

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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Dear Peter,

When I first set off for Latin America, I was bound for one of its less glamorous nations: Honduras. Few people then associated anything other than bananas with this Central American country - an image it had retained for almost a century. My mother used to tell her friends that I worked "in the capital of Honduras," fearing they wouldn't know where (or what) Tegucigalpa was. And I remember the Wall St. Journal ran an advertisement saying, "When you want all the news, even what's happening in Tegucigalpa, read the Wall St. Journal."

Seven years to the day after my first assignment in Latin America, I headed off for another Latin American city. No-one had any doubt where this was. With its sweeping white beaches, beautiful cinammon-skinned women, and a reputation for decadent living, Rio de Janeiro has long held a special place in the hearts, and fantasies, of many people.

The inhabitants of Rio de Janeiro have all the subtlety of fireworks on the fourth of July. The Cariocas - as they are known throughout Brazil - are regarded as fun-loving beach bums; and many, if not most, of the locals do their best to live up to this reputation. I arrived in Rio on a hot, sunny day in the dead of Brazil's "winter." It was a weekday, and I was assured that it was no official holiday. Yet thousands of Cariocas crowded the miles of beaches skirting the city. Some were playing volleyball, others soccer, but most sat in extremely brief bathing suits lazily soaking up the sun. In the United States, people take the day off when bad weather makes it too difficult to get to work. Using similar logic, the Cariocas stay away from their offices when the weather is too good.

A veteran foreign correspondent here assured me that the Carioca notoriety for sloth is not entirely deserved. On the many occasions that he has had to arrive at work shortly before dawn or to stay late into the night, his office lights by no means burned alone in the city's business district. He went on to add, however, that when he is forced to put in fifteen-hour days or to work at weekends, he rarely gets sympathy from his vivacious Carioca wife. She dismisses his behaviour as straightforward North American masochism.

Now, I can accept a certain degree of laziness in a place like Rio. You'd have to be odd not to be tempted to spend your days by the seaside, gazing at beautiful bodies and sipping caipirinhas - a refreshing and powerful concoction of sugar cane alcohol, lime juice and sugar. Yet, what I can't accept so easily is the Cariocas' extremely lazy speech patterns. My hours of Portuguese lessons

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had not prepared me for this. The locals sound as though their mouths are full of peanut butter. A quick visit to the better-spoken city of Sao Paulo reassured me that I do in fact know some Portuguese, but not the Carioca version. The Cariocas just don't bother to pronounce many of the syllables in a word. For example, "esta legal" - which means "it's O.K." - comes out as simply "ta." And "voce" - which should be pronounced vos-say and means "you" - ends up as "say." Like Latins everywhere, the Cariocas also use hand signals and guttural noises to communicate when words fail them. But these are of a variety and ingenuity that add up to a whole separate branch of the language.

What the Cariocas lack in enunciation, they make up for in sheer volume. They tend to scream rather than to speak to each other. In popular restaurants, the din is often so great that I find myself joining in, shouting across the table just to be heard. At home, I use my stereo as a sound buffer against the howling neighbourhood children and their boisterous parents. At first, I thought the Cariocas had an extraordinarily high percentage of family arguments. But that isn't so. They're just carrying on conversations in the dangerous reaches of the decibel scale.

Yet there are some places in the city where the Cariocas' rowdiness is enjoyable. My favorite is Maracana, Rio's immense soccer stadium. Few spectacles in the world can possibly be as thrilling as a game I saw here between two local rivals: Fluminense and Botofogo. It was one of the final games in the state championship, and the fans were out in full force. They nearly filled the stadium's 170,000 seats - Botofogo's supporters ranged on one side, and the Fluminense horde on the other. Batteries of drums beat out two rival rhythms, which the fans picked up, each side chanting and clapping in unison and hurling challenges across the turf. When a goal was scored, pandemonium broke out. Amid the noise, home-made flags the size of bed-sheets covered the bleachers in a violent sea of stars and stripes and polkadots. Fireworks went off; but in the uproar they could only be seen, and not heard.

