

Main image Beach football on Ipanema. Inset images, from top The tiled masterpiece known as Selarón's Steps; Rio's characterful street art; Rio will host 2014's World Cup final; the sound of samba is everywhere; grass roots football

MARVELLOUS RIO

It's nicknamed The Marvellous City, and it's easy to understand why. **John Malathronas** introduces us to Rio de Janeiro, Brazil's culture capital

Rio de Janeiro is one of those very rare cities like Paris, New York or Istanbul that seems to epitomise the culture of an entire country. We all seem to know Rio, the home to **Christ the Redeemer** – the most recognisable art deco landmark on the planet – and the location for the most glamorous of beaches (**Ipanema** and **Copacabana** among them) because we have already been there in our dreams.

As befits the birthplace of samba, there is always the hum of drums on the beach as a background beat to the steady sound of the surf. Genuine samba still survives in the streets of **Vila Isabel**, while its less authentic version is on display in Gamboa's **Samba City**. But there's more to Rio's musical tradition than that. You can hear bossa nova, typified by Tom Jobim's classic *Girl from Ipanema*, in the band kiosks around **Lagoa**, while the cadences of chorinho – vibrant instrumentals that predate samba itself – fill many a square on Saturday nights.

Cariocas, as the locals call themselves, love to look good and it's not only the gyms and plastic surgeries that are full: sport plays a large part in their lives. **Football** is, of course, what the country is most famous for, and if football is the nation's religion, Rio's **Estádio do Maracanã** is its cathedral. The stadium is set to host seven games at this year's World Cup, including the final. Thankfully, because of its large capacity, there are almost always tickets available for a regular game.

Brazil loves beach **volleyball** too, and you will spot players immediately as soon as you lay a foot on the sand. What is more likely to entertain you, however, is the unique mutation of both sports: **footvolley**. This is played like volleyball, except that the teams can't touch the ball with their hands, resulting in a spectacular display of skills.

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Rio is also the setting for Carnival, an ostentatious contest between rival samba schools. But if you happen to visit outside of Carnival time, have a stroll in the area between **Lapa** and **Centro** where traditional rhythms compete with Brazilian pop to transform the streets into a heaving mass of revellers every weekend.

Rio's culture revolves around leisure, and the best way to enjoy the city is to let go and blend in. So, whether at a dance in Samba City or with a volley team in Leblon, swallow away your inhibitions and join in the fun.

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