



## An island-hopping expedition in Palawan

As someone who can feel woozy at the mere sight of a boat, sailing off into the sunset isn't usually my idea of a good time. But when I stumbled across social-enterprise business Tao Philippines, which runs multi-day island-hopping expeditions in collaboration with local communities, the opportunity to sustainably explore the Philippines' idyllic island province of Palawan was too enticing to pass up.

Before I knew it, I was boarding a *bangka* (motorised double outrigger) in the tourist hub of Coron, bound for a castaway adventure. We'd spend the next five days gliding across the blissfully peaceful aquamarine waters of northern Palawan, pausing to snorkel atop remote coral reefs and wriggle our toes in the sugar-white sands of uninhabited islands. In the afternoons, we'd anchor near one of Tao's 15 base camps dotted across the archipelago and 'check in' to our accommodation – a string of simple-looking but surprisingly comfortable bamboo huts, engineer-designed for tropical beach camping.

Most itineraries visit Tao Beach Farm, the heart of Tao's positive-impact purpose. Here, the camp doubles as a learning centre for communities, replete with an organic farm, massage centre and farm-to-table restaurant where our wonderful crew of 'Lost Boys' – recruited from local fishing villages – were trained to cook the wholesome Filipino-style meals we savoured throughout the expedition.

Camps have freshwater showers and flushing toilets, which is where the traditional luxuries typically end. But I couldn't have wanted for anything more as I watched the sun dance across the South China Sea just metres from my mattress on those lazy expedition mornings. *taophilippines.com* – Sarah Reid

PHOTOGRAPHY SCOTT SPORLEDER/@SPOART (TAO PHILIPPINES)

## THE PARTY OF A LIFETIME IN RIO

There are a few exceptional sights on the planet that make any traveller's heart soar when setting eyes on them for the very first time – the likes of Machu Picchu, the Pyramids of Giza, the Taj Mahal. I'm standing on the deck of the *Azamara Pursuit* as the ship slowly glides into the port of Rio de Janeiro when I spot one of these Seven Wonders of the World – the iconic 38-metre Christ the Redeemer statue dramatically perched atop Mt Corcovado with its arms outstretched over the sprawling Brazilian metropolis. Arriving by sea on the Carnival in Rio voyage from Buenos Aires reveals the city's splendour before we even step on its sun-drenched shores.

Known as *Cidade Maravilhosa*, Portuguese for 'Marvellous City', Rio de Janeiro is blessed with an abundance of natural beauty, where lush tropical rainforest-cloaked mountains meet the sea and pastel-hued *favelas* cling to the hillside. Our ship is docked in Rio for several days in February during the biggest event in the Brazilian calendar – Rio Carnival. I'm set to soak up some local *carioca* culture as I join more than two million people each day flocking the streets for Carnival celebrations that begin on the Friday before Ash Wednesday, with the festivities reaching a climax on 'Fat Tuesday'. Carnival uniquely combines

the Catholic tradition of pre-Lenten celebration brought by the Portuguese colonisers in the 18th century with samba, a musical style that is deeply rooted in Afro-Brazilian culture. Today, Rio de Janeiro hosts the most famous carnival in the world and one of the greatest parties on the planet.

I've chosen Azamara's walking tour, Secrets of Old Rio, to get myself acquainted with the city. One of the world's largest murals, the rainbow-hued 190-metre-long masterpiece by Eduardo Kobra is the first thing to welcome us as we disembark at the palm tree-lined Praça Mauá port. We are near one of the biggest arrival points into Brazil during the slave trade, Valongo Wharf, where almost one million enslaved Africans landed on Rio de Janeiro's coast. Many eventually settled in this part of town, known as Little Africa. We pass the historic Pedra do Sol, the site of a former slave market, which is considered by many as the 'birthplace' of Samba. The dance, characterised by fast footwork and rhythmical hips, has become synonymous with Brazilian identity.

It's Sunday, and the streets are alive with the spirit of Carnival. By the time we reach Praça XV, we've seen an array of eccentric fancy-dress >>



costumes, or *'fantasia'*. I notice a few revellers wearing vibrant veils, which our guide explains is an ode to the urban legend of a Carmelite nun who jumped over the walls of a cloistered convent in Santa Teresa to join in the revelry of Carnival.

