

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

JCB-29 First Impressions

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Rua Prudente de Morais 805 c/VI  
Ipanema  
Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

Mr. Richard Nolte  
Institute of Current World Affairs  
366 Madison Avenue  
New York 17, New York

Dear Mr. Nolte:

There is an ocean of difference between Rio and Cape Town. Both have beautiful harbours but Sugar Loaf, Corcovado and the other hills which seem to push Rio into the sea do not have the sharp challenging quality of Cape Town's Table Mountain. By comparison the hills here are round and smooth and at a distance convey a certain softness.

As Table Mountain reflects in a way the solid and orderly mind of South Africa's Europeans so Rio's hills seem to reflect the more relaxed and flexible ways of Brazilians. People here live with severe economic inflation and one political crisis after another without losing their warmth, friendliness or sense of humour. Perhaps it is their ability to take themselves, their lives and their politicians with a grain of humour which sustains them.

Rio's fantastic growth in the last few years has overly congested the city to the point where Cariocas are much concerned about its future. This congestion, plus the hot and humid weather which prevails most of the year, gave us the impression that we had arrived in a Lagos with hills. However, unable to expand inland because of the hills, Rio has become more and more a city of apartments. Copacabana has only a few houses and these are hidden amid the 10- and 15-storey apartment buildings. In Ipanema, the next southern suburb, we live in a small court of houses which will in a matter of time make way for more apartments. Urban Rio somehow finds room for more and more people. Those without money are squeezed among the million poor who live in fantastic hillside favelas where dwellings of all sizes, shapes and construction seem to have been thrown up by some huge wave and where faith alone keeps them from falling. The city has become a jumble of people, cars, noise and inadequate public service. There appears to be a continual state of disorderliness in Rio that borders on chaos....

The erratic driving habits of local Brazilians had until recently been spiced by the drivers of the lotações (something between a taxi and a bus) which careened through the streets as if they were the only occupants. By recommendation of a traffic study they were removed in the southern sections and replaced by more conventional busses. (The busses may be more conventional but the drivers are the same.) Between stops and openings in traffic the bus drivers strive for top speed before slamming on their brakes; a rider comes to feel like a ping-pong ball in a fast game of table tennis!

I have seen busses passing each other three abreast with a little Volkswagon sturdily holding its own somewhere in between, all at high speed and on a two-way street.

Mail service, mostly slow, is always erratic. Sometimes it is surprisingly fast; sometimes it just disappears. Post boxes were removed a short time ago, I was told, and were found to be full of mail that had never been collected.

Larger water pipes are now being laid and in time; according to reports, there will be plenty of water for all. We live in an area where water is considered as much a surety as you can depend on here. But some of the northern suburbs have gone for as long as two weeks at a time without water. Everywhere it has to be filtered before using and to be safe Americans claim that even filtered water should be boiled.

Electricity is now rationed to householders and in this week of writing it is being cut off for over an hour twice a day (usually at those times when it is needed most). We are told that this is because of the drought; there is not enough water to produce the needed electrical power. It has rained every day this week but we find it very romantic eating every evening by candlelight.

And just when we were congratulating ourselves that at least we have a gas stove which would not be affected by the electrical shut-offs a notice appeared stating that if there were any further hold up in the supply of coal (from which the gas is made) gas would be cut off in the city within 48 hours.

Shopping is an adventure. Food is generally adequate but there are always shortages of something. Right now it is sugar and flour. This week supplies of everything ran short because everyone was stocking up "just in case...." (One woman bought 20 cases of Brillo "in case of revolution..") Food is inexpensive for us when compared with Africa and the States; it is not inexpensive for Brazilians since prices rise with the inflationary currency rate. Prices vary from morning to night. And if the Government orders a stable price on a particular commodity it disappears from the market until a raise is allowed.

Exchanging dollars is another adventure. Like a good housewife you have to "shop around" to get the best possible rate of exchange. Here again prices change daily.

Amid frightening breakdowns things generally operate to some necessary degree and somehow this large city continues to function in relative serenity.

Perhaps one reason why this is possible is that Brazilians carry on

with great flexibility and imagination. Nothing is ever impossible here no matter what the law or the state of affairs. There is always a way. If the law gets in the way, go around it, "otherwise how would anything ever get done?" Brazilians are masters of o jeito or the skill of "making do".

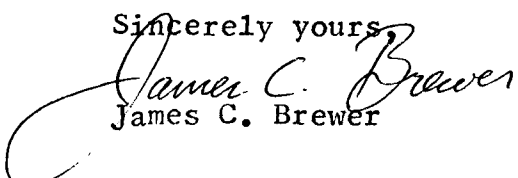
We might never have known about the revolution until it was over if we hadn't been alerted by a friend. Many Brazilians were taken completely unawares and some Rio-based newsmen were actually out of the country at the time. On the day of the revolution there was a bus strike in protest, but there are often strikes of one kind or another. There were lines at the food stores, but there are always lines. Rio's radio (Federal Government-controlled) blared patriotic speeches and martial music but with our still-small Portuguese vocabulary all this needn't have conveyed that anything unusual was going on. The story was circulated about a newsman who arrived during Easter Week when the streets and beaches were alive with confusion and noise. Noticing a similar confusion a few days later (April 1st) he assumed that this was yet another holiday. "What a life they lead here," he mused, "one holiday after another!" When he received a cable from his editor in the States demanding information about the revolution all he could respond was "What revolution?" After the fact, Rio swarmed with foreign newsmen who, in the absence of any dramatic revolution story to file, interviewed each other, took pictures of the scenery and cooked up pieces on the inflation.

This was all in the Brazilian tradition of bloodless revolutions. And probably it is his ability to see the funny side of what is going on that keeps them bloodless. While realizing the seriousness of the problems and purposes behind the revolution, our Brazilian friends still enjoyed making of the whole thing a kind of comic opera. One friend described how Fort VI, a fort in Copacabana, was taken in five minutes by a Colonel with a machine gun who drove up in his DK and left the motor running while he went up to the guards and told them to stop fooling around and lay down their guns. "And they did," he added, "just as soon as they put out their cigarettes."

When our youngest son complained that the revolution had to come on a rainy day, another Brazilian friend explained that if it hadn't been raining the army would all have been at the beach and there wouldn't have been a revolution. Just how can you beat a people who look at the world through such refreshing eyes!

Well, we arrived in Brazil at a most chaotic moment. We were immediately thrown into and engulfed by the whirl of a Brazilian holiday week and a revolution. Images and ideas have come at us in jumbles. Brazil is a huge country and we have much to learn. Right now we are still much involved in the business of living - a fascinating business at any time in Rio!

Sincerely yours

  
James C. Brewer

