An account of the Olympics

I spent the first two weekends of the games in Rio so let me add my opinions to those of the thousands of pundits.

Transport was surprisingly efficient, but the Cidade Olímpica in Barra da Tijuca was a long, long way, some two hours from downtown Rio. We arrived on the first Saturday just as the initial mess was being sorted out and new entrances were being opened, and the long queues shortened rapidly.

The catering was always a mess. McDonalds had the sponsorship deal but didn’t want to open up restaurants in all the stadia, and it seems a small firm was contracted to do everything. Everything soon ran out on the first morning, but the quality of the “food”, rather the snacks, was so poor it hardly mattered. Supply improved but choice was always limited to sandwiches, pizzas and salgados. The Skol Olympic beer beakers with all the different sports a big success, but you had to buy a 13 real Skol to get one, and many were the children begging their parents to have another beer so they could increase their collection.

The stadia at the Cidade Olímpica were functional and worked, but the outside area was barren concrete, uncovered, treeless and hot. The Olympic souvenirs were unremarkable, and while you waited for your next session you could do little more than queue up to take your picture by the Olympic rings. So many people with a lot of money to spend, free time, and nothing to spend it on… I had expected clothes and souvenir stalls, food and drinks of all types, to take advantage of the spectators, but hardly anything.

And getting from one event to another needs time and energy. From the Cidade Olímpica to the Riocentro it was a 45 minute walk in the heat, and I calculated I probably used up more energy than many of the Olympians, those boxers and judocas defeated in the first round!

I tried to fathom out some of the economics. The IOC get so many m/billions from their main sponsors: Visa, Nissan, MacDonalds, Samsung, Coca Cola, Omega, so they are not interested in chicken feed. What is important is the global image. But with half-empty stadia? And this was the major criticism everywhere. Only when Usain Bolt was running was the Engenhão Athletics track anything like full. Even when Michael Phelps swam there were plenty of free seats. I bought tickets early and tried to get some more to complement those already bought. I tried the diving on the second Saturday. Nothing available in the cheaper seats. Only the most expensive were available. Over 600 reais each! Once in a lifetime, so here goes, and as I’m 60 I get a 50% reduction, but Marcela, 4, pays full price. And lo behold! the cheaper seats are 70% empty. Was the IOC just pushing the expensive seats? Had hundreds of ticket holders not turned up? Did the sponsors get so, so many tickets? Other venues such as the Engenhão had no available tickets, but then there were vast areas of unoccupied seats.

However, Thaís and I took Marcela to the Rowing and Weightlifting (again no tickets available) without a ticket for her, but she was let in without any problem — the official limit for free admission was two-years-old!

Oh, and the sports themselves…. I tried to watch sports I had never seen before. At many there are three or even four contests taking place simultaneously: Badminton, Table Tennis, Fencing, Wrestling. And while the long distance Athletics races are taking place the field events just carry on. You have to choose, and can even walk round the stadium, in many cases, to follow whoever you support. At the rowing you only really see the last 200 metres; the rest you follow on the screen. And you just see all the Marathon and Cycling road races pass by, for free of course! Archery is difficult to watch as you can hardly see the arrows swish by. Weightlifting is great; it’s a yes or no. You must be near the Long Jump to have an idea, but the High Jump and the Pole Vault are clear even from a distance.

And the moment I shall remember. Just after arriving at the fencing Carioca Arena 3 I saw the Women’s Epée, and the American Courtney Hurley apparently easing to a win in the Table of 32 over the Ukranian, Yana Shemyakina, but in the last seconds the Ukranian made some rapid assaults and took the bout 14-13. The American was inconsolable after leading throughout the bout and was eventually comforted by friends and family amongst the spectators.

And the worst moment: surely the end of the Marathon, where the winners arrived to a virtually empty Sambódromo in the blustery wind and rain of the final day.

And the legacy? On the second Sunday I had some time free before flying to Porto Alegre and went to the Praça Mauá to see the Porto Maravilha and the Museu do Amanhã. It seemed all of Rio was there, strolling along Avenida Rio Branco, visiting the Museum, chilling out, having a drink, taking selfies, enjoying the sunset, dando una vuelta… like in Madrid, Barcelona, or Buenos Aires. Was it such a long time ago that this area was almost deserted on a Sunday afternoon?