Caipirinha Nights: An American in Rio

Let's talk about sex.

Despite some fierce competition, Brazil in general and Rio in particular rank supreme in the world's libidinous subconscious. Whisper the country's name and, after soccer, sex is the next association. If you don't believe me, just tell your girlfriend that you are traveling to Rio for an assignment and then try to explain why it's best that you go alone.

And yet one has to wonder why Brazil holds this special place in humanity's fantasies.

Certainly, one must consider Rio's Carnivale, a festival that puts the baby-got-back back into Bacchanalia. And then there is the beach culture, especially the gatas ("attractive women") wearing tangas ("string bikinis"—thus, the Brazilian wax), who are the unofficial symbol of Rio. Their girl-from-Ipanema backsides are prominently displayed in ads across the city. Even the men get into the action with sungas ("Speedo-type swimsuits"), which are worn regardless of physique.

But physical beauty is the ideal, honed on the beaches and bronzed under the equatorial sun. And wealthy Brazilians are not shy about improving upon what God has given them. Rio is probably the only city on Earth where a plastic surgeon owns the finest mansion in town—a prominent stop on my city tour. Another stop is his charity hospital, which I assume is a combination of noblesse oblige and a desire to keep the poor masses from storming his gates.

Still, there is something more to it than this.

If you were a Martian anthropologist visiting Earth for the first time and landed at, say, Buckingham Palace, you might conclude that humans reproduce asexually. But even a Martian couldn't make that mistake in Brazil. The country is Bob Jones University's worst nightmare: miscegenation gone wild. Every imaginable combination of European, African, and Amerindian reproduction is in evidence. When government poll-takers asked Brazilians to describe their skin color in 1976, they received back 134 different terms.
of the South.
Meghan O'Rourke
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