

# THE GREAT CITIES/**RIO DE JANEIRO**

TIME-LIFE



# RIO DE JANEIRO

By Douglas Botting  
and the Editors of Time-Life Books

With Photographs by Art Kane

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*Cover:* Traffic on Rio's six-lane Avenida Atlântica pours past the gleaming, 100-yard-wide expanse of Copacabana beach, whose name is almost a synonym for tropical pleasure.

*First end paper:* The mosaic pattern of Copacabana's promenade seems to echo the waves that are just steps away. Throughout Rio, mosaic pavements line wide avenues and enliven the main squares.

*Last end paper:* Soccer players line up for a free-kick during a match held in Rio's Maracanã Stadium. Their club, América, is one of the most popular in this soccer-mad metropolis.



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## The Siren Song of Rio

I was always dreaming of sailing down to Rio when I was a boy. Often I prepared to sail to the Americas by tea-time, casting off the hawsers that tied me to the here and now in England, and tuning my ears like sea shells to hear the roaring of the breakers on the reefs of faraway shores. I made many such imaginary voyages—in barques and brigantines, schooners and men-o'-war, in the Roaring Forties, Sargasso Sea and Straits of Zanzibar—but my voyage to Rio was always intended to be the most illustrious of them all. I knew little about the place, and even into adult life I continued to believe that it was situated at the mouth of the Amazon, the only other name I immediately associated with Brazil. But the connotations and reverberations of the very words, Rio de Janeiro, remained boundlessly exotic and exciting. And they still do.

In this, I think I am not alone. Rio is one of those favoured places of the earth whose names maintain a universal romantic appeal. Like Tahiti or Bali, it seems to offer the possibility of a different kind of life. Rio is not a great historical city like Florence or Venice. It is not a spiritual city like Jerusalem. It is not an intellectual city like Paris, or a great commercial city like New York, or a political city like Berlin, or even a capital city like London. It is a sensual city. Its song is a siren song, its votaries are lotus-eaters, its promise is the promise of a Never Never Land, its denizens are Peter Pans who have attained puberty.

Many years were to pass before I set eyes on Rio de Janeiro, and my journey, when it finally began, was attended by elements of comedy. I was making preparations for a long, photographic expedition through the Amazon region of Brazil, and since this was to be my first visit to the New World I felt it would be appropriate to arrive there in the time-honoured way, by sea rather than by air. It was not easy to find a ship at short notice, but eventually I was offered a berth on a Swedish cargo vessel that was on the point of sailing from Gothenburg for the east coast ports of South America. If I liked, the shipping company informed me, I could have the owner's suite, which had remained unbooked, for the price of an ordinary cabin. It was thus in some style that I prepared at last to sail down to Rio.

The old grey ship lay at the Gothenburg quayside as still and seemingly abandoned as the Flying Dutchman. But when I began to unload my baggage from the taxi, I became aware of a figure rattling down the gangway towards me. He was a chubby man dressed in ordinary casual clothes.

"You coming on board?" he asked in a Swedish accent when he got to the bottom of the gangway.

**In the heart of Rio, the early 20th-Century Municipal Theatre—a two-thirds replica of the Paris Opéra—is dwarfed by office towers. With a growth rate twice that of Brazil as a whole, the city has sacrificed most of its architectural past to high-rise construction.**

"Yes," I announced, drawing myself up to my full height. "I have reserved the owner's suite."

The man eyed me up and down and cast a glance over my travel-worn impedimenta. "The owner's suite?" he asked. "Let me take your bags."

What an obliging salt, I thought. What a jolly tar. I loaded him up with my cases. I hung them round his neck, balanced them on his shoulders, tucked them under his arm, until he lurched and swayed under the weight.

"That all?" he said, perspiration breaking out on his brow. "Let's go."

Thus unburdened, I lightly stepped off the Old World and embarked on the first stage of my journey to the New. I followed the man up the gangway, into the ship, along passages and through bulkhead doors, until at last we came to a spacious and amply appointed suite of cabins overlooking the bow. As the man discharged his cargo, I rummaged in my pocket for a coin to reward him for his services. But he forestalled me. He extended his right hand towards me and, before I could drop the coin into it, he grasped my own hand and exclaimed: "May I introduce myself? I am your captain. We sail within the hour. Would you like some gin?"

And so we sailed down to Rio.

At 12 knots the grey ship stoutly breasted the green ocean swell and brought us every day to more and more southerly latitudes.

