



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Refettorio Gastromotiva; David Hertz (left), Alexandra Forbes and Massimo Bottura; service at Refettorio Gastromotiva



BRAZIL

SOUL FOOD

The kitchen might not be the obvious place for volunteering, but one Rio de Janeiro refectory does as much for the spirit as it does for the stomach

WORDS: LAURA PRICE

Right before the doors open, there's a moment of nervousness; a buzz of anticipation, of butterflies in bellies. Indoors, 15 volunteers line up against the wall, like schoolchildren on the first day of class. On the other side of the doors, 90 hungry, homeless and vulnerable people stand in single-file, their bellies rumbling, anticipating what, for most, might be their first time eating a three-course meal cooked by a restaurant chef.

The doors to Refettorio Gastromotiva open, and the two groups meet. We needn't have felt nervous. Within moments, the long rows of benches in this community kitchen, launched by chefs David Hertz and Massimo Bottura during the 2016 Olympic Games in Rio, are lined with diners, elbows on tables, thirsty mouths downing glasses of water, hands hovering over knives and forks, awaiting the first course. Some diners smile and chat to each other; others sit in silence.

Guest chef Juarez Campos ladles up the starter of *moqueca* (a nutritious, warming fish stew) and we file out like silver service wait staff — albeit equipped with basic white plates rather than fine china, which we place along wooden benches.

Within minutes, we're clearing away spotless plates, under strict orders to turn down any requests for seconds. Then it's time for the main course, a hearty bowl of sausage ragu with polenta mash and melted cheese that beats most of the dishes I've tasted in Rio de Janeiro's fine dining restaurants. A family of four are the last to finish eating, the teenage mother battling away her own hunger to feed her crying baby.

After the last of the diners file out onto the street, we sit down to enjoy the same meal ourselves. Our leader, Winnee Louise, asks us to go around the table, each offering one thing we've learned from the evening. 'Gratitude,' says Jonathan Souza, an 18-year-old volunteering here for the first time.

One image remains imprinted on my mind: a man in his late twenties, his bright eyes framed with eyeliner; he sits close to the kitchen, interacting with the volunteers, and doesn't stop smiling all night as he repeats, "Thank you, thank you, thank you."

👉 [Donate and register interest to volunteer online. It's recommended to register well in advance of your trip, and registration is subject to availability. *gastromotiva.org*](#)

ONLY IN RIO LOCAL EXPERIENCES

CAPOEIRA CLASS

Get a real workout while learning the Brazilian martial art from a Rio master. Open sessions of Angolan-style capoeira are held across the city, with a variety of options for all levels. Turn up for an outdoor workshop at Botafogo metro station on Monday or Wednesday evening. capoeirariodejaneiro.com.br

TIJUCA TOUR

Venture off the beaten track in Rio's 13sq mile Tijuca National Park to see wildlife including monkeys, giant ants and even, if you're lucky, sloths. Take an open-top four-wheel-drive tour or go for the more strenuous option of a guided hike. Exploring the park without a guide isn't advised. parquedatijuca.com.br

SURF SCHOOL

Engage in some water sports off Arpoador, the famous rocky outcrop where the beaches of Copacabana and Ipanema meet. Activities range from paddleboarding to surfing, while those who prefer dry land can try beach volleyball or play barefoot *futebol* with the locals. teambispo.com.br

CITY WALK

Join a three-hour guided tour of Rio's historic centre, taking in cathedrals and squares, the Arcos de Lapa ('arches of Lapa') and the Selarón steps — one of the most photographed spots in Rio. Walks depart from the Teatro Municipal at 09.30, Monday to Friday; arrive early to sign up. Tours are free of charge but a voluntary contribution is expected. riofreewalkingtour.com

SEA LIFE SLEEPOVER

Discover South America's biggest aquarium after dark. Built in 2016, and aimed at revitalising Rio's port area, the AquaRio is a great option for families, offering a sleepover for children aged six and over in view of more than 50 marine life species (daily from 18.00 to 08.00). aquariomarinhodorio.com.br