What the Olympics means for the people of Rio

A year before the opening ceremony of the 2016 Olympics, Rio de Janeiro is a city in motion, rehearsing, training, driving, sweeping, protesting, calculating and preparing for arguably the biggest event in its history.

At the Olympic Park in Barra da Tijuca, a small forest of cranes swings back and forth over the velodrome and gymnasium even as the last few hold-outs in a nearby favela resist police attempts to forcibly remove them. On the banks of the Rodrigo de Freitas lagoon, labourers bolt together seating for rowing spectators as frustrated commuters nearby sit in endless traffic jams and wonder how the roads will cope with the influx of visitors. There is work on the waters of Guanabara Bay, on subway expansion under the luxury condominiums of Leblon, in city halls and police meeting rooms.

It is all geared to providing answers to the two key questions facing any Games: “Will it be ready on time?” and, more importantly, “Will it be worthwhile?” – questions that are becoming even more pressing ahead of the opening ceremony on 5 August next year.

Rio and the organising committee say they are focusing on efficiency, legacy and entertainment rather than scale, grandeur and cost. The budget of 38.2bn reais (£7.9bn) is slightly lower than that of London and well below that of Beijing. But this will still be an epic, city-changing undertaking. Rio expects 15,000 athletes, 45,000 volunteers, 93,000 staff and 380,000 visitors for the two and a half weeks of the Olympics and the following 11 days of the Paralympics.

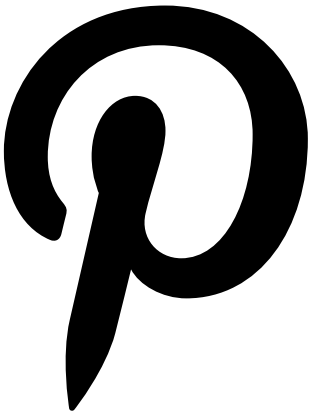
Mayor Eduardo Paes is using the Games – the first in South America – to supercharge development (and, it is widely rumoured, a presidential bid in 2018). He boasts that 57% of the funds will come from private enterprises rather than the public pocket, but this is

not without controversy. Critics accuse him of giving priority to construction firms and real estate developers who have provided him and his party with campaign funds. Meanwhile, the state and city governments say they lack the money to fulfil their promises to clean up Guanabara Bay in time for the Olympics.

There are doubts, too, whether the transport infrastructure will be upgraded in time for the influx of visitors. After cutting it fine ahead of the World Cup, the authorities promise that everything is on schedule for next year, though few will be surprised if there is another last-minute panic.

The only certainty is the unexpected. This amount of time before the World Cup, nobody would have predicted Brazil was about to be racked by its biggest protests in a generation or that the mighty Seleção would be humbled 7-1 by Germany on home turf.

Is anything similar on the cards for Rio 2016? The Guardian asked 10 of those working and living closest to the Games how they see the year ahead.



‘I’m happy with where we are’ ... construction manager Geovane Ribeiro. Photograph: Lianne Milton for the Guardian

The builder
‘I’m happy with where we are’

Few construction workers in the world have as stunning a view from their workplace as **Geovane Ribeiro**, the site manager for tower two of the athletes’ village in Barra da Tijuca. From the half-completed roof, the million-dollar vista stretches from the golden Atlantic beaches to forested mountains. To the north is the Olympic Park, where the aquatics centre, gymnasium, velodrome, martial arts arena and tennis courts are under construction beside an expanse of lagoon. To the south is the new golf course now being grassed for the Games on the edge of a nature reserve. On all sides, the horizon is punctuated by clusters of apartment towers in luxury gated compounds.

Not that Ribeiro has much time to take in the scenery. Work is now in full swing to get the accommodation ready in time for the arrival of the athletes. By this stage ahead of the London Olympics, almost 80% of venues and infrastructure had been completed. Rio is closer to 60%, but organisers say they will avoid the last-minute rush on venue construction that marred the build-up to last year’s World Cup. “With a year to go, I’m

happy with where we are. We're meeting our goals," says Ribeiro, 47, who has seen the final four storeys added to the tower since he began work there five months ago.