After the Bay of Biscay we began to plough the 5,000-mile route of the Portuguese navigators, colonizers, immigrants, and slaves who laid the foundations of Brazil. Past Madeira, the Canaries, the Mauritanian coast of Africa and the Cape Verde Islands, we followed in the wake of Captain André Gonçalves, who discovered the site of Rio in 1502, and Estácio de Sá, who founded the city in 1565, and the Prince Regent of Portugal, Dom João, who settled there with his royal court in 1808. We crossed the Tropic of Cancer, and the sun burned down on us and the deck grew hot. The flying fish flew, the whales sounded, the Portuguese men-of-war floated past on the slow ocean current. Our lives settled into a steady rhythm that was governed by the rising of the sun to starboard and its setting to larboard. The captain proffered gin, threw parties, played the gramophone and dallied with the lonely Swedish wives who constituted most of the small complement of passengers. In all that great circle of water we never saw another funnel or mast.

By the time we crossed the Equator we were nearer the New World than the Old, and a beguiling tropical languor settled over the ship—a compound of heat, confinement and ennui. It was as though some emanation from the land, some distillation of the spirit of the place had wafted out to us, beyond the farthest limits of the skuas and drifting coconuts and silt washed out to sea from the mouths of the rivers. The nights were invariably beautiful, the Southern Cross clearly visible, the moonlight on the water as straight and bright as an airport flarepath.



Two Cariocas—as the people of Rio are called—dally for a moment in a café off Ipanema Beach, a favourite haunt of rich and trendy holidaymakers in summer.

Then one day we picked up Rio radio on the wireless in the captain's cabin. It was very faint, for we were on the very edge of its range, but next day it was stronger, and we sat for a long time listening to the sounds from across the sea. I had been taking my first faltering steps in Brazilian Portuguese under the guidance of a young woman on board. Alas, when I heard the language on the radio I did not understand a word of it. I could only listen to the sounds, the rhythm, the aural ambience. Brazilian seemed a sensuous, sweet, plangent language, all vowels and music, drawl and twang. It was language of the tropics, of verandah and swaying palm, of swinging hammock and brownskin girl.

Very often the radio played a song of Rio—*Garôta de Ipanema*, “Girl from Ipanema”—with a melody so seductive that it became the hit of the ship; its syncopation seemed to fit the throbbing of the ship's engines, its mood seemed to suit my own: “Olha que coisa mais linda, Mais cheia de graça. . . . Tall and tan and young and lovely, the Girl from Ipanema goes walking. And when she passes, each one she passes goes ‘a-a-h!’ . . .”

These were the first vibrations I picked up from the New World, the first intimations I received from that city of hope and illusion, Rio de Janeiro.

We had been at sea for more than three weeks and were drawing near to the Tropic of Capricorn before we caught sight of land. Early one morning I felt a freezing wind off the sea—a novelty after so many sweltering days—and saw a high green headland to starboard. This was Cabo Frio, or Cape Cold, the first landmark on the approaches to Rio. For days we had been sailing on a southerly bearing, parallel with the coast of Brazil, which for thousands of miles runs approximately north-south. Now we turned to follow an indentation in the coast that starts at Cabo Frio and stretches east-west. Rio lies in the middle of this indentation, facing not east towards Africa, as many people imagine, but south towards Antarctica.

All morning we sailed along that coastline, and schools of dolphins, which relished the cold currents off the Cape, sped out to join us and leapt high out of the water from beneath our bows. We had barely sat down to lunch when the captain summoned us to the bridge. We were approaching Rio, he said. We could eat later.

It is not easy to recapture the state of excitement in which I watched the scattered elements of the view—mountains and forests, ocean and beaches—resolve themselves into a coherent picture of Rio from the sea. It was a day of dramatic skies. Blue-black cumulus clouds rolled round the summits of the mountains, drawing shadows across the tropical greenery that covered the hills. The sun shone between the clouds in celestial beams that radiated outwards like the spokes of a wheel. Humpbacked islands lay scattered about like a school of resting whales. On top of a tall peak, clearly visible from far out at sea, an immense statue of Christ with outstretched hands disappeared and reappeared among the clouds like a Boeing jetliner. Some 2,000 feet or more below the statue, squeezed between

mountains and the sea like plaster of Paris in a mould, lay the city: an unbroken line of brilliant white skyscrapers whose rectangular façades gleamed in the sun. From such a distance, the city presented a curiously ethereal aspect. No noise emanated from it, no smells, no squalor, no signs of its human inhabitants. Poised insubstantially between air and water, Rio seemed a dream city—the most beautiful place in the world.

