

Chapter 16 Rio de Janeiro 2001



Thursday, Oct 4, Rio

This will be a quick trip, just four nights away from home, two of them in airplanes. For later reference, this is just over three weeks after the attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. It is not my first trip since then, but my third. I drove to London Ontario for a conference one weekend, then flew last weekend to Miami to give a seminar and drove over to Naples to visit Minda and her guys.

Because of the attack and the increased security, my original itinerary was changed somewhat. I had been going to fly from Detroit to Newark, then nonstop to Rio, all on Continental. Continental cancelled the flight to Rio and rebooked me connecting in Sao Paulo (which is south-east of Rio in Brazil, its largest but lesser-known city). My trip was being arranged by a man from the International Labor Organization (ILO) in Chile, and he thought this was inconvenient and suggested switching me to a single connection in Houston. Without checking on it, I accepted that, even though it would leave earlier from Detroit. As a result of that and the need to be earlier at the airport for security, I had to cut short the class I was teaching to leave for the airport. It's hard to say whether that was necessary, since the lines can be very long or nonexistent depending on the moment. And as it turned out, the flight he put me on from Houston to Rio had a stop in Sao Paulo anyway.

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Getting early to the airport, I wanted to use the Northwest club that I belong to. However, it is in a different concourse than Continental leaves from, so I would need to go twice through security. I was glad to find no line at all at security for the Northwest concourse, where they had me run my laptop separately through the x-ray and then also rubbed it with some sort of testing cloth. At the club, I phoned my dad and updated him on events, mainly my recent trips. Then I left the club, still with lots of time to spare since I'd have another security check to go through. It was good I did, because the line there was very long, and it took at least a half hour. They didn't do very much at this one, at least with me. And oddly, I was never asked, anywhere, the usual two questions about whether I had packed my own bags and kept them with me. The procedures are very inconsistent, but that may be good, since it leaves potential terrorists not knowing what to expect.

This was my first time flying Continental since my college days, when I worked for them. It was interesting to see the minor differences between it and Northwest. One is that it had Coke products, not Pepsi. Another is that the headrests on the seats have a clever adjustable panel behind your head, the ends of which can be bent forward so that you can rest your head sideways. A third is that their instruction video asks you to watch it anyway, even though you've seen it before, and ends by telling you to tilt your seat back and relax. I like that last bit, because I sometimes feel guilty for invading the space of the person behind me.

I was flying economy since an upgrade had not been available. The flight was almost full. I'd been told that some airlines were dropping their meal service to save money after the drop in traffic from the crisis, and in fact Northwest had done that on my flight back from Miami the week before. But Continental gave us a meal even on the relatively short flight to Houston. We had a choice of tuna or turkey sandwich. Sitting behind me was a man from south Asia who, when given that choice, asked if they had fish. The flight attendant explained that tuna is fish, but then he wanted to know what turkey was. Soon everyone around him was trying to explain turkey to him: "like a big chicken," "gobble gobble," etc.

In Houston I quickly found the gate for my next flight, and that was when I learned it would be stopping in Sao Paolo. I found a popcorn stand, and since a "yard" of corn cost only a little more than a normal sized box, I bought that. It was a long plastic bag filled with popcorn, not a full yard, really, but more than two feet. I only had time to eat a little of it before boarding the plane, so I stowed it overhead and then ate some the following morning before we got to Rio.

This flight was not full at all, and after takeoff I was able to move to a window seat with an empty seat next to it. The plane was a new Boeing 767 – they bragged about it in their video – and it did have a very nice modern feel about it. Each seat, even in economy where I again was, had personal video screens in the backs of the seats in front of them, and these provided eight channels of video plus other attractions. The controls for this were in what looked like just a panel in the armrest. But you could pop it out and it became a handheld remote for selecting channels and playing several video games. What's more, the back side of this remote was a telephone! The device was attached to the armrest with a retractable wire that only tugged on it if you wanted it to, like a window shade. Very clever.

