

# B r a z i l

Life, Blood, Soul

john malathronas

summersdale *travel*

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Summersdale Publishers Ltd  
46 West Street  
Chichester  
West Sussex  
PO19 1RP  
UK

[www.summersdale.com](http://www.summersdale.com)

Printed and bound in Great Britain

ISBN 1 84024 350 3

Cover photograph © Stephen Simpson/Getty Images  
Map by Bill Le Bihan  
[www.oldbill.demon.co.uk](http://www.oldbill.demon.co.uk)

Inside cover photos © John Malathronas

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Ethnologue Brasil quote 'Extinct Languages of Pernambuco'  
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SIL International, Academic Affairs Section  
7500 West Camp Wisdom Rd  
Dallas, TX 75236  
USA

The Xavante creation myth the 'Origin of Fire' is an abridged version published courtesy of Alec Harrison, of the SIL organisation. The complete myth can be found at <http://www.sil.org/americas/brasil/langpage/EnglXVPg.htm>.

Amnesty International quotes all courtesy of Amnesty International UK.

*Dedicated to:*

*Esdras Paes de Luna*

*Marcelo Francisco dos Santos*

*André Luiz de Oliveira*

*William Roger Adam Pereira da Silva*

*Árison Tavanelli*

## Acknowledgements

I am indebted to everyone I met in Brazil for providing me with inspiration, especially the people without whose tales there would be no book to write. I would also like to acknowledge the help of the subscribers to the newsgroup soc.culture.brazil who read, commented and answered all my questions and all my Net friends who encouraged me to publish this book. In no particular order a warm thank you to: John Miller, Sílvio Rodrigues Sousa, Marjan Gucek, Mike McKinley, Jim Martens, Chris Viljoen, Emílio Pacheco, Roger Wilcox, Carlos B. Albuquerque, Fausto Arinos de Almeida Barbuto, Marcelo Soares, Sonja Faria Rosa, Sander van Hulsenbeek, Glenn Sahara, Peter Schambil and Rogério Penna. I have to single out João Luiz da Costa Gouvêa who single-handedly taught me Portuguese accents and gave me valuable feedback; my mentor, the author Errol Lincoln Uys who believed in me more than I did; David Herkt for his infectious enthusiasm; Rodney Mello from *Brazzil* magazine whose kind words arrived at the right time; Lise Fernanda Sedrez who helped me with translations, corrected the early drafts and consistently supported me throughout; and, finally, a special thanks to all the nice people at Summersdale, particularly Liz Kershaw for her faith in the book and Kelly Cattermole for turning it into, well, English.

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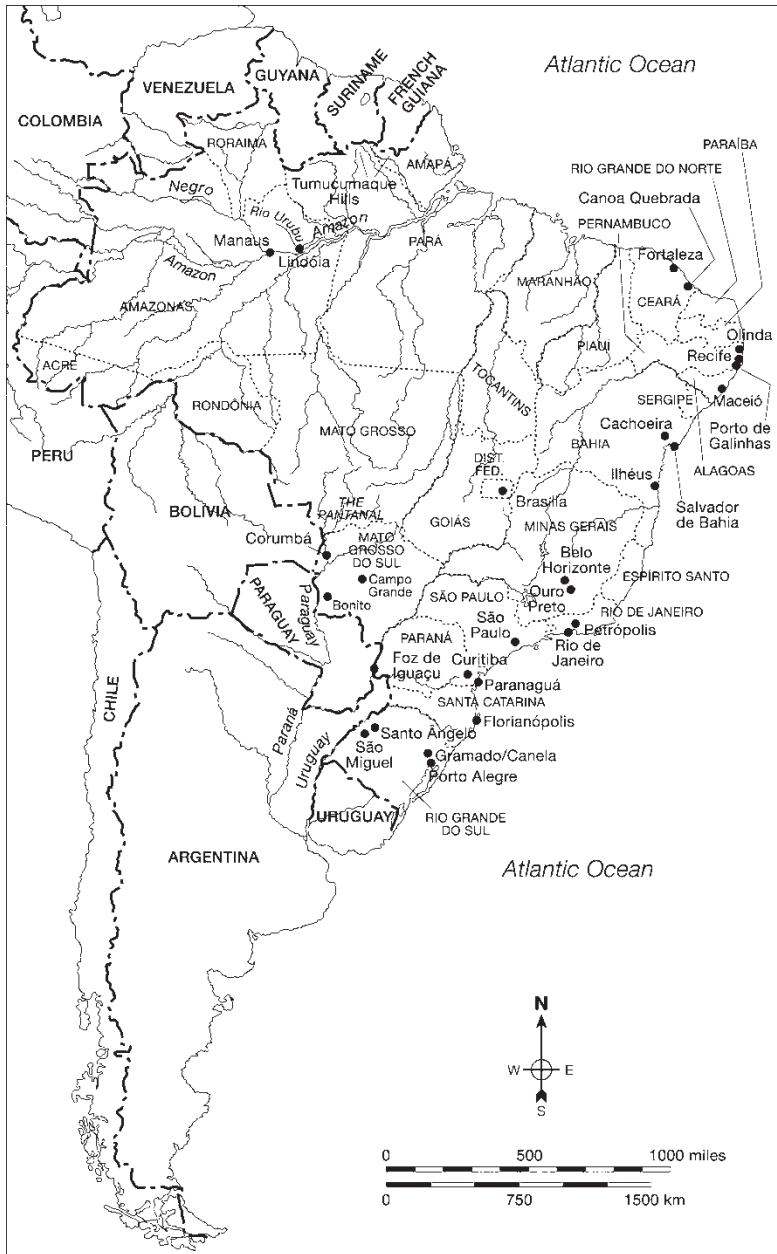
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# Prologue

