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Über meine Stipendienzeit

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Application and Communication

2023 was my lucky year, the year in which I finally could do a DAAD internship. It was also my last chance to do so, as I was graduating in October and the program only calls for undergraduate students. It was not the first time, that I had tried to intern with this program. Since our study coordinator had informed us about this opportunity via his summer internship newsletter in 2020, I applied each year and got a place, only for the internship to be canceled due to the Covid pandemic. But not this year. When I received the email with the placement offer in February, I was delighted to read that I had been chosen to go to Rio de Janeiro, to support Prof. Marcelo Fantappie's Laboratory at the Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ).

Through March, Marcelo and I communicated via email, quickly agreeing that my internship should happen from June on for three months, when the weather in Rio is dry and sunny but not yet unbearably hot. In April we did a Skype call to meet each other in person and talk about his research, my future project, as well as the organizational matters of my visit. I will be honest, the prospect of going to Rio de Janeiro had appeared to me like an exciting adventure, but unfortunately, many of my friends and family reacted with worry and incomprehension in light of Rio's dangerous and violent reputation, also causing me to worry. However, after personally speaking to Marcelo and reaching out to past DAAD interns, my concerns had diminished considerably.

My Preparations

Only when I had booked my flight to Rio my preparations truly started.

I consulted our local tropical diseases doctor and was vaccinated against yellow fever and rabies, as well as a couple more things. Luckily I had gone there early enough, as some of the vaccines needed to be injected several times over the course of several weeks. To my surprise, neither Malaria prophylaxis nor Dengue vaccine were given to me, as the doctor advised me to simply not be bitten by mosquitos. With my current knowledge, I can confidently say that not being bitten by mosquitos in Rio is impossible. They are everywhere and I imagine them maliciously laughing when they smell my overpriced German anti-mosquito spray at night...

I tried to find a shared flat for my stay in Rio, in Portuguese they are graciously called "Republicas", but was unsuccessful in my venture using Facebook groups and various websites. Finally, I decided to rent an Airbnb for the first month and sort the living situation out when I arrived.

The biggest challenge I faced was getting a visa to Brazil. As a German citizen, it is possible to stay without a visa for three months, which means that most visitants do not need a visa. However, since my internship was planned for three months and I wanted to seize the opportunity of being on the other side of the Atlantic and travel a bit, I needed a visa. In hindsight, I really cannot recommend this. Obtaining this visa

was tedious, frustrating, incredibly stressful, and filled the time before my departure to Brazil with dread instead of joyful anticipation. It is definitively not worth the stress, tears, and sleepless nights for just a few weeks. If you are planning your internship and would like to travel, I would highly recommend communicating with your professor in Brasil and arranging the length of the internship accordingly to accommodate for one or two weeks of free time inside the 90-day visa-free period allowed. However, I will also put an account of my odyssey to a visa in an annex to this report for further information.

The week before my flight I was surprised to learn that the bank in our cute middle-sized town did not deal with Reais, the Brazilian currency. Instead, I was advised to exchange money locally in certified exchange places or to simply use my credit card. This worked well for me.

To conduct business, Brazilians have a number called CPF, which is as important, if not more, as the ID. Many stores ask for a CPF when you buy something. All online purchases, regardless if you are booking a flight or reserving a cinema ticket, request a CPF and often cannot be done without it. Only towards the end of my stay, I found out how easy it is to get a CPF. One only has to fill out a document, take a picture, and send an email. I should have done that much earlier, as preparation, so learn from my mistake and get that mysteriously important CPF! 😊

So, and now we come to the fun part:

Living in Rio de Janeiro!

Housing: As I have already mentioned, I expected to find a shared flat with other students and become part of a republic as soon as I had better access in Rio. Well, no. Speaking with my lab mates I learned several things: It is not usual for Brazilians to share flats as we do in Germany. Children seem to often stay with their parents until they have a serious partner, get married, or have a paying job. Additionally, many of the students live with relatives or rent a single room in a retiree's home. As a result, republicas are rare, do not necessarily want short-term renters, or are localized in the best neighborhoods of the city.