Unlike World Cup stadiums, which were mostly built with public money and in several cases ended up as expensive white elephants, many of the Olympic sites are funded with investment by firms such as Odebrecht – Ribeiro's employer and the main builder for Rio 2016 projects – and Carvalho Hosken, which stand to reap a considerable profit by selling or operating the facilities after the Games. The latter is a major campaign donor to Paes and his party.

Barra is becoming one of the most sought-after residential areas in the city. Most of the 3,604 apartments in the athletes' village have already been sold. But it is still a work in progress. The elevator is a juddering cage. On the roof, workers mix up bags of cement and plaster. They are paid union rates, which start at 1,236 reais (£250) a month for the least trained and experienced apprentices.

"I tell the workers they should appreciate the value of what they are doing because when this is done, it will be on television all the time," Ribeiro says. "This is the most important project I've worked on because the buildings will house the world's best athletes, so the reputation of Brazil is at stake."

Resisting an eviction notice ... Jane Nascimento de Oliveira.
Photograph: Lianne Milton for the Guardian

The resident threatened with eviction
‘The stress has made me sick’

Until the Games came to town, **Jane Nascimento de Oliveira** was living quietly in one of the safest, drug-free favelas in Rio de Janeiro. In the past year, however, the pensioner has seen her neighbours’ homes bulldozed, joined residents in a bloody fight against Olympic developers and been served with an eviction notice. Never mind that she has the deeds to her land and broken no laws, mayor Paes wants her removed so that the construction company Odebrecht and its partners can clear the area outside the main Olympic Park of most of the residents in its last remaining poor community – Vila Autódromo.

There is now a huge pit outside her front garden and scaffolding in the yard behind. Her telephone line is down and electricity and water supplies are intermittently cut. A steady stream of city officials and lawyers come knocking with offers to coax her away, but she has turned them down one after another, including the latest for 400,000 reais (£83,000).

“Some say I am being greedy, but I have personal and political reasons for holding out. My aim is to make the government look at themselves and to show humility to the people,” she says. “I’m still learning my rights, but I know enough to get in their way. If the state forces me to give up my home for public works, why do I have to lose out?”

More than 800 families – 90% of the original population of Vila Autódromo – have already left. The city says it has so far paid compensation of 96m reais (£20m), in addition to alternative housing nearby. Only those in the way of roads or on environmentally protected land are being moved, it says.

The remaining residents argue they are being evicted so the nearby land in Barra da Tijuca and Jacarepaguá – much of its owned by the same developers – becomes more valuable. The Olympics, they say, are just an excuse to remove them.

Despite initial promises to the contrary, Paes signed a decree earlier this year for the forcible relocation of many of the hold-outs, including De Oliveira. This prompted violent clashes last month (June) as police moved in with tear gas, rubber bullets and batons. The residents resisted. But De Oliveira is now wondering whether she should capitulate before a harsher deal is forced upon her. Either way, she feels the Games are not for her sort of people. “I feel totally excluded. The Olympics has just brought the destruction of my home. The stress has made me sick,” she says. “How would you feel if your home was disturbed by the interests of capital in this way?”

The new Olympic golf course ‘is an environmental crime’ … Marcello Mello. Photograph: Lianne Milton for the

Guardian

The environmental activist
‘If I die for this cause, it will be worth it’

The return of golf to the Olympics after a 112-year absence has sparked protests by environmentalists such as **Marcello Mello**, who argue the 2016 Games could have used one of the city’s two existing courses at a lower cost and with far less impact than the new links now under construction. “This is an environmental crime,” says the biologist and activist with Rio’s Occupy Golf movement. “They are destroying the Atlantic Forest, which is part of our national heritage.”