Each seat had a plastic bag containing a blanket and pillow, unlike Northwest which provides those things but with no pretense that they are clean. Also in the bag was a set of earphones, the two earpieces of which were cushioned and had plastic clips that looped over your ears, instead of a band over your head. I wore them all night in comfort, listening to classical music. They even came around with another little bag for each of us containing a blindfold and earplugs, which I didn't use. All of this was far better treatment than I'm used to on Northwest.

I had not given a lot of thought to what Rio would be like, except to look up what the temperature would be – low 60s, high 70s. I had not gotten a phrase book or a tourist guide, and I guess I was expecting that it would be as easy to deal with as Europe. That was stupid of me since it is a developing country. My first awareness of that came when I stepped off the airplane into the jetway and smelled the air. It reminded me of India, although the odor (due to pollution, I presume) was not nearly as strong. As I walked through the airport, I also found it dark and drab, like the Delhi airport, although in a different way. Going through immigration was easy, although the way they had it organized was peculiar, with one agent at a table out in

front of the booths where all the other agents were, even though many of the booths were empty. And the layout made it impossible for those of us in line to see when one of the agents was ready to take us, with the result that he waited for a time with nobody.

After immigration and just before customs, there was a booth for exchanging money. For some reason I didn't do it, I guess because I thought I was going to be met by a driver and wouldn't need money right away. That was a very wrong decision, because once I got through customs I couldn't go back, and there was not another exchange booth visible on the other side. Nor was there anybody there meeting me, so I would need money to take a taxi.

Now this could have been very easy. As I craned my neck looking for a place to change money, a man approached me and asked what I needed. I told him, and he said he would change money for me. I said, no, I needed a bank. He pointed to a badge he was wearing (which of course I could not read) that he claimed said he was official. I looked around and lots of people had badges. I told him no, I really needed to find a bank, and I started looking for someone else who might tell me where to find one. There was a row of booths against the far wall, mostly selling taxi services, but one on the end said Tourist Information, so I went there. It was empty. But somebody at the next booth sent me to another one that, although its primary purpose was something else (a hotel, I think), it did have a small sign saying tourist information. The woman there also suggested that I change money with one of the men with badges, but I was still reluctant, in part because I had no idea what the exchange rate was and would have been helpless against being ripped off. So she said to take the elevator to the third floor, where I would find a bank.

I found a bank of elevators, with a sign saying to use the other ones. I found the other ones, and rode one to the third floor, using three fingers to signal the elevator operator which button to push. On the third floor, since still no bank was evident, I asked in a shop and they sent me down the hall about a hundred yards, past lots of shops and eating places, until I did indeed find a bank – the Banca de Brasil or some such. Inside above the tellers were signs saying “change” in several languages. There was also the usual sign telling the day's exchange rates for various currencies, except that the amounts had been left blank. I still didn't know what my dollars would be worth.

I waited in line with several other customers until one of the two tellers was ready for me. It was interesting to see how slowly these two men worked, each transaction requiring not only several pieces of paper to be filled out and stamped, but also several trips across the office and consultation with other workers. When I finally had my turn and showed him my two travelers checks, however, he needed no time at all to tell me he couldn't exchange them – I'd need to go to the American Express office one flight down. I left the bank with a backward glance at the sign that listed “travelers checks” as among their services. I suppose that meant they sold them, not that they bought them.

Back in the hall, I found another bank of elevators and took one down one flight, again by signaling another operator. I saw no American Express office, asked in a shop, and was directed back toward the part of the airport I'd started in. After maybe fifty yards, I asked again and was told to go down another flight, to the first floor. I did, asked again, and was told that the American Express office was closed today. (This was about 11:30 AM on Thursday.) Bummer. So, I went back up to the third floor, returned to the bank and my friendly teller (after another wait), and asked if he could exchange cash. He could, and did. I finally learned that a dollar is worth about 2.5 reals. And I was glad that I had brought along some cash as well as travelers checks. Of course, I also had my ATM card, which would have been my next thing to try if the cash had somehow not worked.