Speaking of, which are good neighborhoods? My professor strongly advised me to find a place in the south of Rio, and from my experiences here I do agree. Not only has the South fewer favelas than the North, but it also has better transportation systems, historic buildings, and beautiful beaches. Roughly put, everything south of Lapa is nice: Santa Teresa (depending on which part), Gloria, Catete, Flamengo, Botafogo, Urca, Leme, Copacabana, Ipanema, and Leblon. Tentatively one could say, the more south, the more expensive.

I particularly enjoyed the neighborhood around Largo do Machado, as it was a busy but cute place surrounded by restaurants, shops, and many different supermarkets.

Also, there was a market on Wednesdays and Saturdays, a cinema, a dancing school, and access to the park along the coast for jogging. Located in the middle of the south zone, the beaches and city center were equally accessible.

My housing situation, unfortunately, developed into a kind of odyssey. I lived in several houses that I had found via Airbnb, and every two or three weeks I had to move again. I have shared a beautiful vintage apartment in a historic house with a photographer and his housekeeper, lived in a crumbling castle owned by a French Hippie and his cats on the hills of Santa Teresa, I stayed in the room of the moved-out daughter of a retired Carioca artist and her dog and resided in a green room so tiny that my suitcase had to be stored in the living room, as it did not fit. I had hoped for a cozy place, where I could find like-minded people of my age and maybe even some friends. But only in my last month, I found this in Chez Zany. Luckily stumbled upon this place on AirBnB, it is a mixture of guest house and WG, with seven rooms for long-time renters as well as tourists, a big kitchen, a living room, a wonderful terrace, and a great atmosphere. You notice, I really liked this place, as to me it felt more like a home than a hostel, which might also be due to my great housemates Nina and Marine.

Security: Rio is a dangerous city. Living here, I heard stories of colleagues and acquaintances who lost valuables due to pickpocketing or even armed robbery (“asaltos”). However, I found it impossible to live in continuous fear and suspicion of my surroundings, which is why after my first days in the city I decided to take a leap of faith and actually live. Of course, that still meant following certain rules of common sense, such as not going into favelas, not displaying my valuables in public, not leaving my stuff unsupervised on the beach, not visiting parks or remote areas when it was dark, not going into the woods alone, rather taking an Uber home than walking darkness, being aware of my surroundings, etc etc. Things that helped me relax: Having a belt bag certainly helped, as well as leaving my passport at home and always carrying a few Reais in cash with me, just in case.

Money and cost of living: With my credit card and exchanging Euros for Reais from time to time, I got by very well. At most places, I could pay by card, but it is also good to have a bit of cash as street vendors and markets often require it. Many Brazilians use a money app called Pix, but I did not have access to it. When I asked about my observation that some stores had different prices for cash and card payments, I was told that this was due to the bank fee for card payments, and there was nothing to do about it.

When I saw the amount of the Scholarship the DAAD would give to me, I was surprised, as it seemed very high to me, but now it appears more appropriate. Rio is an expensive city to live in, with monthly rents of 400-700 Euros, followed by high costs of transportation (150-200 Euros per month) for metro and Uber. Groceries and restaurants are comparatively cheap, but small amounts sum up. I was happy to notice that the budget allows for day trips around Rio, as well.

Communication: Finding a SIM card in Rio is not that easy for a foreigner. Most places sell SIM cards, but to activate it one needs a CPF and a Brazilian document. I found a VIVO store in Botafogo Praia Shopping Mall, which activated and charged a prepaid SIM for me with my passport. When a friend wanted to do the same the following month, she was told that she could not get a prepaid card as a foreigner, but was sold a contract. One of my roommates had an e-sim, which was more expensive, but also less complicated. All in all, there are possibilities, but it is a bit random as to what will work and what not.