The course, designed by Gil Hanse, encroaches on the Marapendi reserve, which is home to rare butterflies, pines and other species not found anywhere else in the world. Mello believes the city government is using the Olympics to expropriate the land on behalf of favoured developers RJZ Cyrela, which was a major campaign donor to mayor Paes. “Without a doubt, the Olympics are a giant real estate scam,” Mello says.

These accusations are denied by Paes, who says the new course is being built at the insistence of the IOC on land that had already been degraded by illegal sand mining. Rather than destroy the area, the mayor insists, it will be revitalised by the planting of 625,000 native seedlings and the expansion of the salt marsh vegetation.

Nonsense, counters Mello, who argues 58,000 square metres of the site has long been a reserve and the city should not use its earlier failure to prevent sand theft as a justification for an even bigger environmental crime. “They’ve already cleared the natural dunes,” he says, leading me through thickets of prickly palms and shrubs and on to a nearby lagoon that is home to alligators and grey storks. “There is only a 40-metre wide strip of the restinga [coastal tropical forest] ecosystem left here. It should be 200 metres.”

The anti-golf movement is small, but any activism can be dangerous in Brazil, where more environmental campaigners are killed than in any other country. Mello is undeterred. “I know there is a risk to this work. It is dangerous to campaign for the environment in Brazil. But I love nature and somebody has to do this job. If I die for this cause, it will be worth it.”

Lucky to be out of the line of fire … Copacabana tourist police officer Marcus Azevedo. Photograph: Lianne Milton for the Guardian

The cop
‘I’ve never had to use my gun in this battalion’

Police in Brazil shoot more, kill more and die on duty more than anywhere else in the world, which makes the proud boast of officer **Marcus Azevedo** all the more noteworthy: “I’ve never had to use my gun in this battalion,” he says of his three years with the Copacabana tourist police. “That’s very rare.”

This is not to claim he encounters no crime on his beach patrol. Azevedo says he has to use his 50,000 volt Taser almost every day in pursuit of robbers and pickpockets. But it underscores the very different degree of risk that Olympic visitors are likely to face compared with the average resident of one of Rio de Janeiro’s favelas. Violent crime is highly concentrated in the city’s poorer communities, where young, mostly black or mixed-race men are most likely to be the victims and perpetrators. In affluent neighbourhoods and tourist resorts such as Copacabana, Ipanema, Leblon and Barra da Tijuca, the dangers are considerably lower.

That is evident from Azevedo’s uniform. When he goes out on mountain bike patrol, he wears a luminous green T-shirt, knee-length shorts and sunglasses. Although he is armed with a handgun, his kit is low-key in comparison with his military police colleagues a few miles away at the Maré favela complex, where officers are geared for

urban warfare with body armour, helmets, automatic rifles and army tanks as back-up.

He counts himself lucky to be out of the line of fire: one police officer is killed almost every three days in Rio, he says. Of his 2011 graduation class of 60 officers, one is already dead and another has been blinded in shootings. His older colleague Sergeant Santana – who describes himself as a former member of a "war unit" – says one in seven of his classmates have been killed. "My old headquarters looked like a Swiss cheese because it had so many bullet holes," Santana says. "When I was first moved to the tourist police, I didn't like it. I thought it was dull. Now I'm married and I appreciate the peace. But any of us could be transferred at any time. Tomorrow we could be in Maré or Alemão [the base of Rio's biggest gang]."

Santana is from Alemão, but says he had to move when he joined the police or the gangs would have killed him and his family. "There are still problems. The son of a cop can't go to public school or ride on a bus – he may be recognised and killed."

By contrast, Copacabana is a haven. Most of the crimes are carried out by teenagers on bicycles who snatch necklaces, phones or handbags, he says. While we are talking, a Uruguayan tourist comes over to report just such a case.

Some criminals use knives. There are also occasional swarms, known as *arrastão*, of young thieves who rampage across the beaches, stealing everything from the tourists.

Extra police will be drafted in during the Olympics. Many are receiving English and Spanish language lessons for dealing with foreign visitors. "We're expecting 500,000 visitors during the Olympics, so no matter what we do to prepare, there will be more crimes because the assaults go up along with the number of people," Santana says. "But despite what the media says, very few people are affected."

