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### **Three Perfect Days / Rio de Janeiro**

Since then, the city has grown into a metropolis of 6 million people, but visitors still feel a similar thrill at their first glimpse of Rio, magnificently set between dramatic mountains and an island-dotted bay. The natural landscape—beaches, rocky hills, and forests—weaves into the urban environment. Rather than dislodge nature, Rio incorporated it.

Strangely, it took a long time for cariocas (as Rio dwellers are called) to acknowledge this privileged setting. For decades they strove to be European, preferably Parisian. Beaches were ignored, and in architecture, landscaping, and fashion, Europe was the mode. Only around 1923, when the Copacabana Palace was built on semideserted Copacabana Beach to receive foreign dignitaries, did cariocas suddenly embrace the wonder and beauty of their unique home. The admiration of visitors did much to turn beaches into something not just respectable, but also chic. And they became part of Rio's style: easygoing, joyous, and intensely alive.

The city retains traces of its imperial past as the capital and home to Brazil's emperors, but, in general, the tone is thoroughly modern. Rio's mix of architectural styles and evidence of unplanned growth in response to the needs of the moment only enhance its vibrant character.

For lovers of year-round sun, there are two perfect seasons in Rio: hot and very hot. Summers—November through March—are when Rio is most truly itself. The beaches are packed, the bars are full, and music plays everywhere. It's also when the city's top celebrations take place: New Year's Eve, with thousands dressed in white on the beach watching elaborate fireworks displays, and, of course, the world-famous Carnival. So dress your lightest and prepare for three perfect days in Rio.

**DAY ONE** / You've checked in at the 1 Copacabana Palace, Rio's most elegant and charming hotel. Attentive staff members make you feel at home amid the luxurious surroundings, and the location is near the best restaurants, nightlife, and visitor attractions. The luxury suite with a sea view that you requested lets you observe local color on Copacabana Beach from your balcony.

Poolside, enjoy a breakfast that features a wonderful array of fresh tropical fruit such as guavas, abiu, and sweetsop, and then take a cab to Marina da Gloria, where a schooner leaves at 9:30 a.m. for a two-hour tour of Guanabara Bay. From here, you'll see a view of the city that many tourists miss. Across the bay you'll pass Rio's twin city, Niterói. Look out for the flying saucer-shaped Contemporary Art Museum, a milestone of modern design created by Brazil's

most famous architect, Oscar Niemeyer (who also designed much of Brazil's capital, Brasília).

Back at the marina, your car is waiting to take you to the Museum of Modern Art, another landmark of contemporary architecture, with exhibits of the top Brazilian and global artists. The museum's gardens are a work of art in themselves; they're part of the Aterro do Flamengo, the largest urban garden in the world. Landscape artist Roberto Burle Marx designed them, using every known Brazilian plant species.

Getting hungry? A seafood banquet awaits you at Marius, only a few blocks from your hotel. In a delightful nautical setting, you can savor oysters, shrimp, lobster, langoustine, coquille St. Jacques, and other tasty fish served *rodizio* (sequentially) at your table—as much as you can eat. Don't miss the spectacular salad bar.

After lunch, another treat: Take the cable-car ride up to Sugarloaf Mountain for spellbinding vistas of Rio and its surroundings. As you leave the cable car, stroll along Pista Claudio Coutinho, a beautiful, forested path where you're likely to see multicolored birds and bands of playful monkeys.

Stop at Manoel & Joaquim on your way back to the hotel. This is a typical *boteco*, a local institution where *cariocas* eat, drink, meet friends, or just pass the time. Ask for *chopp* (ice-cold draft beer) and a Rio favorite, *bolinhos de bacalhau* (codfish fritters).

It's only a short walk back to the hotel along the beachfront, so relax with a dip in the pool before dinner.

You've booked a table at Olympe for superb French food with a Brazilian touch. The owner, Claude Troisgros, hails from a distinguished family of French chefs (with three-star Michelin ratings in France since 1968). Start with the frozen gazpacho and spinach tempura, followed by roasted quail stuffed with onion and raisin *farofa* (roasted manioc flour) and *jabuticaba* (tropical fruit) sauce. The menu includes the best French wines. For dessert, try the exquisite passion fruit crepe soufflé.

The night is still young. Fridays are at their liveliest in Lapa, the soulful bohemian neighborhood where music spills from bars and nightclubs into the crowded streets. Ask your cab driver to drop you off at 1 Rio Scenarium, where bands play samba and other Brazilian rhythms in a striking décor of theater props. Ask for a *caipirinha* (sugar-cane spirits with lime) and watch the revelers on the dance floor—or, better still, join in.

DAY TWO / Breakfast today is at Escola do Pão, with its enormous array of delicacies, such as green-corn pudding, sweet avocado cream, melted cheeses on homebaked herb bread, and natural yogurt with fresh fruit.

