

Cruising – Rio de Janeiro



The Brazilian city of Rio de Janeiro is one of the great evocative waypoints of sailors since time immemorial. Nick Coghlan narrates a modern day visit to the port and its environs

ROLLING DOWN TO RIO



I never sailed the Amazon and I never reached Brazil Oh, I'd love to roll to Rio, some day before I'm old!
(Songs of Rudyard Kipling)

Wéd been to Rio de Janeiro once before and many years earlier, by air. I remembered learning within a couple of hours of landing that in Brazilian Portuguese the term 'Motel' doesn't mean what you might think; the price list in reception with room rates by the hour and the red/green traffic lights above our door were a bit of a giveaway. Then Jenny and I had



been robbed on Copacabana beach and had to walk back barefoot and in swimsuits. My parting memory was of the husky, sexy voice of the announcer at Galeão airport as she whispered enticingly that Aerolíneas Argentinas' flight to Buenos Aires had been delayed, or that the Varig shuttle to Manaus was now boarding. It stayed with me for years.

Now we were 22 days out from the island of St Helena aboard our 27ft cutter, *Bosun Bird*. The sun rising over our stern was just beginning to catch the outline of the Sugarloaf ahead of us. Behind it the Christ figure on the sharper peak of the Corcovado was still floodlit against the lightening sky.

The wind had fallen calm, so I cranked up our engine. I called Jenny on deck, to share the magnificent view.

"I can smell the land. Beautiful, it must be sandalwood," I said. Jenny sniffed. She looked

FAR LEFT
Bosun Bird at anchor in Guanabara Bay, below the Corcovado Mountain

ABOVE
Botafogo and the moorings of the late Clube do Rio de Janeiro

BELOW
The route from St Helena

back into the cabin.

"I don't think that's the land," she said. "It's coming from the engine."

I switched off. For the next hour, we rolled uneasily in the swell while – down below – I struggled to push back into place the stainless-steel shaft of the engine's raw-water pump. It had worked free from its bearings and bored an impressively neat, smoking hole in the wooden engine cover. As we motored into the shelter of spectacular Guanabara Bay, Jenny was deputed to stay below and – with a hammer – tap the shaft back into position whenever it showed signs of edging forward again.

We anchored at the foot of the Sugarloaf in Urca Bay and, recalling our long-ago mugging, stripped down the exterior of the boat and locked up securely before warily rowing ashore. We were greeted by an elderly, respectable-looking man sitting on the beach wall and sipping Antartida beer from a cooler. We asked if this was a safe place to land: "More or less," he shrugged. "But you should lock the dinghy. And don't leave those oars around!"

For the next several days, whenever we went into town we carried with us the two white pine oars. They made getting on and off the bus awkward and we attracted strange looks when we took them into a movie theatre. But the one time when it seemed as though we →





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might be in for another robbery, the menacing group of four youths backed off as we adopted the fencer's 'En Garde' position, oars in hand.

Surprisingly few foreign yachts call in at Rio, except on long-distance races: check-in was laborious. In compensation, I was listed on all official documentation in Brazil as 'Master' or 'Commander', occasionally both. Jenny was less happy; the only options for her were 'Cook' or 'Engineer'. Russell Crowe, eat your heart out.

Returning from our first day ashore, we found the dinghy intact but wondered whether it might be wiser to seek a mooring buoy and land access at the nearby Iate Clube do Rio de Janeiro. The receptionist didn't quite sniff at the sight of us, oars and all. But he looked like he wanted to:

"You are most welcome, Sir.

Visitors may use the facilities of the club with a signed introduction from three members in good standing and following consideration of your application by the Committee,

which meets monthly. Would you care for an application form?"

We said we'd think about that. After half an hour of enjoying the air-conditioning free of charge, we left unobtrusively.

Sailing snobbery

Later, we would find that this attitude towards foreign cruisers was typical in Brazil. In this country sailing was an activity for the mega-rich. Nobody wanted to behold, among the huge power boats and three-spreader super-yachts, a cruising boat with its chunky lines, a weed-encumbered waterline and clumsy self-steering gear on the stern. Least of all did members wish to encounter hirsute foreigners in tee-shirts, ragged shorts and flip-flops, looking for somewhere to do their laundry.