I now dragged myself and my suitcase back to where I had exited through customs, hoping that by some chance a driver had shown up for me. That hadn't happened though, so I hired a taxi from one of the booths. This turned out to be easy and efficient, just as changing money would have been if I'd done it at the first chance I'd had.

It was a long ride, since the international airport is some distance north of the city (on an island, actually, in the bay), and my hotel was near the beaches, which are south of the city. We drove first along a freeway for quite a way, with flat areas on both sides filled with buildings that looked distinctly poor. The main



Precarious houses in Rio de Janeiro from Wikipedia 2023

building material, here, were sort of brick-colored square blocks, which were used like cement blocks to build the walls. Some were then covered with stucco or tile, but a great many of them were not, and they therefore looked unfinished. And what they built were mostly just cubes, with flat roofs, stacked side-by-side and on top of one another in many cases, some finished and some not. It looked very different from anything I'd seen before, and it looked like the people who lived in them would have to be quite poor. But then I saw another area that was filled with even shabbier structures, what I guess you'd call a shanty town. At least the block houses had looked permanent, while these looked like they could collapse at any moment.

Eventually, as we drove, the quality of the buildings improved somewhat. Then we went through two long tunnels and emerged into what looked more like a proper city. By the time we got to my hotel, the buildings were bigger, nicer, and not particularly distinguishable from cities elsewhere. Along the way, and visible both before and after we went through the tunnels, was the statue of Jesus on top of a mountain that seems to be the trademark of Rio. It is a figure looking down on the city with its arms outstretched to the side. I'd expected to see this, but I'd also expected that it would be more impressive than it was. It is not very big, and it does not dominate the skyline the way it does in pictures I have seen.



Cristo Redentor, Rio de Janeiro, Brasil from Wikipedia 2023

As I now understand the geography here, Rio is built on a sort of corner of land, with the Atlantic Ocean to both its south and a large bay to its east. Along the side facing east is the downtown, which I suppose I'll be going to tomorrow for the meeting. Along the side facing south are two magnificent beaches, Copacabana and Ipanema. The city comes right up to these beaches with decent sized buildings, stores, hotels, and so forth. My hotel, called Mar Ipanema Hotel, is on a main shopping street running parallel to the beach and two blocks back from it. It's a bustling city, even here near the beach, although occasional pedestrians are barefoot or in swimsuits.

The hotel is nothing fancy, but it is more than adequate, with two single beds, a window air conditioner, and plenty of channels on the TV. Considering that it is in the heart of a famous city and only two blocks from a famous beach, its \$60 price (if I truly do have the exchange rate right) is more than reasonable. This even includes breakfast.

Shortly after I arrived in the room, I got a phone call. I thought it might be someone about the meeting, but instead it was a reporter for a local financial newspaper, wanting to interview me. We agreed to meet at 2:00, after I'd had a chance to settle in. I freshened up, checked my e-mail, and got the latest news from CNN. I also got another call, this one from the organizers of the meeting telling me when I would be picked up tomorrow.



Mar Ipanema Hotel from Web 2023

My reporter was named Francisco. He apologized for his poor English, and he brought along two other men to the interview, one to translate and the other to take pictures. We sat in the lobby of the hotel and talked for at least a half hour, after which the photographer, who had tired of taking pictures of us talking, posed me in a couple of places. I hope I'll get to see the article.

I then went out for a walk, mostly to see the beach. First, though, I followed the advice I'd been given and stripped myself of anything valuable. I put my wedding ring in my backback. I put all my credit cards and U.S. cash from my wallet into my passport case and put that into the room safe. I put the passport itself (since I'd read that I should always carry it) into a pouch around my neck under my shirt. And I put my larger Brazilian notes with the passport, keeping just the smaller ones in my wallet for any thieves. Conveniently, I guess, the key to the room safe is on a chain, so I wore it too around my neck. And then I ventured out.

