

EXPLORE

PASSION PLAY

Flowering bougainvillea in the coastal town of Itacaré in Bahia. Opposite: Dancers take the floor at a live samba night at Rio Scenarium in the city's Lapa district.



FEEL

THE

BEAT



From samba to bossa nova to regional rhythms, Brazil is a melting pot of intoxicating music. Each genre, deeply rooted in local culture, also has its own sensual dance style, inspiring visitors to shake a leg from Bahia to Rio.

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For country music, forró is a bit short on “do-si-do”. Its roots lie in the Brazilian sertão, the dry scrubland of the interior, a landscape of cattle ranches and men in pickups. Traditionally played by an accordion, a zabumba or hand-held African drum, and a cowbell or triangle, it is rollicking syncopated music, and a lively two-step dance, with the kind of lyrics that wouldn’t sound out of place at the Grand Ole Opry. But there the similarity ends.

In a forró bar in Itacaré, a small coastal town in Bahia, Brazil’s great north-eastern state, I am watching several couples on the dance floor. They weren’t line dancing. This was Brazil where dancing – and I am sure the expression was coined here – really is “a vertical expression of a horizontal desire”. In this part of the world, dancing is the key to natural selection, so central to Brazilian mating rituals that bad dancers, unable to find partners, never have the opportunity to pass on their bad dancing genes. Everyone in Brazil dances as though they were the love child of Gene Kelly and a Vegas lap dancer.

Driven along by an overactive fellow on the cowbell, the band was working up a storm, and the couples took to the dance floor joined at the hip, or more precisely, at the pelvis. Everyone danced barefoot, leaving their flip-flops on the edge of the dance floor. In a blur of intricate buttock-twitching rhythms, the dancers straddled one another’s thighs. Out of a sense of decency I felt I should be looking at the floor. Out of a sense of amazement, I couldn’t take my eyes off those hips.

Thus distracted, I was ambushed by a girl from São Paulo. I wanted to explain that my own gene pool, drawn entirely from Northern Irish farmers, was not really suited to forró. But I could see she didn’t want my life story. It all happened so fast. One minute we were strangers. The next we seemed to have reached a level of physical intimacy that many married couples would envy. And the next I was dumped for someone more accustomed to moving their feet when they danced.

Music is the lifeblood of Brazil. And it is everywhere – in the thunder of samba rolling down from the favelas in preparation for Carnival, in those frenetic accordion-driven dance steps of forró, in the complex rhythms a child is absent-mindedly drumming on a cardboard box, on the swaying terraces of the great Maracanã soccer stadium, in the compelling wall of sound of a bloco anthem, in the sound of amorous tropicalismo wafting down a beach from a car radio, or late at night in São Paulo, an open window, a silhouette, the heartfelt voices of Tom Jobim and Elis Regina, drifting out into the night. Music is central to Brazil’s identity. It is who Brazilians are. It is the genius of Brazil.

The astonishing variety of genres, each with its own dance style, can be almost impenetrable for the newcomer. There are traditional desafio song duels. There are ritualistic afoxés, festive marchas, frenetic frevos, and intense choro. There’s the harsh sound of mangue beat from Recife. There’s axé music, which swept across Brazil with artists like Carlinhos Brown and Daniela Mercury, there is Caribbean-flavoured lambada, sexy baile funk, syncopated samba and sweet bossa nova, and there is the great polyrhythmic spectacle of the Carnival groups with 300 drummers working interlocked patterns. And that is just naming a few.

Whatever the genre, there are two central qualities of Brazilian music: words and rhythm. The first is not obvious to the non-Portuguese-speaking visitor, though those sensual sibilant sounds are seductive even if you don’t know the language. But pause occasionally to ask for a translation. Whether commercial pop or serious jazz, the lyrics of Brazilian music are poetry, and many of its composers are working a day shift as acclaimed poets. The second can be appreciated by anyone with a beating heart. African and Latin rhythms come together in Brazil in astounding, compelling, intricate patterns. It’s the reason almost all the many genres of local music come with their own dance steps.

POETRY IN MOTION
Clockwise from far left: Hip-swivelling forró at a beach bar in Caraíva; a cocktail made with pitanga, the Brazilian cherry, and lemon in Caraíva; a Rio Carnival reveller on the streets of Copacabana; resting dancers at a forró bar in Trancoso; a couple sharing a tender moment on the beach at Trancoso; a musician at the Heaven on Earth street party in Rio’s Santa Teresa neighbourhood.