*Brazil is not a serious country.*

– General Charles de Gaulle

It is hard to fathom how a country's image is subliminally imbued in the hearts and minds of the world at large. Is it selective films and newsreels? Is it repeated urban myths? Is it snatches of music heard, recurrent lyrics or an attention-grabbing travel report? Whatever the osmotic process by which it emerges, there is a collective unconscious which crystallises the unseen into a popular concept. Before I first went to Brazil, my image of the country consisted of the usual: the Rio Carnival, the biodiversity of the Amazon rainforest, that legendary 1970 World Cup team, coffee, and the high level of crime. Brazil was a place populated by jaguars and dense forests (destroyed by hamburger chains), by dirty shanty towns and dangerous muggers, by outstanding football players and carousing carnival revellers.

But I had also seen the Brazilian football squad on television. I knew that Brazil's heroes were black, brown and white; I had watched the mixed-colour fans beating the drums together, dancing the samba. That, at a time when the struggle against South African apartheid was at its peak, at a time when racism in the West needed to be named, confronted and fought against, impressed me.

It was thus in the late 1980s I accidentally came across a 900-page blockbuster: *Brazil* by Errol Lincoln Uys, written in the historical-novel style of James Mitchener. I bought it and was immediately taken in by the nuances of Brazilian history he so vividly described. I, too, started reading about the life and customs of the pre-conquest Indians; the saga of the intrepid Portuguese explorers and Jesuit single-mindedness; the invasions of the French and of the Dutch; the slave trade and the stubborn refusal of the subjugated black nations to give up their heritage; the Wild West adventures of the inland expeditions; the momentous tales of the Rich City of Black Gold, which gilded the churches of Brazilian baroque; the stirrings for independence and the formation of the Empire; the Paraguayan War and its aftermath; parliamentarism and the dictatorship of the Estado Novo.

I had to go.

Now I have seen more of Brazil than most Brazilians, and I know a lot more about the country than all those years ago when the mention of

Cabral and Porto Seguro had me searching the atlas for clues. Yes, the popular image of Brazil is not untrue. There is the Amazon, there is crime and Amnesty International condemnations, Rio is a very pretty city indeed, especially during Carnival, they play some mean football and they export a lot of coffee. But that image is one-dimensional. There is much more to this country of 180 million, the fifth largest in the world, than just that.