As we came in closer, I looked out from the bridge, identifying places from the chart. We were approaching the narrow opening of Guanabara Bay, a huge, balloon-shaped natural harbour on whose western shore the centre of the city lies. So large and impressive is Guanabara Bay that when Captain Gonçalves entered it on January 1, 1502, he thought he had found a great river, and from this mistake the city got its name: Rio de Janeiro, the River of January.

As we drew level with the bay we were no more than a quarter of a mile from the land, and the city's humped and angular mountain profile rose before us against the tropical sky. The immense bulk of Rio's silhouette has been called the Sleeping Giant; seen from a certain direction, it resembles a human form stretched out on its back. The giant's head lies in the Tijuca mountains behind the city, with the peak of Tijuca as his nose. His high flank extends above the length of Rio, and his upturned feet are represented by Sugar Loaf mountain, named after the conical loaves of refined sugar once produced on the Portuguese island of Madeira.

Sugar Loaf stands on the west side of the entrance to the bay. Behind it towers the peak of Corcovado, surmounted by the statue of Christ, and along the coast to the west is Copacabana, that ellipse of brilliant white sand that the people of Rio consider a beach without equal. We steamed slowly past the beach and trained our field-glasses on the little brown figures that inhabited it. After a rocky headland, we came to the second ellipse of Ipanema and Leblon beaches, with a crust of umbrellas like coloured buttons and the ocean coming to an end in a long line of foaming surf.

"Olha que coisa . . ." went the ship's loudspeakers. "When she walks she's like a samba that swings so cool and sways so gentle, that when she passes, each one she passes goes 'a-a-h!' . . ."

I stared entranced as the land slid by, mouthing the names bequeathed to the mountains and headlands and bays long ago by Tupi-speaking Indian tribes: Tijuca, Jacarepaguá, Itapeba, Sernambetiba, Itapuca, Guaratiba. Signs of habitation had petered out by now and the coast seemed as virgin as the day Gonçalves first clapped eyes on it.

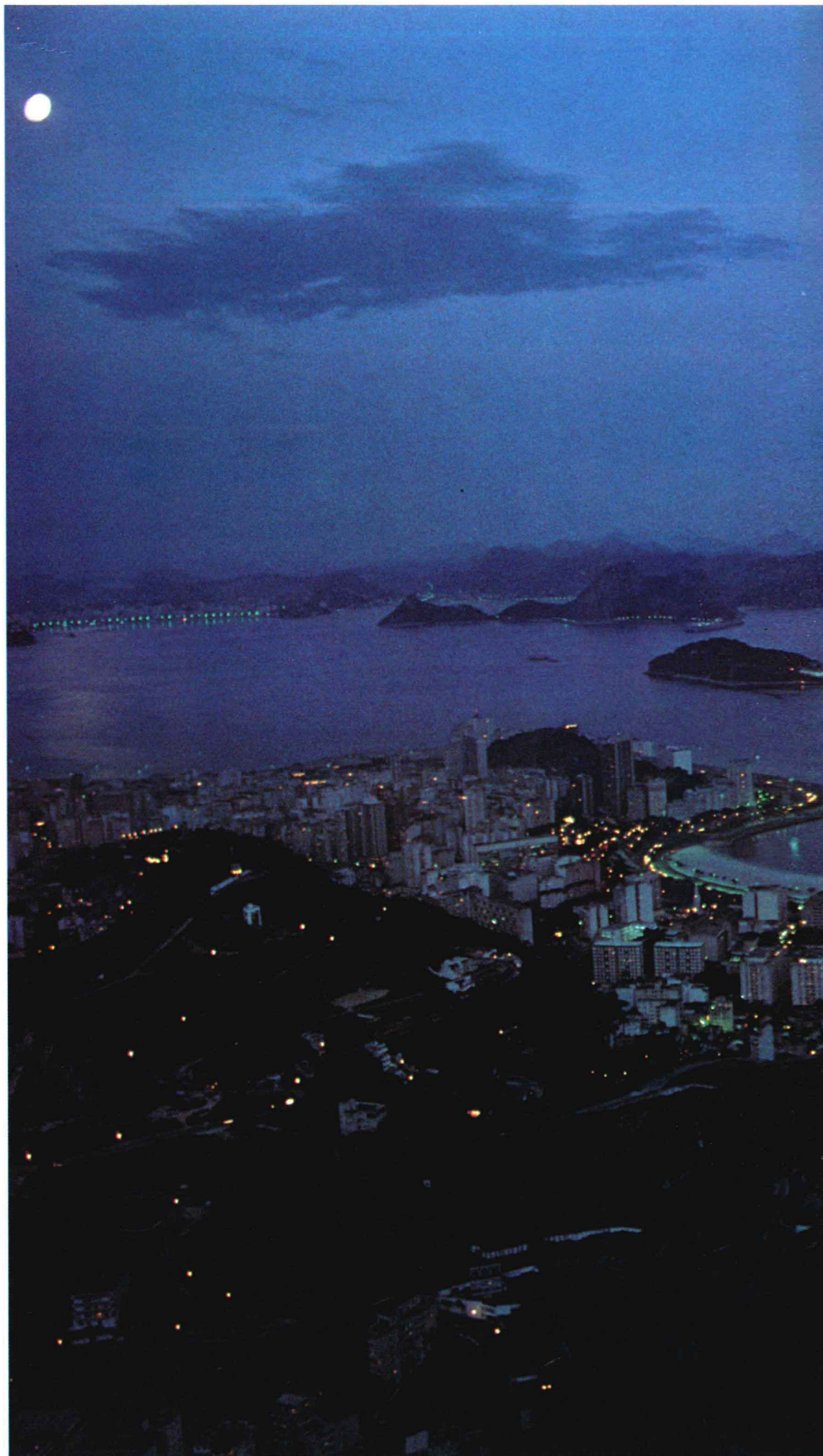
"So," said the captain, glad to have put on a good show. "That was Rio."

