

# CARRYING THE TORCH

LIKE AN OLYMPIC ATHLETE, THE  
CITY OF **RIO DE JANEIRO** TRAINED  
HARD TO BECOME GREAT

BY JOSEPH GUINTO



*Cariocas* are always late. The natives of Rio de Janeiro take an Einsteinian view of time. Makes sense: When you're in close proximity to an endless string of beaches and mountains that spring out of the sea, time would seem relative.

So, a couple days into my visit to this city of 6.5 million people, I'm neither surprised nor upset that Lais Tammela is 40 minutes late when she meets me at the Sheraton Grand Rio Hotel & Resort. But Tammela, who works as a tour guide, is appalled. "It's true that *Cariocas* are late to everything," she says as she joins me in the lobby bar for a coffee. "But I promise I am not a typical *Carioca* in that way. As a guide, you cannot afford to be late."

Tammela had gotten stuck with a foreign news crew who asked her to film a hastily scheduled segment on *Corcovado*, the hunchback-shaped



mountain topped by Christ the Redeemer, a 125-foot-high soapstone sculpture that has been deemed one of the seven man-made wonders of the modern world. I waited for her beside the lobby bar's floor-to-ceiling windows, which frame a gallery-worthy landscape. The blue-green waters of the Atlantic stretch out to the horizon in the center of the frame. Waves break onto Ipanema Beach to the left. And to the far right, Vidigal hill climbs out of the ocean, dotted all the way to the top by the multicolored, concrete-block homes comprising the Vidigal favela.

This is why they call Rio *Cidade Maravilhosa* — the Marvelous City. There are other reasons too. Like Rio's almost 50 miles of coastline and its 72 different beaches, including the famous Ipanema and the Copacabana. Like Guanabara Bay, whose harbor is one of the seven natural wonders of the world. Like the wildly shaped mountains, including Corcovado and the giant nub of Sugarloaf. There are also shabby-chic neighborhoods like Santa Teresa and Lapa and tony spots like Leblon, where homes fetch some of the highest prices in South America. Even Rio's favelas, places like Vidigal and Rocinha, cling to the hillsides and are colorfully eye-catching.

"But, you know," Tammela says, looking out at the landscape in front of us, "sometimes I think Rio can be too beautiful for its own good. Our beauty makes it too easy for us. People, like you, come to visit Rio because we are so beautiful. Some people come to live here because we are so beautiful. But then, because we are maybe too beautiful, we sometimes feel that we don't have to do the work to become a better city."

I arrived in Rio to find the city doing plenty of work. A massive self-improvement project was underway, tied to the Games of the 31st Olympiad, which will be held here this month. The city, through public and private partnerships, is spending around \$18 billion on a variety of interconnected projects that are aimed not just at creating new athletic arenas but at making long-term improvements to traffic, to blighted neighborhoods and to the tourist infrastructure. That face-lift is not without problems. But most of the *Cariocas* I spoke to were optimistic it would result in a Rio that's an even more beautiful, more hospitable place for locals and for visitors like me.

"The Olympics are a moment where we can open ourselves more to the world," Tammela says. "And if we can succeed at the Olympics, then we can also build the city of Rio that the people who live here deserve."

## Troisgros and the Port

*Cariocas* kiss. On both cheeks. Like Europeans, but a little closer. This is a hard thing for me to, well, embrace until a couple days into my trip, when I literally fall into it. I'm about to enjoy a seven-course meal at Olympe, a swanky restaurant where the Frenchman Claude Troisgros — one of the best known chefs in all of Brazil — has been pairing classic French techniques with Brazilian ingredients ever since he arrived in Rio in 1979. (His son, Thomas, born in Rio in 1981, now works alongside his dad.) Denise Barros, the restaurant's media director, is joining me. But as I shake her hand, I stumble slightly, then forget to let go. The result is a hand-holding, close-kissing encounter that was more intimate than the one with my prom date. "Oh," Barros says, smiling. "You are greeting me just like a real *Carioca* does."

