

Memoir of Carnaval 2003
Rio de Janeiro, Brazil
By Cliff Kaminsky

Day 1

I was a little shaky when I locked my door to leave. I suppose the combination of recent fears at home combined with fear of what awaited me was having an effect, although I probably wouldn't have admitted it at the time. The day before my flight, drug-related gang violence in Rio de Janeiro had left 5 buses in flames and many local shop owners afraid to open their stores for fear of retaliation from the local drug lord. Apparently the gang leader was pissed off because the local police had begun cracking down on his operations. So my palms were a little sweaty and my pulse a little fast as I carried my bags down the steps to the waiting cab. The driver, a pleasant older Korean man, helped me put my large gray suitcase and my guitar in the trunk. We got in the car, I told him "to the airport, please, United airlines," and we didn't speak again until we pulled up to the white curb at terminal 7.

I had left plenty of time for checking in, so there was no hurry. In the Business Class/Premiere line was a queue of ten open-collared business travelers with small black bags and big leather jackets, followed by denim-wearing, guitar-carrying me. My turn arrived after just a few minutes and I approached the ticket counter, still very aware that it wasn't too late to turn back. A pleasant but tired-looking woman in her mid-forties faced me. Her badge told me her name was Renée. Her shoulder-length brown hair was up in a ponytail that day, which may have accented the weary, sagging look of her cheeks. "I'm going to Rio de Janeiro," I told the ticket agent. "Ohhhhhh!" she exclaimed, managing a smile. I figured if she was happy for me then it couldn't be that bad, and I decided to be happy about it too. "Yeah!" I said, perking up a little. "I'm going to Carnaval."

She took my papers and my passport and started tapping away at her computer. Tap tap tap. Tap tap tap tap. Tap tap tap tap tap. Tap. Tap tap. Tap tap tap tap tap. Tap tap tap. This went on for quite a while, until she finally said, "You know you have 20 free upgrades. You can fly the Miami leg in business class if you want to. I can't do anything about Miami to São Paolo, though. The upgrades don't work for international flights."

"Sure," I said. "Why not?"

She took back the papers she had just printed, tore them up, and started tapping on her computer again. Tap tap tap tap. Tap tap tap tap tap. Tap tap tap. Tap tap tap tap tap tap tap. Business class customers get extra taps.

The flight went flawlessly. I even got my vegan meal brought up from the coach section and they threw in a mixed greens salad with shitake mushrooms. I sat next to a balding, gray-haired executive for Pioneer Corporation named Joe who lives in Malibu and commutes to Long Beach. That is, in fact, the order in which I learned those things about

him. He was heading to Tierra Del Fuego, at the southern tip of Argentina, for a fishing trip. He was a fishing aficionado and loved to talk about it. He liked to talk about fishing almost as much as he liked to talk about his real estate investments and how successful his son is. I didn't particularly mind the latter two subjects, so we talked for a while, and then I watched *I Spy* with Eddie Murphy. I mean Eddie Murphy was in the movie. Eddie Murphy did not appear and watch the movie with me. After recovering from that disappointment, I studied Portuguese for a while. Portuguese has many "false friends." Those are words that look like English words but mean something different from the words they look like. For example, *procuro* does not mean procure, *preciso* does not mean precise, *legal* does not mean legal, and *diaria* does not mean diary or diarrhea.

Arriving in Miami around 9:30 I had plenty of time until my 11:50 flight to São Paulo. The first thing I did was to go to the ticket counter and ask if there was any way at all that I might get a direct flight to Rio de Janeiro. The agent was shaking her head before I even finished the question. Of course all of the flights were completely booked, and then I had to go back through the security screening. It was worth a shot, I suppose. So at 11:30 I was waiting patiently to board the plane. And at 11:40. 11:50. Midnight. Around that time an announcement came over the public address system: "Attention passengers waiting for United Airlines flight 873 to São Paulo. Flight 873 has been postponed until tomorrow morning at 11:00 am. Please see an agent at the main ticket counter for hotel accommodations." As a crowd of people began to mob the unfortunate woman making the announcement, she repeated "PLEASE SEE AN AGENT AT THE MAIN TICKET COUNTER!!" Most of the throng either didn't listen or didn't understand. I started walking toward the main ticket counter, where a long line had already formed. United Airlines put us up at the local Crowne Plaza and gave us each a \$10 calling card, which was actually much nicer than spending the night on an airplane. When an agent asked me if I already had a calling card I just looked confused and didn't say anything (my natural reaction), and she gave me another one. Sometimes it pays to be clueless.

