

PUC-Rio: Brazil

Semester one, 2017, studying towards my BA(Pols)

Rio de Janeiro

The most vibrant, diverse and beautiful city I have ever been to. Living in Rio was an absolute dream - I completely fell in love with the city and its culture. After one semester I was in no way ready to leave, but unfortunately my degree wouldn't allow me to extend for another semester.

Rio is huge both geographically and by population (about 6.4 million people). One of the reasons I travelled less than I expected was because there was so much to see just within the city, and because Rio is one of the most popular tourist destinations that Brazilians themselves go to.



View of Rio from Vista Chinesa

I feel like it is very common for locals in a city to carry on with their daily routine without getting out and exploring where they live - not so in Rio, all the most exciting activities and adventures in Rio are far more popular amongst 'cariocas' (Rio locals) than foreign tourists.

While Christ the Redeemer and Pão de Açúcar (Sugarloaf Mountain) are must-sees, and both provide incredible views of the city, there are far more exciting and awe-inspiring places to visit! One of my favourite aspects of Rio is that you have this incredible big-city life, but you also have some of the best hiking in Brazil! Incredible mountains border the city, providing for endless day trips. Pedra Bonita, Pedra do Telégrafo and Dois Irmãos were all standouts for me. My one regret was not making it to Pedra da Gávea which requires a little more planning and expertise!



Parque Ruínas, 10 min. walk from PUC

I highly recommend spending a day in Santa Teresa - taking the tram to the top and then wandering down the winding streets where chances are you will find street music, funky bars, and local boutiques at every turn. If it wasn't so difficult to get to university from Santa Teresa, I would have loved to live here! Botafogo is hipster central, always a great place to go if you want to eat well and go bar/club hopping. Copacabana beach is obviously one of the most iconic spots, but I preferred the slightly quieter neighbouring beaches of Ipanema and Leblon. As long as the

sun is up, you will always find cariocas on the beach tanning and/or playing beach sports such as beach volleyball or foot-volley, which is like volleyball except you can't use your hands.

The nightlife in Lapa is unmissable and so typical of Rio - while many clubs and bars line the centre of Lapa under the famous arches, thousands of people mingle outside in the

main square as music blasts from various pop-up drink stalls. This is the samba central of Rio and it's amazing to watch cariocas dance so naturally. As the night goes on, the samba is normally replaced with funk (pronounced 'funky', quite different from funk music that we know!). The energy on the streets of Lapa is indescribable - before you know it you'll realise it's 5am and the sun is starting to come up and somehow you could still stay longer. A similar samba/funk scene can be found in Centro every Monday night at a spot called Pedra do Sal. There are always events on at Praça Tiradentes if you want to watch, or practice, your samba and forró (a style of dance typical of North-Eastern Brazil). One of my best nights out in Rio was at a free outdoor festival on the streets in Centro with four different stages all playing different genres, we stayed until 7.30am!

Favelas

Favelas are unofficial communities dotted all over the city. Rio has some of the worst inequality in the world and this is most clearly represented by favelas such as Rocinha and Vidigal bordering on the richest neighbourhoods of Leblon and Gávea. Although not legally sanctioned by the government, nowadays favelas have their own infrastructure (often makeshift access to running water, electricity, internet and TV). Despite what the upper class of Rio would have you think, cariocas who live in favelas are predominantly law-abiding citizens and they have a strong sense of community and unity. However, the problem is that, due to a complete lack of support from the government and a stigmatisation by rich Brazilians, favelas often have huge problems with drug trafficking and gangs.

I urge you to go and experience the favelas for yourself, and do not succumb to the stereotype that they are bad places filled with bad people. Some of the kindest and friendliest cariocas I met were from Rocinha, Brazil's largest favela. But please, **do your research first**, favelas such as Vidigal and parts of Rocinha are very safe and tourist friendly. Other favelas are highly dangerous and unstable, and not at all appropriate to enter.