If she says so. But although I might be kissing and eating like a *Carioca* — savoring foie gras with caramelized Brazilian cane sugar while Chef Troisgros nibbles yucca crackers — I have yet to take in another tradition: sitting around on the



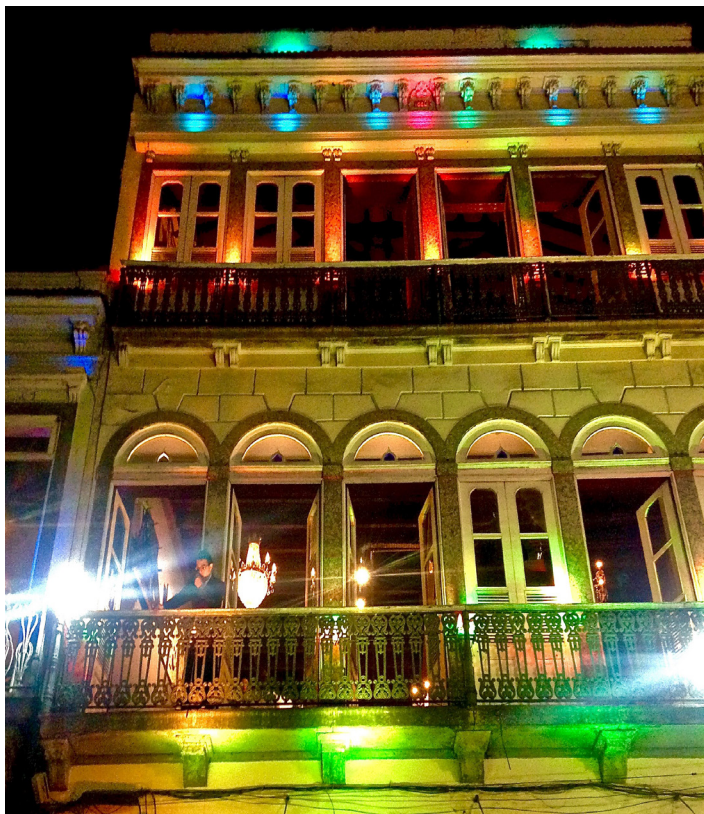
**ABOVE:** Father-and-son chefs Thomas (left) and Claude Troisgros of Olympe.

**LEFT:** Tuna and beet tartare from Olympe's tasting menu.

**BELOW:** *Caiprihina con Maracujá* at Giuseppe in the Leblon neighborhood.







beach.

That's just fine, says Hallie Neumann, who spent a couple years living in Rio as a director at Blue Parallel, a tour company that offers customized itineraries in the city and other parts of the world. "Rio has been perceived as a place where you go samba dancing, where you go hang out on the beach and where people don't take things too seriously," she explains. "That is the initial appeal. But it has more to offer. It is a much more sophisticated place than that."

Indeed, some of Rio's biggest, newest attractions have nothing to do with the beach or the samba. But they are close to the water. In anticipation of the Olympics, the city and private contractors spent \$2.6 billion on a redevelopment of its old port area, *Porto Maravilha*. Standing one afternoon on an outdoor terrace at the *Museu de Arte do Rio* (the MAR), I take in the massive scope of that project. An elevated freeway has been knocked down and the road buried. Docks are being expanded to accommodate megaships. A light-rail system is going in. Luxury hotels and condos are going up. Just below me, I see the recently opened Museum of Tomorrow. Designed by famed Spanish architect Santiago Calatrava, that museum resembles either a giant fish or a Mandalorian warship from Star Wars. Calatrava's all-white museum serves as the centerpiece of a 320,000-square-foot public park and garden project that includes reflecting pools, bike paths and picnic areas.

Just two years ago, this area was decrepit and dangerous. There's still a long way to go, but it's easy to imagine that a nightlife scene here will soon complement the all-day, all-night party that goes on just a mile away in the Sambadrome, an open-air concrete stadium where the city's Carnival parades are held.