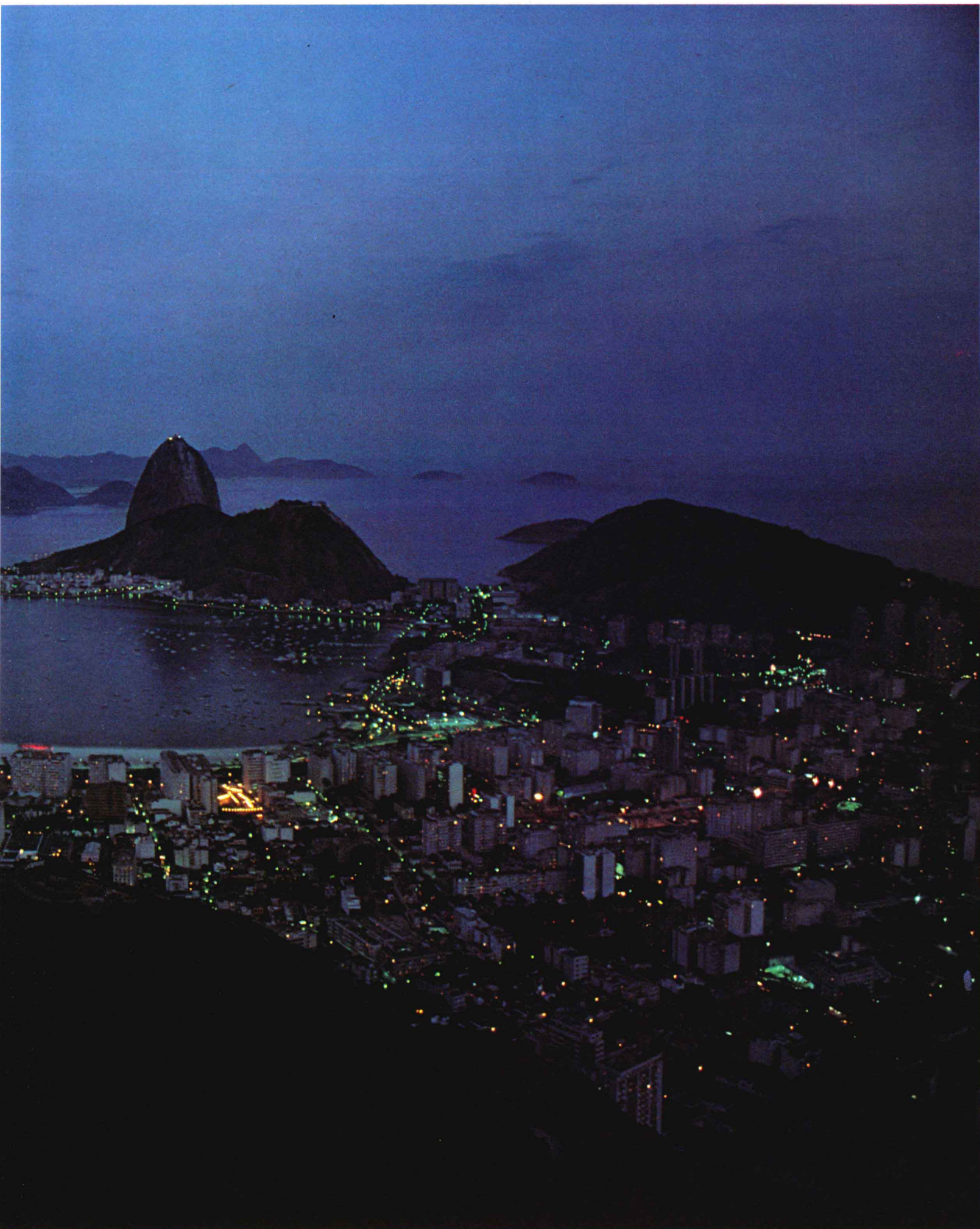
"Wonderful!" I replied. And then I asked: "When do we land?"

