Tourists have long flocked to Rio de Janeiro for its unique and vibrant culture, tremendous beauty, amazing beaches, sizzling nightlife, and dazzling landscapes—both urban and natural. The city is the most visited city in Brazil. In addition to being Brazil’s top tourist destination, Rio receives more visitors than any city in the southern hemisphere. The Cidade Maravilhosa (marvelous city), Brazil’s second-largest city, boasts wonderful food, very friendly locals (referred to as cariocas), and a vibrant culture set in a stunning backdrop.

Squeezed between dramatic jungle-covered granite mountains and the southern Atlantic Ocean, Rio de Janeiro is composed of a coastal plain and a plateau. The coast stretches for 400 miles and is a popular retreat for tourists and locals alike. Several bays make up the coastline, and impressive granite slopes rise from the shore. This varied topography makes for an array of plant and animal life, giving the city an undeniable beauty and depth.

The original 16th-century colonial settlement now makes up the contemporary downtown core, known as Centro. Poor and working-class neighborhoods, which include many of the favelas (impoverished, marginalized communities) in Rio, sprawl to the north of Centro. The Zona Sul (South Zone) comprises the city’s wealthiest neighborhoods, including the famed Copacabana, Ipanema, and Leblon. The Zona Oeste (West Zone), anchored by Barra da Tijuca, a rapidly developing area of shopping malls and high-rise condominiums, is where much of the Olympic infrastructure was developed.

In 2016, the Olympic Games took place in South America for the first time when Rio hosted. The Games were held in four competition zones across the city—Barra da Tijuca, Copacabana, Maracanã, and Deodoro—a strategy aligned with the city’s wider development plan. Indeed, the World Cup (held in 2014) and the Olympics have served as a catalyst for the realization of numerous urban improvements in Rio de Janeiro.

The Iconic Touristscape of Rio de Janeiro

Incredible natural beauty and stunning landmarks have long drawn visitors to Rio. The most popular tourist attractions in the city include its spectacular beaches. Copacabana is the most famous in the Zona Sul region, and the iconic beach is Rio’s first in a string of Atlantic Ocean-facing beaches. The (usually packed) 2-mile stretch of sand is bordered by mountains and high-rise hotels and boasts a bustling, wavy mosaic promenade, Avenida Atlântica, good for biking, strolling, or people watching with a caipirinha (Brazil’s national drink made with the Brazilian rum called cachaça) in hand.

The more upscale Ipanema and Leblon beaches begin where Copacabana ends and offer a slightly more laid-back atmosphere in a more upscale neighborhood. Barra da Tijuca, the longest beach in Rio, at 11 miles in length, boasts excellent waves and water conditions, attracting scores of board and wind surfers taking advantage of the prime conditions. Barra was home to the Olympic Village and several of the Summer Olympics events in 2016.

Pão de Açúcar (Sugarloaf) is one of the most familiar icons of Rio de Janeiro. It is essentially a tourist park composed of two mountains—the Morro da Urca and the Sugarloaf. A visit involves a ride in two cable cars. The first cable connects the Praia Vermelho (Red Beach) to Urca and rises over 700 feet; it was opened in 1912 as the first in Brazil.

The following year, the second cable car began operating, connecting the peak of the Morro da Urca (721 feet above sea level) to the Sugar Loaf (1,300 feet above sea level). The cable
cars have clear sides, which allow for taking pictures during the aerial tour. The view from the top is one of the most spectacular in Rio, with Guanabara Bay, Copacabana beach, the Christ the Redeemer (behind which the sun sets), and the Tijuca Forest all visible.

The statute of Cristo Redentor (Christ the Redeemer) is a massive sculpture of Jesus Christ that sits atop Corcovado Mountain. The remarkable soapstone statue, standing over 100 feet tall is considered the largest art deco statue in the world and the fifth largest statue of Jesus Christ in the world. One of the most recognizable and popular sites in Rio de Janeiro, it has been a symbol of the city for over 80 years.

