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Brazil's 'Marvelous City'

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Forever in a quest for sun, caipirinhas and the world's most perfect beach, travel writer Kristin Luna felt right at home on Rio's white sands among its cariocas. Read her picks on what to do next time you're passing through Brazil's crown jewel.

SIGHTS: A sprawling city that covers 486 square miles and is home to nearly 12 million residents cannot easily be explored in less than one week. If the weather's right--more often than not, it is--hop the train up Corcovado Mountain to witness Rio's most recognized landmark, Christ the Redeemer, the striking, white statue that watches over the city from far above. Then, head over to Sugarloaf Mountain and ride the aerial tram--one of the world's oldest, which you may recognize from its prominent role in Bond film "Moonraker"--to the tip top for a panoramic view of the region. Soccer lovers won't want to miss Pele's former stomping grounds, Estádio do Maracanã, which hosted the World Cup in 1950 and will do so again in 2014. To sample Rio's Bohemian flair, join the artists of the Santa Teresa neighborhood, relax with a latte to the soothing bossa nova tunes in the background, browse the ubiquitous handicraft stores and admire the San Francisco-like architecture. The tropical nature of A Cidade Maravilhosa, the Marvelous City, can best be experienced at the Jardim Botânico (www.jbrb.gov.br in Portuguese) or just north of town at the Burle Marx estate (Tel. 55-21-2558-3235; tours by appointment only).

STAY: The obvious choice, and often the only hotel that comes to mind when thoughts of Rio materialize, is the regal Copacabana Palace (Tel. 55-21-2548-7070; www.copacabanapalace.com.br) that occupies a palatial façade along the beach of the same name. If it's booked--and more often than not it will be, even months in advance--you'll find a plethora of comparable accommodation in the area. The Pestana (Tel. 55-21-2548-6332; www.pestana.com) just down the block houses the city's most stunning rooftop pool, while Caesar Park (Tel. 55-21-2525-2525; www.caesarpark-rio.com) in nearby Ipanema is currently renovating all of its rooms and suites in an effort to offer the most lavish facilities in town. Even if you don't stay at Caesar, try your first feijoado, a Saturday feast, on the top floor dining room; it allegedly serves the best in all of Rio. The most recent addition to Rio's luxury hotels is Fasano (Tel. 55-21-3202-4000), where the diplomats, celebrities and jetsetters lay their weary heads. If you've rented a car (highly recommended) or are traveling with children, you might consider staying a bit away from the pandemonium of Ipanema and Copacabana: The Sheraton in Leblon (Tel. 55-21-3323-2200; www.sheraton-rio.com) and São Conrado's Intercontinental Hotel (Tel. 55-21-2274-1122; www.ichotelsgroup.com) offer the luxuries of five-star lodging with less fuss and more deserted beach along which to play.

EAT & DRINK: The Brazilians love their meat almost as much as they love their native cocktail, the caipirinha, which is mixed in a variety of fruity flavors. Most lunches comprise large meals, buffet-style, at traditional steakhouses; Marius Degustare (0800-707-9001, www.marius.com.br) is perhaps Rio's most interesting, if only for its décor alone (one wall is made up entirely of china; odd objects like benches and boxing gloves dangle dangerously low from the ceiling). If visiting the artsy Santa Teresa, a must-do for the creative souls, stop in at Espirito Santa (Tel 55-21-2508-7095, www.espiritosanta.com.br) for a taste of Amazon cuisine--but call ahead early in the day to reserve your spot, as seating goes fast (ask for a table on the back deck). Rio nights usually consist of light appetizers, mostly fried, at bars washed down by, what else, caipirinhas. If you're interested in a bar crawl and a glimpse of the hopping nightlife options, pay a visit to the Lapa district, which has recently seen a significant regeneration. Start out at Lapa 40° (www.lapa40graus.com.br), an eclectic three-floor monstrosity with live music, ballroom dancing and pool tables--but get there early (by 7 p.m. is advised), or you'll have to deal with long lines and the Velvet Rope Mafia. End your night dancing in the antique-store-by-day-club-by-night Rio Scenarium (Tel. 55-21-3147-9005; www.rioscenarium.com.br) with its clutter of accoutrements--vintage bicycles, old-fashioned cash registers, ceramic lizards and much more--adorning every nook and cranny.

BEACHES: You won't lack sand to lay your beach towel on--if you know where to look, that is. Ipanema is often credited as the sexiest beach in the world, and even wearing a bikini will make you feel conservative amid the thongs and Speedos barely covering the bronzed bodies. On weekends, Ipanema is packed to the brim, particularly around Posto 9 where the celebrities and beautiful people are said to be. Copacabana isn't quite as crowded and is bordered by a famous wave-patterned sidewalk and home to the annual Reveillon, the world's biggest New Year's Eve celebration. My two favorite beaches, however, are Prainha, for its landscape, lack of people and unspoiled nature, and Pepino (think Ipanema without the masses), where the hang gliders and paragliders do their thing.

SHOPPING: Second only to going to the beach is the cariocas love for shopping--and with good reason: When weather conditions aren't favorable, there is little else to do indoors but spend money. Even when there's sun and clear skies, an air-conditioned escape is often necessary. Thus, it comes as no surprise that the fashionable city has more than 20 shopping malls to boot. At Rio Design Barra (also housing H. Stern's only [spa](#) and BarraShopping, with its 800-plus stores, you'll find the hottest Brazilian designers. If you prefer a leisurely stroll out in the sun, opt for shopping in Ipanema and Leblon along Rua Visconde de Pirajá and Avenida Ataúlfo de Paiva, respectively, two of the city's most populated strips. On weekends, you'll find a myriad of colorful markets, the local favorite being the Hippie Fair in Ipanema on Sundays from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., where you can pick up a selection of original art, handmade goods and other authentic tchotchkes. Chocolate and coffee, two things Brazil never gets wrong, can be picked up at any café or culinary goods shop, though the locals will tell you that the best can be purchased, surprisingly, at grocery chain Zona Sul. And of course, you can hardly leave the country without picking up one of its most beloved souvenirs, a pair of heavenly Havaiana flip-flops. You can find these in nearly any supermarket or drug store and will pay a third of the price, or less, in Rio than nearly anywhere else.

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Author

Kristin Luna