"Land?" said the captain. "We don't land. We have no cargo in Rio. Our next stop is Santos. Would you like some gin?"

So my voyage to Rio, the realization of a dream of half a lifetime, did not end quite as I had expected. The ship's agents in Rio had advised the

Standing bold against the darkening coastal mountains, Sugar Loaf peak guards the entrance to the immense natural harbour of Guanabara Bay and the smaller, yacht-flecked inlet of Botafogo Bay (foreground). Central Rio lies on the western shore of Guanabara Bay.





captain over the radio telephone that there was no cargo to pick up there, and so we steamed straight past. Instead of sailing through the seaward portals of the city in my owner's suite, I arrived a week later through the back streets in a clanking bus. I stayed in Rio for some weeks before departing for the interior of Brazil. In the years that followed I was to return four more times, and during those visits I learned at last to recognize which part of the dream was reality and which part of the reality was dream.

The first day of my latest visit to Rio was a day of mixed fortunes and strange impressions. Returning to the city from a wintry Europe after a long absence, I was subjected to a violent sensory assault, a kind of mortar attack of exotic images and sounds that left me dazed. At tea-time on the previous day I had been in London, where a hard northerly wind sniped along darkened alleys and the crowds swept by with wan winter faces, like dead souls. Now it was breakfast time in a tropical city, and although the sun had not been up an hour, the morning was already hot.

In the back of the taxi that brought me to my hotel overlooking the beach of Copacabana, my body sweated profusely while my mind turned numb. It was the morning rush-hour. The streets were jammed with pedestrians, buses and commuter cars. My driver drove at a suicidal pace. He dodged and swerved around other cars and seemed to aim his taxi at pedestrians. So did everyone else. This was normal, I remembered. Rio has one of the worst traffic accident records in the world, and more than 2,000 people a year are killed in the streets, or one every three hours. Every day you see a car upside down on the beach, or a bus that has crashed into a shop window, or a crowd chasing some driver who is running away from the scene of an accident. The squeal of tyres, the clunk of metal and the wailing of sirens is the leit-motif of the Rio streets.

By the time I had been in Rio half an hour, I was suitably prepared for any eventuality. It was therefore with clinical detachment that, stopped by some traffic lights at a T-junction next to a cemetery, I watched as a stoutish, middle-aged woman crossing the road in front of me was cut down by a motor-cyclist. As if in slow-motion replay, I saw the motor-cyclist brake and begin to skid. His right handle-bar scythed the woman down at 40 miles an hour, and the man flew off his bike and rode through space, still in the correct motor-cycling position, then slid along the tarmac on his elbows into the path of an approaching Jeep, which swerved with a squeal of tyres and mounted the pavement, sending passers-by running for safety. The woman by now had been hauled to her feet by two helpers, but her head lolled and her feet bent at strange angles.

The traffic lights turned green and the taxi-driver spun the wheel left and drove at high speed from the scene of the accident. Two hundred yards down the road, he stopped next to a policeman on traffic duty.

