

The Sexy Thrum of Rio de Janeiro
By Suzanne Wright

Look at me and tell me if I don't have Brazil in every curve of my body.
Carmen Miranda

Hands down, Rio de Janeiro is the sexiest place I have ever been.

Yes, Italy is sexy; as is Miami's South Beach. So are Bali and St. Bart's. But, Brazil—especially that stretch of beachfront from Copacabana to Ipanema immortalized in song, is simply unrivaled for sheer sex appeal.

There are the beautiful bodies gracing Rio's myriad beaches and nightclubs, of course—the country has produced a slew of supermodels including Gisele, Adriana Lima and Ana Beatriz Barros. A word about the bodies: they are not uniformly lithe or tall or pale or tanned or blonde or brunette or female; no, they come in both genders, in every shade and in variations from taut to plush. Revealing skin is a democratic activity, perhaps a birthright, executed with a refreshing lack of dysmorphia. Everyone shows their body off and the prevalence of the *tanga*, a bottom with slightly more fabric than a thong explain the necessity of the infamous Brazilian wax. The year-round tropical climate facilitates disrobing. Sultry and steamy, it encourages slow, deliberate movements. Within hours, I found my gait morphed from purposeful to undulating, a delicious change in tempo. .

But the Rio's sex appeal is more than just the impressive bodies, many of which are enhanced by plastic surgery. Beyond skin, there is the landscape: Sugarloaf Mountain jutting up dramatically behind the Atlantic Ocean and the iconic statue of Christ the Redeemer standing as a guardian angel on Corcovado Mountain, visible from every corner of the city. There is also the sensuous rhythm of the country, ever present in its music and dance, especially the languid *bossa nova*—*The Girl From Ipanema* a classic example of the genre—and the festive samba, taught in schools throughout the country. There is the *caipirinha*, a refreshing and powerful libation concocted with Brazilian sugarcane liquor, *Cachaça*, fresh lime juice, sugar and lots of ice. And, of course, there is the world-famous Carnival, a raucous annual celebration held 40 days before Lent. Part circus, part street party, part parade, part masquerade, it grips Rio and the world, year after year with its hedonistic displays. The official language, Portuguese, is melodious to the ear. No wonder Rio's official song is "*Cidade Maravilhosa*," which translates as "Marvelous City."

Approximately the same size as the United States, Brazil was founded in March 1565 by Portuguese knight Estacio de Sa, who called it Sao Sebastiao do Rio de Janeiro, in honor of King Sebastian I of Portugal. Rio remained primarily a colonial capital until 1808, when the Portuguese royal family fled Lisbon and Napoleon's invasion and moved to South America. Portugal's capital was transferred to the Rio, which became the only European capital outside of Europe. Today, Brasilia is the capital of Brazil, but Rio is the country's cultural heart. More than six million people, dubbed *Cariocas*, call this throbbing metropolis home.

Since its opening in 1923, South America's most famous hotel has welcomed visitors from around the globe, including many rich and famous guests. Located right on Copacabana Beach, the world's most famous beach, the Copacabana Palace, an Orient-Express Hotel, is an elegant base from which to survey the shimmering spectacle that is Rio. Still the best address in town, the Copa is old-school glamorous, with an elegant white stucco façade that conjures a wedding cake. For the best views, be sure to reserve an ocean-facing room. Although it's a sophisticated enclave, the staff at the Copa is genuinely helpful. Poolside cocktails and the newly opened spa are just two of its pleasures.

But the pulse of a city, especially a sexy one, is found on its streets. And while Rio is said to be one of the most dangerous cities in the world, owing to huge social disparities between the haves and the have-nots, I took to the streets alone on multiple occasions without incident. Both day and evening, in a bathing suit and flip flops or sundress and heels, I felt the sexy current of electricity with every step—and no more uneasy than I do in my own home city of Atlanta. The kiosks, lifeguards, public showers, hawkers and crashing blue-green waves make for a lively scene day and night. Both residents and tourists exchanged warm smiles with me as we ambled past each other, bewitched by Brazil's picture-postcard city. Still, there's no ignoring the fact that Rio's desperately poor live in the crowded, hillside shanty towns known as *favelas* which literally overlook the affluence. As I strolled the beachfront sidewalks of Copacabana paved with Burle Marx's swirling black and cream mosaic designs, I glanced upward to the *favelas* which cast a shadow on the prosperity below. For all its sunniness, Rio like any urban area, has its darkness.