The walk was fortunately uneventful. I went to the beach, where there was a broad sidewalk between the sand and the street. I walked several blocks east along it, stopping repeatedly to watch people. There were plenty of people there, but it wasn't really crowded. Very few were swimming, and someone had told me that Brazilians go to the beach mainly to show off their bodies. If so, that could explain why most of the bodies I saw were attractive and in good shape. I was glad I was dressed.

Near the sidewalk there were volleyball nets installed in many places, and all of these were in use. One of my longest stops was to watch four girls play, all of them attractive and very good at the game. Other nets were in use by groups of guys, and sometimes both guys and girls. One had just guys who, I soon realized, were playing volleyball as though it was soccer. That is, they didn't use their hands, but instead served by kicking the ball, then volleyed with their heads, chests, and sometimes feet. Quite a different game.



Volleyball players in Ipanema, from Wikipedia 2023

At the edge of the sidewalk next to the sand there were occasional kiosks selling things. Most common was a drink served in a green coconut shell, with a straw. I didn't try to buy one then, but later, back nearer my hotel, I came across a stand selling "coco" drinks served in plastic cups, and I had one that might have been the same thing. The drink was simply the liquid from inside a coconut, freshly opened and poured into the cup for me as I watched. It was just mildly sweet and mildly flavorful, good but not worth going back for another, in my opinion.

After a few blocks of walking, the sights became repetitive, so I crossed the street and worked my way back to the hotel. Along the way I explored some side streets and various shops. There was nothing terrifically interesting, but there were a few things worth observing:

There were a fair number of men, either in some sort of uniform or in business suits, standing outside or just inside many businesses, watching over things. The uniformed men seemed to be guards of some sort. There was one of these at the beach dressed in an army uniform and carrying a gun, and I'm sure he was a guard. The ones outside of stores I was less sure of. And the ones in business suits were, I think, salesmen, ready to wait on customers as they appeared.

Inside one building, which had a lot of shops and was some sort of mall, I saw men in suits at both the top and bottom of an escalator leading up to the second floor. At a signal, it appeared that one of the men at the bottom stopped the down escalator, whereupon the man at the top assisted an old woman with a cane to climb onto it with her companion. Once they were safely aboard, there was another signal and the escalator started moving again. I thought that was a rather nice touch, except it seemed to me that they ought to have an elevator for such people. I rode the escalator up, to look around, and soon found that they did have an elevator around the corner, with a line of people waiting to use it. Then, when I returned to the escalator to ride down, just as I arrived, they stopped it again and simply walked away. I and others then walked down it like a stairway. In the end, I'm not sure what they were up to with the woman who had the cane.

In many places along the streets there are public telephones. Each one has a rounded blue plastic canopy over it, serving both to keep out some of the street noise and to keep the caller dry if it rains. Having just last weekend searched for a payphone in a downpour in Florida, I have to wonder why we can't have such a thing in the U.S.

I have the impression that the people here are physically more diverse than in most countries I've been in. I guess what I mainly mean is that their skin colors are more diverse, ranging evenly from white to black and everything in between. But I also think that their facial features may be more varied. In most other countries that I think of, I tend on a first visit to find myself thinking that, my goodness, there are an awful lot of, say, Chinese here in China, or Italians in Italy, or whatever. And for a time they all look alike to me, until I start to see the differences among them. But here, I feel that I'm seeing the differences from the start, and I don't have an impression of what a "Brazilian" would look like. I wonder if there is any factual basis for this, or if I'm just imagining it.

Saturday, Oct 6

Already my last day here. I'll be taking a taxi to the airport around 3:00. Right now, at 8:00 AM, I'm waiting to be picked up for a four-hour bus tour of the city that I booked last night.

Yesterday I also was to be picked up here at the hotel, at 8:20 AM by a driver who would take me to the site of the seminar. I went to the lobby at precisely 8:20 and waited, but nobody appeared. At about 8:45, I telephoned and, with help from the hotel staff, learned that their driver had picked up another participant but had left without me. He would be back for me in 25 minutes, as indeed he was. So, I arrived at the seminar after it had begun, and was profusely apologized to by the woman who met me there.