In the long term, he hopes the investments for the Olympics will help to improve the city infrastructure and ultimately ease the social problems that are behind Rio's high levels of crime. "That would be the best legacy," he says.

A police clampdown is scaring people off from protesting, says the anarchist Helena. Photograph: Jonathan Watts

The anarchist
‘The violence is coming from the state’

Ahead of the 2014 World Cup, the biggest disruptions in Brazil were the street demonstrations by more than a million people who raged against bus fare hikes, corruption, inequality, forced relocations, wasteful spending on stadiums and inadequate investments in public health and education. Two years on, many of the same problems persist, but those on the frontline of protest are doubtful there will be a repeat of such large-scale unrest in the runup to next year’s Olympics because of what they describe as a police clampdown.

Helena – who did not want to reveal her full name – is an art teacher, militant activist, circus performer and member of an anarchist collective that played a prominent role in organising the 2013 “passe livre” rallies for free public transport that later morphed into huge nationwide outpourings of frustration with business-as-usual in sport and politics.

She is as dismayed as ever with the government and says the Olympics are being used – just like the World Cup – to enable businessmen to profit at the expense of poor people who are being forced to leave their homes and taxpayers who are being overcharged for public works projects. “The causes of the protests haven’t gone away. In fact, they have grown worse, but the police repression has intensified even more

strongly," she says in a communal house daubed with punk images, political poetry and graffiti art. "There is now a very real fear (among would-be protesters) that they will be deprived of their liberty." She cites the case of Rafael Braga, who was arrested during the 2013 protest and sentenced to five years in prison, and the detentions of 23 activists ahead of the World Cup final last year.

There are other explanations why the protests died down: the lack of a clear focus, the promises of reform by president Dilma Rousseff (which initially placated the public, though nothing has come of the pledges), the violence of "black block" radicals who targeted banks and shops, and the death of cameraman Santiago Andrade who was hit by a flare thrown by demonstrators.

Helena, who was brought up in a poor community and says she is dedicated to "breaking the cycle of oppression", believes such explanations miss the point. The day Andrade died, she says, a street vendor called Taslan Acioly was run over and killed by a driver who was distracted by police tear gas and percussion grenades, but the case went largely unreported. She also blames police infiltrators for stirring up violence and turning the protests into battles of strength. "It's true that violence scares people off from the protests, but it's coming from the state," she argues.

As a circus performer, Helena says she usually enjoys the gymnastics at the Olympics, but next year she will not watch any of the events, even on TV. "It would be unfair to those who have lost their homes because of the Games. I know it is not the fault of the athletes, but I don't want to watch sports that have caused problems for so many people."

‘Samba broom’ dance electrified the London Olympics closing ceremony ... Renato Sorriso. Photograph: Lianne Milton for the Guardian

The street cleaner turned celebrity
‘I got this far in life because of my broom’

There cannot be many street cleaners in the world who need security to protect them from admiring mobs, but that was the case for **Renato Sorriso** after his performance at the closing ceremony of the London Olympics.

Dancing samba with his broom, Sorriso electrified the crowds at the stadium, set an upbeat tone for the forthcoming Rio Games and appeared to symbolise a Brazil that was open and confident enough on the global stage to be represented by a rubbish collector.

He is now a celebrity who rubs shoulders with Madonna and Pelé at overseas functions. He is the subject of glowing newspaper articles comparing him to, among other things, Harry Potter in the way he has ridden his broom to a more magical life.

Sorriso is one of 11 siblings from a poor family in Guadalupe. His mother – a laundry worker – always warned him as a child that he would end up as a *gari* (street cleaner) if he failed to study at school. “She was totally right,” he grins. His talents as a showman were discovered after he started dancing while clearing the streets behind a carnival parade at the Sambadrome. With the addition of a smile that seems to stretch from ear to ear, self-deprecating humour and a knack for genial aphorisms, he was soon a

celebrity, mixing his day job on the streets with well-rewarded appearances on TV and stage shows. Coming at a time when millions were moving out of abject poverty into the "C Class", his fame and fortune exemplified the hopes of many Brazilians for lifestyle improvements and greater social recognition. Sorriso is a natural spokesman for such aspirations.