I can't wait for Carnival. So that night, I go out looking for samba. I find it in the Lapa neighborhood on the fringe of downtown. Here, narrow streets are lined with buildings dating to the mid-1800s that have been reborn as restaurants and live-music venues. Lapa looks a little like Lisbon, Portugal, except a bit more (OK, a lot more) run down. The area pulses until dawn with samba, jazz and Brazilian hip-hop.

My wife, who has joined me on this trip, posts up with me at an outdoor café across the street from the popular three-story nightclub Rio Scenarium, where a samba band is playing loudly enough to be clearly heard on the street.

Like most foreign visitors to Rio, I barely speak any Portuguese. And like most servers here, our waiter speaks no English. But *Cariocas* are patient, and I manage to stammer out an order for a couple specialty caipirinhas. The potent cocktail is typically made with muddled lime, sugar and a Brazilian sugarcane spirit called cachaça. You can buy that on the beach for about \$2. In Lapa, I'm paying about \$6. But I've asked for it my way: *Con maracujá* — with Brazilian passion fruit, the pulp, seeds and all.

## Barra

At 9 a.m.-ish the next day, a guide picks me up at the gleaming Caesar Park on Ipanema Beach, where I've spent a couple nights with a breathtaking view of *Morro*

**LEFT:** Rio Scenarium in Rio's Lapa neighborhood pulses with music and dancing until the wee, small hours.

**BELOW:** Grumari Beach near the main site of the Olympics is quiet and uncrowded most days.





*Dois Irmãos*, the twin-peaked Two Brothers Mountain. We head out in a sedan down the beach, past Ipanema and Leblon and Vidigal and on toward Barra da Tijuca. This is where the Olympic Park and Athletes Village are located, and where most of the Olympic competitions will be held.

Barra, which is also where most of Brazil's wildly popular telenovelas are filmed, sits on a wedge of mostly flat land with the ocean on one side and the Tijuca rain forest on the other. Half an hour into the ride, we stop at a beachfront place for a cachaça-free glass of passion-fruit juice. There's a nature reserve behind the beach, and the beach itself is empty, in complete contrast to the barely dressed crowds on Copacabana and Ipanema.

Back on the road, we pass mega stores and strip malls housing subdivisions and brand-new condo towers. This, too, is Barra. But this is not the breathtaking, mountainous Rio you'll see on the postcards, which is why some *Cariocas* refer to Barra, derisively, as "Miami."

Over a meal at Giuseppe Grill, a Leblon restaurant considered to be Rio's best steakhouse (that's saying a lot in a land of grilled-meat fanatics), a local tells me a story of a business meeting he had one day with a "typical" Barra resident. She was dolled up in a leopard-print jumper, her hair teased, and she was balanced on gold, stacked heels while wearing plenty of gold baubles, bangles and beads. In casual, crime-concerned Rio, such flashy attire is rare. "You don't even dress like that here if you're going out dancing," says my lunch companion. "But this lady is wearing all this stuff to a breakfast meeting. These people in Miami, they are not for real."

"Miami" is getting most of the real investment — or that is, most of the Brazilian reais — related to the \$18 billion Olympics. An entire city within a city has sprung up here in just a few years. New office towers. New condo towers. New hotels. Even a multilevel, American-style shopping center called VillageMall. The mall is so new that, when I drop by, I can still smell the sawdust.

Not far from the mall, crews are blasting through the mountains so that a metro line can link Barra to Ipanema, with six new stations moving 300,000 people a day. One of those stations is at the base of Rocinha favela, where somewhere between 70,000 and 300,000 people live, depending on who's doing the counting. "The real legacy of the Olympics will be better transportation," says Rodrigo Braz Vieira, the managing director of a tour company called Bravietour and my guide all day in Barra.