The raucousness of the Cariocas is also exhilarating at the market. Stallholders hawk their wares at screaming pitch, and the customers bellow back their orders. The variety and quality of the goods are spectacular. Even an Oriental greengrocer in New York might be envious of the crisp Boston lettuce and escarole. Papayas can be bought as large as watermelons or as small as avocado pears. The deli stalls range from dill pickles and prosciutto to camembert and goat's cheese. There are flowers as simple as yellow daisies or as exquisite as tropical orchids.

Yet, there are disappointments too. While Rio offers such an array of premium foods in its markets and specialty stores, the restaurants can be disappointing. The waiters may parade with elegant platters of artfully garnished bacalhao (cod) or haddock (pronounced ad-dock-ee by Cariocas). But one ingredient tends to be missing: Flavor. Menus boast a wide range of molhos or sauces. Unfortunately, one molho tastes all too often like the next.

What the food lacks in quality is made up in quantity. A normal Carioca portion is at least twice what you'd get in New York, except possibly at Mama Leone's. In the churrascarias - restaurants that specialize in barbecued meat - waiters in white coats and black ties dash around brandishing full-sized sabres laden with massive chunks of sizzling meat. They'll go on serving you until you beg for mercy. For me, the one really serious culinary disappointment has been the coffee. Brazil is world famous for its coffee. Yet this reputation does not seem to have been won by the quality of its beans, but by the sheer magnitude of the nation's harvest. Brazil grows more coffee than any other country in the world. It is not hand-picked, however, like the finer coffees of Mexico and Central America. The beans are ripped off mechanically with no regard for their ripeness, and then roasted until they are pitch black. Consequently a cup of this coffee tastes like a liquidized charcoal briquette. The Brazilians try to make this more palatable by serving it in what look like thimbles, half-filled with sugar.

Sugar mixed with charcoal is hardly delectable. Yet the Cariocas sit for hours in outdoor cafes sipping these cafezinhos - and watching Rio's continuous fashion show. The Cariocas are an extremely stylish people. They opt for sensuous informality. Brightly coloured cotton sweatshirts have such wide necks that they slide gracefully off one cinnamon shoulder or the other. Blouses and slacks are cut generously, for comfort, with subtle slits at strategic points. Beauty has to look unfettered. Make-up is kept to a minimum and hair is rarely subjected to blow dryers and curling irons; instead, it is left to wave naturally. These rules of style apply as much to men as they do to women - and also to those in between; Rio's many transvestites set the pace in fashion, and sex-change operations are not unusual. Brazil, of course, is famous for its size and for its pride in having within its borders some of the biggest natural wonders in the world - the biggest river system, and so on. So it's a bit ironic that what really catches the world's fascination is Brazil's smallest piece of clothing. The tanga is surely the briefest bikini around. By law, Brazilian women are forbidden to go topless. Most of the beauties who stroll along the beaches stick to the rules, but barely. Their nipples may be covered, in accordance with the law, but their bikini bottoms are cut so narrowly as to be almost non-existent, emphasising the glories of the Brazilian male's traditionally favorite erogenous zone - the female posterior or bunda. Those beauties who break this convention, and dare to go topless as well as almost bottomless, usually turn out to be legally male and therefore immune from the cover-up regulations.

Like the clothing, sexual mores are informal. Cariocas seem to accept sex as a natural and extremely enjoyable bodily function. Affection is expressed openly and enthusiastically; people kiss and caress each other in the most crowded and public places at all hours of the day. Friends end their telephone conversations with the phrase, "I send you a kiss," to which the correct Carioca reply is, "I'd like another." I have a strong suspicion that Rio's relaxed sexual code may explain why men don't accost women in the street to the extent that they do in the rest of Latin America. In Mexico City, even my less than dazzling knee-length skirts and baggy slacks (no slits) used to elicit bawdy remarks all the time. In sharp contrast,

regardless of what I wear in Rio, I walk the streets without problems. Yet there are other forms of harassment. Take the Brazilian bureaucrat, for example. In Mexico, it is normal for a clerk to apologize profusely for not being able to attend to you right away, to beg you to wait for a "momentito" and to deal with you when time allows. That could be hours later, but at least you know that at some point you will be attended to. Not in Rio.

A Carioca bank clerk or government official may look at you, but not offer as much as a nod of acknowledgment, and then return to whatever he was previously doing. If you are persistent, but respectfully so, he might eventually condescend to talk. And if he talks, he might help too.

