



Inside Parque das Ruínas

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tickets for the cable car that would take us to the summit—a mandatory stop on the tourist trail.

As the cable car whisked us up from the ground, we looked down to see magnificent yachts lined up in the harbour. My toddler, his face plastered against the glass and eyes drinking in every sight, squealed as he caught a glimpse of a lurid pink limousine weaving its way through dense traffic. Leaving him to distinguish the vehicles crawling on the street below, I turned my attention to the sheer granite face we were headed towards. Dedicated climbers hugged the rocky face of the mountain, a flimsy looking rope slung between them. As they became little specks in the distance, crawling up like tiny ants, I couldn't help but feel a pang of envy. Could I have done it? With a toddler on my back?

Once we'd reached the summit, we had unobstructed, 360-degree views of Rio de Janeiro. Beneath us unfurled downtown Rio, a tangle of concrete and steel, hemmed in by the golden-white sands of Copacabana beach and the wild-green Corcovado mountain. Beyond lay the jaw-dropping vista of Guanabara Bay.

Over drinks, a local photographer at a beach side kiosk on Copacabana Beach had insisted we make the trip just before sunset to get the best of both worlds—the azure blue of the Atlantic by day and the glittering lights of night-time Rio. As the setting sun cast its last orange glow over the city, it began to morph. It's as if someone had flicked a switch and the entire city lit up, twinkling lights that grew brighter as the sky darkened erasing nature's scenic wonders and highlighting man-made delights. Definitely one of the most stunning sunsets I've seen.

Parque das Ruínas & Santa Teresa

There's far more to bohemian Santa Teresa than stunning views to lure visitors to this hill-top neighbourhood in Rio. Quaint, cobblestone streets wind up the hill, carving their route through ageing 19th century mansions. There's something distinctly shabby chic about this neighbourhood, a grungy, hippy vibe that would appeal to artists and musicians. Tiny art galleries and studios pop up around every corner as the iconic tram, Bonde, plies its way up and down a handful of stops around the neighbourhood.

While it is possible to catch glimpses of downtown Rio through tiny alleys, the best vantage point is Santa Teresa remains, Parque das Ruínas, literally the ruins of an old mansion. This burnt out shell of a building, which serves as an art gallery, has been fitted out with metal walkways that lead you to the highest point in Santa Teresa from where it is possible to take in the expansive views of the city centre

and Guanabara Bay. I distinctly remember climbing the steps up to the cupola and drinking in the view: Sugar Loaf's distinct shape punctuated the sky before me, while Christ the Redeemer stood tall on Corcovado.

My husband, who'd explored the area the day before, implored me to stick around, camera at the ready. He refused to elaborate further and sent me off with a single hint: planes. I was more than happy to wait up there, in that crumbling rooftop, its brick walls exposed. The place devoid of the usual crush of tourists and the birdsong from the lush gardens below formed quite a contrast to the cacophony of the traffic-congested streets of downtown Rio. As I luxuriated in the views, out of the corner of my eye, I caught sight of something white and gleaming in the sky. I turned to face it and gasped. It was a plane, flying very low, barely skimming the mountaintops. It seemed to aim straight for the statue of Christ the Redeemer. I watched transfixed as it flew around it, over the bustling downtown Rio and the shimmering Guanabara Bay to land firmly on the tarmac at the Santos Dumont domestic airport that seemed to spring right out of the water. I spent the rest of the afternoon trying, in various stages of futility, to photograph the phenomenon, but learnt soon enough to give up and enjoy the experience. It remains one of my favourite memories of Rio de Janeiro.

Next stop: Cape Town, South Africa!

Samai Haider is a writer, traveller, artist and... economist. If her rather odd amalgamation of interests isn't dotty enough, she took to travelling around Southern hemisphere - with her pack and toddler strapped to her back. Read about the fables of her foibles here at *The Daily Star*. You can see more of her work at: <http://samaihaider.com/>

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