Transportation: Rio has a relatively modern and safe metro system, mainly through the south zones. The fare is 6.90R (~1,40 Euros) per travel and unfortunately, there are no student discounts or monthly abos. Taking the bus is a bit cheaper, but also more chaotic. The buses show their fares on the front window, normally 4,30R (~1Euro) for the city buses. As they belong to different companies, which do not necessarily cooperate with each other, changing means of transportation might mean paying again. The buses do not have a fixed schedule but operate like the pirate codex in *Pirates of the Caribbean*: rather rough guidelines than rules. One has to wave for the bus to stop and pull a cord. The various degrees of brokenness of the busses do not stop the driver from going from 0 to 100 between every stop. To the university, I took two buses, which took approximately 1 hour from door to door. The app Moovit was a huge help in navigating through this gigantic city. In the south zone, many ways can be made walking, especially the zone along the coast is well developed for strolling around or riding a bike. For this, there is the option to sign up for the rental bike system ITAUbike, which has bike stations distributed around the whole city.

Food: The Brazilian Food in Rio is generally comprised of meat, beans, and rice in varying constellations. The most famous version of this is Feijoada, a stew of various meats with black beans, which is traditionally eaten on Fridays. Another pillar of Rios food culture is the so-called Lanchonetes, small stores that can be found everywhere, that sell small baked goods filled with meats or cheeses called salgados, and often freshly prepared fruit juices as well. It is not easy to find vegan options, as this is a lifestyle that is still establishing itself in Rio, and most vegetarian things contain cheese. There are a few vegan restaurants, but they are considerably more expensive than the average restaurant. One of the culinary things I enjoyed most here is the vast fruit and vegetable options on the market. It was a delight going to the market and choosing something unknown to try, as well as buying deliciously ripe tropical fruits for little money. One thing the Brazilians have mastered is how to make sweets with condensed milk. I recommend trying Brighadeiro, a chocolate-condensed milk praline with an optional strawberry at its core. Trying different Caipirinhas should also not be missing. Often you can choose the fruits and herbs for your Caipi (eg. Mango+ginger, Dragonfruit, Pineapple-mint, the type of alcohol (Cachaca or Vodka), and the type of sweetener (sugar, honey, or condensed milk). They are delicious!

Music & Dance: Brazilians love life music. Especially on weekends markets, places, and restaurants have musicians playing samba or forró music. I enjoyed these

communal celebrations of Brazilian culture a lot. For dancing forró praça São Salvador in Catete offers free music every Friday evening. The most famous place for Samba is Perda do Sal, where musicians perform every Monday and Friday evening. As the city's designated party area, Lapa contains an astonishing number of bars and clubs with a vivid but not completely undanerous nightlife. To learn Brazilian Zouke I took a few classes at the dancing school Cada do Jimmy in Catete.

Climate: Since Rio is in the southern hemisphere, it was Brazilian winter during my internship. However, this mainly was noticeable in the early sunsets. Already around 5 pm dusk set in. When I arrived in June, the days were sunny and mild with temperatures around 25°C during the day, fresh nights, and as good as no rain. With time it rained more and more, until in September there were huge temperature jumps with one day at 33°C and the next day rainy cold 14°C.

Language: In preparation for my internship I did a Portuguese course, which definitely was a good decision. Rio is one of the more international cities in Brazil, so people who speak English can be found, especially in the southern zone. However, it is not normal for Cariocas to speak English. For instance, of the seven people in my lab four spoke English with me. In my first weeks I often got by with Spanish, as most Portuguese understand it, though do not speak it, but forced to practice by necessity, my Portuguese skills improved rapidly. Additionally, I regularly visited language exchange meetings organized by Mundolingo to practice and socialize.

