

Travel

The Observer &
Eccentric Newspapers

Oh Rio! What more could a vacationer ask?

Travel bargain of the century

By Doris Scharfenberg
special writer

Oh Rio! We're flying down to Rio!
Rio de Janeiro ta de dum de de
ay.

The words have dimmed but the mystique lingers on. Curled into my seat on Pan Am's finest, waiting for dawn and that legendary harbor to come into view, I thought of the old Astaire-Rogers movie song and wondered if I should have taken samba lessons.

Today it is more than the essence of an exciting journey, Brazil is the travel bargain of the century. Since devaluation of the cruzeiro, rooms at luxury hotels go for as little as \$65 for two with breakfast, dinner in chic restaurants for \$10, a leather purse for \$8. U.S. tour brokers offer special tour rates. Brazil offers an "Airpass" plan to cut inter-city costs.

Planes from North America arrive from the wrong direction for airborne glimpses of Rio's famous harbor, but it is a fleeting disappointment. On the winding drive from the airport, you can take a vista is a stunner, even with metropolitan clutter pushing toward you. Such matters are over-powered by views of forest-draped rock or by the emerald inlets of the Atlantic Ocean.

With 5-million inhabitants, Rio tumbles out from between these strange hills with a lava flow of city that erupted ten miles inland and spread for fifteen miles along the coast.

Exploring the city begins with a two-stage cable-car ride to the top of Sugar Loaf Mountain, named for its resemblance to the cone-shaped molds used

to form "loaves" of sugar from boiled cane sap.

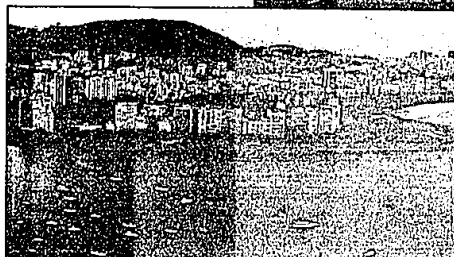
Sugar Loaf's "foothill" rises to nearly 700 feet above the harbor, and you don't see how the view can get much better. Walks with comforting walls lead to picnic areas, a children's theater and restaurant. Rio's symphony has played up here; wedding receptions are big business.

It gets very quiet on top of Sugar Loaf, the way it does at the edge of the Grand Canyon. About 1,200 feet above the water, with Botafogo Bay, fleets of big and little boats, beaches and Sao Sebastiao do Rio de Janeiro — Rio's full name — spread out below. Cameras click, talking stops, until someone runs out of film. (Sold here at pinnacle prices).

I gazed until the sun dropped behind distant mountains and the city lights eased on. It would be easier to define love than to describe the grand panorama. Buy postcards, they are the last resort for the speechless.

Rio was established in 1567 on near-by Castelo Hill as a walled fortress-town to guard the harbor. You can take a trolley car to the oldest sections of the city, called San Teresa. The colonial buildings and cobblestone walks have an aura of their own.

THE HIGHEST ride around is the trip to Corcovado, site of the enormous statue of Christ the Redeemer. Guides love to tell you how this 100-foot colossus weighs over 1,000 tons, that the distance between outstretched fingertips is more than 80 feet and that each hand weighs about 57 tons.



The city of Rio de Janeiro is one of the most beautiful in the world, by day or by night. Viewing the city from 1,200 feet up one can see the fleets of big and little boats on Botafogo Bay. To reach the heights, one can travel along a winding road through the lush foliage of Tijuca Forest National Preserve and stop to gaze at a waterfall on the way.

Revealed, then obscured, by passing clouds, the patient image on the 3,000-foot mountaintop stands surrounded by powerful spotlights for night-time illumination. It is a beacon with a different message for every viewer.

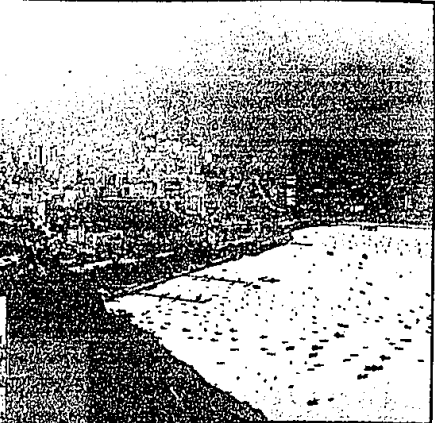
Corcovado can be climbed by cog train, on hiking trails, or by a winding road through Tijuca Forest National Preserve. You can't go to Brazil without visiting the jungle, even one that has a restaurant next to a thunderous waterfall. Towering trees shrouded in mist and vines and the smell of deep foliage are both serene and forbidding. Impatience, a garden favorite at home, provides the color contrast. This is its native turf.

Twenty minutes and some splendid vistas later you can be downtown, ready to go to one of Rio's 21 museums, including the Carmen Miranda collection, or to the Botanical Gardens. The Quinta da Boa Vista Museum was once the official residence of Brazil's Imperial family. It is now the site of an art gallery and Rio's zoo.

Sun lovers postpone everything in favor of a spot on the beach.

To those who live in pursuit of better beaches and frothier surf, Rio is the promised land. Twenty long, wide and golden playgrounds line the coast, their soft acres alive with bathers, ball games and squinting gawkers. It's a tropic sun down there.

SIDEWALKS OF vivid black-and-white stone separate the beach from the boulevard with its miles of shops, hotels and bars. Mid-day action stops for a "chophino". . . small draft beer favored by the Cariocas, i.e. Rio residents.



PHOTOS BY DORIS SCHARFENBERG

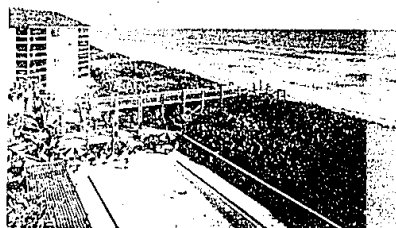
Spain and "Kiss" presides over Impanema, where "the girl from" is from. That's a short sampling from a long list of classy digs now within budget range of middle American dreamers.

Famed jeweler H. Sterns, whose shops grace the best lobbies, has a workshop just a short stroll from the Caesar Park. Since gems are a prime Brazilian resource, I went to watch rough stones cut, buffed and mounted. I was then ushered to a quiet corner of the elegant, well-guarded tearoom, seated, and asked what I would like to try on. The suave, regal approach has made Sterns a top seller . . . although they drew a blank with me. For the serious shopper, however, high fashion baubles go for half of home prices.

My cons went to humber purses. Rio's swarming outdoor markets, held every weekend throughout the city, are stacked with hats, hammocks, framed butterflys and baskets. Best buys seem to be leather goods, lace, ceramics and indigenous art.

The five-star Rio Palace faces Copacabana Beach, the plush Inter-Continental Rio looks over Gavea Beach, and the Caesar Park (host to such diverse types of royalty as the King of

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