

My 'firsts' in Rio

by Sandra Leyva

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After 18 hours on three planes, I had finally landed in Rio. I was exhausted, anxious, yet exhilarated. My first challenge was to find the person who was supposed to pick me up. I hoped this would be easy; how hard could spotting a face in a crowd be? Dozens of people shouted as they held out scrappy cardboard signs with scribbled names on them; unfortunately none of them said my name. I'm not going to lie, I was scared. After getting attacked by dollar-thirsty cab drivers, getting lost inside the three story airport, and asking the elevator girl for directions in my rudimentary Portuguese, I started to feel dizzy. Relax. Breathe in. I can do this. I had to make a decision. I pulled myself together and somehow got into a cab and gave the driver directions as best I could: Rua Almte. Alexandrino 2023, Santa Tereza. A convent.

The first thing I noticed in the cab was that there was no seatbelt. I still felt edgy from the adventure through the airport, and I had been Americanized enough over the past three years to perceive this. I relaxed and enjoyed the view. This was a city full of contrasts— industrial and rural; huge grey buildings and colorful little houses; wealthy compounds surrounded by favelas; people of all colors, rich and poor. After a few wrong turns and a long uncomfortable silence between the driver and me, we finally got to the convent. Like everything in Santa Tereza it was on a steep hill; however, getting up it was not my biggest concern.

I did not know how it would all turn out; my best friend Joanne was supposed to come with me to Brazil, but she had bailed out on me at the last minute, that bitch! I didn't really know any of my trip mates, except for Manny, an overly energetic, bald and giggly Mexican guy, whom I had talked to a little in our pre-departure Brazil class. Will they like me? Would I make friends? Who would I party with? I only hoped that we would all become friends so we could have a good time.

I was the last one to arrive; a test back at the UW had delayed my trip several days. Everyone, already settled in, greeted me

with enthusiasm. “Professor Warren” even greeted me with a traditional Brazilian kiss on the cheek. He became Jona from that point on. I started lightening up and forgetting my worries. Manny showed me around and helped me get settled into my room. I followed him, feeling like a lost freshman on campus, except I was in a maze-like convent with chapels, conference rooms and prayers scribbled on the walls. My room had a small bed with a thin mattress and old-smelling sheets, a foggy full-length mirror, cracked in half, and warped wooden furniture. An antique green French window overlooked a beautiful view of Santa Tereza’s hills: my favorite part, though, was a three-foot hand-carved wooden cross hanging right above my bed. The holiness was a little intimidating so I brightened up Jesus by hanging my colorful bikinis on each of his crucified arms.

After lunch and a three hour Portuguese class, I felt exhausted. I had not slept in who knows how many hours, and I really needed to shower. My trip-mates, however, were in a hurry to get out and I didn’t want to make a bad first impression. We took a couple of cabs downtown. As soon as I hopped in, the cab driver turned to me and asked for directions. All I could do was stare, confused. Did he say something about a tunnel? Thankfully Dan, a quiet guy who spoke pretty good Portuguese, interjected and gave the driver directions. We headed downtown looking for beauty salons. Lisa, a wholehearted half-Mexican girl, was the only person that had been to Brazil before, so after the cabs dropped us off, everyone followed her white polka-dotted dress around and around. We walked in circles for a while but just when we were starting to get frustrated, we found it. Now, my worries turned more physical; we were about to go through the official Brazilian rite of passage: the Brazilian Wax.

There were too many girls to go into the same salon, so we separated to make it faster. Somehow, I was supposed to explain to the kind ladies of the salon what my friends and I wanted. My Portuguese was barely developing, but pointing and giggling worked just as well. I have a small tattoo so I figured this couldn’t be so bad. I was wrong. Maybe it was because it was my first time, or maybe I just got a bad waxer, but those were the longest ten minutes of my life.

I went into a tiny white room with an examination-like table in the middle. The waxer, a smiley middle-aged woman with sweat on her upper lip, gave me instructions with her eyes. I lied down, lifted my skirt up and clenched the table so tightly it made the cheap paper lining wrinkle. The lady did not acknowledge my distress; she went about as she probably did hundreds of times before me: quick and detached. Hot wax, Popsicle sticks and tweezers were laid out like surgical instruments. Each strip of wax yanked from my lower half made my whole body cringe and sweat; the tiny fan humming above my head made no difference. I wanted to keep my eyes shut to relax but it was as if the lady pulled my eyelids open with every hot

strip of wax. Just when my forehead started dripping sweat and I thought I could not possibly take it any longer, it was over. All my muscles were tight and the paper lining under me was wrinkled and damp, but I had survived.

Next we went to a traditional Brazilian restaurant. We sat along the street, next to the people and the soft music. This was a busy city; hundreds of pedestrians went by every minute, street vendors shouted their wares, stray dogs sniffed around public trashcans. We ate churrasco, a mixture of Brazilian meats and sausages accompanied by fresh salad; I had my first (second, third, fourth...) caipirinha, a drink made out of sugar, lime, crushed ice and the famous Brazilian cachaça. After that it was all jokes and laughs; funny how alcohol makes socializing easier, transforming strangers into old friends and quiet people into jokers. When the sun set and our bodies were full and warm we headed out looking for a samba club.

Hundreds of people were out; all dressed up, looking for somewhere to party. Judging by the number of people standing in line to get in, we picked a popular place. An energetic trio played on a small stage in the corner of the crowded club. The music, loud and inviting, encouraged us to dance. The chopes (beers) and caipirinhas had multiplied exponentially in everyone's bodies and dancing seemed natural. Samba, however, is anything but natural for untrained and un-Brazilian hips. It did not matter anymore. We danced with each other, with strangers, by ourselves. People crowded around the bar and the dance floor. The night was growing old and money was running out. My feet were getting tired; after maybe 30 hours without a wink of sleep I was exhausted. I don't even remember how I got back to the convent that night. But once again I survived. Not the night, not the wax, not the long hours in a plane, but confronting my fears and letting go. This day, full of new experiences and excitement, was a good indicator for what was to come in the next five weeks. The strangers whom I had met only that morning became my close friends, the parties multiplied in number and intensity, and the adventures were endless.