I had been wrong that the seminar would be in downtown Rio. It was quite a distance from the hotel, nonetheless, but it was in a nondescript neighborhood far back from the sea in both directions. The host organization, I later learned, was analogous to our National Association of Manufacturers, and its main location is in the national capital, Brasilia, not here. The seminar was being held here primarily because of the attractions of Rio for the participants.

The seminar was not all that well attended, I think, although of course I don't know what was expected. There were maybe thirty in the audience, and these included the dozen or so speakers. All but two of us spoke in Portuguese, and the other spoke Spanish, which apparently is similar enough to Portuguese not to need translation. So, the simultaneous translation, provided through earphones by two women in a glass booth at the back of the room, was almost entirely for my benefit, and for the audience when I spoke. This seemed a lot of trouble to go through for one speaker, especially when I was just one among many.

Fortunately, I would be speaking in the second session, not the first, so I had some time to get used to the setup. Mainly this meant getting used to listening to the translation through my earphones, focusing on it and ignoring the sound of the speaker. I was very impressed with the abilities of the translators, who seemed to keep up with the speakers extremely well, provided a very articulate translation, and even managed to inject some feeling into the process when appropriate. It is a remarkable skill.

The speakers included people from the host organization itself and from the ILO that was also sponsoring it, plus academics, representatives of business and nongovernmental organizations, and one person from the government who was addressed as Mr. Ambassador. My own talk seemed to go well, although it was hard to judge. There were four of us at the speakers' table for the session, and when I returned to my seat two of the others expressed their approval of what I had said. Of course, I later did the same for others, even when I didn't necessarily feel it, so who knows?

We broke for lunch, and I sat at a table with mostly the speakers from my session, including the chair of the session who turned out to be the director of the host organization. He mentioned that he had lived for some time as a youth in Brighton, MI, so we talked a bit about the wonders of Mt. Brighton. But mainly at lunch we all talked about the issues of the seminar, and I think I learned as much at lunch as I had from the talks.

The afternoon was to have two more sessions, one with yet more speakers and then one in which several previous speakers would sum up. As the latter was assembled, I was surprised when they asked from the podium that both the ambassador and I join them, even though we had not been listed for this function. I took that, too, as a sign that they must have liked what I said, although I was startled to find myself with the need to speak again without preparation. Fortunately, they put the ambassador and me last, and fortunately also I had taken some notes during the day, so by the time they got to me I had plenty to say. I thought it worked out rather well.

Afterwards the group broke up, and a driver returned me to my hotel. I ate dinner in the hotel restaurant, as I had the evening before. Both times I was the only customer, perhaps because I may have chosen to eat earlier than other guests, or perhaps because tourism has fallen off due to the economic slump and the fear of terrorism. Oddly, the hotel's restaurant was on its fourth floor with no signs advertising it except a small sign in the elevator, so it was evidently not intended for anyone but hotel guests. My dinners the two evenings were acceptable, with the high point being huge bowls of soup that I ordered as starters.

Sunday, October 7, Houston:

I'm now in the Continental Airlines President's Club in the Houston airport, a club that my membership in the Northwest club gets me into. It is far nicer than any Northwest club I've been in. I have about a five-hour wait before my final flight to Detroit. It looks like I may get my students' papers graded for Monday before I get home.

My tour yesterday was definitely worth the money (\$20), although I didn't think so at first. Once again, I found myself waiting in the hotel lobby to be picked up, and once again they were late. This time, though, there were others waiting for the same thing, and I was confident that I hadn't been forgotten. Sure enough, about fifteen minutes late a large bus arrived, already half full of guests from other hotels. It was very comfortable, even including a restroom at the back, which I suppose is probably standard for this sort of thing.

We drove north through the tunnels, just as I had going to the seminar, but this time we then headed east towards downtown Rio. Our first stop was the soccer stadium, which they are very proud of, although it didn't mean much to me. Soccer is very big here, of course – Brazil is routinely one of the top teams in the world, I think – and the stadium holds 135,000 spectators, if I got the number right. Certainly, it is bigger than Michigan Stadium. But we didn't go inside, so as a tourist attraction for non-Brazilians, it wasn't much.