I volunteered in Rocinha once a week teaching English for an NGO (look up Garagem das Letras on Facebook, or check out their website www.ilsorrisodeimieibimbi.org/the-literary-cafe/?lang=en). This was one of the most rewarding things I did in Rio and I highly recommend getting involved. I learnt so much from the students that I taught, and they were so lovely and appreciative. I also had many exchange student friends who lived in Vidigal, this is one of the most gentrified and pacified favelas in Rio and so it is extremely safe to go into. As a tourist, you are *far* more likely to be mugged/pick-pocketed on the street in Copacabana than you are in Vidigal.



My English class at Garagem das Letras

Vidigal and Rocinha are both much more commercial than other favelas, they have lots of great bars, restaurants and hostels. My friends who lived in Vidigal were staying in Airbnbs for a fraction of the price of what I was paying. I encourage you to form your own opinion on this, but, while it is great to go into the favelas to support their commerce and to help break the stigma of favelas as scary places, I did not think it was appropriate to live there.

By paying rent that is very cheap by our standards, it actually pushes up the rent for locals living in Vidigal, making it harder for them to live there and often resulting in landlords giving foreigners a room over locals who need it more desperately.

Carnaval

If you are doing a semester one exchange, **get there in time for Carnaval!!!** The craziest, most overwhelming, and most energetic week-long party in the world. Carnaval is insane. No matter where you are staying in the city, there are blocos (street parties) all over the place. No matter the hour, you will hear constant music and partying. The streets are filled with food and drink vendors, huge floats blasting music, and tens of thousands of people in costume. I was finding glitter in my hair, in my bedroom and embedded in my clothes for weeks afterwards. My two favourite blocos were both at a park near the beach, which I preferred to the insanely cramped conditions amongst the streets. One bloco was Madonna themed and the other had a live performance by Sargenta Pimenta (Sergeant Pepper) - a Beatles cover band who give the Beatles a samba twist and have a cult following. Being in the crowd as everyone lost it to a samba version of Yellow Submarine was surreal to say the least.



No expense is spared at Carnaval

Language

With about a month of non-intensive Duolingo usage and some embarrassingly basic high school Spanish, it's safe to say that my understanding of Portuguese was 0%. The language-barrier was by far my biggest challenge in Brazil, but don't let that put you off! At PUC, Portuguese lessons are compulsory and relatively intensive (6 hours a week). These lessons were invaluable and lots of fun. Lots of people can speak English at a very basic level, but not many Brazilians speak English well. However, you'll be surprised how easy it is to get by without speaking Portuguese, and cariocas are incredibly encouraging and patient as long as you're willing to give it a go! Although a battle at first, after 6 months I was so surprised at how much I could say. I could easily get by in shops and day-to-day life, and had a basic but comfortable conversational level when meeting new people.

Safety

My number one rule: don't let safety concerns stop you from exploring the city! All you have to do is be sensible and know what to expect before you go there. While the crime rates and levels of police violence in Rio are horrific, the serious violent crimes occur almost entirely within the most dangerous and unstable favelas. As a foreigner, it is quite possible that during your semester you will be pickpocketed or mugged, but the possibility of being physically harmed is extremely low. Don't flash your phone around if you're walking home at night time, and don't leave bags unattended on the beach. There are many poor people who do not have any hope of getting a job or social welfare support, all they want is money, they do not want to hurt you. I had petty cash pickpocketed from me during Carnaval but other than that I did not personally experience any crime, lots of my exchange student friends had phones stolen but it's not the end of the world. Make sure you are backing up your photos regularly and get travel insurance to cover any losses.

Accommodation



Sunrise from my bedroom window, Leblon

PUC-Rio doesn't provide student accommodation but they have a host family programme whereby exchange students can be placed with a Brazilian family. I chose to opt into this programme because, being unable to speak Portuguese before I left, I wasn't sure how else to find accommodation. I was placed with an 82-year-old lady who spoke fluent English. I felt that this defeated the purpose of the 'culturally immersive' experience I was expecting from a host-family as it was difficult for me to practice my Portuguese with her and it wasn't exactly a 'family'. Apart from that I have no real complaints, she was lovely, I was in a great location within walking distance of uni and the beach, and it was extremely safe. The host family programme was pretty hit and miss, some had lovely inclusive families with kids and pets, others were clearly only taking on exchange students to get the money and could be very strict, or refused to follow the requirements outlined in the contract.