Tijuca Forest National Park surrounds Corcovado Mountain and the statue of Christ. Tijuca Forest National Park is the largest urban forest in the world. The 8,000-acre rain forest was once completely stripped of its native vegetation by coffee and sugarcane plantations. The ecologically minded King Dom Pedro II had the forest replanted by hand. It is now home to dozens of waterfalls, hundreds of trees and plants, and over 100 species of animals.

The Lapa Arches represent the most massive public work built in colonial Rio. Composed of 42 arches in two tiers, the structure was built as an aqueduct to supply the city with water. For over a century, it also carried a tramline linking the Carioca Station downtown to the quaint Santa Teresa district, a vibrant artistic community.

Also located in Centro is the Catedral de São Sebastião do Rio de Janeiro, a striking and unique piece of architecture. Also known as Catedral Metropolitana, the breathtaking volcano-shaped cathedral can accommodate up to 20,000 people. Four massive and colorful stained glass windows enclose the church and allow sunlight to stream in. The basement houses the Museu de Arte Sacra (the Museum of Sacred Art), showcasing various historical and religious items. At night, the unique cathedral illuminates the Centro skyline with color.

In addition to Rio’s iconic landmarks, visits to Rio’s favelas—home to a quarter of the city’s population—are now on the city’s tourist maps. In 2008, the government began an aggressive policing campaign known as “pacification” to win back Rio’s favelas from drug traffickers. Since then, favelas have been actively promoted as a tourist destination by Rio’s tourism office, with tens of thousands of tourist visits every year. Tourism in favelas, however, is often as controversial as it is popular. Although supporters describe the many benefits that such tourism brings, some critics see it as exploitative and voyeuristic.

**Event Tourism in Rio de Janeiro**

Events are also an important motivator of tourism for Rio. Each year, 6 weeks before Easter, millions of people gather in Rio to participate in the biggest party in the world, **Carnaval**. In Rio de Janeiro, there are two places to see carnival: in the Sambodromo or in the streets. Carnaval at the Sambodromo, essentially a huge stage area that seats 90,000, is an enormous parade with samba dancers and **bateria** (massive drum corps) playing samba. Carnaval in the streets is more participatory with everyone joining in on the dancing and partying.

Also not to be missed is New Year’s Eve in Rio, which is celebrated along all the beaches, but especially in Copacabana where millions of revelers come together on the beach and in the street (which is closed to traffic) with almost everyone wearing white. As midnight approaches, the crowds surge toward the beach for a New Year’s Eve tradition where Christian and Afro-Brazilian traditions mix.
Thousands of candles illuminate the beach, and the sea is filled with white gladiolas and red roses, as people make their offerings to Yemanjá, the goddess of the sea. At midnight, an incredible fireworks display begins, along with music on stages throughout the city. The event continues through morning. Another major event, Rock in Rio, one of largest music festivals in the world, began in 1985 and has been held five times since then (in 1991, 2001, 2011, 2013, and 2015). The enhanced exposure because of these events has attracted sailing competitions and business conventions to the city.

As host to two mega sporting events, the landscape of Rio is being significantly altered, with more than $20 billion invested in urban improvements to provide ample accommodations, pleasant cultural attractions, and adequate transportation for visitors. In addition, the Porto Maravilha (Marvelous Port), an urban waterfront renovation project, offers the city a new image.

New attractions for the waterfront area include the creation of cruise ship berths; commercial development, including Trump Towers Rio, the largest urban office development in the BRIC countries; a historical and archeological circuit celebrating African heritage; a new Museu de Arte do Rio (Rio Art Museum); and the project’s anchor, the Museu do Amanhã (Museum of Tomorrow), a more than 100,000-square-foot venue scheduled to open in 2015 in concert with the city’s anniversary.

Rio celebrated its 450th anniversary in 2015, a metropolis undergoing tremendous transformation. The improvements in the tourism infrastructure are intended to prepare the most-visited city in the southern hemisphere for the increase of international visitors with improvements to airports, infrastructure, and public transportation. As Brazil continues to rise as a global economic power, Rio is firmly positioned as the nation’s tourism capital.

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See also Brazil; Fair and Festival Tourism; Olympic Games and Their Impacts; Slum Tourism; Sports Tourism

Further Readings

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