

HOTTRAVEL



Rio

REINVENTED

Brazil's hottest city shapes up for summer 2016.

By Shira Levine

"NO CARIOCA WENT TO WORK TODAY," a local banker in a sweat-soaked oxford and jeans explains, shouting over the music as a throng of people dance by in itty-bitty bikinis. "Today is a holiday."

Cariocas, as Rio natives are called, make an art out of good times. Rio de Janeiro is home to some of the world's most recognized and largest celebrations of carnival. The 246.22 square kilometers of seductive coastline boasts the famed beaches of Copacabana and Ipanema, both excellent sand spots for people watching; it's a challenge not to gape at those Brazilian bikini bottoms! And then there is futbol. In Brazil, futbol is religion. (I

witnessed earth-shattering hullabaloo around the Flamengo vs. Fluminense game that Flamengo ultimately won. Think Yankees vs. Red Socks in the World Series at Fenway Park.) So when there is something to celebrate (and there is plenty) forget walking—everyone moves by samba.

As expected, the energy level rose even higher in October when it was announced that Rio would be the first South American city ever to host the Olympics, in summer 2016. "*Eu ja sabia!* I knew it!" they exclaimed. Brazil's national colors, green and yellow, decorated the city, and the pre-made signs were a self-fulfilling prophecy.

IMAGES BY SHIRA LEVINE

Rio is more than the desirable vacation spot that inspired the simple poetic lyrics of *The Girl from Ipanema*. It's more than a Seven World Wonder locale, home of the Christ the Redeemer statue. For nearly a decade, Brazil has been included in the economic acronym BRIC, coined by Goldman Sachs, referring to the rapidly-growing developing economies which also include Russia, India and China. That means within seven years, Brazil could become the world's fifth largest economy. They have a significant oil and natural gas industry, as well as notable financial services, technology and telecommunications businesses. And the *feijoada* gravy? They're growing during a

is named), an example of developments happening within transitioned former *favelas*.

City of God director Fernando Meirelles brought the *favelas* to global awareness in his eye-opening film, but it's important to realize that *Cariocas* living in those slums fight an unfair misconception. Yes, many *favelas* are controlled by druglords, but their residents are generally anything but.

"Inside *favelas* are honest, hardworking, clean people who are warm and have morals," Mark Birchall, GM of the Santa Teresa Hotel told me. "The rich and poor live side by side here. You have to consider that it's disrespectful and unfair to walk down the street



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global recession. By 2016 Rio will be completely reinvented and ready for the summer games. The "Marvelous City," with its \$14.2 billion Olympic budget and predicted \$60.3 billion in public and private investments (according to a published state study), will add an additional 14,000 hotel rooms to its current 28,000, build a solid transportation system and garner a significantly better hold on the crime frequently connected to the estimated 600 *favelas*, or slums, existing in the city today.

I stayed at the grand 86-year-old Copacabana Palace Hotel. A classic, it went mod last March with the addition of the glossy, elite Bar do Copa. I also spent time relaxing at the rooftop pool and sleek Baretto-Londra Bar within the sumptuous confines of Philippe Starck's très chic Hotel Fasano. (The Fasano is one of only a few ubiquitous Starck global projects that isn't a tacky celebration of the designer's vanity.) Located on Ipanema Beach, it was worth the effort of gaining entry just to enjoy a generously priced drink. Then there is the year-old 44-room Hotel Santa Teresa. Ten minutes from downtown Rio, it's located on a mountain hilltop of 150 different tropical trees in the artsy enclave of the revitalized Santa Teresa barrio. The 4,000 square meter resort is a converted "love hotel" or *descasado* (for which their terrace bar

with a superior air. If you don't flaunt your wealth, you'll be fine."

There are some noteworthy and creative partnerships bringing business and "slum tourism" to visitors seeking that other Rio reality. Pousada Favelinha, located in Pereira de Silva, is an international guesthouse started by a German and Brazilian couple. Apparently the neighborhood totally changed after one fateful day (fateful for the drug dealers): "In 1999 there was one big blow by the police, who in a single day killed or brought into custody all of the local drug dealers plaguing the area."

Affluent or not, it's cliché (but requisite) to lounge around in a teeny bikini and channel your inner Samba queen or king at Carnival. So consider the City of Samba and the *Sambodromo* as off-season, tamer ways to channel your inner Carmen Miranda. Drink intelligently: Leblon Beach's Academia de Cachaca has a menu featuring 80 different types of *cachaça*. The chic neighborhood Barra da Tijuca is littered with posh cafés ideal for grabbing a *caipirinha* and excellent conversation.

Off the beaten path, but well worth the drive, Museu Casa do Pontal is a remarkable and hilarious collection of folk art. A sign within the museum reads "*E tudo acaba em samba*" or "And everything finishes in Samba." At least in Rio, it's true. ♦