

New York with beaches

RIO DE JANEIRO — The big news down here is that there is no news. Not unless you are Brazilian and care about the price of eggs or what new kind of economic mumbo jumbo the government has come up with this week, or, of course, the football scores.

To the rest of the world what's happening in this huge, steamy nation is hardly front-page material.

Still, readers might like to savor a few slices of local life in Rio:

It's around 95 degrees and dripping humidity. *Cariocas* think nothing of strolling about city streets in bathing suits. And what suits! Brazilian swimwear for women makes skimpy bikinis look downright frumpy. Most important, the magnificent posteriors of Brazilian women, the object of intense national pride and rapture, are displayed in all their glory to the world. A tiny patch in front somehow connects to a string in the back. The overall effect is deeply moving.

On Rio's twin downtown beaches at Copacabana and Ipanema you see the world's most beautiful women. Prime female concerns here are being attractive, keeping in shape and enjoying men.

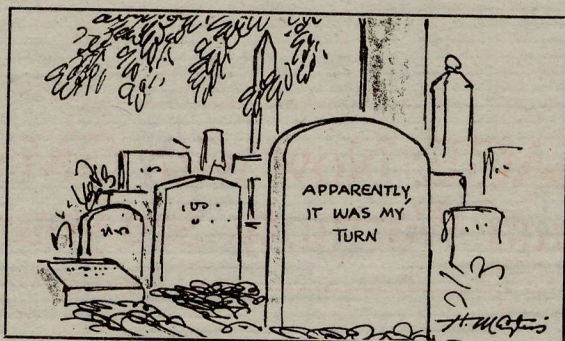
But while Brazilians adore the beach, hardly any seem to go into the water. Many don't know how to swim. Another good reason may be the disturbing brown objects that I saw floating in front of my nose while swimming off Ipanema beach. There was also the municipal sewer emptying evil-smelling effluvia into the beach water.

Trouble in paradise. Dengue fever has broken out here, carried by the same mosquitos that spread malaria. Three thousand cases have been reported in Rio, affecting the rich as well as the poor. This has people upset: Wealth is supposed to protect one from disease. Dengue is a nasty African malady that makes one very sick. More on Sunday about another scary African import.

Tourists planning to come to Brazil hear a lot about crime. No need to be scared away, but caution is mandatory. Poverty is rampant and street crime a fact of life. Wealthy Brazilians live in homes that resemble fortresses, protected by heavily armed *pistoleiros*. Pickpockets and muggers thrive on unwary tourists.

Rio's transvestites, who cluster along the Copacabana beachfront, are notorious for pulling knives on lust-blinded tourists. Here, a fool and his gold are quickly parted.

Punch



ERIC MARGOLIS



No question, Rio — all Brazil, for that matter — is a tough place and not for the faint of heart. In fact, Rio is rather like New York City with beaches. Just today, proud city fathers announced that Rio's murder rate had far surpassed that of the Big Apple. Last year there were 3,497 homicides in Rio, compared to a paltry 1,800 or so in New York. This figure does not include the 500-odd *presuntos* knocked off each year. These are chronic criminals routinely bumped off by the police.

The food here in this tropical paradise is surprisingly bad. Meat, because of recent price controls, is in short supply and of poor quality. Fish is not much better. Cooling is not a finely developed art in Brazil, which is too bad considering the variety and freshness of the food. Fortunately, the beer is excellent and the local liquor made from cane juice stunningly effective.

Carnival will be here in about three weeks and already Rio is palpably slowing down from its normal lassitude and falling into torpor. Here and there you hear sounds of bands or the beating of drums. Hotel rates are being jacked up as supplies of rooms dwindle. Party-hungry foreigners, determined to go native, are arriving by the planeload. Meanwhile, many savvy natives, turned off by the growing commercialism of Carnival, are getting ready to flee Rio for the country.

Three hours down the coast, for example, is Angra dos Reis, one of the favorite retreats of Rio's wealthy. I spent the weekend there with friends, welcoming the quiet and majestic beauty of the islets and coves that dot the coast. We also visited Parati, a charming colonial village where the locals were busy running about in Halloween costumes in order to scare away any evil spirits before Carnival time.

In Parati I again noticed something that had struck me on Rio's beaches. Most people here seem to be young. No surprise: In Brazil, like most other Third World nations, half the population is under 20. People like me, who prefer to describe themselves as "mature," are dismissed by locals as "ready for a box." What is irksome for my vanity represents a major problem for the nation: Where will the jobs come from for all these youngsters? Will they become a source of political and social instability? But there I go talking politics, and I'm not supposed to . . .

A word of advice to would-be tourists. Hotels in Rio tend to be either outrageously expensive or small, dark and dank. Tourists are considered fair game by the Brazilians and hotel prices, even confirmed in advance, may soar alarmingly. Also, bring lots of U.S.-dollar traveller's cheques and don't plan to use charge cards. The official rate for U.S. dollars is 16 cruzados. Unofficially — and easily attainable — you get 22 to 25