Daytrips: There is so much to explore in Rio. Even after almost four months in this city, I cannot say I have seen everything. Of course, there are the classical tourist destinations, such as Cristo Redentor, Pão de Açúcar, or Parque Lage, as well as the famous city beaches Praia da Ipanema, Copacabana, and Leme, which are nice but astonishingly full on weekends. For surfing many people take the metro to Barra da Tijuca beach, Rio's longest beach, but my favorite was Prahina, a more wild and uncommercial beach. Additionally, Rio offers exciting hikes and climbs, ranging from easy 1h walks such as Pedra Bonita or Dois Irmaos, to heavy climbs up Pedra Gavea or the Trilha Transcarioca. Also, the gigantic forrest Floresta da Tijuca offers interesting flora and fauna as well as waterfalls. The city itself has a lot to offer, as well. The bohemian neighborhood of Santa Teresa with its crumbling castles and good views, the museums and art galleries in Centro, the calm luxurious neighborhood around the botanic garden... And if one gets tired of the noise and traffic of Rio, there is a ferry that is part of the public metro system that brings you in 1h to a quiet, traffic-free island in Guanabara Bay, called Paqueta.

Traveling in Brazil: Since there exists no long-distance railway system in Brazil, there are two options for traveling: Either by plane, which can be expensive, or by bus, which is cheap but takes time. While popular destinations such as Fortaleza, Manaus, or the Iguazu Waterfalls are a two- or even three-day bus drive away, one can easily take an 6h sleeper bus from Rio to São Paulo for the weekend. Although São Paulo is the cultural center of Brazil and the biggest city in Latin America, my favorite weekend getaways were to Ilha Grande and Cabo Frio, two tropical island areas within the state

of Rio de Janeiro, but well away from the city. In both cases, I took a bus to the area and then joined a boat to sail around the islands, stopping to enjoy beautiful white beaches, swim in amazing blue waters, and see fish, turtles, and once even a whale.

The Internship

The University: The Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro is one of the big universities of the country. According to my lab mates, studying here is popular, as it is cheaper than private universities and has a high teaching standard. While the faculties for politics, law, and history are located within the city center, the natural sciences and humanities are located on an island called Ilha Fundao. Access is possible via one of the bridges. I always took a bus or metro to Cidade Nova and changed there into either line 323 or 321. These two are the direct bus lines. While other lines also take you to the uni, they pass through and stop in Maré, a giant Favela around Avenida Brasil. The Cidade Universitaria is a huge but mostly empty campus of unconnected faculties. Because of the distances and missing sidewalks, it is often necessary to take a university bus if one wants to visit other faculties. Also, I was surprised by the number of crumbling building ruins scattered across the campus. Projects that had been started when their funding ran out and which now are too expensive to demolish.

The faculty in which my lab was located, called CCS, was dedicated to health sciences and also included pharmacy, biology, physics, medicine etc, and directly opposite the university hospital. It is not a nice building and requires some renovations. Old and broken, with clefts in the floor and missing ceiling panels, terrible toilets, and gaps in water service. However, there is a food court with several student restaurants, commodities such as a banking and post branch, a vaccination center, a key maker, a market with clothing, as well a surprising number of laboratories hidden within the labyrinthic corridors of CCS.

The Laboratory:

Although the Laboratory of Molecular Entomology is relatively small, it has all things necessary, including a super modern qPCR machine (its futuristic opening sound brightened my days :). The team of approximately 10 persons mainly consists of students of different programs and years. They were very welcoming and it was nice to have little chitchats during lunch, as well as discussions about dialects, music, and pop culture with another lab mate who is a sunshine. Not everyone spoke English, but this helped me to practice my Portuguese. Especially my postdoc, who has an astonishing memory of where everything is in the lab, was very supportive. Generally, I had the impression everyone was working on their part project in a quiet and concentrated atmosphere. As a lab, we took part in a faculty Festa Junina celebration and also had a celebratory laboratory lunch on my last day.

My Project:

First, I started to work on a project with Western blots, but (un)fortunately, this did not give as promising results as expected. So, my project was changed to establishing the baseline expression levels of several important proteins by quantifying their RNA. This I found much more interesting than the Western Blots, as I had made lots of Western blots for my bachelor thesis, but I never before had worked with RNA. I learned how to dissect mosquitoes under the microscope, how to isolate RNA, how to reverse transcribe, and performed several qPCRs. When I started training my protocol I was very slow and sometimes even lost the genetic material. However, it was fun to be challenged and I soon could observe that my speed and accuracy in doing these tasks improved. In the end, it became a bit time-intensive, as I also did the replications of the experiment, but it was important to me to finish my experiment myself to know what the results would be before the internship ended. I enjoyed working on a project independently by myself but still had the opportunity to ask my postdoc for help if needed. So we found the perfect balance between being micromanaged and being left alone.