I shake any lingering thoughts of despair (and make a mental note to get in touch with Brazil Foundation, which fights social inequities, upon my return home) with a visit to the Carmen Miranda Museum. Although she collapsed onstage of a heart attack at just 46, the 1940s bombshell eternally epitomizes the color, energy and sensuality of her country. Even a half century after her death, she is still considered the country's greatest singer and dancer. The bunker-like exterior of the museum seems improbably modest, but inside its collection includes movie posters, costumes and jewelry of the flamboyant star.

Seeking an escape from the teeming masses and wanting to enjoy a bit of nature, I visited the Tijuca Forest, billed as the world's largest urban forest. I also hopped a 20-minute hydrofoil for the Ilha de Paqueta, a car-free island. Once there, I took a horse-drawn carriage tour to admire colonial homes. Later, I admired more than 7,000 plant species on display at the Botanical Garden with its majestic king palms. SAARA, the largest ethnic market in downtown Rio, is another sexy excursion where you can check out the exotic foodstuffs as is the H. Stern Gem Museum (ask your concierge to arrange a free visit), which features a workshop tour and a collection of sparkling tourmalines and other stones. Leblon, just west of Ipanema, is considered the city's toniest neighborhood and has few chic shops and restaurants.

I continued my explorations by hiring a car and driver to take me to 2,230-foot Corcovado so I could view the famed Christ Redeemer statue at closer range. With outstretched arms, the graceful white Art Nouveau-style figure is protector and symbol of Rio and was recently named one of the new Seven Wonders of the World. Yes, the steps leading to it are steep and yes, the site is crowded with visitors, but the 100 foot tall, 1,000 ton statue is spellbinding.

So much so, that I return after dark for a different perspective. With my back to the statue, I can see the world's largest soccer stadium. Maracana seats 200,000; Pele once played for his countrymen and women. I also take the cable car up 887 feet to the top of Sugarloaf, where the city tumbles down to the sea in a glittering, breathtaking panorama. On many Friday and Saturday nights there's a party called *Noites Cariocas* under the stars, so check local listings.

As a meat-lover, I wouldn't dream of leaving Rio without sampling a *churrascaria*, a Brazilian barbecue. A unique dining experience, *churrascarias* originated in the plains of Pampas in southern Brazil, where *gauchos* (cowboys) cooked slabs of meat over open fires; modern *churrascarias* employ gaucho-clad servers to troll the restaurant, carving beef, lamb, pork, sausage and chicken in tableside *rodizio* service from large, handheld skewers. An ingenious system signals your carnivorous desire: by flipping a two-sided green (go) and red (stop) card, *gauchos* know whether to approach. The meat is the second course, following a salad bar extraordinaire that includes hearts of palm, mussels, plantains, beans, *farofa*, toasted manioc flour, and much, much more. Be forewarned: squeezing into skimpy clothing is significantly more challenging the following day.

Finally, I visit an *escola de samba* or samba school (ask your hotel for rehearsal times and locations, which vary). Samba music and dance entered Rio with refugee slaves from Africa; the schools began in 1928 for the purpose of learning samba. Active from September to February, samba school participants compete for Carnival championships and a chance to join the parade. I envision scantily attired women in brightly plumed costumes and headpieces, shaking their hips in a spectacularly frenzied sexual rite. But most of the dancers are in street clothes. Still, watching their fiery performances, I feel the heat. I'm swept up into the sexuality—literally—a grinning, dark-skinned man in a cowboy hat reaches for my hand, plucking me from my seat. We whirl, we laugh, we sweat. Repeat.

I ask you, what's sexier than that?