



BRAZIL

THE DRUMS ARE BEATING AGAIN IN IPANEMA.

They are bubbling under, muffled, soft, subdued – like the sluggish sound of car engines whirring in stationary traffic. They enhance rather than disturb my people-watching, for, when in Rio, do as the Cariocas do: watch others watching you watching them. Rio's beach culture makes it a city best enjoyed at daytime so, even as the tropical sun shines down with extraordinary ferocity, the beautiful people come to promenade, to sunbathe or simply to be seen.

And they have to be seen to be believed. As is now well-known this is a city that likes its gyms, its jogs and its facelifts. The women's features are flawless, the tan just so and the perfection of their figures exposed as much as socially acceptable. This stretches far, for Rio is a very tolerant city where beauty is concerned, and the concept of nudity is as elastic as the 'dental-floss' bikinis around me.

The men with their hairless, oiled chests, ripping muscles and five-o'clock shadows at noon are as much in the watching game as the girls. When they are not beating their bongos, they are playing beach volleyball, or that inspired Brazilian invention: foot-volley. This game is played with normal volleyball rules, except that players aren't allowed to use their hands to handle the ball; they have to head it, chest it and kick it up across the net. No wonder Brazilian footballing skills are so exceptional, for you need expert ball control to hold your own on a

On Ipanema beach, Rio, boys and girls partake of the national sport – exhibiting their bodies.



A house interior in Laranjeiras, Rio.
Wheels in Leblon, Rio's Beverly Hills.

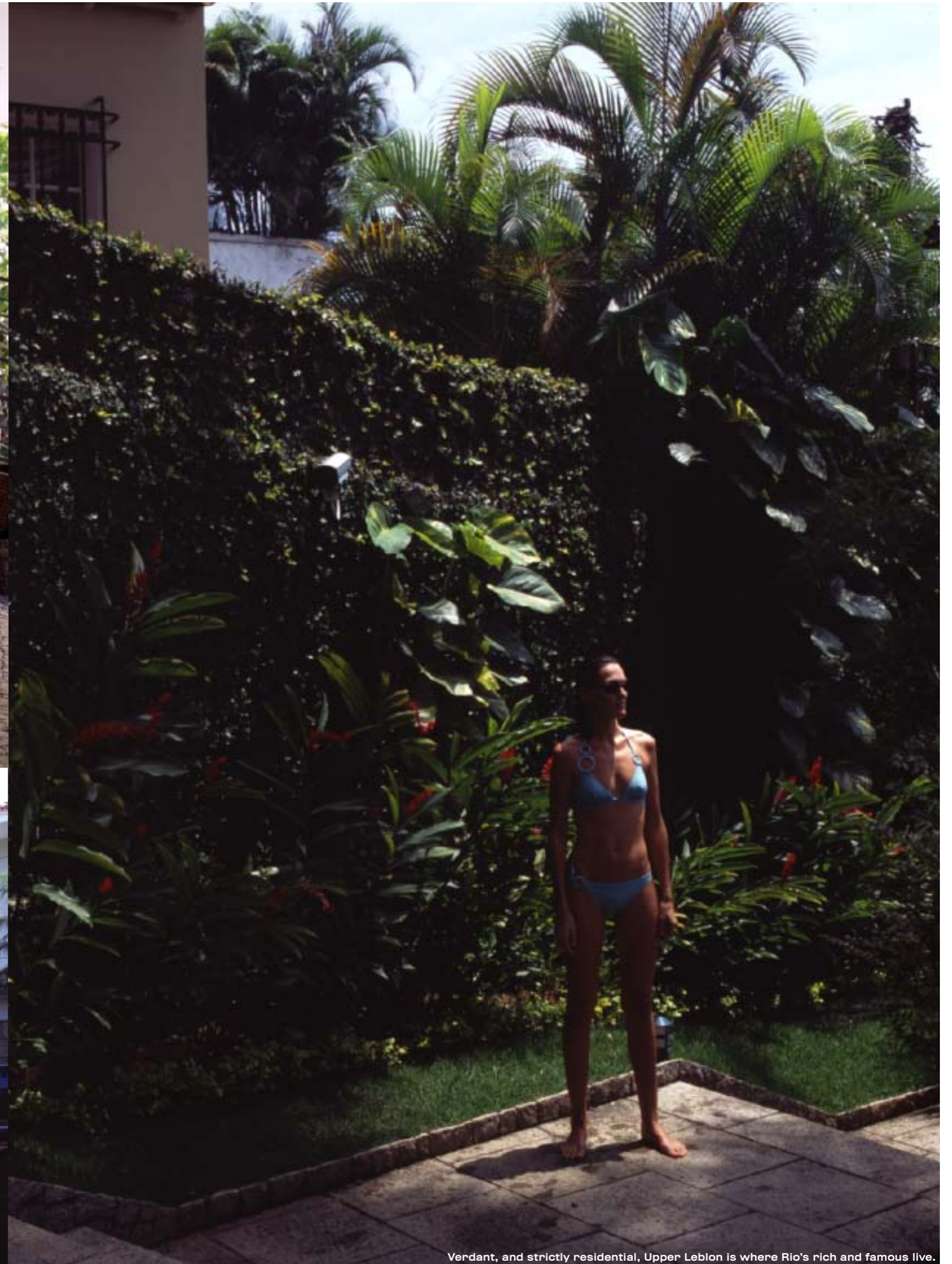
sandy terrain. The casual spectators, like me, are mesmerised, as the players tease, play-act and lead us on. They know they are being watched – they're playing for being watched. It's all a show. This is what this city is all about.