Day 2:

The next morning I woke to the Howard Stern show, had a shower, brushed my teeth, and even had a chance to get some more cash from an ATM before catching the hotel shuttle back to the airport. I had been a little worried that I hadn't brought enough cash, so this unexpected stopover turned out to be a very good thing. When I was waiting by the gate before the flight I heard my name called over the PA system. This was unexpected. I feared the worst. I approached the desk and spoke hesitantly. "Um. Did someone call Kaminsky?"

"Yes, I did," the man said.

"That's me."

"Well as you can tell, today's flight is very full, and we need your seat. Would you mind if we upgrade you to business class?"

“Uh. No.”

He took my boarding pass, tore it up, and tapped on his computer for a minute (because that’s what they do for people in business class) and handed me a new boarding pass.

“Thanks.”

By that time he had already started tapping away for the next passenger, so my gratitude went unnoticed.

Watching the computerized map display on the little TV screen at my seat, I read over and over the phrases “Distance to Destination,” “Estimated Arrival Time,” “Altitude,” “Head Wind,” and so on, followed by their Portuguese translations. One phrase in particular caught my eye: “Ground Speed,” or “*Velocidade do solo.*” “*Solo,*” I thought. What an interesting word for “ground.” Indeed in my dictionary it was defined as “ground” or “earth.” I looked up the word for “solo,” and indeed it was “*solo.*” So the Portuguese word for “earth” has the connotation of being alone. Is that interesting or do I think too much? Meanwhile, the Portuguese word for “sun” is “*sol.*” I’m not sure what conclusions to draw from that, but it seems worthy of note.

Day 3

Even though this was technically the third day of my trip, I lost all track of time because I did not sleep the night before. A group of stranded passengers from the ill-fated United flight 873 decided to stay up all night in the bar at the São Paulo Airport Marriott hotel. We had a great time drinking *cervejas* and *caipirinhas* until our 4:00 am shuttle showed up and then left without us. One of the passengers was a woman from Martinique who spoke only French, so I spent most of the night acting as her translator. We all had a great time and ended up exchanging phone numbers and planning to have a reunion next year, and not to fly United to get to it. When we arrived at the airport there was a distinct smell of burning plastic, which should have been our first warning that something was wrong. The flight was scheduled for 5:55 am but we didn’t board the plane until close to 7:30. After the short flight and a ride to the hotel from one of my new-found friends, it was 10:00 by the time I was ready to start my Carnival adventure.

I checked into the hotel without incident, which was surprising since I showed up a day late and had neglected to call them. It was the Rio Othon Palace hotel, which has a reputation of being a nice but slightly older hotel. My key had a big red square plastic tag attached to it with the room number 1416 on it. “Oh good,” I thought. “A big red plastic tag with my room number and the name of the hotel on it won’t attract any thieves or anything.” There was a small matter of an overcharge on my credit card that I attempted to resolve with the hotel manager. While I was sitting and waiting for him to mull over his computer files, the desk clerk came around the corner and asked me to come back to the check-in counter. “There is a problem with the room,” he said.

“What sort of problem?” I inquired.

“There is a problem with the pipes. We need to switch you to another room.”

