



Rio is unlike any city I'd been in before: not just geographically, where the urban sprawl gives way to fine, sandy beaches and rainforest covered hills with sheer drop down to stunning lagoons, but also culturally as it exudes a vibrant yet laid-back vibe.

We weaved our way through rush hour traffic, crawling over circuitous flyovers, past the shimmering Atlantic, and giant signs directing traffic to the Sambódromo and the Maracanã stadiums. Every so often, I would glimpse hills rising above the freeway, vast and unyielding, seemingly built from a clutter of concrete buildings. These, I would later find out, were the fabled *favelas*, the Brazilian slums. We'd just reached Rio de Janeiro, and for now, I couldn't mute Barry Manilow crooning inside my head "*At the copa (co) Copacabana... The hottest spot north of Havana...*"

Our taxi had stopped a block from Rio's famous Copacabana Beach, on a bustling city street lined with shops and juice bars. Before us, stood a high-rise apartment, a rather ugly, but solid, concrete structure standing shoulder to shoulder with other near identical buildings, each guarded by sour-faced security guards. Unsightly metal bars protruded out onto the footpath before each entrance, forming little enclaves, not unlike mini jail cells. Crossing through the jail-like entrance, we entered through the dimly lit front foyer and were escorted to a bank of lifts, which took us eight floors up to our apartment. Light and airy, it had

backdrop of glitzy high-end apartments and hotels and verdant mountains beyond. The palm tree lined promenade, made of black and white mosaics laid out in psychedelic waves, would soon come to be a symbol of my time in Rio. It's on this stretch of footpath on Avenida Atlantica that I learnt to embrace Rio's super chill beach culture.

Countless kiosks (beach bars as residents call them) lined the promenade, spilling out onto the warm sand beyond. A retinue of waiters dashed among patrons spilled around the beach, crispy plates of calamari and *caiprinha* (Brazil's national drink) in hand. Tiny carts plied the promenade, selling street side favourites like açaí ice cream and tapioca pancakes during the day, and feisty *caiprinhas* once the sun had set. More entrepreneurial *cariocas* (residents of Rio de Janeiro) had set up shop along the esplanade, displaying their wares—from artwork and souvenirs to sun hats and customised city tours. Their vociferous calls to attract attention to their sales would often turn to alarm at the sight of the police, the presence of whom would prompt them to quickly pack up and disappear, until the police cavalcade had left. On the beach, tanned *cariocas* smashed volleyball over the countless nets strung out



Icy drinks at a Copacabana kiosk

crafted jewellery. All this, to the ever-present beat of the samba.

Somehow, or perhaps unsurprisingly, our little family was completely seduced by this beach culture. Mornings would see us saunter over to one of the juice bars for a quick bite of coxinha (Brazilian chicken croquette) and avocado smoothie. Then, with beach towels slung around our necks, balancing the toddler and his armament of digging paraphernalia, we'd hit the beach, where we would end up spending the better part of the day. Quite astonishing, given we never quite saw the point in lounging around on the sand beyond a quick swim in the ocean. Copacabana, however, made it easy.

It is possible to literally sit on a sun lounger on the beach and not leave all day. Need some shade? Beckon over one of the beachside stall attendants and they'll swiftly set you up with a beach umbrella and chairs for as little as 5 USD—the set price for the day. Thirsty? Flag down any of the vendors selling fresh coconuts or icy, cold *caprinhas*. Forgot your swimsuit? Not to fret, hawkers will magically appear with impressive collections of bikinis, hats and cangas.

To appease our hunger pangs, we'd wave down one of the many vendors that meander up and down the beach with their tiny metal grills for a *queijocoalho*—a popular beach snack. The hawkers would rummage in their polystyrene boxes and extricate a slab of cheese, throw it on the tiny, coal-fired BBQ and slather it in honey or dried oregano, before handing it over for us to devour unceremoniously, as sticky honey dribbled down our hand, mingling with sand and salty sea water. Messy perhaps, but there was something blissful in its simplicity.

When it got too hot, we'd jump into the ocean to cool off. My son, however, preferred digging a hole for himself in the cool sand and chilling out. Families would amble past, setting up camp nearby. The kids would run amok on the sand and my son, enchanted by their play, would scamper out of his little hole and join forces with them to dig even bigger holes. The *cariocas* were only too happy to let him join them, often feeding him from their family's pack of Biscoito Globo—light, puffy ring-shaped biscuits—the quintessential beachside snack.

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Beach Bums in Rio



Leblon

PHOTOS: SAMAI HAIDER

large windows that opened to a spectacular view of the tropical hill-top jungle rising up behind urban Copacabana. This was to be our home for the month.

Zona Sul or the South Zone of Rio de Janeiro is dotted with some of its most famous beaches. The iconic Copacabana stretches out over four kilometres, before a

near Rua Santa Clara, while *favela* kids engaged in stupendous *tiki-taka* between goalposts in the sand. Whether it was night or day mattered little, as the scene was always festive. Those with a creative streak built sensational sand sculptures in the hopes of enticing tourists to take photos in lieu of donations; others whittled shells and driftwood into beautifully