

globeTrotting

FLORIANÓPOLIS, BRAZIL

by Joseph Pedro

I swoop back into my hammock. Vicious rocking turns into a caressing cradle as cooling South Atlantic Ocean breezes mask the Brazilian morning humidity. The sun shines through an intricate spiderweb and refracts through drops of dew that drip down from the petals of bright yellow hibiscus blossoms. An inquisitive Cattle Tyrant pops onto the deck and teeters his head to synchronize with my swaying while letting out rhythmic squawks. I pop open some Guarana and place the green can on the table where it blends with the tropical-green flora, then I pry myself up and walk to my private beach. Fishermen in brightly colored jon boats zigzag through the natural harbor returning home from their morning catches. I tiptoe through the rocky beachfront and find a smooth stone to sit on and feel the warm waves lap against my feet. I take in the clean air and the inspiring views and get ready for another day on Ilha de Papagaio in Florianópolis Brazil.

It's not a quick trip from the United States to Florianópolis, the capital city of the Santa Catarina region of Brazil. Connections must be made through either São Paulo or Rio—both cities, though, offer numerous flights throughout the day. The long journey is easily forgotten when you experience the ocean-to-table cuisine, idyllic beaches, supremely attractive locals, gay-friendly atmosphere, and unparalleled natural beauty that this 202-square-mile island has to offer.

Floripa, as most locals call it, has attracted Brazilian gay and lesbian travelers since the 1970s and, until recently, has been a magnet for LGBT international visitors. “The reason, I think, is that it has a bit of a San Francisco background: it has had alternative lifestyles (artists, surfers, and gays) since the late 70s, all coming to settle in a small, provincial capital island and being welcomed,” Marta Della Chiesa the director of **Brazil Ecojourneys** (www.brazilecojourneys.com)—the first gay-owned tour operator to open in South Brazil—tells me as we cruise by beachy storefronts on the way to the gay beach where multi-colored huts form a patchwork of



lifestyle shops, bars, and drink stands. It is not uncommon to see same-sex couples holding hands along the beach or throughout the city's historic district. “In the last census (two years ago) it was shown to be the Brazilian capital with the highest number of cohabiting gay couples in the country,” she gleefully adds. Gays here also occupy some high positions in the government. “This year we had the first openly gay councilor elected, and he was the most voted by a large margin, having double the number of votes than the second elected.”

As our bus pulls forward, I experience my first taste of Floripa's gay community. Hidden down a long path (across from the surfer statue) is the city's gay beach, **Praia Mole**. It is autumn here (April), so the scores of shirtless/bikini-clad beachgoers are reduced to a few diehard surfers and a handful of giggling gays sipping pineapple drinks from the still-open beachside bar. The massive waves provide surfers with primo-board time, and I watch their skills and quickly slip into a fantasy: me the lucky surf bunny with my dreamy longhaired wetsuit-wearing Brazilian. In the summer, the beach is crowded with a mix of gays and lesbians who clamor to find room for their beach gear. If a beach's sexual orientation is not a priority for you, you're in luck—

Florianópolis is home to over 42 different beaches.

I get to experience another popular beach called **Praia da Joaquina** located about a ten-minute drive south of Praia Mole. Though, instead of wasting the day away melting into the sand, I opt for a more exciting way to experience the beach—sand boarding. A few steps from the waterfront, huge sand dunes await adventure-seeking locals and tourists. I soon find a small stand that rents two types of boards: stand up or sit down. Having not been on a snowboard in nearly ten years, I decide to get the sit-down board that looks just like a sled. It fits two people and makes the initial plunge down the hill a little less nerve-wracking having someone to scream down the hill with. I grab my friend, and before we can really question the safety of the entire situation we're thrust down the hill, and we let out a string of probably not-so-appropriate verbiage—if the other sand boarders didn't know we were American when we arrived, they do now. As sand shoots into our mouths and surrounds us like the Tasmanian Devil's dust tornado, we nervously anticipate our ultimate fate on the board. The lurching ride down the hill ends with us both falling off into the powder-like

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sand. Feeling like 12-year-olds, we begin the run back up the hill dragging our board. We could go down all day, but unfortunately, the walk back up the hill is the most taxing part. Before we leave, a golden-orange sun begins to set below a sand dune, and we take one last ride.

Gloaming reveals a whole new side to the city. Boat lights reflect off the water and streetlights illuminate the multi-colored buildings, and we walk the seemingly empty streets. “On the weekends people will head home and get ready for a dinner. Which will start late, around 9 P.M.,” a local named Lukas tells me. “Especially in the gay community when most bars and clubs really start after 1 A.M., dinner is very late.” My tired, tourist self is ready to eat though so I head to a fabulous gay-owned restaurant called **Bistro Isadora Duncan** (Rod. Jornalista Manuel de Menezes, 2658. Tel: Tel: 48-3232-7210. www.bistroisadoraduncan.com.br). This intimate (by intimate I mean five tables) restaurant is beyond romantic. The two-person, candlelit tables overlook the lagoon, and the menu offers a hearty selection of both land and sea options. But we’re in Floripa, so I have to sample the seafood. I opt for the gorgeously fresh shrimp that are slightly sweet from an orange juice glaze and wash it down with the signature Brazilian drink, a caipirinha.