I didn't really know what to expect, but he took my key and then he started tapping on the computer, which I figured is probably a good thing since that's what they do at the airport when they're upgrading you. He tapped for a little while and then handed me another key with another big red plastic tag with the number 2625 on it. “Wow,” I thought. “I didn't even know they had 26 floors.” It turned out that they have, in fact, 30 floors. It also turned out that my hunch about being upgraded were correct. The top floor has a bar, a restaurant, and the pool. Floors 25 to 29 are what they call “Master Floors.” I knew this because the buttons in the elevator had “Master Floor” next to them written in big fancy script lettering. I thought that looked very promising. When I arrived on the 26th floor, the first thing I noticed was that all of the lights were off. Strange for a Master Floor, I thought. I stepped off the elevator and a few lights near the elevator turned on. Ah. Motion detectors. That explains it. I made my way down the hall toward my room and the lights turned on around me as I walked. I felt like Michael Jackson in the Billy Jean video where the lights turn on under his feet as he walks. Strangely, even after the lights turned on, the hallway seemed just as dark. I was very excited to see what a room on a Master Floor looked like. I unlocked and opened the door with great anticipation.

What I found surprised me: a small, plain looking room with ugly furniture and two of the smallest beds that I've ever seen in a hotel room. The linens were old, in faded pastel colored diagonal stripes and an occasional splotch of discoloration. The carpeting was matted, off-white shallow pile shag with stains from apparent drink spills. Then I noticed the sliding glass door at the other end of the room. I walked across the room and looked through the door. Outside were a balcony just big enough to stand on, and a breathtaking view of the city. My window looked south along the Avenida Atlântica. About a mile down from my hotel, the coast made a 90° turn to the right along Ipanema beach and into Leblon beach. To my right, about a half mile away, there was a big granite hill with a steep bare face on one side. On the other side a bunch of small, run down houses balanced on every available perch. This area is one of the *favelas*, the poorest parts of town where most of the crime occurs. For some reason the *favelas* all seem to get what in California would be considered prime real estate. This one little balcony by far made up for all of the deficiencies of the hotel room.

I sat on my bed and prepared to plan my day. Unfortunately my first day in Rio started out on a depressing note. My first phone call was to a work associate who lives in Rio. We had been planning to take a trip out to Sugarloaf, the big rock that was the location of the cable car scene in Moonraker (remember when the man with the stainless steel dentures bit through the cable?), in order to climb it. When I called him that morning, however, he informed me that they had lost the baby his wife had been carrying for nearly nine months. I offered my condolences and we made plans to catch up sometime in the future. I don't know if I can imagine what it would feel like to lose a pregnancy, but it happened three weeks ago and they still find it difficult even to leave the house, so it must be pretty awful.

After taking a moment to absorb the full magnitude of the first call, I picked up the phone again and called the home of Carlinhos de Jesus, my acquaintance from my previous trip to Brazil who is the head of the #1 samba school in the country, the *Mangueira* school. His wife Rachel, who doesn't speak any English, answered the phone. I asked to speak to Carlinhos and she replied that he wasn't there. We fumbled around in Portuguese for a while until I managed to correctly ask her for another phone number where I could reach his daughter, Tainah. I called Tainah, who speaks English, and she told me to go immediately to her father's dance school in Botafogo, the next town inland from my hotel in Copacabana, to buy a T-shirt. I would have to wear this T-shirt to take part in a small parade that they call a *bloco*. It would be a local celebration, a mini-Carnaval, for a particular samba school that, in the case of the *Mangueira* school, attracts between 1000 and 2000 people.

Around 10:30 I caught a taxi over to the dance school and bought a T-shirt emblazoned with, among other things, the name **Carlinhos de Jesus** in bold, bright letters, and then waited for Tainah to show up. After waiting for about an hour, I decided to get something to eat so I asked someone if there was any place to get some vegetarian food nearby. He pointed me toward an Italian restaurant just down the street. I thanked him and walked over, being careful to try to walk like a native and not to look around too much. Vegetarian food is not hard to find in Rio, but it's not too exciting. There are very few Asian restaurants. The promotional materials for my hotel said there was a Chinese restaurant on the 3rd floor, but when I got there I found that it was an imaginary restaurant. According to my internet research there is exactly one Thai restaurant in Rio, and one vegetarian health food restaurant. There are a few Japanese and Arab restaurants around, but I didn't go to any. Buffets are popular, and most buffets include a variety of intriguing vegetarian options such as vegetables.