Which brings me to General de Gaulle's bitchy comment. I don't know what he meant, but I know he didn't make it. It is one of those quotes that were never said, like Humphrey Bogart never said 'Play it again Sam' in *Casablanca*. The person who *did* say this was Brazilian: an ambassador to France, Carlos Alves de Souza. Apparently, during the Lobster War of 1962 (a fisheries conflict between Brazil and French Guyana) he was summoned by the General for a dressing down. When the Ambassador was later interviewed, he made that notorious quote which was somehow attributed to de Gaulle. Still, the arrogant, disdainful General *could* have made that remark, which is why it stuck to him.

Perhaps the Ambassador had in mind Cacareco, São Paulo's beloved female rhinoceros. Cacareco arrived in São Paulo for the inauguration of its zoo in September 1958. She was the daughter of Britador and Teresinha, had a sister called Patachoca and was an Aquarius. I mean, the girl had pedigree! Maybe it was for that reason that a reporter decided to put Cacareco forward as a candidate for the State Parliament as a protest against political corruption. In the forthcoming election Cacareco was the most popular candidate with 100,000 votes, declared null and void by the authorities who had no sense of democracy. She also visited São Leopoldo Zoo for its inauguration, being an old hand at public ceremonies, but her political career there came to nothing. She was a political has-been.

The Ambassador (and the General) would be apoplectic if they were alive today and read some of the National and State Days in Brazil. There is the Day of the Parking Attendant (Belo Horizonte, 14 January), the Day of the Gravedigger (again BH, 17 December), the Day of the Street Peddler (BH once more, 17 August), the Day of the Office Boy (Rio, 19 March), the Day of the Dubbing Actor (São Paulo, 29 June), the National Day of the Sports Referee (on the infamous 11 September) and my favourite, the National Day of the Unrecognised Cadaver (25

