



RAGING RIO

**It's Carnival
time again in
South America
and Antonio
Pasolini was
there to watch
it in all its
spendour...**





SUN, long, sandy beaches, manageable flight distance, little jet-leg and loads of human eye-candy: Brazil is one of the best holiday destinations for those willing to stretch the imagination beyond the Canary Islands or the Australasian beaten track. One of the best times of the year to visit is Carnival, which takes place between Saturday and Tuesday before Ash Wednesday. But that's only in the official calendar, because it is preceded by weeks of warm-up parties and events. This year's Carnival started on the 4th February.

We arrived in Rio a couple of weeks before the official start just in time to catch the **Banda de Ipanema**, one of the most famous and long-standing 'blocos' (organised street parties with floats and samba music) in Rio. Banda de Ipanema is famous for the drag queens that

take part in it – like the fabulous Isabela de Patins (Isabela on Roller Skates) - and the liberal, no-holds-barred atmosphere. The 'folia' (word used to describe 'party' during Carnival) includes older local veterans, guys in trunks, women in bikinis and feather boas, with plenty of flirting and boozing on the side.

The blocos whip up a frenzy of anticipation as the city revs up for the party while visitors arrive in hordes. Americans are by far the most conspicuous of them and Ipanema turns into a gay village around that time, with muscle-bound queens from all over the world jamming the beach and the busy roads of the district. The epicentre of the action is **Farme de Amoedo St**, which leads right up to the gay section of the beach.

One of the mandatory things to do in Rio before Carnival is to go to an open rehearsal held by one of the first-league samba schools. These open their doors to the general public in order to get a cash injection and popularise their theme songs (called 'samba-enredos', or 'samba-plots'). We went to see the rehearsal of Unidos da Tijuca in a suburb of Rio near the main bus station. The sound of the drumming was absolutely mind-blowing and the atmosphere really friendly and relaxed. The crowd was more suburban and less snooty than Ipanema folks can be. Everyone talked to everyone, drinks were cheap and they handed out leaflets with the words of the song - it

didn't matter if you could read Portuguese or not. After a while, it was just one big chant noise.

The rehearsal and the street blocos gave us a taste of Rio Carnival but as the official start date approached we hit the road to go to a small place called **Barra do Jucu**, about 300 miles north of Rio, in search of a more authentic, grass-roots brand of Carnival. The seaside village is home to surfers, fishermen, bohemian types and the of body boarding world championships, the place's main claim to nationwide fame, although it is regionally very popular.

We stayed with a German friend who owns a house there and knows everyone in the village, which made us feel at home immediately. Come Friday night (**Carnival Eve**) and we planted ourselves at the local gay bar which overlooks the square where the party concentrates: stalls were up, music was coming from everywhere and beautiful topless boys were roaming about in a very casual, un-selfconscious way.

After a long morning on the wavy beach on Saturday we got ready for the first day of folia. Saturday was the day of '**bloco de putas**', or 'bloco of whores', which meant the streets got taken over by an army of men in drag. It was hilarious to see cute surfer boys wearing their sisters' dresses, pot-bellied men in bras and smudgy make-up and 'real' drag queens going about the streets dry-humping each other and being teased with by other men and women alike.

Sunday was the day of the '**surprise bloco**', the main event of the local calendar, when a succession of themed floats clogged the streets followed by thousands of revellers. It was hard to decide where to look: it was a mayhem of costumes, noises and laughter, redolent of medieval buffoonery. Monday was the women's parade and you were allowed to join in if you were in drag, which sums up the spirit of the party. The last day of Carnival saw the return of the 'surprise bloco' and the atmosphere was actually quite magical. But, were it not enough, at midday on Ash Wednesday, the organisers of the event paraded on floats across the village cradling pink piglets, and followed by those who refused to let the party come to an end. Meanwhile, across the country people were glued to their TV sets following the counting of votes that would crown this year's winner of the **Rio Sambadrome** parade. The party wasn't quite over yet: the top-five schools would go back to the avenue for their final triumph parade on the coming Saturday. Until then, the spirit of Carnival would stay alive and kicking.

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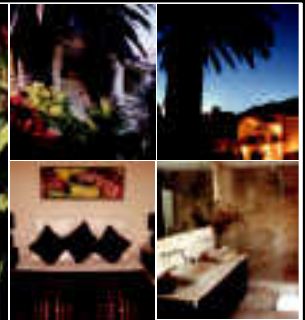


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