When Tainah and her father finally arrived, a crowd was beginning to form around the entrance of the dance school. An hour later, the street was completely packed. Most of the people wore the same T-shirt as I, a not-so-subtle homage to the man who choreographs this neighborhood's samba dances. A truck trailer had been packed with a gigantic sound system, and a railing was set up on top so that the singers and MCs could stand up there. Carlinhos and his son were the MCs. On top of the trailer there were also a group of dancers and musicians, and a television crew. I was standing with Tainah, her friend Branca (which means "white," and she is very pale for a Brazilian), and a group of her other friends and family. The party started at about 4:00 pm. The music was blaring; the crowd was dancing and singing, jumping up and down and waving their arms. Carlinhos was singing and encouraging the crowd from his perch on the trailer. Vendors were selling water, soda, beer, *caipirinhas*, hair paint, air horns, and spray foam that is a cross between shaving cream and silly string. Everybody was getting silly and foamy. As the sun began to set, the party started to move. The truck carrying the MCs began to creep slowly down the road and everyone began to follow it. Tainah took her boyfriend's hand, he took Branca's hand, Branca took my hand, and we made our way through the crowd to the front of the parade. At this point I was completely covered with silly string and my head (and what's left of my hair) was painted bright orange. We danced and walked for a few hours at the front of the parade from Botafogo into Copacabana.

Everyone was happy, laughing and dancing down the street, except of course when taking a shot of foam to the face. After the parade I spent some time with Tainah, Branca, and some of their other friends. Branca is a gorgeous tall redhead, just out of high school, who is currently a professional dancer and applying to college. She explained to me the Brazilian university system. There are both public and private universities in Brazil, but most are public, and the public ones are better. Of the public universities, a few of them are free of charge, and those are the very best ones. The entrance exams for these universities are very difficult and include a wide array of subjects. When I told Branca that our entrance exams include only math and English, she was incredulous. She had tried to take the entrance exam once already but did not pass the history section. Tainah told me that she plans to study for her entrance exams for an entire year before taking them. Conveniently, the parade ended not too far from my hotel, so after we said our goodbyes I just walked back. I went up to my room, washed the orange off of my head, ate dinner in the restaurant upstairs, and finally went to sleep.

Day 4

Today was rather uneventful. I woke up around 12:30 and was writing in this journal when my new friend Bob from flight 873 called. He told me to meet him at the Praça de General Osaria, a marketplace in Ipanema, to see a live samba band play. The band was called *Simpatia Quase Amor*, or Affection Almost Love. I went down to the Praça and strolled around for a while looking for Bob. There were a lot of people milling about, and I stopped at a few places to buy some food and some Brazilian percussion instruments that sound really cool. There are cowbells, tambourines, and a funny instrument that's like a little hand drum with a small stick jammed right into the middle of it. The stick is firmly attached, and it's played by sliding a wet cotton swab up and down the stick. It makes a noise sort of like a circus clown's horn, and you can change the pitch by moving your fingers around on the drum head. When I play it, it sounds something like a cross between a clown horn and a donkey in severe pain (which isn't vegan, in case you were wondering, mostly because of the suffering I inflict when people hear me play it). Tainah had asked me to call her at 6:00 pm, so I did, and I learned that unfortunately I would not be able to get a costume for any of the upcoming parades, but it would still be good to watch. She told me to meet her at her house at 3:30 in the morning to go to the first parade. I thought exactly what you're thinking right now. Yes, 3:30. They start really early because there are so many parades to get through. I went back to my hotel room and tried to take a nap but I couldn't, so I got some food and went for a walk. There were tourists and drink vendors and dancers and music and prostitutes everywhere, as is the norm in Copacabana. I partook of the drinks, dancing, and music, but decided to forego the rest.

Day 5

Three o'clock rolled around eventually and I caught a cab over to the de Jesus residence, which is in a penthouse apartment in a very nice, modern building in Copacabana. I said to the doorman, "Querida ver Carlinhos de Jesus." He looked at me blankly for a moment and then said something like, "Calioshjejeshuish." I was baffled.