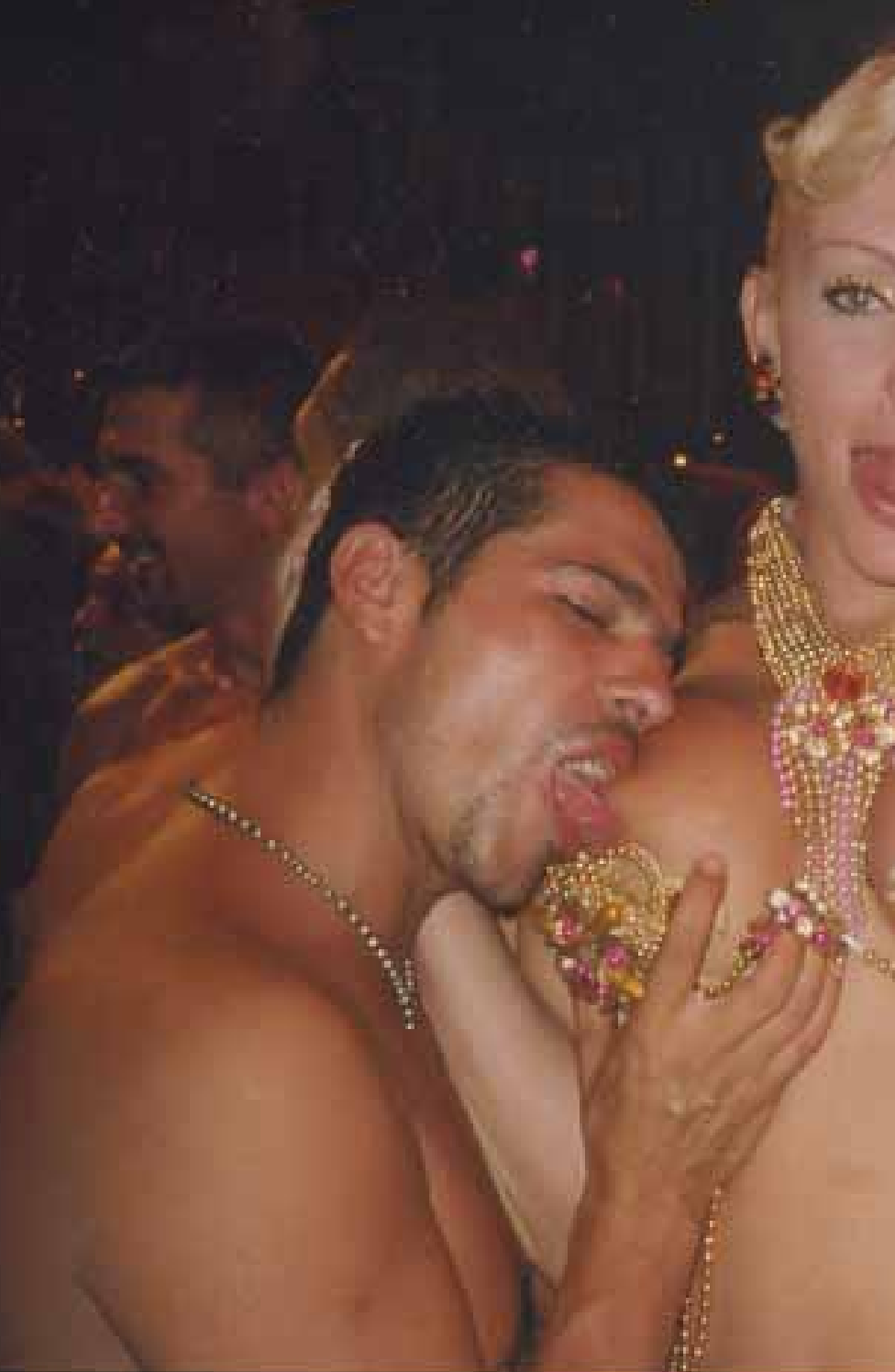
## PROLOGUE

September). Everyone, bless them, is remembered, nay *commemorated*, in Brazil.

But if the Ambassador (and the General) were alive today, I would point out to them that if Brazil is not a serious country – whatever that means – in the Eurocentric sense of the word, then this is a strength and not a weakness, for Brazil's strength lies in its people and not in institutions that have been imposed, modified and mutated over the centuries to serve an elite; the ruling classes have failed the Brazilian people who do not deserve the politicians they vote for. But as anyone who has seen how easily they burst into song and dance, as anyone who has been moved by their friendliness, their approachability, their concern and curiosity for strangers, as anyone who has been to a country that moves and laughs and lives life as if there was no tomorrow, I know that Brazilians have something that we in 'serious' countries have lost, perhaps forever.

And this is what my story is about.







LIFE

# Chapter 1

## Carnaval! (Rio de Janeiro)

Oh, how the attitude of various countries to their colonies betrays national obsessions and quirks! The French tried to civilise the natives by teaching them the secret delights of the subjunctive; the British by providing them with a legal framework so that they could imprison homosexuals; the Spanish turned them into good Catholics by burning the ones who were bad, in the name of God; but the Portuguese – now, the Portuguese were insidious: they tried to pass on their ‘master race’ genes. In other words, they shagged everything in sight. Hell, even if I were a jaguar, I would be loath to meet a Portuguese sailor in heat.

And if it’s good enough for the valiant explorers, it’s good enough for me.

---

### The Words You’ll Need

*a dona da casa = housewife – more akin in Brazilian Portuguese to our grand-sounding ‘mistress of the house’*

*caipirinha = the most common cocktail in Brazil: Brazilian rum (cachaça) with lime*

*Carioca = native of Rio de Janeiro*

*Carnaval = Carnival (see? Portuguese is easy)*

*farinha = manioc flour*

*favela = shanty town*

*lanchonete = fast-food joint*

*passarela = stage*

*picanha = Brazilian steak*

*Polícia Militar = no, not the military police: this is the state police force as opposed to the federal police force*

*preciso (ir) embora = I must leave*

*primo = cousin*

*real = the basic unit of Brazilian money (the plural is reais)*

*tem troco? = do you have change?*

*travesti = transvestite or transsexual*

---

Blessed are the meek who can sleep in the seat of a British Airways Airbus, for they shall inherit a full day in their itinerary. I am clearly cursed because I get a bad neck, a bad shoulder, a bad back and a bad temper which put me out for days after a long flight. You have to admit though that they try their best to make you sleep. They turn off the lights even for flights starting in the afternoon, and they either put on the worst film you've seen before, or the most mind-numbing one you haven't. This time it was Kevin Costner emoting about baseball, a game with more innings than moments of excitement – and *Double Jeopardy*, which required a considerable suspension of disbelief. I mean, would *you* bury a woman alive with a loaded handgun so that she could shoot the lid off her marble coffin – and miraculously survive with her hearing intact? Does she know she has a future as a Black Sabbath reunion sound manager?