"Everything has got better – my quality of life, my knowledge, my tools. I've gained so much," he says of the 20 years since he started working as a gari. He has certainly helped the image of his employer. The municipal cleaning corporation, Comlurb, is now among the city's most respected service providers. Their orange uniforms, trucks and plastic bins are as distinctive a symbol of Rio as red buses and pillar boxes once were for London. Children in this city have gari-themed fancy-dress parties.

But interviewing Sorriso is a little disconcerting. Although his enthusiasm is infectious, his jokes well delivered and his sunny disposition apparently genuine, it is hard to shake the feeling he is performing a well-rehearsed shtick on behalf of his employers. "I got this far in life because of my broom," he says on several occasions. "Everything I have I owe to Comlurb. Before I put on my uniform, I'm just another guy dancing samba."

He is careful to remain within safe boundaries. The previous week there had been a strike by Comlurb workers, but Sorriso says he doesn't want to talk about salaries and conditions. He is evasive about whether he has noticed more people living on the street. Asked about crime, he first insists he has never seen any, then – noting the incredulity among his listeners – explains: "In my 50 years, I've learned to close my eyes, ears and mouth." After every answer, he seeks reassurance from an attendant press officer: "Was that right? Did I say it well?"

Rather than dwell on the dark side of society, he says his mission is to spread a more positive message about his country and profession. With luck, he hopes to spread that word at the Olympic opening ceremony, though he has not yet been invited. "I want to show an image of Brazil that is not just crime and hunger," he says."It's important that people from my class and my profession are represented at the Olympics. We garis don't just clean up, we perform a social service and show that every job is worthy of respect."

‘The Olympics will be a life-changing experience for Brazilian society. We need that’ ... city official Cláudia Uchôa. Photograph: Jonathan Watts

The official
‘If I’m not panicking, you should commit me’

In some Olympic cities, officials try to project an image of calm reassurance in the build-up to the Games. In Rio, it seems, they are more likely to embrace chaos. “Of course there will be a last-minute panic,” says Cláudia Uchôa, planning secretary in the Rio state government. “We are under a lot of pressure. If I’m not panicking, you should commit me.”

Uchôa has a senior position in a complex, three-tiered system of governments – city, state and federal – that must coordinate with the Olympic organising committee and private partners to ensure preparations go smoothly – or, at least, as smoothly as possible. So far, she insists, everything is on course, which was not the case a year before the World Cup. Rio’s Games are more compact and the stadium construction is on schedule, she says: “It’s definitely better. But even so, it’s a migraine to make sure everything is ready on time.”

Most of the Olympics projects are under the jurisdiction of the city government, which has earmarked 38.2bn reais (£7.9bn) for the Games. But Uchôa says the state has been asked to support the financing of the metro line, the recruitment of volunteers, upgrades to the Maracanã stadium (mostly done before the World Cup) and preparations for the

rowing events at the Rodrigo de Freitas lagoon.

More than infrastructure, Uchôa hopes the legacy of the Games will be a shift in attitudes. “The Olympics will be a life-changing experience for Brazilian society. We need that. Although Brazil is known as a peaceful country, we have more killings here than in war zones. Although we are known to be multicultural, we have seen how much prejudice there is against black people. The cultural differences of the Olympics should bring out more tolerance.”

Some hoped-for changes, however, have come more slowly than anticipated. Outside the church, Brazil does not have much of a charity culture, which may explain why it has proved difficult to recruit volunteers. Merely offering experience does not seem to have been enough so the state government has now added a range of extra incentives including transport payments, language training and preparatory courses. While volunteers at past events have predominantly been students, Rio 2016 organisers are aiming for more retirees.