Even less was our next stop: the parade ground that they use each year at Carnival. This was basically a street, 700 meters long, with grandstands along one side. I suppose others were able to imagine what it looked like during Carnival.

Our third stop was a cathedral. This was somewhat interesting, since it was very modern. It was a big, inverted cone, with four broad stained-glass windows extending almost to the top. After it, we drove through the oldest part of downtown Rio without stopping, passing some massive government buildings in the style of, I suppose, 18th century Europe. As I said, none of this yet was worth the \$20, except perhaps to assure me that I hadn't missed anything too wonderful in Rio.

But then we went to Sugar Loaf. This is a giant rock, or mountain if you want to call it that, extending up out of the sea at the entrance to the bay. I suppose it is shaped like a sugar loaf, which means nothing to me. I would describe it, not very accurately, as looking like about half of a giant thumb, sticking up at just a slight angle out of the water. The rock is sheer on all sides that I could see, with foliage just at the top. We got to it by riding in two cable cars, one after the other, each of which had a capacity of 75 people. The cable cars had been built by Italians back in the 60s or 70s, which may or may not be reassuring. Up close, they did appear to be extremely solid and well made.

At the top of Sugar Loaf, we had 35 minutes to wander around, and there was more to wander than I would have thought from a distance. There were nice paths working partway down the sloping top of the rock,



Rio de Janeiro Cathedral exterior from Wikipedia 2023



Sugarloaf Mountain, Rio de Janeiro, from Wikipedia 2023

winding through what was mostly a bamboo forest. But the best part was the view, or actually the views. In all directions it was impressive, whether you were looking out to sea and the islands that speckled the horizon, or back at different parts of the city.



Panoramic view of Rio de Janeiro from Sugarloaf from Wikipedia 2023

Best of all was the view of the mountain I mentioned earlier, with the statue of Christ on top of it. It is called Corcovado, and I no longer thought it was less than impressive. The problem before had been partly that I had seen it only from the side, but from here one could see the statue's outstretched arms, making it much more beautiful and meaningful. Furthermore, it no longer seemed so small, and it really did dominate the scene. Best, there were small clouds around the top of the mountain it was on, constantly shifting, so that the statue often looked like it was suspended in the sky above the city, rather than being on land. I took lots of pictures, trying to capture the different look of it as the clouds shifted.

That's about it. But I also learned one thing about Rio de Janeiro on this trip: the meaning and reason for its name. It means River of January, because the explorers from Europe – Portugal, I presume – found it in January. And they mistakenly thought that the bay they were entering was a river.

The ride back to the hotel took us along first Copacabana Beach and then Ipanema beach, but I didn't see much that I hadn't seen on my walk on Thursday. I did notice that Copacabana Beach had large banks of lights high up on poles, so I gather that the beach is used at night.

A couple of other things to mention that I had noticed earlier: I'm always interested in the cars, to see which companies are represented. Here in Rio I saw (and rode in) lots of Chevy's, and also saw even more Volkswagens and assorted Fiats and Fords. I saw an occasional Honda, as well as other Japanese and European brands. But I never saw a single Toyota.

The other thing to mention that I've somehow not is the trees. The streets of Rio, at least in the parts that I was in, are almost all lined and shaded with mature trees. When you look down the length of a street, what you see is a tunnel of green. The architecture of Rio is nothing special, but then you don't see it so much as you do all these trees. It is very nice.

Back at the hotel I changed my clothes, checked out, and took a taxi to the airport where I ate lunch before checking in and, eventually, departing. Security in Rio was the tightest I've seen, including questioning before check-in, at check-in, and then again on the jetway leading into the plane. Of course, there was also the usual X-ray and metal detector, after which they also frisked me head to toe, even though the machines had found nothing to object to. And they had me take out my laptop and turn it on, not once but twice. They were really trying to take no chances.