We left late one morning for a sail 60 miles to the west. We passed the great sweep of Copacabana, its white crescent of sand, backed by modern high-rises, then Ipanema and São Conrado. Behind the last beach, rose the distinctive peak

ABOVE LEFT
Copacabana beach, from the Sugarloaf

ABOVE CENTRE
At anchor in Guanabara Bay, as the sun sets behind Corcovado Mountain

BELOW LEFT
Securing the dinghy as we land for the first time

BELOW CENTRE
At anchor in Angra dos Reis

known as Pedra da Gávea (Squaresail Mountain), proudly climbed by Darwin on the *Beagle's* outward voyage. By dawn we were off Angra dos Reis (the Bay of Kings).

We spent the next 10 days cruising the spectacular verdant islands and inlets of this region, sailing only short distances and anchoring every night in a different cove – each with dense tropical jungle tumbling from hundreds of feet to the shore itself, toucans, mirror-flat calms and warm swimming. Occasionally a fishing boat would pull in late at night. At the weekend there were some more power boats and yachts around, as the São Paulo crowd materialised. But after the hustle and stress of Rio this was tranquillity.

Our final stop was off the beautiful old colonial town of Paraty.

Founded in 1597, Paraty boomed when gold was discovered in the hinterland of Minas Gerais province, and it became the seaward terminus of a road from Ouro Preto known as the Caminho do Ouro (Gold Road), at which the Portuguese



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galleons were loaded with bullion. They'd sail from here to Rio where convoys would be assembled (hence the name of the airport), then onwards to Lisbon. But so conducive was the deeply-indented coastline of Angra dos Reis to pirate hideouts that eventually a safer route from the mines to the (then) capital was found. Once-opulent Paraty fell into gentle decline.

Colonial jewel

It's now a colonial jewel, decreed a UNESCO World Heritage site in 2016. The town is so close to the water and so low that the streets flood at high tide (an efficient means of clearing them out).

Our anchorage here was marked on the chart as Praia Cantagalo ('Singing Rooster Beach'); it was also known, more aptly, as Praia dos Vagabundos. On shore was the International Yacht Club, an abandoned and shuttered house by a small, isolated sandy beach with a spring channelled into a hose. It had come to be used as an informal gathering spot for foreign yachties.

Among them was Horacio, the singlehanded skipper of *Marie Galante*, from Puerto Madryn, Argentina. Tanned and wiry, he was very friendly and more than happy to regale us with accounts of sailing the wild waters of Patagonia into which we would be headed. Sooner or later, when yachties swap stories, they become accounts of storms, catastrophes narrowly avoided or of actual disaster. Horacio's stories were all in this vein, accompanied by belly laughs and much use of "Che." He insisted that we visit his home port, famously founded in the mid-nineteenth century by Welsh pioneers.

"I'm sure it's a very interesting place," I said. "But isn't it a lee shore in anything except a westerly? And there's no harbour..."

Horacio reluctantly admitted this was so. And he went on to tell us of sundry yachts that had been blown onto the beach when the wind moved into the east.

Rowing back in the balmy Brazilian night air to *Bosun Bird*, the only sound was the frogs croaking. The

ABOVE RIGHT
Paraty, Angra dos Reis

BELOW RIGHT
Adriana's home-built catamaran

BELOW LEFT
At anchor, Angra dos Reis

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nick and Jenny Coghlan have sailed 70,000 miles offshore in two successive 27ft boats. Nick's latest book – *Under Wide and Starry Skies: Fifty Sailing Destinations in Seas less Travelled* – was published in 2025 by Adlard Coles (UK)



sea was glassy still and the stars were reflected in it. You could see the darkened bell tower of the old Paraty church and a few golden lights in the windows of the colonial houses on the waterfront. I hoped Patagonia was going to be worth it.

Doing a final batch of laundry on the beach next morning, we chatted with Adriana, a young Black Brazilian woman who lived alone on a little white catamaran, a remarkable exception to the national sailing profile.

Adriana had a low, sensual and husky voice that was oddly evocative. I got up the nerve to tell her about that announcer at Galeão:

"Oh yes!" Adriana laughed. "She was famous all over the world, as well known as the Girl from Ipanema. But nobody knew anything about her. Then when she retired – years ago now – the newspaper did a report. It turns out she was a solterona – an old maid – of 75: short, fat and with thick glasses. Everyone was so disappointed. The Brazilian men, at least!"