Then there's corruption, which sometimes surprises by its absence. In Mexico, you can assume that - let's say - all customs officials are corrupt. In Rio, you can't; but even that can be a problem. Our belongings arrived in Rio by boat from Mexico as long ago as last April. We hired a despachante. This is the Brazilian answer to an impenetrable bureaucracy, the man who knows which forms have to be filled out and how, which officials have to be paid off, if any, and by how much. In short, he knows exactly how to grease the cumbersome government machine. (Of course, one must be careful to hire the right despachante. A specialist in drivers licenses may be a dunce at customs forms.) When May arrived, our baggage was still in the customs shed; but we thought little of it. June came and went, and we started to get worried. Friends told us of the bribes they'd had to pay, and of the goods that had been pilfered from their baggage in customs despite their pay-offs. One foreign correspondent had had a particularly painful experience. His despachante cost a lot of money, but proved absolutely useless. Then one of the customs men demanded an extremely hefty bribe. What was causing the problem was the fact that the correspondent's baggage included his collection of fine Persian carpets, a prize the customs men didn't want to let go. In desperation, he tried the one option open to him. He called in a pistolao or "big gun," in other words a heavyweight government official with enough influence to terrify the customs men into submission. Luckily he was able to call in a heavyweight champ: one of the most powerful men in the government, whose immensely plump figure causes awe wherever he turns. Even so, when the correspondent's shipment was promptly delivered to his home, the most valuable carpet in his collection had been "misplaced." With this in mind, we told our despachante to pay off whoever was holding up our baggage. When July arrived, he reported back that there was no-one who had to be bribed. It was just a matter of waiting for the official procedures to take their course. We began to fear that we had hired a fool. But in the first week of August our bags were released. No-one had taken money from us, and nothing was missing.

With equal luck, we've had nothing stolen since arriving in Rio. The city is plagued by a high crime rate, as Cariocas are the first to point out. I was still on the plane that brought me from Mexico when a Brazilian air stewardess suggested that I remove my shiny loop earrings. I explained to her that they were not valuable. "Yes," she replied, "but the street thieves don't know that, and they'll rip your earlobes to get them without asking questions." The Carioca takes no chances. The only thing the women wear less of than clothing is valuable jewelry. Instead, wood, shells, colored glass and plastic are crafted into fashionable earrings and necklaces. At night, it's not unusual for friends to drive to each other's houses only a few blocks apart, rather than walk even a short distance. No reason to tempt a roaming robber. Thieves in Rio have a major tactical advantage over their counterparts in other cities. Many live in the favelas or slums that blanket the hillsides just behind the wealthy beachfront neighbourhoods. The favelas' maze of unlit and unpaved streets are impenetrable even by the police pursuing a thief.

While I've yet to run up against such problems, I have had my difficulties with Rio's beggars, who are self-assured to the point of being aggressive. Beggars in many Latin American cities tend to sit passively on street corners, looking hungry and helpless, waiting for someone to drop them a few coins. Rio's mendicants use a different approach. One sunny Sunday morning I stood talking to some friends on a smart shopping street that runs parallel to Leblon beach, one of the most fashionable spots around. Suddenly, a short, round woman in a faded blue dress came up and demanded money. She wasn't carrying a weapon; nor did she look disposed to hit us or kick us if we didn't oblige; but she made it quite clear that she expected her demand to be met. My friends, who were wearing beach shorts, said they had no money. I pulled out two 100-cruzeiro notes and gave her one of them, the price of a coca-cola. But rather than thanks, I received a scowl in return. She demanded the other bank-note. We told her to go away. She would hear nothing of it, angrily. I gave in. On another occasion, I was eating lunch in an outdoor cafe. I was just starting my meal when two hands appeared through the barrier of tall pot-plants that separated my table from the sidewalk. The hands groped across the table. A voice demanded food. I saw a waiter rush outside. There was a scuffle and the hands withdrew; but they returned, three more times.

This is where the privileged Rio that I inhabit comes up against the real Rio de Janeiro of the many hundreds of thousands of other Cariocas whose way of life is neither stylish nor lazy. They wash in fountains, beg or steal for food, dress in rags, and die in poverty. It's a deep and dreadful destitution that I must try to penetrate. Not yet, however. For the next few months, I shall be back in familiar territory, reporting on events in El Salvador.

All my best,