

Rio de Janeiro: keeping safe



Safety in Rio de Janeiro is an issue most travelers are aware of before they get to Brazil. It is said that many visitors arrive with money concealed in their shoes and an elaborate system of hiding valuables to ensure they don't get mugged the minute they step through customs. While it is true that Rio has a higher level of crime than, say, Copenhagen, reports of it being like the Wild West are (thankfully) exaggerated. Nevertheless, here are some tips for staying out of bother during your trip to Rio for the 2006 IMS Annual Meeting and XEBP.

Common sense and vigilance

Rio de Janeiro's reputation as a dangerous place is not entirely undeserved, but it would be a mistake to allow worries about your personal safety to interfere with your enjoyment of your trip. The most common problem faced by tourists is petty theft, but even this can be avoided by following some obvious guidelines below. Most actual violence is drug-related, and confined to the *favelas*. You should take sensible precautions, rather than be in a state of panic.

Assaltos

If you are unlucky enough to be the victim of an *assalto*, or hold-up, try to remember that it is your possessions, rather than you that is the target. Do not resist: it's not worth it. Just hand over what is demanded and walk away. Of course, you should take out travel insurance before you leave home, and consider carefully whether you need to bring laptops and cameras at all.

This may be stating the blindingly obvious, but avoid isolated areas or poorly-lit streets at night.

Furtos

More common than being held up is being pickpocketed. A *furto* is more likely to happen if you look like a tourist, have a flashy bag, camera, or jewelry. Dress to blend in with the locals: many Brazilians wear shorts and t-shirts all year round.

If you're carrying something valuable, put it in a cheap bag. Cameras dangling from the wrist are easy targets. Laptops are harder to conceal because of their size: if you have to carry it to and from the meeting, remember to back up your data before your journey!

Be discreet when paying for anything, and carry the minimum amount of cash that you will need. If you're going to the

beach, don't bother with a bag: a towel, sunscreen and a small amount of cash will do. If you're eating out or going shopping, many stores and restaurants take credit cards.

Use the safe in your hotel room for your passport and any valuables. You can carry a photocopy of the relevant passport page for identification purposes.

Moving around the city

As a general rule, even if you don't feel it, act confidently. Plan your route so you know where you are going and what you are doing. Try to avoid looking lost or confused.

As stated above, stick to busy, well-lit streets. Use taxis to get around, even for short trips. Your hotel, or the restaurant you're eating in, will be able to order one for you. (See below for more on taxis.)

Below: the view of Rio at night from the top of Corcovado, where the statue of Cristo Redentor stands. You can get two views for the price of one by catching the train up the mountain in the late afternoon, watch the sun set and the twinkling lights come on over the city. Photo: Stéphan Duchesne/Trekearth



You should be vigilant at all the main tourist sites [*we'll bring you some information on Rio's must-see highlights in the next issue*]. This includes the buses and taxis that serve them, and everywhere on Sundays when police presence in districts like Centro is limited.

If someone accidentally spills something on you in the street and offers to clean it, say thank you, and walk away. They may have a partner waiting for a chance to pick your pocket while you are distracted with the action.

Getting from the airport to your hotel

Transportation from airport to hotel is easy: arrange a taxi ride at the airport, at one of the booths next to the customs exit gates (pay at the counter).

There are two types of taxi companies that operate at the airport: special and regular taxis. We recommend the special taxis, either *Cootramo* (blue cars) or *Transcoopas* (red). A one-way ticket from the airport to Copacabana (where most of the meeting hotels are) costs around R\$67 (US\$31). Taxi drivers are generally gentle and honest, but rarely speak English: it might be a good idea to have your destination written down in advance.

If you are staying in one of the Othon hotels (Rio Othon, Savoy, Lancaster and Olinda), there is shuttle bus to and from the airport. This must be pre-booked: see the meeting website for details.

Getting from your hotel to IMPA

During the conference, transportation will be provided from hotels to the conference site at IMPA in the morning before the beginning of the activities, and back to hotels at the end of the day.

