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Seduced by Rio, and Learning Its Secrets



Richard Perry/The New York Times

On a weekend day in the southern summer, it seems that all of young Rio is at the beach, in this case, Ipanema.

By **SETH KUGEL**

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AT 5 o'clock on a hot Sunday afternoon in early December, a few scattered loungers chatted over draft beers on the verandas of the Rua dos Oitis, a graceful, narrow street of informal restaurant-bars in Rio's affluent neighborhood of Baixo Gávea.

Under the Brazilian version of daylight saving time, the summer sun had several hours left to dapple the adjoining plaza, the Praça Santos Dumont, where a few old men dotted benches and a young couple admired the fountain. A bustling thoroughfare on the other side of the trees seemed a mile away. Occasionally an overzealous puppy yipped, interrupting the quiet, or a taxi dropped off a passenger at one of the nearby apartment buildings.

The calm was unremarkable: most of Rio de Janeiro was, as usual on summer weekends, at the beach.

By 7:30, signs began appearing that a party was about to materialize. In couples and groups, advance units of the perma-bronzed, perma-happy après-beach crowd drifted in - parking their Peugeots or Volkswagen Golfs on nearby streets to be attended for the evening by men working for tips - and made their way into the bars.

By 10, the Rua dos Oitis was a happy hour run amok. Throngs spilled out of the Hipódromo Up, popular for its pizza, including the multitopped português version.

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Rio locals seem to have a magical ability to know where the next party will be.

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Women in jeans shorts and skimpy tops smiled at men buying them Skol beer from coolers in the crowded street. The seductive buzz of Brazilian Portuguese was punctuated by the shouts of friends hailing one another as they pushed through the congestion to bestow double-cheeked kisses. Despite their evident delight at meeting, many had probably shared a patch of sand a few hours earlier.

My cellphone buzzed; Carolina Barreto, one of my new local circle of acquaintances, was trying to find me in the crowd. She and her friends were only 50 feet away, but it took five minutes to get to them.

It was all typically, intangibly Rio - tanned midriffs and intoxicating smiles, informal celebration and friendly exchanges, the casual democracy of an American street festival combined with the charged vibe of a South Beach nightclub.

This was not precisely a planned event: The Rua dos Oitis fills up regularly on Thursdays and Sundays by a kind of unwritten common consent. Cariocas, as the people of Rio de Janeiro call themselves, have a magical tendency to know exactly where the next high-density, low-pressure social gathering is going to appear.

Sometimes it will be in a small club with spellbinding local music, sometimes in a shopping mall soaked in beer and cachaça, the signature sugar cane liquor of Brazil. Sometimes, too, it will be on an iconic urban beach with kiosks selling cold coconut water for 50 cents.

Americans may think of the beach as literally a laid-back affair, but on the sands of Barra da Tijuca or Ipanema, social butterflies outnumber book readers 10 to 1, and small stretches of oceanfront morph into packed-in party spots. So many people seem to know each other that remembering to flip over to even out your tan is a nonissue, rendered irrelevant by how often you are roused by the arrival of yet another friend in yet another impossibly tiny bathing suit.

The street gatherings at Baixo Gávea used to happen on Mondays instead of Thursdays and Sundays (Segunda-sem-lei, or Lawless Monday, it was called), until the complaints of well-organized party-pooing neighbors won out. Alas, in a city of 10.8 million, not everyone can be young, beautiful and available to party any night of the week.

Most tourists in Rio spend most of their time downtown or in the city's Zona Sul, or southern zone, where the Rua dos Oitis is located. But in the 50 weeks of the year not devoted to Carnival or New Year's Eve, it can be easy to miss the party. It takes some guidance to develop the sense of where the Cariocas will be exercising their native joie de vivre.

A working knowledge of Portuguese is an easy in, but even lacking that, with a little advance work and a few English-speaking Brazilian contacts you can weave your way into the action and get a glimpse of the real scene.

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Richard Perry/The New York Times

What is billed as a rehearsal for Carnival at Mangueira, one of the most popular samba schools, is actually a come-one-come-all Saturday-night dance party.

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