I clarified with the room number. “Apartamento numero nove zero um.” At least I thought I did, but I must have said it very poorly.

“Calioshjejeshuish,” he replied.

“Que?”

He asked me to write it down. I wrote “901” on a piece of paper and handed it to him. “Calioshjejeshuish,” he said.

“Sim,” I replied, hoping for the best.

“Queshenoime,” he said.

“Uhhhhhhh. Não entendo.” He must have thought I was mentally challenged.

“Queshenoime,” he said again.

I realized I was experiencing the quintessential carioca accent. Carioca is what people who live in Rio de Janeiro call themselves. They typically turn “s” into “sh,” “o” into “oi,” and speak very quickly. “Ohh! O meu nome! O meu nome é Cliff.”

“Kreesh,” he said.

“CLIFF,” I replied. “C-L-I -F-F.”

He picked up the phone and called upstairs. I faintly heard Tainah’s voice from his telephone. He said something to the effect of “blah blah blah blah blah blah KREESH blah blah blah blah.” Tainah’s voice sounded faintly for a moment. “KREESH,” he repeated. Tainah figured it out and the doorman pointed me to the elevator.

After me, a bunch of de Jesus friends and relatives arrived wearing some costumes (*fantasias* in Portuguese) that frankly looked more than a little silly. They wore short blouses that exposed the stomach, made from light blue semi-transparent material, with big poofy sleeves, along with baggy pants of the same material that came down to the shins, with fluorescent orange ruffles along the collars and cuffs. That is what the MEN were wearing. The women wore similar tops with long skirts, which looked only slightly more feminine. We sat around for a while talking and eating some breakfast. Tainah was talking with her uncle when she suddenly got a big smile on her face, turned to me, and said, “Hey Cliff, do you want a costume?” I was very surprised but of course I said yes, and with a quick exchange of 50 reais to Tainah’s uncle, who had opted out of the parade, I was in, wearing something that no straight man would be caught dead in in the USA. It’s funny how things work, though, because when we arrived at Avenida Presidente Vargas where the parade was to take place, we learned that the director of the *Mangueira*

school had had a heart attack and we might not walk in the parade after all. We took our place in the procession, but a few minutes later we got called back. There was a brief but heated discussion between Carlinhos and the dancers about whether the director had died or not, which he hadn't, or at least nothing had been confirmed. We all really wanted to be in the parade, especially Tainah who looked stunning in her exquisite, gold-colored Carmen Miranda costume. Carlinhos acquiesced and we all breathed a sigh of relief and went back to our place in the procession. Looking around, I noticed from printing on various shirts and banners that this parade was actually entirely in honor of Carlinhos. Even the samba song to which we were dancing had his name in the lyrics. The man is truly a local living legend. The crowds gathered, the band started playing, and we all danced our way down the road about a half mile. At the end I was sweaty but happy, and they even complimented me on my samba dancing.

After sleeping for a few hours, I had only a little while before I had to leave to see the big parade. The parade takes place in stadium affectionately called Sambódromo, officially called the Passarela Professor Darcy Ribiero. Around here, everything is named after a person. The stadium is custom-made for parades. It is 700 meters (about ½ mile) long, with terraced seating on one side and box seats on the other side of a paved road, with a total capacity of 60,000 spectators. The street is lined with about 80 large, new, computer controlled spotlights that illuminate the parade in various colors, or occasionally turn upward in unison, creating a spectacular mesh of light in the sky. A robotic television camera scurries along a rail just above the box seats.

