

Brazil's biggest Carnival mixes 'popcorn' and peril

By Irin Carmon
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

Taking Off SALVADOR DA BAHIA, Brazil — This is a country that finds cause for celebration even in the daily sunset. Having seen Brazilians cheer mere nightfall, I was eager to witness the biggest party of all: Carnival.

Salvador da Bahia's Carnival has edged out Rio's for the title of world's biggest party (certified by Guinness World Records) mostly by dint of its reputation for spontaneity and authenticity.

Paradoxically, these two qualities are available to the foreign tourist only with careful planning and a fair amount of cash. Airlines raise prices, and hotels impose inflexible weeklong "Carnival packages" that begin in late February at roughly quadrupled rates.

So in October, I booked the highly recommended Village Novo, whose attentive US owner, Bryan Houck, said the beachfront mansion-turned-hotel was already half-filled for the event. Paying roughly \$1,000 for the weeklong stay in advance is considered a good deal. Splitting the room with

safest option, Carnival in a camarote creates a separate universe from the actual party, one where you often have to fight for space just to see the action below. If you were resigned to spectatorship, I wondered, why not opt for Rio, where at least the samba schools have lavish costumes and floats?

The vast amounts of money flowing during Carnival seem to have only a seasonal effect on the

area's endemic poverty. Near our hotel, the plazas of Porto da Barra beach were transformed into something akin to a refugee camp. The number of bedraggled street children hawking wooden beads, or simply begging, multiplied daily, and night found dozens of them sleeping on the sidewalk. Petty crime raged, even when people brought as little as possible; one US traveler we met had her dispos-

able camera stolen.

We couldn't hide our disappointment. But then we found Carnival in Pelourinho.

One of the best-preserved districts of Colonial architecture in all of Brazil, the neighborhood's steep, winding cobblestone blocks pulsated with a more intimate type of revelry. Arriving a few weeks before Carnival, I had found Pelourinho charming but

excessively touristy. But the balance had shifted. Now, local families, hands grasping costumed toddlers, mingled with beplumed drummers and dancers forming small-scale blocos from cultural groups. Joining in was as easy as jumping in, but establishments were open for those who preferred watching over a cold beer.

Pelourinho's candy-colored architecture formed the ideal stage

for Afro-Brazilian arts like capoeira, fitting Brazil's cultural fusion into a single frame. The air smelled of "dendê," the palm oil that is the staple of Bahian cooking, and crackled with spontaneity. We had finally found the Carnival of our imagination.

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as many people as possible would make the outlay less damaging.

Contrary to reputation, Salvador's Carnival can be as rigidly ruled by money as the one in Rio, where tickets to the Sambadrome parade can run in the hundreds or even thousands of dollars. Rather than featuring a spectator-only parade, however, Bahian Carnival occurs on three big street circuits, dominated by gargantuan trucks called "trio elétricos," which serve as slow-moving stages for the region's best-loved musicians.

You can join in for free by just showing up, known as being "pipoca" (popcorn) for its clash of bodies. But on the first day I learned this could be perilous.

Anthropologists say Carnival is meant to create a free space where class, race, and other boundaries are rendered invisible in a frenzy of joy. In practice, it gives license to all forms of lewd behavior. After five minutes, my sister and I began hitting the mostly unseen men who groped us as we passed; we were left bruised, sweat-soaked, and cranky. We decided to stick close behind the packs of grim-faced military police, to whom the crowd always deferred.

There are more organized options, but they cost. Up to a couple of hundred dollars a day earns you a T-shirt and the right to march with a "bloco" (group) within the more protected roped area surrounding a particular truck. This year, local legend and musician Carlinhos Brown complained that the bloco system created "apartheid" within what was supposed to be a democratic festival.

The elitism of the third option, the "camarotes" (boxes), apparently went without saying. These multilevel boxes built along the circuits cost between \$50 and \$150 a day; the most luxurious include an open bar, snack buffet, and Internet cafe.

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