IF RIO IS PLAYGROUND TO THE BEAUTIFUL,

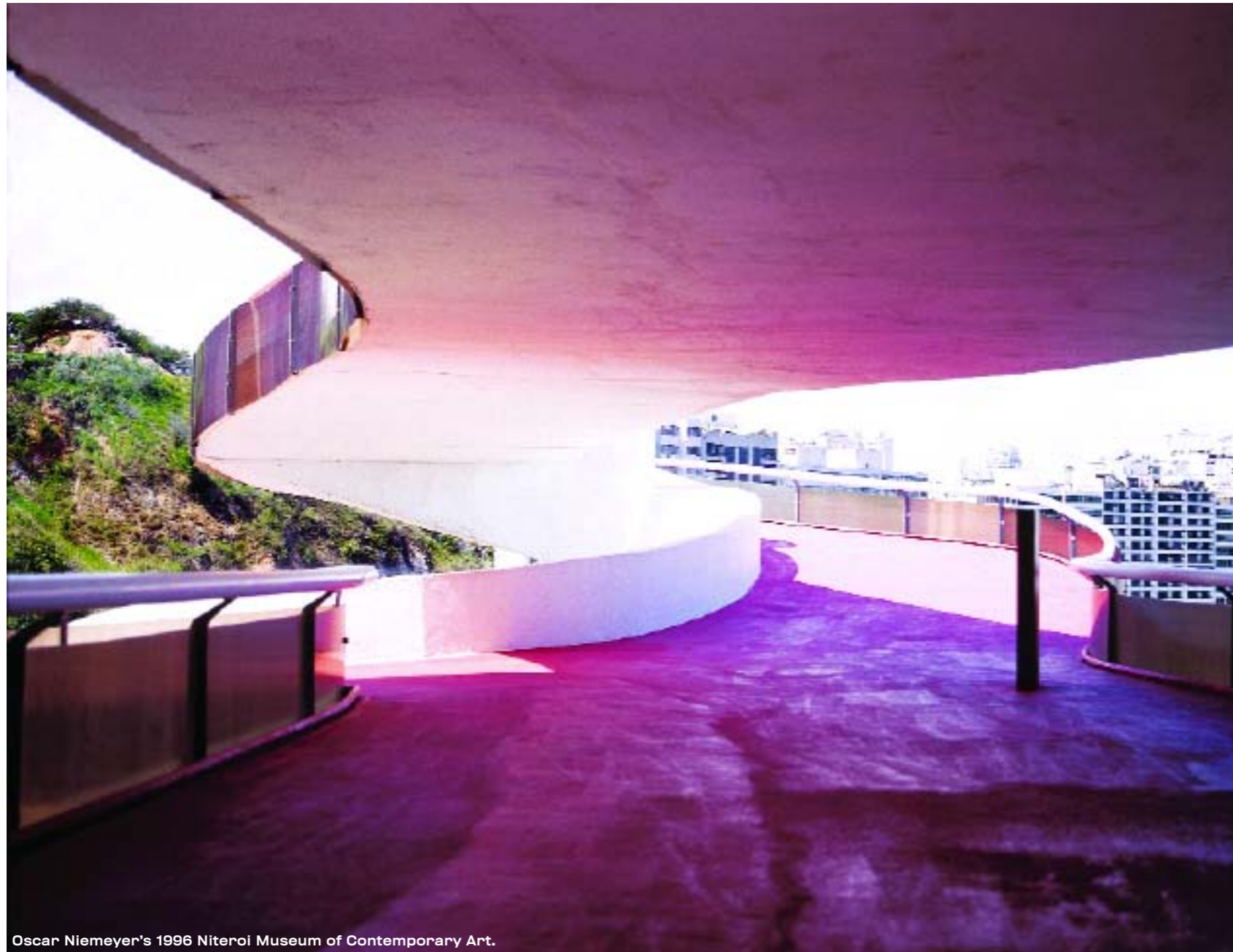
São Paulo is bear pit of the industrious: unlike the *cidade maravilhosa* with its tropical vegetation and curvaceous landscape, São Paulo lies in a spirit-levelled plateau with no obvious landmark for reference, populated by motorways, cars and skyscrapers. It seems endless and immeasurable. Is it the second or the third largest city in the world? Is its population 15, 17 or 20 million? Imagine: one million people could die within its perimeter, and a statistician wouldn't notice.