With the knowledge I have now, I probably would not do the host family programme again. There are many Facebook pages that advertise for rentals, and Airbnb. Look out for PUC affiliated pages that can link you up with other students (Brazilian and/or foreign). If in doubt, it might be best to stay in a hostel for a week or two and scout out rental options once you are there. The cost of the host family accommodation is R\$1600/month (approx. NZ\$750) all inclusive. This is on the higher end but not unreasonable.

University



On campus at PUC

PUC (pronounced 'pooky') is a private Catholic university, although you wouldn't know it was Catholic apart from the occasional nun and a small church hidden away. The campus is stunning - nestled in what feels like rainforest. There are so many nice outdoor areas to study in with exotic flora and fauna - monkeys become so normalised you stop reacting to them.

The classes are more like a high school set up, with small numbers and an expectation for students to engage in class discussion. If you're taking papers

in English, you'll already be at an advantage just by being fluent. If you're taking papers in Portuguese, the teachers will go easy on you because it's not your first language. A 75% attendance rate is mandatory so make sure you keep track of your absences to maximise travel time, try to structure your timetable to be as minimal as possible on Mondays/Fridays to get a long weekend.

Academically, the courses are incredibly easy compared to Otago. I never studied more than two days for an exam, often I didn't study at all. Yet I came out with grades that,

according to the university, should correlate to between A and A+. My two favourite papers were my Portuguese lessons and Brazilian Political Sociology. The latter was vital to understanding the extremely complicated history of Brazil and understanding the culture that exists today.

My only advice is to prepare yourself for an immense amount of bureaucracy when you first arrive and are getting set up at uni. Both the university and any government facilities are plagued with bureaucracy and inefficiency. Spending 7 hours at the Federal Police getting my visa sorted was not one of my most enjoyable experiences. Before you leave, make sure you have multiple copies of EVERYTHING; Otago and PUC approval/acceptance letters, passport, visa, passport photos, etc. The exchange office at PUC are very friendly and helpful if you go in but don't expect a fast response if you're corresponding via email.

Travel

I knew I wasn't going to have time to travel after my semester finished as I had to get back to NZ in time for the start of semester two.

Because of this, I set out early and fit in about 5 weeks of travel before my semester started. I landed in Buenos Aires and backpacked from there to Rio in time for the start of Carnaval. Backpacking was a lot of fun and pretty easy to do.

Highlights were Buenos Aires, Salta and Iguazu Falls (one of the natural wonders of the world, don't miss it!). To get from Iguazu Falls to Rio,

I visited Curitiba, São Paulo and Paraty. I met my parents and brother in Rio and we spent some time at the indescribably beautiful Ilha Grande not far off the coast of Rio, and they stayed during Carnaval, too. During the semester I did a lot of travel, often just for a long weekend but sometimes we squeezed in a full week. However, I still did not even make a dent on all that there is to see in Brazil. Within the state of Rio, I went to Paraty and Búzios. I also did trips to Minas Gerais, Bahia (my favourite trip) and squeezed in a week in the Amazon at the very end.



Iguazu Falls from the Argentinian side

Travel within Brazil is reasonably inexpensive, if you book in advance it is often not much more expensive to fly than to bus. Although, the buses are surprisingly luxurious and comfortable. However, given the limited amount of time you will have - I highly recommend flying unless you are not travelling far.

At first, I was disappointed that I wouldn't be able to see more of South America. However, you'll soon realise just how much Brazil has to offer. It is such a culturally diverse country; visiting different states gives you an entirely different cultural experience. Also, Brazil is so different from the rest of South America, I preferred to get to know this language and this culture more thoroughly - rather than just tapping into the surface of lots of different places.