

NEIGHBORHOODS

top picks

- Ipanema Beach (p63)
- Cristo Redentor (p85)
- Bonde to Santa Teresa (p97)
- Copacabana Beach (p75)
- Pão de Açúcar (p79)
- Parque Nacional da Tijuca (p105)

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The *Cidade Maravilhosa* (marvelous city) is justly famed for its beaches and nightlife, but the city has lots more going on beyond its steamy seashore and samba-filled nights. Rio, after all, was once the mighty ‘capital of the Brazilian empire’ (as one Portuguese king crowned it), and its European settlement dates back more than five centuries. History lives on in its colonial quarters, cobbled lanes and 19th-century mansions, with many relics from the past waiting to be discovered.

Wanderers and adventurers have a wealth of options when tackling the city. Our recommendation is to head up to the heights of Pão de Açúcar (Sugarloaf) or Cristo Redentor (Christ the Redeemer) for an overview of the city. There you’ll see the city’s wild urban diversity, with beaches, mountains, skyscrapers and favelas (shanty towns) all woven into the landscape. The city itself can be divided into two zones: the Zona Norte, which consists of industrial, working-class neighborhoods in the northern part of the city, and the Zona Sul, with its middle- and upper-class neighborhoods and well-known beaches in the city’s southern half. Centro, Rio’s business district, forms the boundary between the two.

After getting an overview, it’s time to dive in. We’ve organized our neighborhoods chapter generally from south to north, and have included a number of walking tours for exploring the city streets.

The Zona Sul has the city’s star attractions. At the far southern tip, the upscale neighborhoods of Ipanema and Leblon share the same stretch of south-facing shoreline. Rio’s beautiful people flock to these beaches, while the tree-lined streets just inland hide some of the best eating, drinking and shopping in the city.

The northern border of Ipanema and Leblon is the Lagoa Rodrigo de Freitas, a saltwater lagoon fronted by the high-rent districts of Gávea, Jardim Botânico and Lagoa. Here you’ll find open-air dining and drinking at lakeside restaurants, as well as the verdant botanical gardens to the west.

East of Ipanema begins the scalloped beach of Copacabana. Once a destination for international jetsetters, Copacabana is the city’s somewhat ragged tourist magnet, with dozens of oceanfront hotels and sidewalk restaurants. The population density is high here with old-timers, favela kids and tourists all on the streets, and you’ll find an equal mix of high and low culture.

Botafogo lies just north of Copacabana, and is a desirable neighborhood with an active *boteco* (small local bar) culture and some intriguing museums in the area’s old mansions. Next door, Urca retains a peaceful vibe that seems a world away from the Zona Sul’s busier neighborhoods, and is famed for the iconic mountain Pão de Açúcar overshadowing its leafy streets.

Continuing north are more residential neighborhoods, including low-key Flamengo, leafy Laranjeiras and further west Cosme Velho, where Cristo Redentor opens his arms atop Corcovado. Following the curve of the bay north is the Parque do Flamengo, a tree-lined park that is home to cycling trails, football (soccer) pitches and several monuments and museums. Inland from there, Catete and Glória hide much history in their battered streets, including the former presidential home.

One metro stop up, Centro is Rio’s business hub; it’s also one of Rio’s oldest areas, with baroque churches, former palaces and excellent museums. On the southeastern edge of Centro is Lapa, Rio’s nightlife nexus with dozens of samba-filled bars and clubs. Uphill from Lapa is Santa Teresa, a picturesque neighborhood of winding streets and old mansions that have been restored by the many artists who have settled there.

Greater Rio includes Zona Norte destinations such as Maracanã soccer stadium, the Feira Nordestina (Northeastern Fair) and the Quinta da Boa Vista, former residence of the imperial family. It also includes the Baía de Guanabara, with the picturesque island of Paquetá. Across the bay is Niterói, home to one of Oscar Niemeyer’s architectural creations. Another place to explore is the region west of Leblon, where you’ll find lush rain forest and the beach of Barra da Tijuca. Other beaches dot the coast heading west, and get wilder and less populated the further out you go.