Perhaps reflecting her decades of working within a notoriously complex, bureaucratic and slow-moving system, Uchôa says it will also be important for the outside world to accept Rio as it is, rather than having unreal expectations.

Guanabara Bay will not be cleaned up in time. “That is a historical problem that cannot be fixed in a year,” she says. “There will still be homeless people on the streets (unlike Beijing, where many were relocated for the duration of the 2008 Olympics). Social problems such as inequality will not suddenly disappear.

“We’re a very mixed city. It’s impossible for us to clean up in that way,” she says. “But I enjoy this. If I didn’t like suffering, I wouldn’t have become a public servant.”

The Olympian
‘If there is one place where party, fun and sport come together, it’s Rio’

Spectators who turn up to watch the Olympic marathon next year will be able to while away the time between the start and finish with a carnival parade by the samba schools of Rio de Janeiro. The pocket performance – which will take place at the Sambadrome during the two hours that the athletes are pounding the pavements – is an example of how Rio 2016 will try to outdo its predecessors in terms of entertainment rather than scale, organisation and depth of culture.

Plans to ‘bend the rules’ to make more of a show ... executive director of sports, Agberto Guimaraes. Photograph: Lianne Milton for the Guardian

“I don’t know any other country that can do this,” says **Agberto Guimarães**, executive director of sport in the organising committee. “If there is anything we can expect at these Games, it is fun. We don’t have the formality of the UK or the culture and history of China and Japan. We’re a young country and we’re not used to following rules.”

Guimarães is better qualified than most Brazilians to make such comparisons, having been involved in every Olympics since 1980. From humble origins in the Amazonian state of Pará, he was the country’s leading middle distance runner for more than a decade. In the 800m final at the Moscow Games, he led the pack for the first lap and eventually came fourth behind Steve Ovett and Sebastian Coe. Like the latter, he moved into Olympic administration. Today, he is responsible for the 15,000 athletes expected at the Games and Paralympics, as well as the venues, accommodation, doping labs and announcers for the 52 disciplines, which will include rugby for the first time and golf after a century-long absence.

To generate interest in events outside the usual Brazilian favourites of football,

volleyball, basketball, swimming and athletics, Guimarães plans to “bend the rules” of presentation to create more of a show with lights, music and entertainment during breaks.

“If there is one place where party, fun and sport come together, it’s Rio,” he grins. “It will be crazy, but organised; fun, but also following the rules of the sport.” There will also be a mobile phone app explaining each event, “so people can go inside the venues and not feel so stupid”, he says.

With a year to go, he still has his work cut out both to generate excitement and to make sure the Games deliver all that has been promised. Demand for tickets was modest for the first round of sales, but he puts this down to a Carioca tendency to leave things to the last minute.

But the former athlete still expects the Olympics to be a turning point for Rio, as it was for Seoul in 1988. “Look at the transformation the city is going through. It wouldn’t have happened in the next 30 years if it wasn’t for the Games. I’m not saying everything will be perfect, but it will be a big step forward,” he says, pointing to infrastructure projects, the redevelopment of the port and the boost in property prices. “There is nothing in Brazil that comes close to what we are doing here,” he says of the transformation.

The Paralympian
‘We don’t want people to pity us. We want respect’

Having overcome amputation and cancer, R**oseane Ferreira dos Santos** now faces heartbreak in her bid to add to her tally of two gold medals in the Paralympic Games. Although she recently posted a Brazilian record for shot put in the F57 category, her chances of representing Brazil on home turf next year are diminishing by the day. Now 43, she is having trouble persuading the national paralympic committee that she is worthy of a place on the team, though there is arguably nobody in Brazil who has done more to promote sport for athletes with disabilities.

Desperate to compete … Rosinha Dos Santos. Photograph: Jonathan Watts/Guardian

For Dos Santos – better known in Brazil by her nickname Rosinha – amputation has brought opportunities she could never have dreamed of when growing up in a poor family in Pernambuco, though it did not seem that way at the age of 18 when she was told she would lose her left leg as a result of an accident involving a drunken truck driver.