São Paulo is used to setting records. This is the city with the largest apartment complex in Brazil, Oscar Niemeyer's Edifício Copan, with 38 floors comprising 115,000 square metres. This is the city with the largest hospital complex in Latin America, the Hospital das Clínicas, whose 5,500 employees perform 30,000 operations per year. This is the city with the third longest metropolitan avenue in the world, Avenida Sapopemba, which runs for 45 kilometres – 42 of them inside city limits. But this is the also a city with Latin America's own Empire State Building, the 1930s Edifício Martinelli, long surpassed in height, but not in its Bauhaus beauty. It is the powerhouse of Brazil's economy, the roth largest in the world. Its nightlife rivals that of London and New York and, yes, that of Rio, whose citizens care far too much about their complexions to miss out on their nightly beauty sleep.

It is also the town that was built by coffee money. On Avenida Paulista you can still see some of the *casarões* of the coffee barons that used to line its span in the beginning of the last century. My favourite stands empty at number 1919. It is a two-floor mansion with parquets,

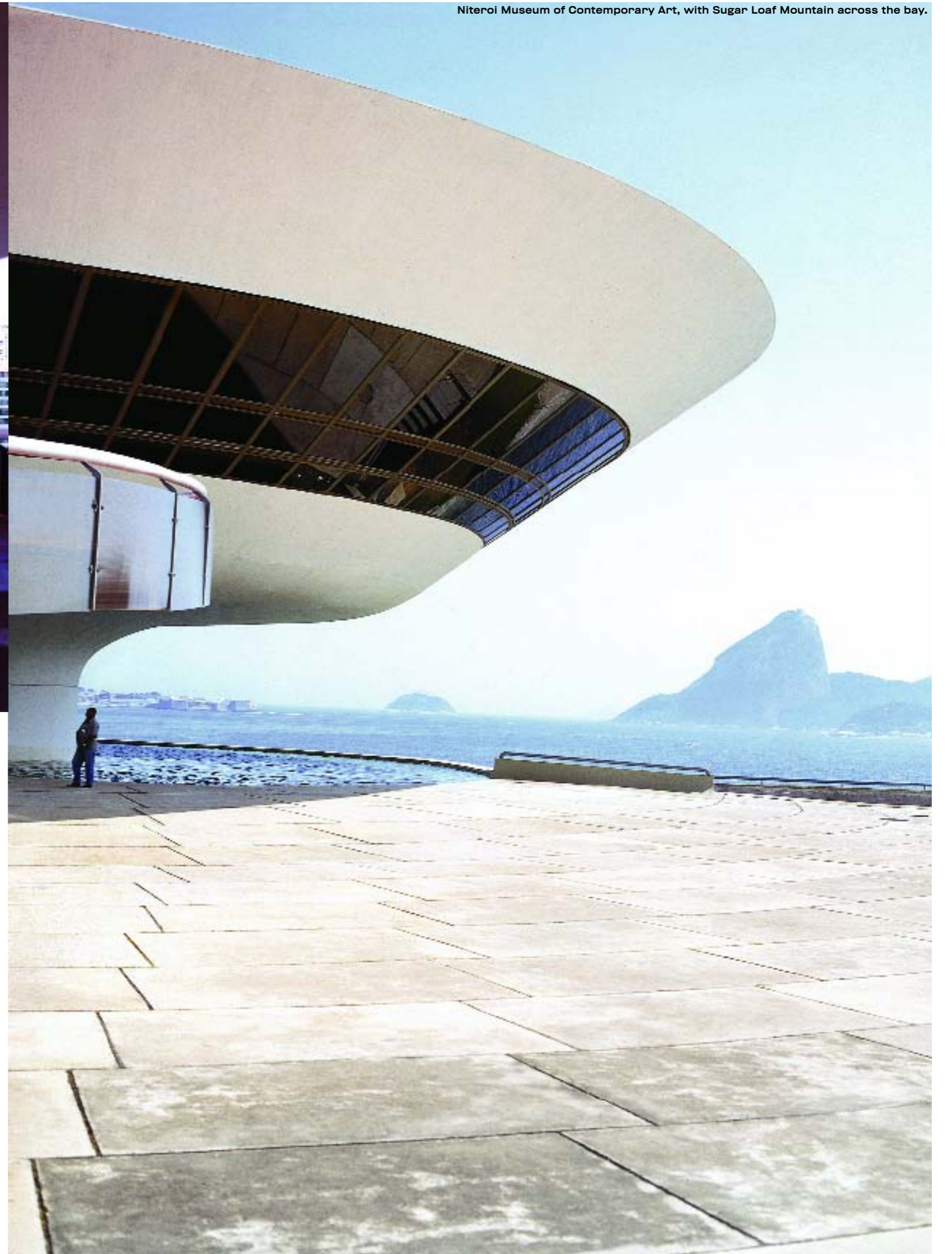


Verdant, and strictly residential, Upper Leblon is where Rio's rich and famous live.



Oscar Niemeyer's 1996 Niteroi Museum of Contemporary Art.

Niteroi Museum of Contemporary Art, with Sugar Loaf Mountain across the bay.



Ipanemans have a lot to talk about.

hexagonal mosaics and a carved wooden ceiling. Last time I visited, there was an Internet café on the ground floor. This time, a sign on a marquee set on the spacious but neglected garden is advertising a warehouse party. I turned up that evening: it was free.

You see, it is at night that São Paulo commands your attention: this is when the neon lights and the flashing digital boards dazzle you into believing you have been transported into a Latin reflection of Tokyo or Los Angeles. This is when the rich and the beautiful hang out in the bars, clubs and restaurants of the Jardins district; they are too busy making money during the day.

