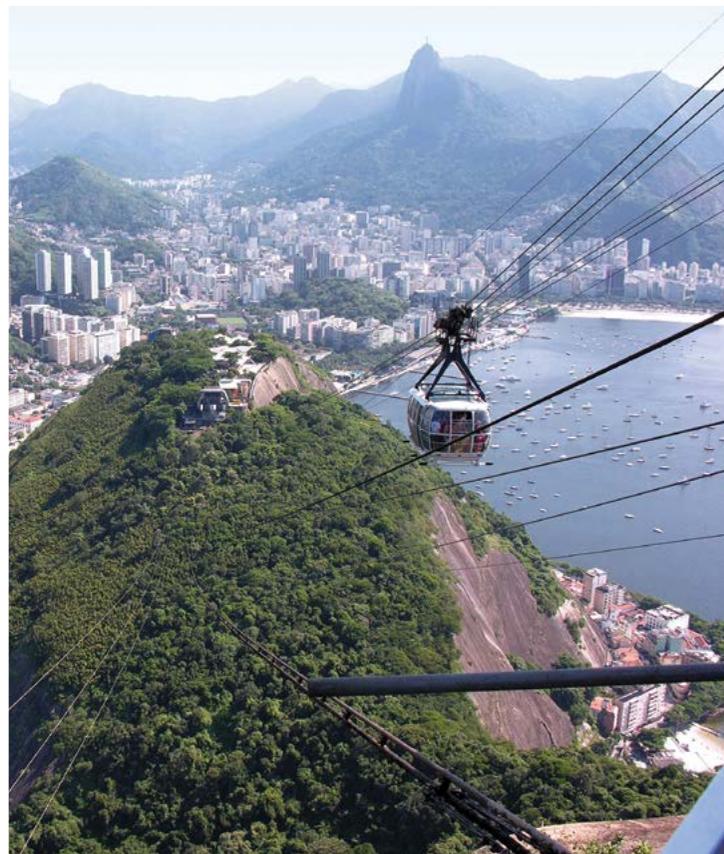


Río de Janeiro Welcomes All Tribes

A lesbian look at the Olympic city.

BY KEPH SENETT



“Like we say in Brazil, it’s for all tribes.” I’m speaking with lesbian tour guide Polyanna Miranda about Galeria Café. “Just like Rio,” she adds. “Rio is for everyone.” I get where she’s coming from. Everything connected with place feels multipurpose and a little improvisational. Take, for example, “foot volley,” a hybrid sport that fuses beach volleyball and futebol and endows its players—both male and female—with some of the best bodies in the world. And then there’s cachaça. This sugarcane liquor is the main ingredient in the caipirinha, Brazil’s national cocktail, but, according to local lore, fishermen have also used it to clean the decks of their boats. Likewise, Galeria Café (galeriacafe.com.br) leads a double life. It’s a coffee shop and art gallery by day, but at night it turns into a club known to be GLS, or gay, lesbica, e simpatisante—slang that essentially means “all tribes.” Flexibility, it seems, is a cultural motif in Rio, one that makes the city simultaneously welcoming and difficult to define.

There are more than 6 million people in Rio de Janeiro, a metropolis of less than 500 square miles. Every 20 minutes, linked cable cars leapfrog up Pão de Açúcar (Sugar Loaf Mountain) at the mouth of Guanabara Bay, revealing unobstructed views of Christ the Redeemer on Corcovado Mountain, the far-off forests of Parque Nacional da Tijuca, and two of the most famous beaches in the world: Copacabana and Ipanema. It’s at this last location, at the foot of Rua Farme de Amoedo between lifeguard towers (Postos) 8 and 9, that you will find the center of Rio’s GLS scene.