The next afternoon, I'm strolling down the street in the leafy Gávea neighborhood with Sophia Eham, a 31-year-old Bavarian-born photographer and artist who has been



**ABOVE:** The day's first light breaks over Ipanema Beach. **LEFT:** The Vidigal favela clings to a hillside above one of Rio's wealthiest neighborhoods.





dividing her time between Munich and Rio for the past five years. She moved here, renting a home in Vidigal, at the same time a wave of foreigners arrived. During the global financial crisis, when the world was down, Brazil was up — drawing investment and new residents. Now that the world is up (more or less), Brazil is, as *The Economist* puts it, in a state of “torpid stagnation.”

Eham is worried about where the money will come from to complete the vast transit projects that are connected to the Olympics, and to keep the city from backsliding where crime is concerned. “I never felt as safe as I did during the World Cup time,” she tells me as schoolkids scurry past. “There was a lot of security here then. And, it is certainly safer in Rio than it was 10 years ago when I visited for the first time. But I don’t know after the Olympics what is going to happen, because it costs a lot of money for all that security.”

The next day, I’m spending a lot of money, albeit on handcrafted items. I’ve dropped by Monica Carvalho’s atelier in a mostly residential neighborhood just behind Copacabana Beach for another chat about Rio’s future. Carvalho is an artist and designer who makes jewelry and housewares using organic materials from Brazilian forests: chamomile flower-filled pillows; chandeliers made out of wood; beautiful things. Brazilian things. Carvalho is proud of both her native products and her native city, as so many *Cariocas* are. So I ask her what she thinks the Olympics’ long-term impact will be on Rio.

“I’m more of an artist than a businesswoman,” she says. “So I don’t know for sure. There are many remodelings going on now. It has been hard for residents to cope with all of this. But by the end, I think it will look much better. There will be new businesses. There will be new investors. There will be new places to live. There are a lot of indirect economic results that will come out of it.”

She makes a good point. The world will see a new Rio this month. But the real new Rio won’t be revealed until after the Olympics. And that’s the one we should all want to see. I’d discuss that further with Carvalho, but I’ve got a lunch meeting to get to. So we double-kiss goodbye, because I’m already half an hour late.



**ABOVE:** *Morro Dois Irmãos* or Two Brothers Mountain rises above Ipanema Beach.

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*JOSEPH GUINTO once hoped to be an Olympic boxer, but his initial, lopsided sparring matches knocked that notion out cold.*

#### STAY

##### **Sheraton Grand Rio Hotel & Resort**

The only beachfront hotel in all of Rio, this resort-style property sits on Vidigal Beach and has views of Leblon and Ipanema, both just minutes away and reachable by bike path or car.

[Starwoodhotels.com/sheraton](http://Starwoodhotels.com/sheraton)

##### **Caesar Park Hotel**

This Sofitel property on Ipanema has recently been remodeled to include a rooftop bar and restaurant with stunning views.

[Sofitel.com](http://Sofitel.com)

#### JW Marriott

This elegant, comfortable and modern hotel faces Copacabana Beach.

[Marriott.com](http://Marriott.com)

#### EAT/DRINK

##### **Olympe**

When Chef Claude Troisgros arrived in Rio in 1979, he could find no French ingredients — not even butter. So he bought local fare, which was a tough sell for his early guests.

Today, he says, “There is a real appreciation of Brazilian products. It is an exciting time to eat in Rio now.”

[Olympe.com.br](http://Olympe.com.br)

#### Giuseppe Grill

The best steakhouse in beef-obsessed Rio? Believe it. And believe this: The fish — caught daily by fishermen who work a boat assigned to just this eatery — is just as good as the meat.

[Bestfork.com.br](http://Bestfork.com.br)

#### SHOP

##### **Monica Carvalho**

Handmade jewelry and housewares made from organic materials from Brazilian forests are sold in this small home behind Copacabana Beach.

[Monicacarvalho.com.br](http://Monicacarvalho.com.br)