

It was all Dom Joao VI's fault. The Portuguese Prince Regent turned up in Rio on 8 March 1808, having fled Napoleon with 12,000 groupies, and immediately got down to brass tacks. He commissioned a swathe of cultural and commercial institutions, transforming what was then a village in a swamp on Guanabara Bay into a civilised city suitable for royal habitation. The gunpowder factory, one of the first buildings, was built at a sensible distance from the centre. Unfortunately, it was also right where he'd decided to place the nursery for his well-travelled colonial plants and trees. By 1822, the gardens had been opened to the public; nowadays, there are 8,000 species of plants and trees spread throughout 137 magical hectares. But the site also includes the remains of the gunpowder factory, which exploded in 1831 – the very first rumble in the jungle.

Today, the dangers inherent in a visit to Rio's botanic gardens are less likely to be fatal. In fact, as I wandered there early on a weekday morning hoping to spot a toucan, it was a frenetic Brazilian fitness posse that nearly mowed me down. They popped up like Spandex-clad meerkats behind the Amazon-tree section, near the rose garden (shrivelled by the tropical sun) and ran amok in circles around the pagoda where Dom Joao VI's grandson, Emperor Pedro II of Brazil, used to bring his family for picnics.

By the time of Pedro II's accession in 1831, Brazil had declared independence and was making its own way as an empire in its own right. It didn't last long. From the botanics, I made my way to the Confeitaria Colombo, built in 1894, just five years after royal rule was unceremoniously dumped by the nation in favour of a republic. It's a riot of Belgian crystal, and a great place to scoff through *pasteis*, fish stew (remember to avoid the ominous brown slop called *tutu*) and a glass of house nectar (mango, ginger, passion fruit and basil).

When Dom Joao VI arrived in Rio, the first thing he did was to make for the nearest church, to give thanks for reaching Brazil in one piece. That church was Nossa Senhora do Carmo da Antiga Sé, now an eclectic combination of baroque, rococo and neo-classicism. Dom Joao VI ordered it to be tarted up and made fit for a King with lashings of gold, and it became the royal cathedral. Now it's being restored ahead of the bicentenary of the royal arrival and is due to reopen to the public on 8 March with a *son et lumière* extravaganza, which will then become a regular event.

Although Antiga Sé was the official place of worship, the royals apparently preferred Gloria church. An octagonal, baroque gem perched on a hill over the bay, it is also undergoing restoration. Here there's none of the opulence of the Carmo da Antiga Sé; instead there's plenty of carved, plain wood. Much of the gold was removed in the 1940s because it had been badly restored in the 19th century – and it has never returned.

I didn't expect much from Gloria's sacred art museum, but once inside was blinded by the bling that had been stuffed into one of the dusty old cabinets. Donated by devotees to adorn the lucky saints, the diamonds contained within were huge. When I asked the attendant how many carats the biggest one was, he nervously mumbled that it was information they don't like to divulge so as "to avoid an inconvenience". He then admitted that the glass was bullet-proof and that the entire hill had to be cordoned off by police roadblocks when the jewels came out for a polish.

Dom Joao VI moved up the property ladder at the end of 1808 to Quinta da Boa Vista, a mansion in the Sao Cristovao district, bequeathed by a wealthy local merchant. These days it houses what's misleadingly called the National Museum – in fact it's more of a natural history museum, now sadly dilapidated. I moved on down the hill through the museum's tatty gardens, where street kids were risking hepatitis in the imperial pond.

When Dom Joao VI went back to Portugal in 1821, his son Pedro I declared himself the first Emperor of Brazil. He was a bit of a ladies' man and had a long-term affair with the Marquesa de Santos, whom he placed in a mansion at the edge of the palace grounds, now known as the First Empire Museum. The hallway contains murals depicting the four seasons. An English-language photo-guide to the artefacts is available: among them are the Marquesa's fan and hair-combs, and Dom Joao VI's throne from the throne room at Quinta da Boa Vista up the hill, which is now stuffed incongruously with pre-Colombian relics.

By 1843, a new town in the mountains 40 miles north of Rio was planned. Petropolis was Brazil's brave new venture in town planning, where opulent homes were built alongside ordered streets and canals – and where the royal family could escape Rio's summers by retreating to their spanking new summer palace.



Empire of the son

Carnival has just kicked off, but this year Brazil is also celebrating the bicentenary of the arrival of Portugal's Prince Regent, who left a fabulous legacy of imperial palaces. **Sue Chester** has a right royal good time

'The gardens were also home to the gunpowder plant. In 1821 it exploded'

At Rio's riotous bus station I asked for a seat on the side with the best view, then found I was on the mountain side of the road and had to rubberneck across the aisle to see anything at all. Perhaps it was just as well: the road is perched on the mountain edge and must have been an engineering wonder when it was built in the 1920s (the original road is on the other side of the mountain and is, if anything, even more dramatic). As we climbed higher the clouds moved down to hug the sheer rock cliffs; by the time we'd pulled into Petropolis one hour later they had wrapped the town with mist. The temperature had dropped too; a pleasing 22C after Rio's blow-torch heat.

Once the word was out that Pedro II was going to build a summer palace in the mountains, there was a high-society stampede to build fine homes in the new imperial utopia. As a result, Petropolis is home to a vast array of eclectic, eccentric, showy piles. You can see the interiors of the Yellow Palace, the Rio Negro Palace and the Casa de Petropolis (whose live-in painter of 10 years apparently couldn't leave an inch of wall un-doodled – it's a world of antiquated fresco wonder).

You can also stay in a palace. My hotel was the Solar do Imperio, built in 1875 by a coffee baron, Joaquim Antonio dos Passos. It lies a few mansions up from the pad belonging to Princess Isabel, Pedro II's heir. Passos had to get the princess's permission to build his palace – and she agreed only on condition he built a home in keeping with the Petropolis fantasy. As I walked past the iron railings and among the baronial columns of the hotel, with its flamboyant black-and-white floor tiles, it was clear that he'd succeeded in his task.

The restaurant serves up an "Imperial Menu", with some of the royals' favourite dishes. Dom Joao's wife Carlota Joaquina was apparently partial to palm hearts, Pedro I was a hunter and big on meat, Pedro II had simple tastes and Princess Isabel relished manioc and coconut cake, with pitanga sorbet.

But Petropolis's jewel in the crown is Pedro II's palace, which became the Imperial Museum in 1943. The contents include original imperial belongings from both Quinta da Boa Vista and the Petropolis summer palace, as well as antiques from the period. The palace depository houses a collection of old carriages,