



FUN  
+

NO ONE LOVES SOCCER LIKE THE CROWDS IN RIO DE JANEIRO. AFTER FEELING THE VIBE  
AT A LOCAL LEAGUE MATCH, **JOHN STENSHOLT** DISCOVERS NON-STOP FESTIVITY  
ON THE STREETS AND BEACHES OF CIDADE MARAVILHOSA – THE MARVELLOUS CITY.

GAMES



FROM LEFT:  
Rio's Maracana Stadium,  
where World Cup drama  
will be played out mid-  
year; a Copacabana  
Palace Hotel suite is  
perfect for people-  
watching on the beach  
opposite, or poolside.

**T**he singing and dancing don't stop for the entire 90 minutes. Flags fly, whistles shrill, drums beat and the chanting doesn't let up, despite the driving rain and steamy conditions. People sway and jig next to each other, clapping and cheering.

It's party time, Brazil style.

Given my well below average dancing skills, luckily this isn't samba that I'm partaking in. Rather, I'm inside a world-famous landmark – the Maracana Stadium in Rio de Janeiro – the very place that billions of people will be watching via satellite once the football World Cup kicks off in mid-June.

Australia is one of 32 national teams descending on Brazil, the heartland of soccer, for the event that stops the world every four years. But while the beautiful game is loved universally, it's fair to say no one loves it quite as much as the Brazilians do.

The match I'm watching is a nail-biting clash for one of Rio's big four clubs, Fluminense. If the club wins it staves off relegation to the second division. Alas, it doesn't – and fans all around me are devastated when we file out of the stadium into the night.

Brazil is soccer mad, and Rio, in particular, lives up to that ideal. It's by far the best place to base yourself during the World Cup, with seven matches scheduled to be played at the Maracana – and transport links to every other World Cup host city around Brazil.

Citizens of this stunning metropolis divide along team lines, with their different colours on display all around the streets, and even beaches. Like a pub or café, the beach is where Brazilians go to socialise, packing the golden sand from first light until well into the night, depending on the weather. Families jostle with teenagers for space on the crowded sands, while vendors peddling towels, chairs, fresh coconut juice, beer and bikinis vie for customers.

Rio is dominated by the famous Copacabana and Ipanema beaches, named after the districts by which they lie. The best way to visit the former is a stay at the Copacabana Palace Hotel, owned by Orient-Express. The first floor of the hotel displays photos of their many famous celebrity guests, from Errol Flynn to Michael Jackson and Albert Einstein to Nelson Mandela. The suites facing the beach are huge and luxurious, and whiling away the hours lying poolside is perfect for people-spotting and sun-tanning. (Given my still very pale complexion on arriving home in Melbourne, clearly I was better at the former.)



 PERSONAL SERVICE

THERE'S FRIENDLY service, and then there's friendly service Latin American-style.

Take the steward in LAN Premium Business Class offering the attractive blonde female traveller his phone number should she need a guide when we arrive in Santiago, Chile, from Sydney. I decide to chalk it up to being helpful, rather than anything untoward. As does said female traveller; she accepts the number with a good-natured grin.

LAN's Business Class makes the 14-hour flight from Sydney to South America a smooth one, and the salmon main I enjoy on the flight over is just about the best airline meal I've ever eaten.

The flatbed ensures a decent sleep and there are plenty of movies and TV series to watch.

Wines from Chile and Argentina are a highlight, as is their availability in Santiago Airport's two well-stocked LAN VIP lounges, Neruda and Mistral.

LAN and TAM (the Brazilian offshoot it merged with in 2012) are in the process of opening five new luxury lounges in South America – hopefully to be completed this year. **JS**

*The writer flew to Rio (via Santiago) courtesy of LAN Airlines. Business class fares return from \$9909 (economy from \$3119). Go to lan.com or call 1800 558 129.*

YASUYOSHI CHIBA



Regardless of where you stay, reserving an afternoon for a long walk along Ipanema beach is essential. After lunch at the Sofitel Copacabana Beach's restaurant (the degustation at Le Pré Catelan is superb), I begin the long walk from the rocks jutting out at Arpoador beach, pausing to watch the surfers, before continuing.

By the time I've reached Posto 9 – the posts where lifeguards sit along the beach are numbered – it's time to sit down for a beer and, yes, more people-watching. Posto 9 is said to be where local intellectuals meet. Every post has a distinct identity – post 12 for families, post 8 for gays and lesbians, and so on.

Then, in among the human throng, the posts and the beach

flags, I spy what I've been told to look out for: a Uruguayan flag. The vendor has apparently been on the beach for the best part of three decades and makes arguably the best barbecued meat sandwiches around. Will he be there during the World Cup? It depends if he reminds Brazilians of their loss in the 1950 event in front of 200,000 locals at the Maracana to, yes, Uruguay. (If BBQ isn't your thing, the line waiting for a table at Delirio Tropical is quick and worth it.)

My slow walk continues. Late in the day I reach the fashionable suburb of Leblon, home to expensive boutiques and fancy restaurants. Dinner here is a must – Rua Dias Ferreira is known as "restaurant row". Yet another great dining option is the leafy inner-harbour city suburb of Urca at



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Copacabana and Ipanema beaches stretch out in front of Sofitel Copacabana Beach; Hotel Santa Teresa is oasis of peace and quiet; there are dazzling views down to Rio from the pool; Casa Turquesa, in Paraty.



sunset. Grab some tapas and cans of local beer from Bar Urca, walk across the road and sit on the seawall to watch the fishing boats.

