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WHAT'S DOING IN; Rio

By **LARRY ROHTER**

Published: February 2, 2003

The new year may have brought a new government and the promise of sweeping social change to Brazil, but the everyday rhythms of a Rio de Janeiro summer continue undisturbed. By day, the beaches are crowded with vacationers, and once the sun sets, especially on weekends, the social and musical clubs known as samba schools begin the rehearsals that prepare them for the intense competition that takes place during Carnival, the climax of the season.

Carnaval starts this year on Feb. 28, with a series of gaudy costume balls at leading social clubs and concludes, as usual, on Ash Wednesday, March 5, with the announcement of the samba school that has won the competition. But before and after the big parades, the city has plenty of other attractions, ranging from aquatic sports to museum exhibitions to shopping for gems and leather goods on Avenida Visconde de Pirajá in Ipanema.

It is always wise to be alert on the beaches and streets and to leave flashy jewelry and large amounts of cash locked in a hotel safe. That counsel holds especially true during Carnival, when pickpockets and thieves count on the fatigue and inebriation of revelers to make their tasks easier. In addition, following a recent series of armed robberies and assaults downtown (which has none of the city's leading hotels), the police have issued a warning to tourists to avoid that area after dark, when most offices and shops are already closed. The State Department, speaking of Rio and São Paulo, also cautions about crime against tourists, "especially at dusk and during the evening hours."

Events

The best box seats for the dazzling Carnival competition among the 14 leading samba schools on the nights of March 2 and 3 went on sale last month, and at this late date can be obtained only from scalpers at exorbitant prices. But bleacher and ground-level seats for the big shows go on sale one week before the show, at \$20 to \$55 (at 3.5 reals to the dollar), and can be bought at the Unibanco Sales Center downtown at Avenida Graça Aranha 416A. Information: call (55-21) 2292-3177.

Parallel to the official competition, colorful neighborhood bands and clubs known as blocos take to the streets at established times, which can be found in a bilingual Summer 2003 Guide available from Riotur, the local government's tourist agency; (55-21) 2217-7565. The time and place of free neighborhood Carnival dances promoted by Riotur are available at (55-21) 2217-7560.

An alternative may be one of the Carnival balls held at Scala Rio, Avenida Afranio de Melo Franco 396 in Leblon, the neighborhood adjoining Ipanema, which are open to the public, encouraged to attend in costume. Each night offers a different theme aimed at a different audience, ranging from older people to gays, and that information, as well as ticket prices, is available by calling (55-21) 2239-4448.

From Feb. 15 through March 15, winning costumes from last year's Carnival parade will be on display at a pair of downtown subway stations, Carioca and Estacio, a roughly 20-minute ride in from the end of the line in Copacabana. The costumes are more elaborate and extravagant than can

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be imagined -- tropical baroque at its most bombastic.

Once Carnival is over and things start to cool down, the Centro Cultural Banco do Brasil, at Rua Primeiro de Março 66 downtown, will be offering a complete change of pace: an exhibition of engravings by Rembrandt on loan from the Rembrandt House in Amsterdam, along with works of artists who influenced the 17th-century artist. The show will run March 17 to May 4, and admission is free; (55-21) 3808-2000.

On April 25, the Grammy winner Milton Nascimento, one of Brazil's most popular singers and songwriters, begins a monthlong engagement at Rio's principal concert hall, Canecão, Rua Wenceslao Bráz 215 in Botafogo. Each week from Thursday through Sunday he will be performing songs from his new album, "Pietà," as well as old favorites that have been recorded by American artists ranging from Sarah Vaughn to Earth, Wind and Fire. Information about ticket prices (not yet set) and other pop shows: (55-21) 2543-1241.

Sightseeing

There is a reason the Christ statue atop Corcovado Mountain is the most popular postcard image of Rio: the view of sea, green hills, buildings and streets from 2,300 feet up should not be missed on a clear day. Access has just been made more cumbersome by a new system that obliges visitors to use elevators and escalators fed by train and taxi routes, so service has slowed and the already large crowds are likely to grow. Admission is about \$7. Open 9 a.m. to 7 p.m.; (55-21) 2258-1329.

Rio has over 20 miles of ocean beaches, which provide one of the best people-watching shows in town. Copacabana and Ipanema are the most famous sites, and deservedly so, but surfers flock to São Conrado, farther west, and many young people prefer to congregate out at Barra da Tijuca. Even after sunset, people use the well-lighted beaches to play volleyball, walk their dogs or to stop and sip from a chilled coconut.

Because of Rio's stunning natural setting, visitors are tempted to overlook its architecture. A trip downtown reveals gems like the heavily gilded Baroque Church of São Francisco da Penitência, just off the Largo da Carioca and open Wednesday to Friday, 9 a.m. to noon and 1 to 4 p.m., and the pastel colonial Paço Imperial at Praça 15, once the residence of the Portuguese and Brazilian royal families, now a cultural center open Tuesday to Sunday, noon to 6:30 p.m. Admission to each is free.

Also worth visiting are a pair of welcome refuges from the summer heat and the urban hurly-burly. Tijuca National Forest, admission \$1.50, (55-21) 2492-2253, on the other side of the mountain behind the main hotels, is Rio's answer to Central Park, only 31 square miles and with monkeys, parrots and waterfalls. It is open from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m., the same hours as the Botanical Gardens, Rua Jardim Botânico 920, created by the Portuguese royal family in 1808 and today displaying more than 8,200 species of tropical flowers and trees; (55-21) 2294-9349. Admission \$1.