And it is at night that you finally realise that the two iconic Brazilian cities have something in common. The Cariocas flaunt their gorgeousness; the Paulistas show off their designer ensembles: the pavements are their catwalks and the glitzy bars their auditoriums. They are, after all, Brazilians and have this longing to be seen. In São Paulo, however, dress matters, because money does. Even in my coffee mansion rave, where loud, live drumming is supplementing the DJ's mix, the labels may be homegrown Brazilian – Mormaii, Bad Boy, Reef, Maresia – but they are definitely stylish. I look at the drummer who is submerged in the beat. He's wearing Redley.

THE BUILDING OF BRASÍLIA IN 1958, IN THE

hot savannah of the central plateau, was an act of monumental financial folly. Brazil was bankrupted in order to build the new capital quickly and remotely. The spiral of inflation sparked by printing money resulted in the military coup of 1964 and 21 years of dictatorship. But it was also an act of faith and more; we will conquer the interior and bring prosperity and hope where previously there was none. As the 1966 edition of the South American Handbook says: 'It is not in the nature of governments to turn their backs on luxury and make for the wilderness.' Others called Brasília 'inspired lunacy', 'Utopian horror' 'a brave new city cunningly disguised as a World's Fair'; Yuri Gagarin, the astronaut, said he thought he had arrived on another planet.



It is shaped by planner Lúcio Costa like an aeroplane with the 'cockpit' facing east. This cockpit is the power centre: it contains the huge Square of the Three Powers with the modernist structures of the high court, the president's palace and the congress. The body of the plane (called the Monumental Axis, pointing west to east), thin and long, contains the ministries, the theatres, museums, the cathedral, the banks, the hotels and the entertainment complexes. The wings (pointing north to south) are composed of the superquadras – superblocks which include residential buildings, local shops and restaurants each connected with symmetrical access roads; the town cemeteries are in the wing tips so that the centre is spared the sight of hearses.

IT OUGHT THEN TO BE EASY TO NAVIGATE.