"There's been a woman knocked down up the road," he said and sped

off before the policeman could take his number. He didn't want to be a witness, he wanted nothing to do with the police at all. No one in Rio does.

We came to Copacabana and burst into the space and light of the wide seafront thoroughfare, the Avenida Atlântica, with its pavement mosaics and bright seafront bars and terraced restaurants.

"Do you think she was killed?" I asked the driver when we got to my hotel. The taxi-driver nodded. "Dead," he said in a matter-of-fact tone. "That will be a hundred cruzeiros. Haven't you got anything smaller?"

By now my dream of Rio as a city of lotus-eaters and infinite romantic promise was shattered. Reality took over. Rio I knew then, if I had not known it before, was a mortal city like any other, inhabited by people preoccupied with the daily realities of the human condition, with living and dying, getting and spending in a world where fate was blind.

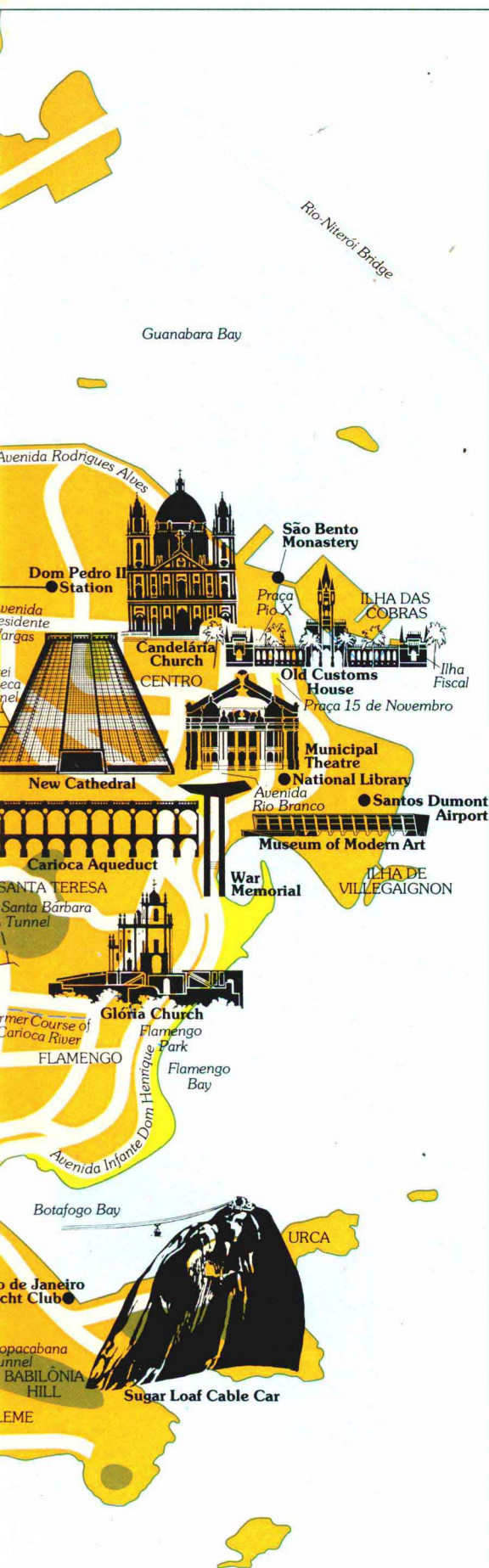
Those daily realities in Rio are complicated by some especially trying problems. Rio is one of the fastest growing cities in Brazil; but because mountains occupy so much of its land area, the extra inhabitants must either go and live on the distant outskirts or else become more and more crowded within the existing urban areas. Add to this geographical problem a disorganized bureaucracy, inadequate sanitation and transport systems, unemployment as high as 15 per cent and a rate of inflation varying between 20 and 80 per cent—and you have something close to chaos.

Until 1960 Rio was the capital of Brazil, but in that year it handed over this role to the new city of Brasília in the distant interior, and it is now simply capital of its own state of Rio de Janeiro. It used to be the commercial centre of Brazil, too, but that role has been usurped by São Paulo, Brazil's great boom city. So what is the function of the city now?

If Rio is no longer the leading city of Brazil, it is nevertheless still the only city which is an administrative, cultural, university, industrial, shipping, commercial and banking centre and at the same time a beach resort open all the year round—Brazil's biggest holiday attraction. Now more than ever, Rio stands for fun, expressed most notably through the popular outlets of Carnival, football and the beach. The Carnival festivities before Lent are far more riotous in Rio than in other cities with similar celebrations. The great football clubs of Rio play the game with more uninhibited talent and with far noisier crowds than most teams anywhere. As for the beach, it is to Rio what cuisine is to Paris: the essence of its soul.

