from £1,394pp, B&B, including a full day's excursion and flights. For expert guiding around Vidigal favela, Rio de Janeiro and Brazil, contact Martin Frankenberg at **Matuete** (00 55 11 3071 4515, info@matuete.com; www.matuete.com).