Some of the people you meet in-flight are also probably plants. There was Daz, an old Indian computer contractor, who tried to put me to sleep by recounting the good old times of the 1960s computers with 32K RAM the size of an aeroplane hangar, or the couple from Barbados who kept offering me their duty-free gin. I tried to warn them that they had far too much gold on their fingers, around their necks and in their mouths.

'You'll bankroll the entire *favela* of Rocinha,' I said. 'I hope you have good dental insurance, or else you'd better tear your teeth out now and put them in the hotel safe. You'll drive down the price of gold in town if you but smile in Praça Mauá.'

The couple seemed to think that being black rendered them immune from mugging.

'Ah,' I said, 'but colour isn't that important in Brazil.'

The novelty amused them.

'Seriously,' I said. 'One of my cultural shocks when I first visited Brazil in '93 was that there were blond street kids in São Paulo as dirty and destitute as the rest.'

They seemed to ignore my advice; it may have been the gin. I don't know what happened to them, but I haven't been watching the price of gold recently.

Finally there was the Italian industrialist who tried to make us slip into catatonia by repetition.

'Do you think we'll find a hotel in Rio? Do you? Do you? We haven't

booked. We are arriving on Saturday before *Carnavale*. And it's a *speziale Carnavale* for the five hundred years of Brazil. Do you think we'll find a hotel? Do you? Do you? Because we haven't booked. And it's Saturday before *Carnavale* ...'

'Actually, no,' I said, interrupting him. 'I think everything will be booked up.'

'My friend wants to go to the Amazon,' he said. 'I want to see Salvador. So I thought five days in Rio, three days in Manaus, two in Salvador.'

'You won't see the rainforest in three days,' I said. 'Not unless you count your hotel's potted plants.'

'But I only have ten days. I have to be back in Milano Monday week.'

'Then go to Manaus straight away.'

'Hmmm,' he said. 'We haven't booked. And it's Saturday before *Carnavale* ...'

\*\*\*\*\*

Unlike the Italian, I had booked with a B&B at the bottom of Copacabana well in advance. I shared a taxi with Daz.

'Goodness me,' he said. 'It's so green. So green.'

This is the overwhelming first impression of any visitor to Brazil: the light and the vegetation; the sun and the greenness; the open sky and the vast verdant horizon. But in Rio there are other landmarks. Daz was dazzled.

'The hills – the hills have strange shapes,' he remarked, like an extra in *Twin Peaks*.

Yes, the hills have strange shapes: from Sugarloaf Mountain and Morro da Urca to the Morro dos Cabritos and from the Corcovado to Dois Irmãos, Rio is winding and hilly with every wide-open space providing another unique vista.

I was almost asleep as I left Daz and made my way to the ninth floor of a Copa skyscraper to meet my hosts. Jim was a taciturn, softly spoken Australian who was married to beautiful, vivacious Glória.

'You have a choice,' Jim said after the greetings, the smiles and the measuring looks, as he showed me two large rooms at one end of the L-shaped flat. 'And the guests' toilet is all yours.'

As soon as I saw the second room, I was bewitched. My balcony overlooked the Avenida Atlântica by the Copa Fort, and I had a view all the way to Leme. I stood there for a few minutes on my own private belvedere, grinning, taking it all in: the Copacabana curve, the reclining

buttock of Sugarloaf Mountain, the sky, the beach, the black and white wavy meeting-of-the-waters pattern of the pavement, more striking from above than on the ground. The fantastic Rio panorama, the warm breeze and my happy heartbeat made me realise that yes, I was in Brazil again, this time in its 500th anniversary year. It was on 22 April 1500 that Pedro Álvares Cabral landed on a beach near present-day Porto Seguro in Bahia. Well, that's what the guidebooks say, so it must be true.

Except that he was not the first, and his name was not Cabral. Start again.

Let's dispense with the name: 'Cabral' was the second of seven children by Fernão Cabral and Isabel de Gouveia and being called Cabral was the privilege of the first-born, Pedro's elder brother. When he discovered Brazil, he was called Pedro Álvares Gouveia. Then his brother died, and he assumed his father's surname. So much for that.

