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Frugal Traveler

Seeing the World on a Budget



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\$100 Weekend in Rio de Janeiro

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Seth Kugel for The New York TimesA salesman with Matte Leão iced tea in one tank and lemonade in the other, on Ipanema Beach.

Filling your time during a cheap weekend in Rio de Janeiro would seem like a no-brainer: head to Ipanema beach on Saturday, spend a couple of bucks to rent a beach chair and a couple more on tempting snacks from roaming vendors. Rinse (in the on-beach showers) and repeat (on Sunday).

But if you want to eat actual meals, drink the local grog (ice-cold beer), listen to music and get around town, too, you're asking for trouble. The Brazilian real is at its strongest this century – the weekend I was there \$1 got you 1.57 reais – and by one consulting group's measure life for expatriates in Rio is more expensive than anywhere else in the Western Hemisphere, except São Paulo and New York. Tourists will feel that pain as well, especially when it comes to restaurant meals, taxis and entrance costs to attractions.

That made it a great candidate for a Frugal Traveler \$100 Weekend, in which I attempt to prove that \$100 in walking-around money is all you need for a great time anywhere in the world. (That excludes lodging, of course: If you don't have friends there and shy away from Couchsurfing, other hotel alternatives include the brand-new Z.Bra Hostel in chic Leblon or the Cama e Café bed and breakfast service.) Here is where my money went.

Friday Night



Seth Kugel for The New York Times The scene at Bar do Peixe in downtown Rio.

My crash pad – the couch of a female friend's apartment in the centrally located Urca neighborhood – fell through at the last minute, so I stayed with old friends in the lovely but distant Barra da Tijuca area. I thought that any attempt to use public transportation from there would prove disastrous but then I learned about the quick Barra Expresso bus, which takes you to the Ipanema subway stop in about 30 to 45 minutes and gives you a transfer to the subway for 3.80 reais (\$2.42). I couldn't help stopping into the Big Nectar juice stand near the subway where I bought a soursop juice for 4 reais and brought it along for the ride.

Visitors will find the subway, which now runs from Ipanema through Copacabana and to most attractions in the city center, easy to use. Signs are in English, and there are only two lines. Buses are trickier, but note that Google Maps works quite well to show you which lines to take, and you can pay in cash as you get on.

After getting settled, my plan was to head to a dive bar in Rio's crumbling but lively downtown for beer and dinner, then meet another old friend, Carolina Barreto, for her birthday. I got off the train in the Cinelândia stop, where streets were packed with cheap outdoor bars and even cheaper drinks from entrepreneurs hawking beer by the *latinha* (350 milliliter cans, two reais) or the *latão* (473 milliliter cans, two for 5 reais). Music from samba to Brazilian funk wafted in from various directions.

My destination was the Bar do Peixe (the Fish Bar), which the restaurant critic for the weekly magazine *Veja Rio*, Fábio Codeço, had recommended to me as a top dive bar. It was a huge, bustling affair, stretching out over at least three storefronts with plastic tables encroaching on the narrow street and packed with the Rio residents that tourists don't always see: normal people (as opposed to the superhuman, impossibly toned crowds in trendier neighborhoods.)



Seth Kugel for The New York Times A samba band at Parada da Lapa.

After about 15 minutes, I scored a streetside table, ordered a 4-real half-liter of Skol beer and the cheapest fish on the menu, a plate of freshly fried, butterflied sardines for 10 reais. Aside from the two times that a stinking garbage truck came within a foot or so of my chair, it was a great meal.

Next, I was to meet Carolina and her friends at Parada da Lapa, a samba club that's walking distance from Bar do Peixe. Carolina had assured me that the place was frugal enough for my budget, and she was right: the cover was 20 reais but included 15 reais worth of drinks (read: one caipirinha cocktail and two beers, plenty for me) and two live bands. I made my way home by late-night bus at 1:30 a.m. – a long haul, but worth it.

Friday total: 57.10 reais. Remaining: 99.90.

Saturday

I rode the Barra Expresso back to town the next day to hit the weekly 11 a.m. crafts market on Rua General Glicério in Laranjeiras, a leafy neighborhood that is a 15-minute walk from the Largo do Machado subway.



