



## Rio de Janeiro

by James N. Green

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Rio de Janeiro is justifiably known as the Marvelous City. Built on land that borders a broad bay and the Atlantic Ocean, the city is surrounded by huge granite hills--covered with lush green vegetation--that jut up into the sky. Glittering white sands on urban beaches offer an easy-going life for those who can afford to skip work and enjoy the tropical sun.

Yet with over 11 million inhabitants, Rio de Janeiro is a bustling metropolis and Brazil's second largest city. Its luxurious and animated Carnival celebrations, visible Afro-Brazilian cultural influences, and its breathtaking landscape have long made the city an international tourist attraction. During the hot summer months, hundreds of gay foreigners join Cariocas, the natives of Rio de Janeiro, to enjoy the muscled, bronzed beauties on an ever-expanding queer strip of Ipanema Beach.

### Early History

Rio de Janeiro was the capital of colonial Brazil from 1763 until 1808, when the Portuguese royal family, fleeing Napoleon's invading armies, converted the city into the capital of the Portuguese empire. As the center of imperial Brazil for most of the nineteenth century, Rio de Janeiro attracted migrants from all parts of Brazil as well as immigrants from abroad.

At the heart of what was Rio de Janeiro's entertainment district in the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century stands an equestrian statue to Brazil's first ruler, Emperor Pedro I. Although the mounted monarch represents Brazil's move towards independence from Portugal in 1822, the park surrounding the statue had a less patriotic purpose for men who enjoyed sexual liaisons with other men. Constitution Square, as it was called in the nineteenth century, was such a notorious cruising area that turn-of-the-twentieth-century cartoons made direct allusions to its use by men as a site for sexual encounters.

### The Twentieth Century

During the early twentieth century, men who appropriated public spaces in downtown Rio de Janeiro to socialize with those who shared their sexual desires faced constant police harassment and threats of arrests. In 1932, Rio de Janeiro's Chief of Police collaborated in a study with Dr. Leonídio Riberio, the director of the Institute of Criminology, by arresting 132 homosexuals who were placed in a line-up, photographed, and then studied to determine the relationship between their body parts and homosexuality.

Ribeiro conducted his research based on the theory that hormonal imbalances caused homosexuality, which could be detected by noticing the excess or lack of hair or unusually longer or shorter limbs among homosexuals. His research won the dubious distinction of receiving the 1938 Lombroso Award in Italy for excellence in criminal anthropology.

During World War II, many U. S. sailors stationed in Rio de Janeiro developed relationships with Brazilian gay men, and during those years certain bars permitted somewhat open manifestations of homosexuality in



A view of Rio de Janeiro looking in the direction of Copacabana and Ipanema.  
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public places. At the same time, the beach immediately in front of Rio de Janeiro's most luxurious hotel, the Copacabana Palace, became a well-known gay site, where Brazilians occasionally caught a glimpse of their favorite international movie stars who were vacationing in Rio de Janeiro.

Hundreds of thousands of gay men and lesbians moved to the country's capital in the 1950s and 1960s to enjoy its urban delights. Gay men were avid fans of radio singers and crowded into the recording studios of the National Radio to cheer their favorite divas. Rio de Janeiro's night life, especially the smoky clubs in Copacabana, also attracted many young gay men and lesbians who sought out spaces to socialize.

Carnival celebrations, however, crowned the year's social activities for gay men and women in Rio de Janeiro. The opportunity for men to dress up as women, or vice versa, and frolic in the streets or attend Carnival balls in drag was a liberating experience for many since they were confined to "proper" gendered public comportment the rest of the year.

Groups of gay men became increasingly visible in several Carnival balls. Beginning in the 1930s, producers of these events organized costume competitions and encouraged celebrants to invent ever more elaborate outfits. One particular theater that organized such competitions began awarding prizes for the best man in drag, and the event soon became known as a drag ball, although ninety percent of the male revelers did not cross-dress.

By the mid-1970s, these balls were so famous that international celebrities visiting Rio de Janeiro for Carnival celebrations made a point of visiting the drag balls. In addition, more and more gay men took an active role in designing and creating the spectacular samba school parades that became the highlight of Rio de Janeiro's Carnival.

In the mid-1960s, several rising young pop singers, including Maria Betânia, Gal Costa, and Caetano Veloso moved to Rio de Janeiro. Their ambiguous sexual personas and the constant rumors about their bisexuality or homosexuality fueled passionate support among gay and lesbian fans. These and several other Brazilian singers, such as Ney Matogrosso, also expanded traditional notions of appropriate gender behavior as they came on stage in flamboyant costumes and kissed other singers of the same sex on the lips.

## **Activism**

In 1978, inspired by the international gay and lesbian movement, a group of gay writers and intellectuals began publishing a monthly journal entitled *Lampião da Esquina*, a name that means literally "corner street lamp." The title of the tabloid played on the double meaning of the word *Lampião*, which as street light referred to cruising, but in a tongue-in-cheek manner also referred to the person *Lampião*, a hyper-masculine Robin Hood-like bandit figure from the Brazilian Northeast.

Based in Rio de Janeiro, *Lampião* served as a clearinghouse for the emerging politicized glbtq movement. It also promoted the idea of building alliances with Black groups, feminists, the indigenous movement, and ecologists. During its three-year run, *Lampião* solidified in Brazil the idea of coming out as a political act.

When gay groups in Rio de Janeiro decided to host the International Lesbian and Gay Association's Seventeenth International Conference in 1995, the movement in Rio de Janeiro was still quite fragile. However, the participation of several hundred international guests as well as the enthusiastic logistic support offered by Brazilians from across the country helped consolidate a national movement in Brazil.

At the end of the Conference, two thousand people marched down Atlantic Avenue with a hundred meter-long rainbow flag in the largest Pride Parade in Brazil up until that time. In 2003, a quarter of a million people retraced those steps for the June Pride Celebration.

In spite of the violence that has plagued the city and the stark social differences between the privileged

and the poor, Rio de Janeiro continues to be a fun-filled gay and lesbian mecca.

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### **About the Author**

**James N. Green** is Associate Professor of Latin American History at California State University, Long Beach and president of the Brazilian Studies Association. In 1978, he was co-founder of *Somos*, Brazil's first gay and lesbian rights organization. He is the author of a prize-winning social history of same-sex desire in Rio de Janeiro and Sao Paulo, *Beyond Carnival: Male Homosexuality in Twentieth-Century Brazil*. He is currently working on a second volume, "*More Love and More Desire*": *A History of the Brazilian Lesbian, Gay, and Transgendered Movement*.