Pedro Álvares Cabral/Gouveia, about 32 or 33 years old at the time, sailed from Lisbon to India on 13 March 1500 with 13 ships and 1,500 men on the route pioneered by Bartolomeu Diaz, who discovered the Cape of Good Hope, and Vasco de Gama, who sailed all the way to India. Their objective was to avoid the Mediterranean–Middle-Eastern route, the monopoly of Turks and various Italians. Bartolomeu Diaz himself was one of the captains in Cabral's fleet. It is a great irony that he drowned in a gale outside the stormy Cape he had discovered (and named prophetically Cape of Storms – it was the Portuguese king who gave the Cape a more sailor-friendly name).

Cabral (let's call him that) was not exactly the brightest of Portuguese explorers. He, ahem, *lost* a ship ten days out of Lisbon. I mean, how daft is that? His caravels looked for two days but couldn't find any trace of it. Presumably the unfortunate captain – Vasco de Ataíde – was on a proper course for India rather than South America, and he expected Cabral to be going his way; we will never know, since he vanished completely. Then Cabral hit Brazil at Porto Seguro, way out west, instead of India, way out east. To top it all, when Cabral anchored off the coast of Brazil, he thought he had hit an island, which he called Ilha de Terra Cruz. An island? South America an *island*? Only in the sense that Eurasia plus Africa is an island, and I don't think Cabral was capable of deep tectonics analysis. Needless to say, he never got another naval commission and died in obscurity.

Cabral may have taken the credit for Brazil's discovery, but he was not the first there. A few months earlier the Spanish navigator Vicente Yáñez Pinzón – who was the captain of *Niña*, one of Columbus's ships

back in 1492 – had landed further up in what is now Cabo Agostinho in Pernambuco (although some argue it was Cabo Mucuripe in present-day Fortaleza) and sailed all the way to a huge ‘freshwater sea’ (*Mar Dulce*), which was clearly the Amazon. Further up the coast he met another Spaniard, Diego de Lepe, who had navigated up a river he called Marañon, which we now know as Pará. No one doubts their word, since they also took captives to show the Spanish court, and a subsequent map of the area by Pinzón’s pilot Juan de la Cosa made in 1501 shows the Amazon correctly marked.

But enough of confutations: Cabral had a better spin doctor, and that’s why it is his remains that are buried in Rio’s church of Nossa Senhora do Carmo. The spin doctor’s name was Pero Vaz de Caminha, and he was the voyage’s chronicler. He wrote a letter to the Portuguese king, Manoel I, which can be summed up as ‘*Oh, brave new world, that hath such people in it!*’ He described Brazil and the Tupi Indians he encountered in such wondrous tones, combining excitement and rare scientific insight, that he got the Portuguese crown hooked. His account of the naked, peaceful, beautiful Tupi started the myth of the ‘noble savage’ and inspired many Enlightenment writers, including Thomas More, whose *Utopia*, published sixteen years later, is set on an island off the coast of Brazil.

The best spin doctor of them all was Amerigo Vespucci whose 1503 description to the Medicis of Brazil and the north coast of South America was translated into all the major languages and turned out to be a bestseller of its time: ‘*If there is Paradise on Earth, it can’t be much further from this land.*’ It was so successful that people started talking of the new continent not as the New World, but as Amerigo’s. In the same way the merchants started speaking of the new territory not as *Ilha* – later *Terra*, as the penny dropped – *de Vera Cruz*, but as *Terra do Brazil*. For this was the place where ships loaded the valuable brazilwood and sold it in Lisbon for the manufacture of the precious red dye. (‘I’m off to the Land of Vera Cruz tomorrow.’ ‘Where?’ ‘You know, the land of brazil.’ ‘Ah!’)

The merchants’ name won.

John Hemming, a renowned historian of the Brazilian Indians, astutely observes that when Cabral sailed from Porto Seguro, he unknowingly performed two acts whose symbolism is hard to beat, for he left the means of destruction of the natives. He gave them alcohol, which they drank ‘*with great willingness*’, and he also left two *degredados* – convicts – behind. They cried and cried, but the naked Indian women provided them with comfort. Thus, the first modern Brazilians were born.