Except it isn't. For a start, the addresses: my hotel, Hotel Bristol, gave its location as SHS Q4 Bl F... As in: the Southern Hotel Sector (SHS), 4th Quarter (Q4), Block F. There is also a Northern Hotel Sector (SHN), just as there is a Tourist Hotel Sector North, SHTN, a Sector of Clubs South, SCES, the Sector of Banks North, SBN, the Entertainment (Diversão) Sector South, SDS, and so on. Within those there are quarters and within those there are blocks. The only indication (if any) of which block or quarter is which, is a small letter hidden away in an unlit corner, a doorway corniche or maybe the lawn. But it's in the residential blocks where it gets really interesting. These are called SQS and SQN for SuperQuadras South and North respectively, numbering 100–116 up to 900–916, and they recede like wings from the 'fuselage', 101 being the closest and 116 the furthest. The even hundreds are below the aeroplane wing axis whereas the odd ones are above. So below the right wing of the plane (pointing south as cockpit point east) you have what? But of course 202, 402, 602, 802 SQS! Above the left

The tan is always just so.

Flying down to São Paulo – before landing at Guarulhus International Airport.



Jardín Botánico, Rio de Janeiro, a taste of the rainforest.



wing you have 102, 302, 502, 702, 902 SQN! Easy, if you also remember that they all start at 102, 202 as the 101, 201 superblocks are subsumed by the Hotel, Bank Sectors et al closest to the plane axis. There is an exception to this exception: there is 801 and 601. If you are really advanced you will know that 102S-116S is ERLS, 903S-914S is SGAS (but that SGAS also reappears between 602S to 612S, jumps 613S and 614S and recomprises 615S and 616S) or that after 116N comes SHLN but its southern counterpart SHLS follows 715S and is not symmetrical. Of course the intermediate side-avenues parallel to the axes are called names like W3 and W7. Trust the architects to use a letter (W) which does not exist in Portuguese.



IT'S HARD TO ESCAPE THE SOUND OF THE drums in this country. Even in the depths of the Amazon, you can hear drumming where the locals – and I don't just mean the indigenous Indian tribes – beat hollow ficus trees to communicate with each other over large distances. On the beach they provide a background shuffle; in religion they summon gods; and in a club, they are an essential live adjunct to the mixing desk. Only the staunchly Catholic cidades históricas of the province of Minas Gerais, with their picturesque Portuguese colonial architecture, seem to be more or less immune to the lure of percussion. Here, Catholic liturgy replaces candomblé rite, and in the town of Mariana a large German organ, in immaculate condition, provides the aural accompaniment to prayer. Its rarity and uniqueness in this throbbing, rhythmic country has made it a tourist must-see.

Not that Mariana, or its larger neighbour, Ouro Preto, need any extra spin. They are both Unesco heritage sites, the products of the 18th century gold rush from São Paulo into the Brazilian interior that shifted the centre of gravity – and the capital – from north to south:

In Rio there's the beach; in São Paulo rooftop swimming pools.



from Salvador and its sugar plantations, to Rio, the closest port to the mines. Attracted by the promise of riches, some of the best Portuguese artists came to Brazil and their baroque influences transformed and embellished the gold mining towns; even today Ouro Preto looks more like Siena than Santos. The various lay orders vied with each other to build a church more magnificent than the last: whether in São Paulo, Rio or Ouro Preto, competition in exhibiting one's body, one's attire or one's faith is a passion that runs deep in the Brazilian psyche.

But among the heavily decorated churches, my favourite is Santa Ifigênia. This is a church built by African slaves, imported to work in the mines, and its decoration is a mute reminder of their down-to-earth beliefs. It is said to have been built by Chico Rei, who is a cross between a historical figure and a folk tale. According to legend, he was an African king who was transported to Brazil along with his people. He worked extra hours on Sundays and festive days to buy himself off. He then earned the fee for his son's release and together they both worked to free his faithful servants of old and so on, until eventually his whole tribe was liberated – and he reigned again supreme among his people. Even if this is a myth, I would like it to be true.

THE PEOPLE ARE IN NO DOUBT: ON THE DAY of Epiphany, they still celebrate his memory by marching to the rhythm of the congado, a dance attributed to him, and it is then that the drums start bouncing off the cobbled streets of Ouro Preto straight onto your solar plexus. Brazil may be the fifth largest country in the world, encompassing impenetrable rainforests, sugar-fine beaches, cosmopolitan cities, Christian and African beliefs, but when it comes to partying, the drums come out, the bodies swing sexily and the dance begins in earnest. And the people themselves make up the show. 🍷

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The capital Brasília: a folly, perhaps, but strangely beautiful in its way.