I’m staying at the Ipanema Plaza Hotel (ipanemaplaza.com.br/en), literally half a block from the rainbow flags at Posto 9, and like many visitors I make the beach one of my first stops. The Postos offer more than a lifeguard lookout—they serve as handy markers to find your tribe. If you’re into surfing (or ogling surfers), head east to Arpoador at Posto 8, or round the outcropping to visit world-famous Copacabana. To sunbathe with the locals, try Praia Leblon just west of Posto 11; this stretch

is popular with the cariocas (those born in Rio). Weekends are prime beach time, so stake out a spot early and schedule in at least one sundown near Posto 9, where it’s a tradition to applaud the sunset.

It’s the carioca way to fuel up on light snacks and drinks at a beachside tent. For a specifically GLS- and trans-friendly vibe, visit the Rainbow Kiosk in front of the Copacabana Palace hotel. If you’re looking for regional eats, you must try feijoada. Unofficially Brazil’s national dish, this bean and smoked meat stew is available at many restaurants around the city. Serious carnivores should visit a churrasqueira for all-you-can-eat meat, while vegetarians will have more luck at any of the city’s por kilo buffets. The gay-owned Gringo Café (gringocafe.com), located right in Ipanema, has a menu full of American comfort food and cocktails; or you could head over to Eclipse in Copacabana for late-night pizza.

Party planning is a serious business in Rio, and for me, the first order of business is a nap. Cariocas arrive at the clubs after midnight, often staying until the sun rises. “Up Turn is a container in a supermarket parking lot in Barra,” tour guide Miranda says, adding that it hosts her favorite girl party, because from there “we can see the day rise.” The Week (theweek.com.br), in Centro, also attracts all-night revelers to hear big-name DJs in its multilevel dance space. Make sure you bring your ID—the security here is tight. Come for sushi and stay for the dancing at OO (pronounced “zero zero”) in Gávea’s planetarium (OOriodejaneiro.com.br). On Thursdays and Sundays, the crowd is predominantly gay. In Copacabana, Fosfofox (fosfofox.com.br) has parties for girls, or try TV Bar (bartvbar.com.br), especially on Saturdays. This venue is the former site of Rio TV and still maintains its décor. Finally, make sure you get to Lapa, an up-and-coming district that’s attracting attention for its young hip crowd and Bohemian vibe. Buraco da Lacreia (buracodalacreia.com.br) is a good bet for a fun, friendly night with its cheap beer, drag shows, snooker, and videoke. Lapa is also

where you’ll find plenty of raucous samba clubs.

The unleashed revelry of Carnival has helped put Rio on the map of party cities, but there are persistent concerns about crime and, for many LGBT travelers, violence. In Brazil, anti-discrimination laws are irregular and unevenly enforced—a work in legislative progress—and as in other countries, human rights advancements have been met with resistance, primarily from religious sectors. “You don’t have to be concerned about LGBT safety specifically, but Rio is a big city and as dangerous as any other big city,” says Miranda. In addition to the experience she’s gained from years of work with the tour organization Rios de Historia, Miranda is also an out lesbian. She met her partner in Rio three years ago, right around the time same-sex marriage was legalized (though she points out that Brazil has recognized civil unions since 2004). “My bride-to-be and I have always been pretty affectionate everywhere and never had problems,” she says. The couple are getting married this summer, on their third anniversary.

In Rio proper, there’s a state organization—Rio Sem Homofobia (Rio Without Homophobia, riosemhomofobia.rj.gov.br)—and a municipal body, the Office for Sexual Diversity (cedsrio.com.br), both dedicated to increasing visibility and rights for LGBT people in the city. Additionally, since 1993, Grupo Arco-Iris (Rainbow Group, arco-iris.org.br) has successfully advocated for legislative change, helping to extend rights to same-sex partners and set penalties for discriminatory practices. And their annual Gay Pride event is a multiday celebration capped by a parade on Copacabana Beach that is expected to attract a million people in November 2016.

Whether you’re coming for a world-class celebration like Pride (in 2016, November 13 through 16) or Carnival (February 24 through 27, 2017), or for some independent travel, Miranda makes one recommendation: “Always tour with a licensed guide,” she urges. “We have the safe, legal, and correct access to the sights.”