



Members of Vila Isabel samba school perform during the last night of Rio de Janeiro's Carnival celebrations. *CARL DE SOUZA / AFP*

# SAMBA TIME AT CARNIVAL

**GLEN PETRIE**

The world's biggest party is not a spectator sport

My taxi driver slams the wheel and swears. I take it he's one of the Cariocas (residents of Rio de Janeiro) who'd rather leave town during Carnival. I've flown through the night to cross this off my bucket list.

The street is so full of revellers that the taxi can't move. It's a bizarre crowd: An old guy in campy drag, a curvy young woman in body paint and not much else, and several human-sized butterflies, complete with green wings and bobbing antennae.

All districts in Rio launch a Carnival street party, called blocos, and one of the oldest and biggest rocks the leafy, beachside neighbourhood of Ipanema. Throughout several blocks, both main roads and side streets comprise one giant rave.

I abandon the taxi and squeeze through the crowd toward the Ipanema apartment I've rented. "Banda Ipanema" declares a banner waving above the samba band leading the crowd. Someone splashes me with water.

After a nap in the flat, I head out into the milieu. The sea of people has only grown larger as the sultry afternoon slides into night. People are so tightly packed from curb to curb it's almost impossible to pass. The night air is so hot guys remove their shirts; the girls have already been wearing as little as possible since the afternoon.

The crowd carries me like a bug caught in the current of a stream. When I try to change direction



Each samba school's parade entry is led by a lead dancer, a highly coveted position. *GLEN PETRIE*

I'm a salmon fighting upstream. Everyone has a sheen of sweat, and this enables my escape, lubricating a sideways rub to the sidewalk where there's enough room to catch my breath.

A vendor pushes a cold can of Antarctica beer into my hand.

The port-a-potties nearby overflow with a malicious odour (400 million litres of beer are con-

sumed during Carnival) so I flee the streets and head to the famous Ipanema beach.

On the sand, a dance party rocks in a roped-off area. It's all young people bopping to pop music under bright lights. Do I need a ticket? I try to get in and a young man stops me.

"Hey, where are you from? Have a caipirinha."

The clear liquid has a lot of sugar and lime and cachaça, a liquor distilled from sugar cane that is not rum. Said to be first contrived by slaves over 500 years ago, it's made from fresh sugar cane, whereas rum often comes from sugar products, like molasses.

So now I have a beer in one hand and a plastic cup of Brazil's potent national drink in the other.

I'm still in my airplane clothes so I kick off my loafers and roll up my pants and feel the cool sand between my toes. Atlantic waves slap the sand behind me and the glittering lights of Rio climb black hills into a starry sky.

Somehow it's 2 a.m., I haven't unpacked yet, and I'm feeling a little like Alice on the other side of the looking glass.

### A FANTASY

This legendary blowout is said to date back to a Greek celebration of the wine God, Dionysus, which was later adopted by the Romans to honour Bacchus and Saturn, and then used by the Catholic Church as a feast to mark the beginning of Lent, a period of abstinence. (The word Carnival may derive from carne vale, "farewell to meat.")

Portuguese colonizers brought Carnival to Rio in 1723. It was a time of dousing people in the streets with water, and the rich would swap clothing with the poor, starting the notion that Carnival was for fantasy, for turning everything on its head. Masquerades in the streets took hold by the 1840s.

Brazil freed African slaves in 1888, and they built vast slums, or favelas, around Rio and brought to the festivities their bold rhythms and dance moves. By 1917, samba had become the signature sound of Carnival.

Officially spanning five days, celebrations often start two weeks before the weekend of samba parades, Carnival's climax, which is what I've come to see.

SEE CARNIVAL ON **G2**



Viviane Araujo from Mancha Verde samba school performs during Carnival at the Sambadrome in Sao Paulo, Brazil. AMANDA PEROBELLI/REUTERS

# RIO'S CARNIVAL PARADE A SENSORY OVERLOAD

## CARNIVAL FROM G1

I have sprung for costly front box seats at the Sambadrome, a stadium that was purpose-built for the samba parades, seating 90,000 people on both sides of a paved runway. The city's metro takes me within earshot, and I follow the crowds and signs.

As I take my seat, a glittering dragon the size of a Boeing 737 hangs above the dancers. It is only one float of several belonging to one school, and between the floats spin elaborate-costumed dancers moving in a dazzling pattern. There are as many as 5,000 performers per school. I reel from sensory overload.

Each school — which aren't schools, strictly speaking, but community associations that meet a variety of local needs — hails from a different neighbourhood, including several poor favelas. The samba parades are fierce competitions among Rio's samba schools. The prestige attached to winning is immense.

Forty judges appraise the schools in 10 categories: Percussion, song, harmony, flow and spirit, theme, floats, costumes, the vanguard group (the lead troupe of dancers), the performance of the flag bearer, and overall impression. The slightest flaw costs points, such as when a plastic bag blows onto a float and isn't removed, or when a lady's G-string breaks. (Total nudity is forbidden, but a dab of body paint is enough to get around that.)

Designed in secrecy, the immense floats are brought to the

Sambodromo's staging area on parade night, where cranes help assemble them in a matter of minutes before they're sent down the runway. At the other end, the same process takes place in reverse.

The cost to each school is between \$3 million and \$5 million. Funding comes from ticket sales, broadcast rights, government grants, sponsors (though no advertising is allowed in the parade), and businesses run by the schools themselves. These are not always legal, and are said to involve black market lotteries and drug money, especially in the poorer communities.

On each of four consecutive nights, six of the 24 competing schools strut their stuff. The action begins around 9 p.m. and doesn't finish until sunrise. Each school's presentation is like an entire Macy's Parade on steroids.

## AND THE MUSIC!

Each school creates its own samba tune for Carnival, amplified through giant speakers. The sound lifts everyone to their feet and releases unfettered joy. Ninety thousand people are out of their seats. I feel electrified.

Eventually, the sky begins to lighten and I'm still dancing on my seat, but decide to slip out ahead of 90,000 others. I'm appalled to find the streets littered with abandoned costumes, since they require hundreds of dollars and countless man-hours to create.

I snatch a piece of glitter to take home as a souvenir of a night I'll never forget.



Each samba school's presentation includes as many as 5,000 costumed dancers, a procession that can take an hour to pass the length of the Sambadrome. GLEN PETRIE



Rio de Janeiro's famous Ipanema Beach stretches for two kilometres. GLEN PETRIE

## IF YOU GO

Carnival parades are held and judged over four nights, Friday to Monday prior to Ash Wednesday, at the Sambadrome. Winners are announced on Ash Wednesday, the first day of Lent. The six samba schools that score highest stage a special "Champions Parade" on the following Saturday.

If you opt for the Champion's Parade, you'll not only see the best of the best, but also save money as these tickets are less costly and inflated Rio hotel prices return to normal right after Ash Wednesday.

Parade tickets can be booked in advance online ([rio-carnival.net](http://rio-carnival.net) or [rio.com](http://rio.com)) and picked up in person in Rio on specific days prior to the parade date. Delivery to your hotel can be arranged for a fee. Prices vary by night and seating section.

The first two nights of parade competition (Friday and Saturday) are less expensive because they feature schools that scored lower in the prior year's competition. "Special group" schools, having scored higher the year before, parade on Sunday and Monday nights. Only a few points separate first place from last, so every night features a great parade. Tickets range from \$35 for unassigned grandstand seating to \$1,075 in a VIP box (all prices in U.S. dollars). My "front box" seat, three rows back, cost \$455.

Tourists may parade with a samba school by reserving a costume (from \$138 to \$808, depending on the school) and showing up early for a quick rehearsal.