Our next stop is the stunning Mosteiro de São Bento, built by Benedictine monks in the 16th century – the Baroque interiors are dripping in gold. I'm struggling to sit still in the pews as I feel the thrum of samba carrying through the air, and I'm beginning to empathise with the runaway nun.

Continuing our walk, we attempt to cross the wide Rio Branco Avenue. Suddenly our small group finds itself swept up in the swirl of sequins, feathers and glitter. The pace of the drums seemingly quickens as the crowd surges around us. Hundreds of *blocos*, or block parties, are held all over the city's neighbourhoods during Carnival. There are five blocos in Centro today and the tour has accidentally joined one.

As entertaining as we find the crowds – pirates, priests, performers stretching to the sky on stilts, and all sorts of creative ensembles of scantily clad men and women sweating it out in Rio's soaring temperatures – they seem to find a bevy of bewildered tourists just as amusing. "Where are you from?" they

laugh as our ordinary clothes give us away. A girl dressed as an angel produces a little pot of silver glitter. She anoints me in a faux ceremonial manner, smearing sparkles onto my cheeks.

Those seeking the quintessential Carnival experience book tickets to the extravagant annual pageant hosted at the Sambadrome. The purpose-built 'stadium of samba', designed by world-renowned Brazilian architect Oscar Niemeyer is flanked with seats that can hold up to 90,000 spectators.

Ticket prices to the official parade vary, from grandstand seats to lounge access, which can set you back more than \$1000. You're guaranteed excellent views and a bar in the VIP section where you can order endless *caipirinha* – Brazil's national beverage made with *cachaça* (a local liquor distilled from fermented sugarcane juice) and lime.

The main event runs over two consecutive nights as 12 of the best samba schools compete for the crown. It takes around an hour for about 3500 to 4000 members of each samba school (*escola*) to perform. It's a once-in-a-life spectacle of gigantic floats, percussion bands and sizzling-hot samba dancers wearing dazzling headdresses. Our local guide Paulo explains: "Each of the samba schools develops a theme. It's almost like an opera

where they are telling a story." It takes 365 days to prepare for the one big day and tonight is their night to shine. The energy is palpable. The grandstands erupt with roars as Brazilians sing along and cheer on their favourite samba school with a passion rarely seen outside of a football game. There's an explosion of bejewelled costumes and glittering confetti as the elaborate floats pass us by. The parade shows no signs of slowing down until sunrise.

"Carnival is officially five days and we hear which samba school is the winner on Ash Wednesday. People are frantic to see who wins. They are glued to their television screens," Paulo adds.

Despite my lack of sleep, I'm eager to sightsee the next day. It takes 20 minutes for the tram to climb through the thick tropical Tijuca Rainforest to reach the summit of Mt Corcovado. The towering Art Deco statue of Jesus Christ dwarfs all in its shadow; it's an engineering marvel that's been watching over the city since 1931.

Afterwards, we stop for a *churrascaria* lunch at Fogo de Chão, an authentic Brazilian eatery overlooking Pão de Açúcar (Sugarloaf Mountain). All-you-can-eat barbecued meat is carved tableside, such as the highly prized *picanha*, accompanied by fresh salads. The papaya cream, a dessert made from blending papaya with vanilla ice-cream, is drowned in blackcurrant liquor.

With Carnival comes the crowds, resulting in lengthy queues for the two-part cable car to the granite peak of Sugarloaf Mountain, 395 metres above Rio. The city's lofty landmark gained its name during the heyday of the sugarcane trade. It offers breathtaking panoramic views over Rio de Janeiro.

It's our last day in town and I have one last mission in mind to complete the tourist trifecta – Copacabana Beach. The four-kilometre stretch of golden sand is more than just the enduring symbol of Rio; it's the lifeblood of the city. This prime people-watching position is Rio's very own playground, where I simply sit back and order an ice-cold caipirinha from one of the kiosks.

Kids from the favela practise their football skills. A procession of bronzed beach babes saunters by. Leathery-skinned fishermen heave old wooden boats into the water. And vendors comb the beach selling everything from fresh coconuts to grilled lobster.

Copacabana is the perfect place to cool off in summer. I dip my toes in the sparkling Atlantic Ocean. It's a moment to refresh before joining the next bloco. I can already feel the infectious beat of the drums calling from across the sand. *azamara.com* – *Edwina Hart* IT  
*Azamara's next 12-Night Carnival in Rio voyage departs Buenos Aires and sails to Uruguay and Brazil.*