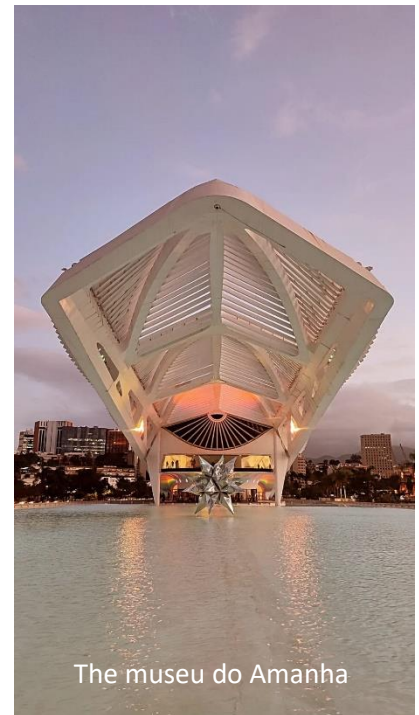
Photos:



The beautiful Ilhas Paradisiacas around Ilha Grande



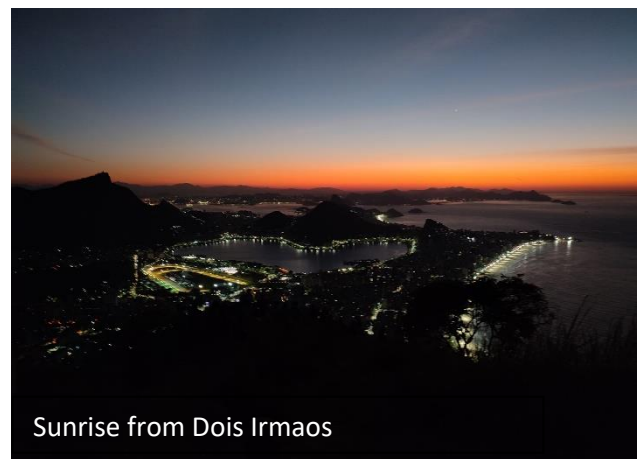
Climbing Pedra da Gavea



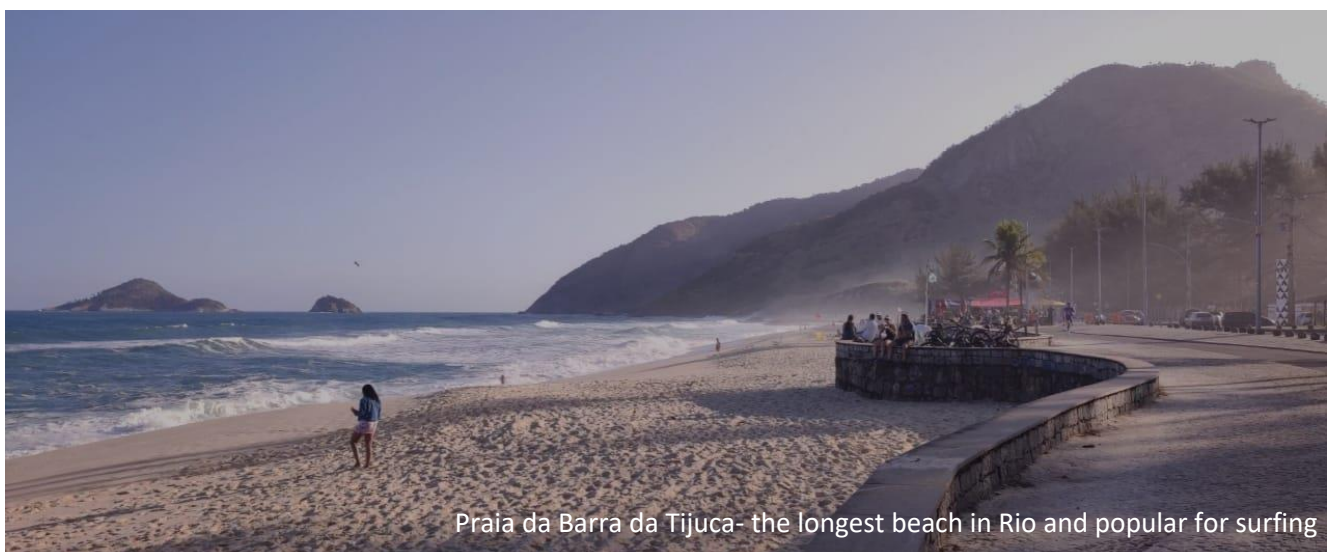
The museu do Amanha



Rio from the sugarloaf mountain cable car



Sunrise from Dois Irmaos



Praia da Barra da Tijuca- the longest beach in Rio and popular for surfing

Annex:

There are several Brazilian consulates in Germany each with different procedures and requirements, plus the fact that many websites are in Portuguese and phone calls are categorically not answered, which is not mentioned anywhere.

So, here you can find my step-to-step retelling of how I did it. But warning, it is frustrating and tedious and they often change the rules.

1. Find out which consulate is responsible. Living in Baden-Wurttemberg that would normally be Stuttgart. That consulate was, however, currently not staffed (not mentioned anywhere on their website), which is why Munich was my contact.

2. Find out what kind of visa applies. For me, this was Visa IV, for students, trainees, and interns.

3. Gather all necessary documentation (spoiler: it is a LOT):

- 2-3 Passport pictures
- Passport with several free pages
- Birth Certificate, potentially even certified. I got mine from my home towns registry (Standesamt)
- Certificate of good conduct (Führungszeugnis). This needs to be requested at the city hall and takes 7-10 days to arrive as it is sent by the official department and is only valid for a few months.
- Certified Immatriculation Certificate. My University normally hands out these with an online signature, but since the consulate explicitly mentioned it would not accept this kind of signature, I went to the student secretary of my Uni and let somebody sign and stamp my copy.
- Financing (Finanzierungsnachweis): This was luckily provided by the DAAD very early in the process, a document with the amount of the monthly stipend and health insurance
- Copy of the flight tickets
- Request form for the consulate. The link for this form did not work on the website, but when I requested it directly via Email, it was sent to me.