Where to Stay

It would be hard to improve on the location of the three-year-old Ipanema Plaza, which opened in 2000 at Rua Farne de Amoedo 34, (55-21) 3687-2000, fax (55-21) 3687-2001, www.ipanemaplazahotel.com. One block from the beach, it is in an area that is also crowded with restaurants, bars, clubs, cafes and boutiques. The 135 rooms, though not especially large, are sunny and decorated in

pastels, and all offer views either of the sea or of Corcovado. Double rooms begin at \$120 a night.

A longtime favorite of European visitors, the Hotel Meridien, Avenida Atlântica 1020, (55-21) 3873-8888, (55-21) 3873-8777, www.meridien-br.com/rio, at the point where Copacabana turns into Leme, is in a 38-story tower that is one of the tallest buildings in Rio and offers a commanding view of Guanabara Bay. With 496 rooms, it is also one of the city's largest hotels and has recently undergone a \$16 million renovation. It has an outdoor pool and sauna. Doubles with sea view begin at \$140 a night, breakfast included.

Budget: The Grandarrell Ouro Verde, Avenida Atlântica 1456 in Copacabana, (55-21) 2543-4123, is in a building that has been declared a historic monument because of its Art Deco architecture and looks much as it did when it first opened for soccer's World Cup in 1950. The 62 rooms are spacious and decorated with period furnishings. Doubles with sea view are available for \$88 a night, a bargain considering the choice location.

Luxury: The Copacabana Palace, Avenida Atlântica 1702 in Copacabana, (55-21) 2548-7070, (55-21) 2235-7330 www.copacabanapalace.orient-express.com, is a striking white neo-Classical-style building that has been a Rio landmark since 1923 and still dominates the beach front. The 226 rooms are spacious and have high ceilings, and an added attraction is what may well be the city's finest Italian restaurant, Cipriani. The hotel is a celebrity favorite, with prices to match: Doubles start at \$265 a night for rooms with a city view and \$310 for a room facing the beach.

Of the three major American chain hotels that operate in Rio, the Marriott Hotel, Avenida Atlântica 2600 in Copacabana, (55-21) 2545-6500, fax 2645-6555, is the only one that is both on the beach front and a convenient walking distance from restaurants, clubs and shops. As one of the city's newest hotels, having opened in 2001, it offers two phone lines, high-speed Internet connections and CD player in all of its 245 rooms. Doubles without a sea view start at \$225 a night and those with the view start at \$265.

Where to Eat

Year after year, Antiquarius, Rua Aristides Espínola 19 in Leblon, (55-21) 2294-1049, ranks at the top of nearly every restaurant poll in Rio. Among its Portuguese dishes, served in faux farmhouse surroundings, is a signature offering, a codfish moqueca, a stew in a coconut-tomato sauce -- an irresistible mixture of Portuguese and Brazilian influences. Dinner for two with a bottle of Chilean wine about \$100. Diners Club cards only. Open for lunch and dinner daily.

Just a few blocks away, at Rua Dias Ferreira 64 in Leblon, is the most fashionable restaurant of the moment, Carlota, (55-21) 2540-6821. The atmosphere is cozy, with only a dozen tables in an all-white bistro setting, and the menu mixes Brazilian and foreign ingredients in dishes such as lobster tail with manioc purée or a duck confit with mango and passion fruit sauce. No reservations. Dinner for two (lunch also offered on weekends) about \$75.

Thanks to movies like "Woman on Top" and "Dona Flor and Her Two Husbands," the cuisine of Bahia has gained an aura of sensuality. Short of a visit to that state, the best option may be a meal at Siri Mole & Cia., at Rua Francisco Otaviano 50 in Copacabana, (55-21) 2267-0894. Open all week, with a branch downtown at Avenida Rio Branco 1; the Saturday buffet is especially recommended because it offers a chance to sample dishes ranging from a spicy chicken gumbo to shrimp, cod or crab stews with coconut

milk. Waitresses dress in the turbans and puffy white dresses of the old plantation style. Lunch or dinner for two with beer: \$50.

No trip to Brazil can be considered complete without a visit to an all-you-can-eat rodizio restaurant, where waiters bring cuts of grilled beef, pork and chicken on skewers to the table and allow diners to choose the slice they want. The Porcão chain (three locations) is probably the best known, but Marius, at Avenida Atlântica 290 A/B in Leme, has an added attraction: separate dining areas for seafood and barbecue fanciers. Lunch or dinner for two with beer in either about \$50; phone and fax (55-21) 2542-2393 for the grill and (55-21) 2543-6363 for crustaceans.

Rio is also crowded with dozens of "food by the kilogram" restaurants that offer an even more economical alternative: places like Da Silva, Rua Barão da Torre 340 in Ipanema, (55-21) 2521-1289, are especially popular among office workers for lunch. Also recommended at any time of day is Fellini's, at Rua General Urquiza 104 in Leblon, (55-21) 2511-3600, which offers dishes ranging from sushi to duck in a honey-mustard sauce as well as a sinfully rich dessert platter, all for about \$4 a pound.

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