If this schedule doesn't suit you, or you miss the conference bus, you can take a taxi: a special taxi from Copacabana

to IMPA will cost approximately R\$25 (US\$12). There is also a public bus service, but we would recommend that unless you are familiar with Rio, you should use the conference transportation or a taxi.

If you do use the buses, don't do so alone, and avoid the window seats and the back rows. Keep the exact change in your hand, so you don't have to fiddle with your wallet (which, obviously, is in your front pocket, right?) or your moneybelt.

Police

Though police officers in the street will try to be helpful, most do not speak languages other than Portuguese. If you need to report that something has been stolen for insurance purposes, go directly to the tourist police (DEAT). The DEAT offices, open 24 hours a day, are located in Leblon, opposite the Casa Grande and Scala theaters. The DEAT police officers are used to dealing with tourists' concerns; they speak English and efficiently process reports of theft or other incidents.

Delegacia de Atendimento ao Turista - DEAT
Av. Afrânio de Mello Franco, s / nº - Leblon
22430-060 Rio de Janeiro - Brasil

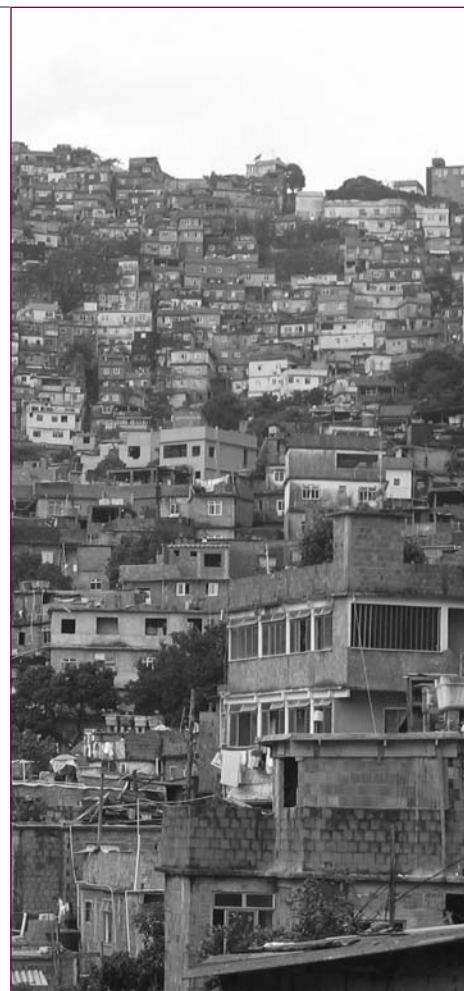
Tel: (55 21) 2511-5112 / 3399-7170

Health

Rio de Janeiro has a number of internationally respected hospitals, clinics and doctors. However treatment is expensive so visitors are strongly advised to take out medical trip insurance before traveling to Brazil.

Feeling better?

We hope that this article has allayed any lingering concerns you may have had over safety and security. If you haven't done so already, you can register for the meeting at <http://www.imstat.org/meetings/ims2006/>



Above: Rio's largest "popular community": Rocinha favela in São Conrado. Rocinha has anything up to 250,000 residents. Favelas are complex and vibrant communities. According to www.ipanema.com, there are a few misconceptions about them, like the assumption that this is where the bad guys live. Most residents of favelas are people that work hard for their money, and have perfectly honest jobs.

In recent years the Favela Bairro project has been urbanizing each favela, while setting physical limits for its growth. Streets are paved; houses in areas subject to mud slides are pulled down; public squares, community centers and creches are built. Even favelas that have not been urbanized yet have basics like electricity and running water ... and satellite TV!

The best way to understand a favela is a first-hand experience: local travel agencies can book a favela tour for you, which will usually include a visit to a resident's home, and sometimes even a stop for a quick bite at the local boteco (bar).

Visiting a favela in Rio is considered a highlight by many international visitors, who are often surprised at the warm reception they get from residents.

Photo: Phil Torney/Worldisround.com