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SOUL OF BRAZIL
Baiana women in traditional dress at an afoxé procession during the Afro-Brazilian cultural festival of Yemanjá in February. Opposite: Reveller Sol Lelis at the festival in Salvador, Bahia; flower-bearing, white-clad festival attendees; a drummer at an afoxé gathering; traditionally dressed Baiana women.



In Rio, if you want a flavour of Brazilian music, head for Lapa, the city's oldest bairro, and home to its musical traditions. A hundred years ago it was famous for cabarets and brothels, for gambling dens and seedy taverns. Now, after long decades of decline, Lapa has reinvented itself with a raft of trendy new bars and music clubs opening in the old 19th-century mansions. Weekends, it is one great music-fuelled street party. For something different – cool Latin jazz, perhaps – head up to leafy Santa Teresa, or down to Ipanema, strung between the lagoon and those endless beaches.

In Copacabana, one of my favourite venues is Bip Bip, a tiny bar just a block from the ocean. It is the antidote to the crowds and the high energy of Lapa. Most evenings, a small group of acoustic musicians sit in, jamming round the various styles of music from samba to bossa nova to chorinho, or choro. There's no wait service; punters help themselves to a cold beer from the fridge or mix their own Caipirinha at the counter. When you leave, you tell the owner what you have had. It doesn't get any more laid-back than this, and there is hardly a tourist in sight.

In Brazil they speak of *mistura fina*, an exquisite mixture, when referring to the country's multi-racial character. It applies equally to the music, and nowhere is that more evident than in Bahia, the province that many call the soul of Brazil. European colonisation began here, in 1549, soon followed by an influx of African slaves. Despite an initial hiccup when the Caeté people ate the first bishop, Salvador da Bahia went on to become the capital of the new nation, long before anyone thought much of Rio. Its Carnival is still a far better street party than Rio's.

REAL IN RIO

Clockwise from far left: A guitarist plays choro at Bip Bip in Copacabana; seafood dishes by chef Camilo Vanazzi at Emílio restaurant in Emilianio Rio; street musicians performing at the Selarón Steps in Rio's Lapa neighbourhood; a view of Ipanema and Leblon beaches; vintage vinyl stand on the streets of Laranjeiras in Rio; a suite with verandah at Emilianio Rio.

Some years ago in Salvador, I was enjoying a cigar with Father Pedro in the doorway of the Church of São Francisco as a Carnival band of drummers came up the street. Stripped to the waist and glistening with sweat, the drummers were surrounded by a throng of dancers. No one was immune to the pulsating beat: old men on sticks, widows in black, tiny toddlers, women with perms and handbags, middle-aged men with reputations and mortgages – they were swept along by the drummers, throwing their arms aloft, shaking their hips, cavorting licentiously as they jived past the church. Father Pedro drew on his cigar. "You see enough in Carnival week," he said, "to pack the confessionals for the rest of the year." He shrugged. "It is Brazil – music is our drug." Then he stubbed his cigar out and stepped out into the street to join the dancers. **T**



THE FINE PRINT

In the Lapa neighbourhood of Rio, look for Rio Scenarium (rioscenarium.com.br), a rambling former mansion full of quirky antiques with live music – chiefly samba and choro. For more locals and fewer gringos, head for Carioca da Gema (barcariocadagema.com.br) or Sacrilégio (sacrilégio.com.br). In Copacabana, don't miss the Emilianio Hotel (emiliano.com.br), which hosts intimate music evenings in its wood-lined Emilianio room. As for Bip Bip, it's at 50 Rua Almirante Gonçalves. No website.

Check out Rio's samba schools on the League's website (liesa.globo.com). Their weekly rehearsals – known as ensaios – are more like parties, with live music, drinks and dancing. Rehearsals start in August for the Carnival in late February.

Your first stop in Salvador da Bahia, named as a City of Music by Unesco, should be the City of Music Museum (cidadedamusicaabahia.com.br) to explore the musical heritage of the Northeast. For the latest events, and tours of the city's nightlife, including information about Salvador's fabulous Carnival, check out Bahia-Online (salvadorbahia.com).