Next day, I get up early and catch the funicular up to see Christ the Redeemer, the largest art deco statue in the world.

Nearby Sugarloaf Mountain offers fantastic views of Rio and the bay. Once you're tired of the waterside, head to the Santa Teresa district, a brilliant option in the hills about 15 minutes' drive from Rio's centre.

Hotel Santa Teresa is a luxury oasis away from the hustle and bustle. The pool offers dazzling views down to Rio, while its Tereze Restaurant has great food in a romantic setting. The famous Rio Scenarium dance club is a short taxi

ride away in nearby Lapa. But I enjoy some quiet in my room with a balcony that opens out onto the cooling garden. Easing into the hammock, I open up my copy of *Futebol: The Brazilian Way of Life*, by Alex Bellos, to find out how soccer became Brazil's "beautiful game".

When I'm done, the hotel is only 15 minutes by taxi to the beach – and it's not much further to the Maracana. What more could a soccer-loving tourist ask for?

JSTENSHOLT@FAIRFAXMEDIA.COM.AU  
@JOHNSTENSHOLT

*The writer's tours and accommodation were courtesy of luxury travel group Abercrombie & Kent. For A&K's Best of Brazil package (priced from \$6095 per person twin share), go to [abercrombiekent.com.au](http://abercrombiekent.com.au).*



## GRANDE DIVERSION

AS I wait on the pier of Ilha Grande (literally "large island"), a small motorboat rushes towards me, its driver waving enthusiastically.

A minute later my luggage and I are bundled aboard and we're off on the five-minute jaunt across the Vila do Abraão bay to the Portal do Sol, a *pousada*, or boutique hotel.

What the hotel lacks in luxury is more than made up for by its location, including a private beach with canoes and snorkelling gear. The hotel motorboat – or you can get a water taxi – is available to be transferred back into town at mealtimes. Not surprisingly, seafood is a local speciality with shrimp stew a particular highlight at the casual, fun Lun a Mar restaurant.

Ilha Grande is a two-hour drive south of Rio and offers much needed respite from the craziness of Brazil's party capital.

There's also plenty of nature to soak up. Local

guides recommend forest walks or hiring a boat to travel to the unspoiled beaches on the island's south, where turtles and other marine wildlife are easily spotted on a day of snorkelling.

No large developments have taken place on the island, which adds to its charm. For years it was used as a quarantine stop-off for immigrants arriving in Brazil (yes, the local version of Christmas Island). It then became a jail, where hard-core criminals mixed with political prisoners.

It's a similar story in the village of Paraty, back on the mainland, 1½ hours' drive further south from Ilha Grande. My local guide, Chris, tells me the beautiful cobble-stoned village remained



virtually unknown to outsiders for centuries. It was bypassed after being used as a port and storage centre for tobacco and coffee transported from the mountains.

Chris grew up in this sleepy village, which gained notoriety in 1979 when a famous Brazilian TV soap opera, came to town to film a series. Paraty has since become a romantic getaway with several luxury guesthouses scattered in the heritage protected middle of town, where rows of whitewashed houses are distinguished by colourful painted doorways and windowsills.

Casa Turquesa (left) is considered to be the best hotel in Paraty, and it doesn't disappoint. The owner, Tete, has plenty of thoughtful dining recommendations in town, and can organise boating expeditions or hiking in the nearby mountains.

The nine-room boutique hotel stands behind a meticulously restored 18th-century townhouse façade. Each room has modern en suites and four-poster beds with handy mosquito nets. Breakfast is taken on a terrace next to the pool, near the reading room, which has a log fire for those cool South American winter nights.

JOHN STENSHOLT

## CHEER THE GREEN AND GOLD – AUSTRALIA'S MATCHES

JUNE 13

### Australia v Chile CUIABA

A boom town in cattle country in the geographic heart of Brazil. Avenida Getulio Vargas district is the place to eat. Arena Pantanal is 3 kilometres from Praça de República in town centre. Walk or grab a taxi as the planned light-rail link won't be ready in time for the World Cup.

JUNE 18

### Australia v Netherlands PORTO ALEGRE

There are plenty of good *churrascaria* (steakhouses), micro-breweries, bars and restaurants in the Moinhos de Vento district. Brazil's best wine region, Vale dos Vinhedos, is two hours' drive. Estádio Beira-Rio has a unique setting inside a park by the river Guaíba. Catch the bus for the 3.5 kilometre trip from downtown.

JUNE 23

### Australia v Spain CURITIBA

Billed as the country's green capital, locals treat Curitiba's city parks like beaches – places to gather and socialise. Nightlife is concentrated around the city centre or Batel district. Curitiba is also the starting point for the scenic Serra Verde Express train. The Arena da Baixanda is just south of the city centre.

## PICK OF THE WORLD CUP – TOP 5 MATCHES

JUNE 12

### Brazil v Croatia, SAO PAULO

The eyes of the world will be on the host nation in the opening match.

JUNE 14

### England v Italy, MANAUS

Two soccer giants meet in the steamy gateway to the Amazon.

JULY 5

### Quarter-final, SALVADOR

Defending champions Spain should go up against Uruguay in the northern party town.

JULY 8

### Semi-final, BELO HORIZONTE

Should be Brazil versus Germany if all goes to plan; an epic clash for sure.

JULY 13

### Final, RIO DE JANEIRO

The biggest event in the world bar none. Reserve the family couch and pour yourself a caipirinha.