And oh, the Indians offered Cabral's men something called tobacco. Good return, boys ...

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*They appear to be people of such innocence that if they comprehended our speech and we theirs they would become Christians instantly, given that they do not seem to believe in anything. Thus if the convicts who are staying back learn their language and understand them, I am in no doubt that they will become Christians according to the Holy Intentions of Your Majesty, and will adopt our Holy Faith [...] because these people are of wonderful simplicity and it will be easy to imprint upon them any belief we wish to bestow to them, since Our Lord gave them beautiful bodies and beautiful faces like honourable men. And I believe that he did not bring us here without good cause. Therefore your Majesty who wants to spread the Holy Catholic faith ought to take care of their Salvation. God willing it will be thus with little effort.*

*They do not work the fields nor raise cattle. There are no bulls or cows, goats, lambs or chicken or any domesticated animals. And they only eat yams of which there are many and such seeds and fruit that lie on the earth and the trees. Despite all this, they are more muscular and lithe than ourselves however much wheat and vegetables we eat.*

*That day while we were walking with them they danced and pranced with us to the sound of a tambourine like they were more our friends than we theirs. When we asked them in sign language whether they wanted to come to our ships, they were so ready to agree that, if we invited all of them, they would all have come aboard.*

– Pero Vaz de Caminha in that famous letter to King Manoel I, bonding with the Tupi who already sound like modern Brazilians.

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– 2 –

I woke up at 6 p.m. I'd been sleeping for six hours. I felt very tired, but this was Rio, Saturday night during *Carnaval*. I couldn't stay in.

I dressed up and walked towards Ipanema. The gay street party was at Rua Farma de Amoedo. Outside the Cardiac Arrest Hospital the ghetto-blasters were ghetto-blasting samba tunes, and a thousand-strong crowd, dressed only in shorts or swimming trunks and flip-flops, was drinking and dancing. Even the hospital patients were leaning out of their windows shaking their shoulders. I sat down at Bofetada's and had one of those divine Brazilian *picanhas*.

---

### Things I Like About Brazil #1: The Beef

*It is superb and second in the world only to the Argentinian. The picanha (steak) is tender, juicy, always medium done and melts in the mouth. In many colonies the outdoors consumption of meat, and especially beef, played an important social role as the local foodie terms give away. American barbecues, South African braais, Argentinian churrascos or Brazilian rodízios betray the cowboy cultures that inspired them. The barbecue is an indigenous American practice: New World Indians used a rack to roast fish and game over an open fire; the word itself comes from Haiti where the natives called this rack 'barbacoa'.*

*In a Brazilian rodízio restaurant you are brought steak, loin, topside, silverside, fillet, brisket, rump and flank, chicken hearts and legs, sausages, turkey, pork – in short, as many meats as you can dream of and as much as you can possibly eat without exploding. I have mental images of me eating that last sausage and bursting open like Terry Jones in The Meaning of Life.*

*I have a recipe for Brazilian picanha:*

- *Take one bull and cow.*
  - *Remove them forcibly from Europe.*
  - *Never feed them hormones by law.*
  - *Wait for 500 years.*
  - *Kill one of their offspring as humanely as you can with the minimum of pain and distress.*
  - *Slice the fucker and roast it.*
- 

This must be – this must be ...

'EMÍLIO!' I shouted, as I spotted a Brazilian friend I knew from London.

'I told you we'd meet in Rio!' he replied.

Emílio was tall, blond and beautiful with a perfect body, white as milk. He is still the whitest, least hairy Brazilian I know. He comes from good German immigrant stock from Brazil's southern-most corner, Rio Grande do Sul. We did not have much to catch up on as we had met only a few weeks earlier. Emílio told me I had missed the procession Carmen Miranda, which draws the biggest bevy of outrageous drag queens in Ipanema; thankfully some of them were still around: Lola Batalhão, with enough fruit on her hat to feed the bird population of a small Caribbean island, and Isabelita dos Patins, with nothing less than a decent-sized tree stuck on her headdress.

‘The place to be tonight is X-Demente,’ he said. ‘They have Paul Oakenfold DJ-ing.’