Until then, she had been working as a housemaid. For the first five years after her accident, Dos Santos was depressed and isolated herself at home. But her first visit to the paralympic training camp was a revelation. “It opened my eyes. The people there had much worse disabilities than me, but they were happy. I was ashamed that I had cut myself off.” She threw herself into shot put and went on to travel the world, break two world records, win two golds at the Athens Games and become so well known for her inspirational TV appearances that she is now called “the Godmother of Brazilian para athletics”.

She has remained at the top of the sport for more than a decade. Even in the midst of chemotherapy for throat cancer last year, she reached the standard for the Pan

American Paralympics with a new personal best for shot put. But team managers say she is not guaranteed a place in the national team. “I was so upset. I’ve cried so much over this. After overcoming so many obstacles, they still won’t say if they will select me,” she says. “I don’t understand.”

Whether or not she makes it, she hopes the Games will help to change attitudes in Brazil. “There is little respect here for the disabled. Overseas, people go out of their way to help. Here, they are more likely to feel you will slow them down,” she says. “I hope people will realise that Paralympic athletes train as hard as Olympic athletes. We don’t want people to pity us. We want respect. I’m hoping next year will touch people’s hearts and change the way they see paralympic athletes.”

The driver
‘When Brazil are playing football, I’ll stop the car to listen’

More than most taxi drivers in the world, Wladmir Holmer Baltar spends a great deal of his life sitting in traffic jams. Rio de Janeiro has the third most congested roads in the world (after Moscow and Istanbul), which is not just a daily headache for professional drivers, it is also a primary cause for concern ahead of the Olympics.

While Baltar is used to passing the time by listening to music (1980s easy listening rather than samba) or football commentaries for his team Flamengo, visiting athletes, VIPs and tourists are likely to be a lot less patient, which has raised fears that the Rio Games could be as marred by traffic jams as the notoriously choked Atlanta Olympics of 1996.

With so many events taking place in such a short space of time in a single city, the challenges of the Olympic traffic are greater than those of the World Cup, or other recent mega-events such as the pope’s visit in 2013 or the annual carnival.

The two main sites for the Games – Barra da Tijuca and Deodoro – are about an hour’s drive from the city centre on a good day, but the journey time can easily double during rush hours. To tackle this problem, the city government has focused the bulk of its Olympic spending on transport upgrades: four rapid bus lines, four new highways and a subway extension.

A year ahead of the Games, most of these projects are still works in progress, which has only made the traffic worse, but Baltar, who declares himself a perennial optimist, is

hopeful for improvement. “The Olympics preparations are a pain now because nothing is finished, but once it is done, the transport should be much better. Rio really needs more trains and bus routes,” he says.

That is particularly true of his home of Deodoro, which is on the periphery of the city. Unlike Copacabana beach, the Maracanã stadium and Guanabara Bay, few foreigners are likely to have heard of this north-western corner of Rio that is best known locally as a military base. But this time next year, Deodoro will be the focus of the world’s attention when it comes to rugby, hockey, BMX biking, white-water rafting, shooting and equestrian events.

Baltar hopes the new Olympic road will help put it on the map. “Deodoro is a relatively isolated place as far as tourists are concerned. Everyone in Rio knows it, but usually they just pass through Deodoro on their way to somewhere else. With better transport, access will be easier and property prices will go up.”

Although he will have the Olympics on his doorstep, the father of three says the average taxi driver income of 5,500 reais (£1,200 per month) is not enough for him to attend any events. “The Games are not really for people like me. When you are broke, you can’t go to that sort of thing, so I’ll just be working,” he says. “But when Brazil are playing in the football, I’ll stop the car to listen to the game.”

Additional research by Shanna Hanbury

This article was altered on 20 July 2015 to change a mistaken reference to the first Olympics in Latin America to the first in South America, and to correct the Paralympian’s first name.