A bit needs to be said here about the nature of these parades of which we have seen so many pictures in the United States, but really know so little about. Samba is a huge part of Brazilian culture. Many people in Brazil are very poor, but even those who can't afford a soccer ball can always take up dancing, and they do. Everyone learns samba dancing from an early age. If you ask a carioca if he knows how to dance samba, he will look at you funny and say, "Of course." In the city of Rio de Janeiro there are 14 samba "schools." A school in this sense is not literally a school, but an organization. The schools have directors, choreographers, band leaders, musicians, and, of course, dancers. They range in size from about 2000 to about 5000 people. Every year the schools compete in a judged competition for the title of the best samba school in Rio. This competition is the parade with which we are all vaguely familiar. Carlinhos and the *Mangueira* school won this competition the past two years. It is actually not one parade, but in fact it is seven parades on each of two days. The parades begin around 9:00 pm and finish around 7:00 in the morning. Don't ask me who makes these schedules, but someone must think that is the best way. Translating from a local publication, they are judged on the following criteria:

Time: The parade must be longer than 65 minutes but no more than 80 minutes.

Drum section: The jurors observe the regularity and sustain of the cadence, also giving credit for the marriage of sounds and versatility. Details such as marching patterns or different rhythms can add, but are not required.

Song subject: Lyrics, melody, and the relationship between the two are the focus of the jury. The lyrics must describe the subject well, with attention to poetic form. The melody should motivate the song and dance components.

Harmony: The judges check the uniformity of the components of the samba song, and that the tone and continuity are precisely maintained. The worst thing here is when a school mixes up the samba when onlookers sing different passages of the music.

Movement: They observe the enthusiasm and agility of the components. The school also must be compact, without spaces, in order not to lose points. This is the area that punishes the schools that rush to complete the parade in the permitted time.

Subject: Credit is given for development of the theme, clearly binding well-represented ideas with costumes and props.

Props and Decorations: More than the need for lavish designs and originality, the jury examines the adaptation of the floats to the subject. They also pay attention to finish, creativity, and highlights.

Costumes: Again, coherence with the subject is fundamental. Judges target their attention also on creativity, materials, forms, and colors, and the integration of the wings precisely with the clothes in a uniform manner.

Front commission: They have the job of presenting the concept by the school to the public on the avenue. In this sense, they also carry the weight of taking into account communication, coordination of movements, and the costumes.

Master class and flag carrier: They need to demonstrate everything for the excitement of the crowd – but without breaking up the samba. The dance must be uplifting, elegant, and romantic.

I showed up at the event at 7:00 pm in order to get a good seat, and I didn't. Luckily I made friends with a few English-speakers, many of whom were Californian, who were right up in front. Around 8:00 a murmur spread through the crowd as we felt rain beginning to fall. Everyone was gazing upward and holding out open hands to check for falling drops. Slowly the rain grew heavier, and by 9:00 it was pouring. Vendors were making a fortune selling plastic ponchos for 10 reais each. It continued to rain during the first parade, but had stopped by the time the second parade started, which was the *Mangueira* school. Each of the seven parades was better than any I had seen in the past including the Tournament of Roses, Macy's, and Disneyland. The floats were incredibly elaborate including robotic spotlights, neon, running water, scuba divers in giant tanks, and moving platforms supporting barely-clothed performers. There were talented acrobats, clowns, and thousands of energetic dancers in brightly-colored costumes of every conceivable design, and some nearly inconceivable. The subjects of the samba

parades usually have to do with freedom, nationalism, and peace. This stems from many years of bad government and rampant crime. The *Mangueira* samba was on the subject of Moses and the Jews' escape from slavery in Egypt. At the beginning there was one man with a long gray beard and long flowing robes who I'm supposing was a representation of God. Given the subject matter of the samba that was sort of funny because Jews aren't supposed to have any images of God. The floats included representations of The Creation, giant pyramids and Egyptian statues with dancers dressed as Egyptian slave drivers and Jewish slaves. Later Moses showed up, played by Carlinhos, and everyone cheered for him. There was a group of about 300 dancers all in sparkling blue costumes. Moses approached them from behind, raised his staff, and they parted. He walked through leading another group of dancers, and the crowd cheered again. Other groups of dancers came along later wearing costumes with Stars of David, menorahs, and other Jewish symbols. I thought it was a very interesting subject matter given that Carnaval is itself a Catholic celebration. I thought it was very touching though. All of the spectators were dancing and singing along too, with flags and arms waving. All of the parades seemed to me to be equally as spectacular. I didn't know how the judges would make their decision. Admittedly, after about six hours of parades it started to get a little more difficult to maintain the pace. I left with my new friends around 7:00 in the morning, having been on my feet for 12 hours straight. We shared a cab back to our respective hotels. I was surprised that I managed to make it to the end with sore feet and drooping eyelids the only negative symptoms.