When you've eaten all you can, take a cab to Ipanema, Rio's fanciest shopping area. On Rua Vinicius de Moraes, you'll find Toca do Vinicius, the place where serious music lovers stock up on bossa nova CDs and song books. Nearby, Soulier sells colorful handbags, belts, and shoes. At the end of the block, turn right onto trendy Visconde de Pirajá Street. At Contemporâneo, you'll find snazzy clothes by Brazil's hottest stylists. A few blocks along, Garcia D'Avila Street is the place for high-class jewelry and home décor. Antonio Bernardo, at No. 121, sells wonderful designer jewelry in white and yellow gold with delicate movement and flair—it's Brazilian design at its very best.

It's getting near lunchtime, so drop off your shopping at the hotel and head for D'Amici, an Italian restaurant with great pasta and roast dishes. Start with brie and pear tortelloni, followed by roast partridge in wine and herb sauce. For dessert, indulge in the delicious almond ice cream.

You've arranged a car for the afternoon, so head up through Tijuca Forest, leaving behind the crowds that jam the roads to Corcovado Mountain as you turn off onto lesser-known Mirante Dona Marta. Take in the stunning views of the city and the famous Christ the Redeemer statue.

Along a mountaintop road, you'll arrive at the picturesque Santa Teresa district, home to many artists. The Chácara do Céu Museum has a fine collection of Brazilian modern art, paintings by 19th-century travelers to Brazil, and 18th-century maps. After a stroll in the gorgeous gardens, head to Espírito Santa, just down the road, for refreshments and Amazonian delicacies. On the shaded veranda with its enchanting view of the neighborhood, ask for exotic cupuaçu (an Amazonian fruit) juice and crunchy cheese pastries with açaí (another Amazonian fruit) chutney. A few houses along, La Vereda sells interesting handicrafts from all over Brazil.

Back at your hotel, watch the sunset from your balcony and have a well-earned rest before the evening outings. You've made reservations at Carême, a delightful bistro serving epicurean dishes with local flavors. The foie gras, served with manioc mousseline and caramelized cashew, is delicious, as are the lamb chops with mushrooms and fragrant cocoa and pepper sauce. End regally with chocolate madness: six small portions of divine chocolate creations.

Rio is a city of many arts, but music is by far the favorite. Mistura Fina has the best live Brazilian music in a congenial atmosphere of music lovers. Order a strawberry caipirinha; then sit back and enjoy the wondrous sounds.

DAY THREE / Walk among the early-morning joggers on Copacabana to Café Fleuri. Savor the beach-front view along with your pancakes, cheese toasts, and pastries. Your cab is waiting to take you to Sitio Roberto Burle Marx, where you've made an appointment for the 9:30 park tour. It's a long but rewarding drive; you'll pass most of Rio's scenic beaches and retrace the city's growth, from Copacabana to Ipanema, then São Conrado and the new high-rises of Barra da Tijuca. It's just as well you're off early. Tourists don't usually get this far, but savvy cariocas will soon be packing these roads on their way to the best beaches.

The beautifully landscaped Sitio Roberto Burle Marx estate has one of the largest collections of tropical plants in the world. It includes 3,500 species from the forests of Brazil, Asia, and Africa. Bromelias and palm trees, giant ferns and heliconias—all are here in a profusion of mesmerizing colors and shapes assembled over a lifetime by Burle Marx. This is where he lived and worked; it was his lab, as he called it. You can visit his house and studio, where you'll see his sculptures and paintings, as well as his private collection of Brazilian art.

Burle Marx, who died in 1994, created the modern tropical garden. Before his designs, the model for gardens was European. A great lover of Brazil with extensive knowledge of its flora, Burle Marx did much to show Brazilians and the rest of the world the richness of local plants.

After the two-hour tour, you have time for a swim on charming Prainha Beach before heading to your lunch at Bira. This rustic restaurant, set in the forest overlooking Guaratiba Bay, serves excellent fish, caught daily by owner Bira. Try the delicious crab pastries, followed by muqueca de robalo (robalo fish stewed in coconut milk and spices).

After lunch, stop at the Casa do Pontal Museum to see the finest collection of folk art in Brazil. Wood and clay figurines poetically depict with humor and skill the culture of rural Brazil: fishermen, musicians, street-vendors, women at work, and children at play. Frenchman Jacques van de Beuque, the museum's founder, collected these pieces on his travels.

Don't linger too long or you'll face heavy traffic on your way back, with surfers and bathers returning from the beach. Arriving in Copacabana, stop at the Copacabana Fort for a cafezinho (a small, sweet coffee—a Rio mainstay) at Colombo do Forte patisserie. Try quindim, a favorite local sweet made from coconut and eggs.

After your eventful day, just chill before dinner. You're going to Lagoa Grill, one of the kiosks along Rodrigo de Freitas Lagoon. The house specialty is charcoal-grilled picanha (a choice cut of beef) with banana and fries. Have a caipirinha and enjoy the samba sounds playing on guitar.

As you watch the city lights reflected on the lake and feel yourself moved by the rhythms of the past three days, you understand why Rio is considered one of the most magical cities in the world.