

Brazil, a rich mix of culture and natural beauty

It was a dream come true for me, having longed to visit Brazil — one of the most diverse countries on the planet and home to the wonderful Amazon forest and the Iguazu Falls. After a long gruelling flight, we reached Rio De Janeiro Airport early morning and immediately started for Copacabana.

With its white sandy beaches, soaring mountains and picturesque beachfront, it's no wonder that Rio de Janeiro is known as the "marvellous city." Facing the South Atlantic coast, Rio de Janeiro is one of the most visited cities in the southern hemisphere, and is blessed with one of the most beautiful natural settings — beaches like Copacabana, Ipanema, and Leblon.

We spent the very first evening in the downtown section of Rio, specifically the Lapa neighbourhood, known for its vibrant nightlife. Most of the architecture dates back to the 1800s, providing a scenic backdrop. We relished Brazilian coffee and just seeped in the ambience from one of the numerous sidewalk cafes.

One afternoon, we drove through the beautiful Tijuca National Park — one of the largest urban forests in the world with a huge area of a mostly mountainous forested landscape, and also spent some time at the Parque Lage, a beautiful park at the foot of the Mt Corcovado. Surrounded by rainforests, it boasts walking paths and gardens rich with sculptures.

We then availed a glass-walled cable car from a ground station at the base of Morro da Babilônia, to reach Morro da Urca and thence to Sugarloaf's summit. Rising above the mouth of Guanabara Bay, Sugarloaf Mountain is a monolith of quartz and granite. The name "Sugarloaf" was coined in the 16th century by the Portuguese during the heyday of sugar cane trade in Brazil. According to historians, blocks of sugar were placed in conical moulds made of clay to be transported on ships.

The shape of these moulds was



similar to the peak, hence the name.

From there, we took a second cable car up to the Corcovado mountain's summit and finally availed an elevator to reach the giant statue of "Christ the Redeemer." A symbol of Christianity across the world, the statue has also become a cultural icon of both Rio de Janeiro and Brazil. We were awed to see the giant statue with arms outstretched, which has also been named one of the new seven wonders of the world. The statue is considered the world's largest in the genre. The most panoramic views of Rio can be best appreciated from the summit. Simply stunning!

Rio is famous for its inviting beaches bathed in the azure blue waters of the Atlantic. We found time to explore a few, and stayed by Copacabana. Visitors indulge in the sun, sea, and various beach sports, particularly football and volleyball as vendors hawk their wares of fruits, drinks and snacks from kiosks that line the beach. The walk along the white sandy beach is lovely. There are numerous closely-packed multi-storeyed hotels and apartments along the beach too, and the food, like the delicious fried sea fish and French fries we had from a wayside kiosk. Of particular interest was the makeshift night market along the Copacabana beach which remains open till the wee hours with vendors selling all types of boutiques items, handicrafts, art, toys and food.

Close by is the Ipanema Beach, one of Rio's most popular tourist spots. With its long expanse of soft white sand and rolling waves, Ipanema routinely

the best beaches of the world lists every year. The beach is bordered by a parade of shops, cafés and restaurants as well as an array of art galleries, theatres and clubs. To boost our energy, a cup of hot Brazilian coffee was enough. The Barra da Tijuca Beach nearby, the longest in Rio, boasts clean white sand and tends to attract active beach goers, and many surfers were spotted here.

We took a city tour one day and came across few fascinating places of interests. First we visited the Carioca Aqueduct — built in the mid-18th century as a way to supply Rio de Janeiro with fresh drinking water from the Carioca River. One of the features of the aqueduct was a segment that consisted of two storeys of huge arches, the top which carry a tram that connected the city centre to the neighbourhood of Santa Teresa. Presently, the arches are a popular meeting spot for locals, especially at night, when the area comes alive with street vendors, music and dancing.

We then moved to Maracanã Stadium, one of Rio's most important landmarks and currently the largest stadium in South America. Football is by far the most important sport in Brazil and Pele and Brazil are two sides of the same coin. Being a die-hard Brazil football fan myself, naturally, we were very excited to have visited one of the world's largest football stadiums. Next on our list was the Sambadrome, a permanent grandstand-lined parade avenue which is used during the well-known annual Brazilian carnival. However, because it was not carnival time, we had to be satisfied by driving through the barren avenue.

As evening fell, we visited the Cathedral of St Sebastian of Rio de Janeiro, the See

of the Metropolitan Archbishops of Rio. An architectural marvel, it was designed based on Mayan pyramids. The cathedral's four rectilinear stained glass windows soar from floor to ceiling in a conical form to symbolise the equidistance and closeness of people in relation to God.

Rio is famous for innovative and creative street art and the entire city looks like an art gallery.

Street art is very popular and the city fathers have made use of every walls to depict history, culture and lifestyle through brilliant display of colours.

The big bird then flew us to Sao Paulo, the largest and the most populous city in Brazil



in the southern hemisphere. The city is a mega cosmopolitan drawing immigrants from all over the world. The influence of Portuguese, Spanish, German, Jewish, Arab and Japanese residents on its life and culture are visible. Historically attractive to immigrants, it's one of the most diverse cities in the world. The local populace is very much outnumbered by residents of European countries, and to us, it felt more European. From the 16th to the early 19th century, Brazil was a colony and a part of the Portuguese Empire, and Portuguese has remained the national language as well as Latin. São Paulo also has one of the world's largest concentration of street art murals, thanks to an innovative group of dedicated artists who continue to refine the art.

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