‘I’m going home,’ I said. ‘Just arrived this morning.’

A second wind came over me.

‘Although I may go to Le Boy. That’s close.’

‘Oh, that was *last* night,’ Emílio said. ‘Tonight it’s X-Demente. The party only happens twice a year!’

‘Mmm, Le Boy is only five minutes away,’ I said. ‘I have good memories of it from my last visit to Rio.’

‘You mean you scored there,’ Emílio said.

‘I wouldn’t put it that bluntly, but yes.’

Le Boy is a club with a rectangular bar in the centre where barmen with square shoulders operate. *A very orthogonal arrangement*, I thought, and that was just the security men’s jaws. Rio men make you want to hide under the carpet and pray: ‘Squash me, Goddess, squash me like an insect, for my pecs are not worthy.’ Kafka must have met a Carioca before he wrote *Metamorphosis*. After a few hours in Le Boy, I, too, felt like a cockroach.

The music was, however, as mainstream as I remembered. Rio revels in its samba – everything else is played half-wittedly and danced to half-heartedly. Lounge music on the main floor? Someone tell Gilles Lascar, the French owner who greets everyone with gusto at the door as if this were a private party and not a commercial club. But it’s in the shows that Le Boy comes tops, and during *Carnaval* they have specials: ‘*Seven Days of Total Madness*’ featuring Brazilian singing divas. On Saturday, today, there was a night of Bahian music with Simone Moreno. On Monday, the Night of the Millennium Elza Soares, the sexagenarian ‘Queen of Samba’, would receive the prize of the Singer of the Millennium (and you thought it was Michael Jackson?). Elza Soares is the Judy Garland of the Cariocas: in Brazil’s 500th year – and she looks as if she has lived through the best part of that period – she was made the patron of the Movement of Transvestites and Female Impersonators of Rio, which *surely* must be the pinnacle of any entertainer’s career. There was a Gala night on Tuesday with Gretchen (Gretchen?) and finally on Wednesday a bye-bye *Carnaval* night with Eloina and her Leopards, who I took to be go-go boys and not the real thing. Multiply all this by every club in Rio and there you have it: ten million revellers, including 300,000 foreign tourists, going ape for a week.

\*\*\*\*\*

I returned home at 5 a.m. drunk, spent and hungry. I saw an open *lanchonete* stall with several prostitutes hanging about, a common sight in pre-dawn Copacabana. There were only some *kibbés* left: oblong Middle-Eastern meatballs. I was about to order one, but one of the girls looked at me, pointed at them and made a vomiting face.

When a whore tells you not to put something in your mouth, you obey.

- 3 -

I woke up late in an empty flat. On the dining room table, laid out for breakfast, there was a letter:

'John,

Trust you had a good start to Carnival. Please help yourself to whatever you want in the fridge (except Moët et Chandon)! There is fresh coffee in the thermos, bread, butter, cheeses, fruit, cold meats etc. We have a big beach day ahead. We will be in front of Caesar Park Hotel, Ipanema if you want to join us. Banda da Sympatia will be playing near there.

Jim and Glória.'

They had even left me a beach towel ...

I had a quick breakfast and left for Ipanema. The sun was hot, and every single square inch of the city beaches had a bum on it. Well, part of a bum really, as the Carioca behind is of considerable circumference. It took me half an hour to find Jim, Glória and an American colleague of Jim's in the crowded area in front of the Caesar Park Hotel, and it took me another half hour to butt-off the space to stretch out my own bottom. Diving in the sea is a no-no. If the waves don't get you (Ipanema means 'bad, disturbed water' in Tupi), the freezing water will put you off more than the new experimental oil rig in the ocean spoiling the view.

It was in Ipanema that Jim and Glória had met five years earlier. Jim had just been posted to Rio and felt so lonely – the city's overwrought sexuality can be intimidating.

'I was walking along the pavement,' he recalled, 'and our eyes met. We each drank a coconut on the beach, and I asked her out for a drink. She accepted.' Dinner followed where he and Glória talked a lot. 'We just couldn't stop, as if we had met already in another lifetime. So I did something mad,' he said.

Mad?

'I took time off, and we went for a long four-day weekend to Búzios. That sealed it.'