To the inhabitants of one of the most densely populated places in the world, the beach is the great escape. Without it they would become neurotic, as the citizens of São Paulo, which has no beach, are said to be. There are innumerable beaches in Rio, but on a fine morning at the height of the holiday season, they are all so packed that it seems as though the entire population has taken to the edge of the sea like an army awaiting evacuation—or, as one reporter from São Paulo put it, "like the crowds of the faithful on the banks of the Ganges". "Crabs" is what the French





## City of Bays and Peaks

Rio de Janeiro lies on a south-facing strip of Brazil's coast, just above the Tropic of Capricorn (inset map, left). The greater portion of the city—embracing the Centre and the North Zone—lies on the western shore of Guanabara Bay (inset map, below), cut off from the chic South Zone by coastal mountains. In 1960, on ceasing to be Brazil's capital, Rio became a self-contained city-state called Guanabara and then, in 1975, capital of the larger Rio de Janeiro State. Metropolitan Rio lies within the old Guanabara boundary (red dotted line); the urban areas lying beyond are part of greater Rio.

Forested ridges and peaks (dark green on large map, left), combined with four square miles of tropical parks and gardens (the main ones light green), give a sense of impinging wilderness unmatched in any other great city.



called the early Portuguese settlers in Rio in the 16th Century; and crabs they are still, scuttling about the sands and compulsively roasting in the sun.

By far the most popular beaches in Rio are Copacabana, Ipanema and Barra da Tijuca. Copacabana and Ipanema, together with the skyscrapers behind them, constitute what is known as the South Zone, a strip of land along the Atlantic so narrowly compressed between the mountains and the sea that it is only five streets deep at the western end and only three streets deep at its eastern end. Yet the South Zone contains fully one-sixth of the population of the city, and its skyscraper apartments are among the most coveted and expensive living units in the world. Here are found the smart, the swinging, the chic and the rich. An apartment in the South Zone is the up-country millionaire's ambition and retirement dream, the one place in Brazil he would choose. The South Zone is what people abroad or in the interior think of when they hear the name Rio. It is, in effect, a second city, whose only connections with the central and northern parts of the metropolis are three tunnels running through the hills.

I breakfasted my first morning, as I was to breakfast every morning, on the fruits of the country: the juice of the cashew or the maracujá, the flesh of the guava, pawpaw, melon or fruta-de-conde, and strong black Brazilian coffee. My table looked out on to Copacabana beach. It was February, the middle of the antipodean summer and the height of the Brazilian holiday season. An extraordinary vitality filled the city, a restless energy and exuberance. People drifted in an unending stream out of the deep shadows of the side streets into the blinding sunshine of the Avenida Atlântica: bikini-clad young girls tanned to the colour of chocolate; millionaires with borzoi dogs; bronzed youths with cut-off jeans; mothers in strapless beachrobes called *tomara-que-caia*, meaning "If only it would fall"; pot-bellied old men in shorts standing motionless in the first patches of sunlight they came to, their faces turned upwards to the sky, eyes shut, absorbing the warmth and radiation like lizards on a rock.

I changed and went down to the beach. There was no breeze off the sea this morning. Brilliant butterflies from the forested mountains above the city fluttered across the sands, and huge frigate birds with seven-foot wingspans and long forked tails soared over the penthouse suites of the apartment blocks, circling effortlessly on the thermals above the softening asphalt. I struggled through the soft sand to the edge of the sea and set up my bivouac—beach mat and sunshade and towel—among the other encampments near the pounding surf.

The beach was as blinding as the Sahara. Even under my umbrella the heat reflected off the white sand was scorching, and to this day I carry two permanent sun-burn scars incurred in the first hour on that beach. Even the beach-lovers of Rio are deeply lacerated by the sun and suffer an abnormal incidence of skin cancer as a result of heavy doses of ultra-



Arms outstretched in a gesture of divine forgiveness, a 700-ton concrete figure of Christ the Redeemer reigns over downtown Rio from the 2,307-foot peak of Corcovado. At that height, the statue is often veiled by cloud or mountain mist and, when floodlit (right), appears to shed unearthly rays of glory.