While it is still off-season in Floripa, the nightlife exudes an infectious Ibiza-like atmosphere. We roll into the **Concorde Club** (Avenida Rio Branco, 729. Tel: 48-9932-8998. www.concordeclub.com.br) where a near completely shirtless crowd of well-built revelers dance non-stop to house music on a rotating dance floor. This isn’t a place to get to know any locals as most are here to do one thing: dance. And they take their moves seriously. “I dance now,” one guy says when I try to engage him in conversation. “Well how long do you dance for?” I ask, seriously suspicious of just how long someone can bop his or her head. “Till close...so like 6 A.M.” So, I find some solace from the massive club floor on an outside patio and knock back a few more caipirinhas, and I insist on talking to more people. A boisterous woman with neon-orange hair is drunkenly ashing her cigarette everywhere. She seems like the perfect one to chat up. For ten



minutes, she slurs a mix of Portuguese and English and I understand nothing. Though I nod my head gladly pretending I do. Then, she starts shouting dollar amounts at me. Luckily, Lukas spots me and grabs my arm and pulls me away. “Man! Why are you talking to her? She’s a working girl,” he says. “Let’s go dance.” And I gladly oblige.

Partying in the city, though, is drastically different in the summers when an endless stream of chic beachfront lounges open along the water. It’s like Miami meets Vegas. Day parties turn quickly into all-night parties at some of the more popular stops. While most places are gay-friendly, and you should feel comfortable going to just about anywhere, there is one beachside gay bar that packs in a whole lot of six packs. **Bar do Deca** (Tel: 48-3232-2052. www.facebook.com/bardodeca.floripa) is a non-stop, sun-filled goodtime and *the* place to be seen on a weekend during the summer. Be warned, you should probably start visiting the gym now.

With just a little taste of the more natural side of the island, I am quickly getting into the Brazilian

swing of things. Of course, the capital isn’t all unspoiled nature. With over 23 colonizing ethnic groups, the colonial center of the historic city gives visitors a true sense of what it means to be from Santa Catarina. I quickly take to the streets and find myself in the heart of the city, a circular park caled Praça 15 de Novembro. Here, a tremendous ficus tree reaches up toward the sky and locals take shelter from the sun under its thick branches and blanketing leaves. Surrounding the park are examples of colonial architecture. Be sure to admire the baroque and neo-classical Palácio Cruz, a former government palace that is now the **Museu Histórico de Santa Catarina** (Rua Arcipreste Paiva, 55. Tel: 48-3028-8091. www.fcc.sc.gov.br/mhsc).

This is probably the best example of the eclectic architectural styles within the city. The museum is also worth a quick visit. The flavors of Brazil literally float out of the turn-of-the-19th-century **Public Market** where you can taste your way through the various cultures that comprise the city. Our guide insists that we take a shot of Cachaça as we smell and eat our way through the vari-

ous stalls, or boxes as they are called. Across the street is another building that has wonderful handicrafts. I still love my hand-painted, ceramic Bernunca (a hippo that is the center of a Brazilian folktale).

Further solace in Floripa can be found at one of the many ultra-swank, private accommodations. I escape everything completely by spending an evening on **Ilha de Papagaio** (Tel: 48-3286-1242. www.papagaio.com.br). Here, I check into my own private bungalow located about a ten-minute walk from the check-in area—it's the farthest bungalow, and I revel in the seclusion. The best part of being on a private island is completely losing any sense of pressure to do things. You can lounge by the pool, drink Skol beer at the little bar, luxuriate on your hammock, or pull up a chair on the beach. For the more adventurous, though, you too can make the most of the solitude by grabbing a kayak, hiking around on one of the many nature trails or having a go at paddleboarding.

Unparalleled luxury can be found at **Ponta dos Ganchos** (Rua Eupideo Alves do Nascimento, 104. Tel: 48-3953-7000. www.pontadosganchos.com), a Relais & Châteaux property located in a region steeped in history called Governador Celso Ramos. I tour the sprawling resort via a golf cart and quickly fall in love with the effortlessly chic vibe of the place. True privacy can be found in one of the bungalows. Choose from a one bedroom with cozy fireplaces and balconies that offer sweeping water views or go for the larger bungalows where you can soak in the outdoor pools. Here, I dine at the beachfront restaurant. And as I lunch on fresh seafood dishes like shrimp, oysters, and melt-in-your-mouth squid, I watch the gorgeous clientele enjoy the private beaches.

If you're looking for a gay-owned property, you can check into **Natur Campeche Inn** (Avenida Pequeno Príncipe, 2196. Tel: 48-3237-4011. www.naturcampeche.com.br)

in Praia do Campeche. This mini-resort has internationally inspired rooms that contain the owners' personal collection of trinkets from around the world.

As the sun sets on Ilha de Papagaio, we finish up our gorgeous dinner of freshly caught fish and gallons of caipirinhas. Nearly bursting through the wicker chairs, we are all ready to retire to our own little slices of the island when we see some disco lights flashing, and we hear "Ai se eu ti pego" (a song by Michel Teló that has been haunting us the entire trip) blaring from the outdoor speakers. The owner and the staff wanted to make our last night special so they set up an impromptu dance party. As more drinks flow and silly costumes are put on, I walk alone to the beach. As I stand out looking out at the calm ocean and twinkling lights of Floripa the music behind me becomes muffled, and I can't help but feel so welcomed, so inspired, and so calmed by this region's vast nature and its welcoming people. ■




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