

□ The Games of the XXXI Olympiad were declared open in spectacular fashion on 5 August, as host city Rio de Janeiro welcomed the world to what promises to be an incredible two weeks in the latest chapter of the Olympic story. The Opening Ceremony took place in Brazil's iconic Maracanã stadium.

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“This is the moment of the cidade maravilhosa,” said [IOC President Thomas Bach in his opening address](#).

“The first-ever Olympic Games in South America will go from Brazil to the entire world. The Organising Committee, Brazilian authorities at all levels, and all Brazilians can be very proud tonight. With the Olympic Games as a catalyst you have achieved in just seven years what generations before you could only dream of. You have transformed the wonderful city of Rio de Janeiro into a modern metropolis and made it even more beautiful.”

Reflecting that beauty, a stunning Opening Ceremony depicted the rich and complex history and culture of Brazil. Fireworks and laser-lit dancers provided a suitably arresting start, before Paulinho da Viola performed a moving acoustic version of the national anthem.

The story of Brazil was then retold in a stunning showcase, beginning with the birth of life itself, depicted on a huge screen on the stadium floor, and continuing with a representation of the country's rainforest and the forming of three huge "ocas" or huts to symbolise the indigenous people who call that amazing and precious habitat their home.

Dancers then appeared, creating ships to portray the arrival of the Europeans, who were followed in turn by performers representing African slaves, shackled and bound to large wheels. The ceremony reflected the profound influence African culture has had on Brazil, and the country's clash of cultures, with waves of immigrants from countries as far and wide as Lebanon, Syria, Japan, and Germany all helping to make it the complex mosaic it is today.

The stunning spectacle continued with a section entitled "Metropolis" and the rise of Brazil's great cities, with parkour practitioners skipping and tumbling across an impressive cityscape. Next in the spotlight was powered-flight pioneer Alberto Santos-Dumont, the first man to take off with a heavier-than-air machine, who was shown soaring majestically in his plane, the 14 Bis, over night-time Rio.

The appearance of Gisele Bundchen, strutting out to the sound of "The Girl From Ipanema", marked the start of "Bossa", celebrating the curves and sensuality of Brazil. Pop then took centre stage, as the voice of the favelas, funk, samba, "passinho" and popular Brazilian music

filled the air, while breakdance, capoeira and a host of the country's regional variations of dance also put in appearances. Some 1,500 dancers then arrived on the scene for with a mass dance-off, as Brazilian singer Regina Casé urged everyone in the stadium to get on their feet.

The tone changed as the focus switched to the environment and the problems posed by melting ice caps and rising sea levels. As a sign of hope, however, a lone seedling emerged from the ground, symbolising a key message of the Games and the importance of trees in trapping carbon dioxide and delaying global warming. With this goal in mind, on arriving at the stadium for the parade, each athlete was given a seed of a native tree of Brazil and a cartridge with soil for them to plant it in the Radical Park in Deodoro. The Athletes' Forest they will create there will be their legacy for Rio de Janeiro. To underline that message, actor Fernanda Montenegro and Judi Dench read Carlos Drummond de Andrade's, *A Flor e a Náusea*, a poem announcing hope for the future.

It was time then for the athletes, the planters of the world, to make their entrance. In time-honoured fashion, the first of the 207 delegations to make their way out were Greece, who were led out by Sofia Bekatorou, the first woman to be the country's flagbearer. Taking a very proud part in the parade of athletes was the ten-strong Refugee Olympic Team, who received huge cheers from the crowd, a hugely significant and poignant first in the history of the Games.

"In the spirit of Olympic solidarity and with the greatest respect, we welcome the Refugee Olympic Team," said Bach. "Dear refugee athletes: you are sending a message of hope to all the many millions of refugees around the globe. You had to flee from your homes because of violence, hunger or just because you were different. Now with your great talent and human spirit you are making a great contribution to society."

The noise levels rose as Brazil's team of 477 athletes brought up the rear, marking the end of the parade. Formed by the cabinets housing the athletes' seeds, the five Olympic rings then appeared in the centre of the pitch, only this time in a striking green – mirroring the environmental theme of the Ceremony and the Games – instead of their traditional colours.

The President of the Rio 2016 Committee, Carlos Nuzman, then spoke a few words, describing himself as “the proudest man alive” to be hosting the Games in his city, before handing on to Bach, who made this appeal to the athletes:

“In this Olympic world there is one universal law for everybody. In this Olympic world we are all equal. In this Olympic world we see that the values of our shared humanity are stronger than the forces which want to divide us.

“So I call upon you, the Olympic athletes: Respect yourself, respect each other, respect the Olympic Values which make the Olympic Games unique for you and for the entire world.”

The Olympic Laurel was then awarded to the Kipchoge Keino, the legendary Kenyan distance runner, in recognition of his outstanding achievements in the fields of education, culture, development and peace through sport. It was then time for the performing of the Olympic Anthem and the taking of the Olympic oaths by Robert Scheidt, Martinho Nobre and Adriana Santos.

There was still time, however, for one last show of Brazilian exuberance, with the 12 drum sections from Rio's main samba schools providing a rousing musical footnote to the evening.

The spotlight then fell on former tennis player Gustavo Kuerten, who jogged into the stadium clutching the Olympic Torch before passing it on to basketball player Hortência Marcari. She in turn handed it on to former Brazilian marathon runner Vanderlei Cordeiro de Lima, who had the honour of lighting the Olympic cauldron and setting the seal on an evening high on colour, verve and hope for the future.

** Olympic Games