Seth Kugel for The New York Times Chorinho musicians at a crafts fair on Rua General Glicério.

Though the crafts are nice and the “pastéis” — fried dough filled with meat or cheese — are delicious with sugar cane juice (5 reais for the combo), the highlight of the market was a group of string, percussion and wind instruments playing upbeat yet calming chorinho in the middle of the crowd.

An older couple struck up a conversation with me about my fancy camera (Canon 7D digital SLR), and I ended up joining them for the rest of the afternoon. We went on to Santa Teresa, the Bohemian hilltop neighborhood where we stopped at their favorite spot, the Bar do Serginho, and the quirky Atelier Chamego Bonzolandia, a trolley-shaped streetside workshop where Getúlio Damado makes art from trash. I bought an anatomically correct dog made from an old shampoo bottle, a corkscrew and other doodads for 10 reais.

I always try to fit in a little high culture into a \$100 weekend. In New York, that meant a Shakespeare performance. In Paris, a play at La Comédie Française. In Rio, I thought I had found the perfect event: a piano concert, utterly free, part of a regular January-to-May series called **Música no Museu (Music in the Museum)**. Turns out, however, that this week’s event was not in a museum, but at the Portuguese consulate, which does not admit concertgoers in sweaty T-shirts and shorts bearing a shampoo-and-corkscrew dog. I wasn’t let in.

So I went for the low culture, dining in a bar called Cachambeer in the distant Zona Norte, the northern zone of the city where few tourists go. I went by subway, but it's much easier to go there via the 457 bus, which goes straight from Ipanema and Copacabana to Cachambeer's very block. When I got there, it was packed — Cachambeer was participating in Comida di Buteco, the bar food festival that sweeps many cities in Brazil this time of year. I got out of there for only 28 reais — for a few beers and two appetizers — but mostly because I bribed the waiter for some free food when he wanted to move me to make room for a large group. Desperate budgets require desperate measures.

Saturday: 76.20 reais. Remaining: 23.70

Sunday



Seth Kugel for The New York Times Views of the Ipanema neighborhood and sea beyond from the Cantagalo favela.

For many years visitors to Rio have had the option of taking a “favela tour”, a guided walk through the labyrinthine hillside slums long ruled by drug gangs but almost legendary sources of artistic and musical talent. Exploring them alone was considered folly, but several are now under control of “Police Pacification Units” and are — police officers and local residents agree — safe to visit.

And they are incredible to visit, too, I might add. The Santa Marta favela is the most popular — there's even a tourist map in English and an information booth at the entrance, but I went to Cantagalo, right next to Ipanema, where I was planning to hit the beach later. A sparkling new elevator ferries residents (and visitors) the equivalent of 23 stories up, depositing them in the middle of random winding

alleys and staircases with electric wires crisscrossing everywhere. For anyone – especially anyone who has gazed up at the hillside slums from below for years but never dared enter – it’s incredible. I wandered by neighbors chatting, people shopping (“How much for the watermelon?”) and children playing marbles; none gave me a second look unless I greeted them, and then they were almost heartbreakingly kind. When I asked a man named André where the best view of the city below was; he simply pulled me into his house and showed me the stunning mountain-ocean-lagoon panorama from his unfinished upper floor.

After a quick lunch of acarajé (a black-eyed pea fritter topped with shrimp and all kinds of other goodies) and tapioca cake, I headed to Ipanema beach to end my weekend in the sun, surrounded by the iconic Rio beach scenes of tiny bikinis, amazing no-hands soccer-volleyball and a social scene so bustling that many people never even bother to sit down.

I didn’t know anybody, though, and with enough money for either a beach chair or a drink, I opted for the latter, spread out my T-shirt on the sand and plopped down on it. Guiga had told me that any man who sits on a towel will instantly be pegged as a tourist: the horror! They’d have to turn to other evidence – like my lily-white torso – to smoke me out.

With my remaining change, I flagged down a vendor with a metal tin over each shoulder. Everyone on the beach knows what they’re selling: ice cold Matte Leão iced-tea in one, and lemonade in the other. It’s a choose-your-own-ratio Arnold Palmer, and it tastes better than a beach chair any day.

Sunday: 22.80 reais. Left over: 0.90