Day 6

I got some sleep and then met up with some people to eat and then go out to a nightclub. I called my new friends from the parade and told them to meet us at Clube Emporio, a small, unpretentious bar near the Praça de Nos Senhora da Paz in Ipanema. There we ran into some other Americans who were in Brazil for work internships. They had had a bit to drink and weren't slowing down, and ended up coming over to our table and joining our group. I was on the dance floor when my friends I had called showed up, one woman from San Diego and two from London, and I introduced everyone. We danced and drank until about 3:00 in the morning and then I caught a cab home, drank some water, took a few Tylenol, and slept some more.

Day 7

On TV today they had the scoring of the samba parades, and the *Beija Flor* school won. The *Mangueira* school came in second place. Tainah says it was all political, so she's not too worried about it, but her father is apparently quite upset. There will be another contest on Saturday between the top seven from this one. I'm not sure why. In any case, *Mangueira* will have another opportunity then. I went to take a shower after I woke up this afternoon, and there was no hot water. I have never heard of a 30 story, 4 star hotel that runs out of hot water. I also noticed that the elevators are pretty rickety. Some of the buttons don't work and the ride feels like driving a Porsche down a cobblestone road. Not that I've ever driven a Porsche down a cobblestone road, but imagine it would feel pretty bumpy.

This evening we had a birthday celebration for Branca. Tainah and her boyfriend Ática were there, along with a few other younger friends and relatives. We went to a pizza place and then went out to the beach. First we stopped at Copacabana beach but there were some not-so-nice looking people around, and after one of them approached us asking for money, we decided to go to Ipanema, which is much safer at night. I stopped into my hotel and grabbed my guitar. I hadn't played it at all this week and I really wanted to play it at least for a few minutes just so I could justify having carried it all this way. At night the beaches in Rio are well lit with very bright lamps mounted at the tops of very tall poles. The light reaches all the way to the water's edge. We sat on the sand and sang songs, played games, danced, and played in the water until the early hours of the morning. One of Tainah's friends, Rodrigo, also plays guitar. We traded songs for a while. I loved listening to all of them singing songs in Portuguese, and I even occasionally joined in on a harmonica. The highlight of the evening was a rousing rendition of "I Want It That Way" by the Backstreet Boys. There were a few other people hanging around on the beach, mostly couples. A few were couples of men because that part of Ipanema beach is known during the day as the gay section. When the evening was over my friends drove me back to the hotel. I said my goodbyes and went back up to my room for my last night's sleep in Rio. I set the alarm for 10:00 am, and slept with the balcony door open so I could hear the ocean. I made one new friend that night – a mosquito. I named him Itchy.

Day 8

I decided to go all out and buy a *cavaquinho*, a little four-stringed guitar that they use in Brazilian samba music. I had to wait until the last day to buy it because all of the local stores are closed during Carnival. Unfortunately the music store did not have any books from which to learn the instrument, but I stopped by a magazine stand and picked up a few samba magazines. Yes, they have samba magazines. I bought three different ones, in fact. I also stopped into a music store and bought the official 2003 samba CD. It has all of the samba songs from the various schools that took part in this year's parades. The hotel manager took care of the overcharge on my credit card, and at 4:00 pm I was off to the airport.

On the flight from São Paulo to Miami, I sat in front of Mr. and Mrs. First Time Traveler. Their banter was charming for the first few minutes.

"Oh, look honey. We're moving!"

"Here it comes. We're lining up on the runway!"

"Why are all the signs in Portuguese?"

"No, that's Spanish." (It was Portuguese)

"Oh, look, there's a little TV screen here."

And on and on it went. I finally started listening to the samba CD to drown them out.

I was sad to leave Rio, and I definitely want to go back again. Next time I'll call ahead for a samba costume!