- Online request via the portal of the Brazilian Government. Most of the documents listed here have to be uploaded to the portal, as well. It generates a form to print and sign.
- Internship contract from the Brazilian University
- Invitation letter from the Brazilian University

These last two were the most difficult to obtain, as they needed to be “originals” and apparently nobody seems to be officially responsible for this at the Brazilian University. Luckily, my Professor knew a colleague who knew how to write and certify these documents, but it took very long to organize and I perceived it as quite chaotic. Only now, that I have experienced this gigantic university, I can fully appreciate how lucky I was to find that woman.

4. Put everything together with my passport in an envelope and send it to the consulate.

From here, the visa should arrive in the next 10 days. In my case, it arrived even in a week, but finding all the information and documents took two months. As you probably gathered, this whole process stressed me a lot as I was under the pressure of potentially having to change my flights, and I still feel a lot of frustration thinking back to it and the feeling of helplessness, as nobody wants to help. Later, I met several German students who also had bad experiences with the Visa application, so please plan enough time for it!

But if you thought finally having the visa in your passport was all of it- hahaha -no. In Brazil, one has to register with the Federal Police at Santos Dumond Airport bringing additional documents, such as the original Visa form you got from your consulate, a birth certificate in Portuguese, two printed online forms, a receipt of a paid fee, and passport pictures. Then, after making an online appointment, they process you and it takes weeks until one receives the final visa card. For me, the message that I could pick up my visa permit came after I had already traveled back to Germany. All in all, I am sure the three additional weeks were not worth the effort.