Argentino offered instant expiation; like everyone I'd met in Brazil, he brightened at the mention of San Francisco, my home base, and offered the requisite compliments on my Portuguese ("Você fala muito bem!").

Frankly, though, talking got in the way of the purity of the dance. We were a team now. As each record ended, we remained poised for the next, grinning, relishing our glorious calibration.

Doubtless there are men in the world who love to dance and are good at it and who can lead a woman partner through an experience where two are one and aren't even thinking about taking off their clothes. I had just never met such a man. Dancing with men meant dancing near them or at them, as with Tadeu, or leading them, as with my friend Jim, who could expertly follow my every step and spin.

But here with Argentino, it wasn't even a matter of his leading me; it was more like his moves were my moves, we were just making them together at precisely the same moment. Moreover, his skulking-glee was of a piece with mine—closer to the pulse of the music, right in it rather than spurting out from it. Peripherally I could see many such gushing dancers in the yard, exhausting themselves after one go-round. Argentino and I, we kept percolating, marveling at the persuasiveness of a hip with intent, exploring the rich dimensions of movement in the smallest possible space. We were the heartbeat of samba.

How many hours passed? We hadn't left each other's company all evening, nor had the smiles left our faces. But the music had quieted down, the party was rapidly thinning out, madrugada was settling in. Marinha and Marcos were saying their good-byes to the Passarinhos, and that meant I would have to bid farewell to Argentino.

We faced each other with this task, still aglow. "Você dança como um anjo," I said helplessly. You angel you.

Not missing a beat: "Aprendi esta noite contigo," he replied, the picture of serenity. I learned tonight with you.

In English the concept of speaking with someone is self-evident, but in Portuguese you also learn with someone, not from them, and you dream with someone, not about them, suggesting that these are not solitary activities. Clearly Argentino and I had both dreamed of a mutual surrender to the music on a tropical Christmas night. As we danced together, we learned how to make our dreams come true.

Born in New York and "actualized" in California, Terri Hinte fell in love with samba and bossa nova many years ago and studied Portuguese in order to travel to Brazil. She has worked as a music business publicist for more than twenty years, and contributed to the Brazilian music section of The All Music Guide. Whenever she travels, she pines for her garden and her Siamese cat, Ertha.

If you are going to Brazil, be forewarned: when you come back home, if you do, you will have added a few special words to your emotional vocabulary. You will join us in the group that knows the feeling yet cannot explain the meaning of the word... saudade. If you can explain it, you've made a poor translation. It has a place of its own, it changes you more than your vocabulary.

If you haven't been somewhere but yearn to see it, you may be getting a glimpse of saudade. It means longing for someone or something, more or less in the realm of "I miss you," in English. Yet, it carries more than longing, more than missing Yearning... a hole carved in one's heart, a feeling which stands on its own as much as it permeates one's whole being... It simply cannot be translated.

A Brazilian person has saudade or feels saudade. Tenho saudades do Brasil or Sinto saudades... portraits of a melancholic yet sweet longing. It transports me there when I say it.

—Neise Cavini Turchin, "Longing for Brazil"
Once Upon a Time in Ipanema

The author recalls the splendor of Rio's most enchanted neighborhood.

For several years I lived in a neighborhood that I came to consider the most singular in Rio—if not the world—Ipanema. A middle-to-upper-middle-class haven, Ipanema rises on a narrow isthmus between an ocean beach and a lagoon, arched by the mountain peaks of the city. One of these peaks is crowned with the city's emblem, the statue of Christ the Redeemer with outstretched, benignly protective arms. Indeed, almost in the shadow of that peak, one of the most elegant passageways of Ipanema is tree-shaded Redeemer Street.

Ipanema, which stirs my memories not only of the neighborhood but of Rio and of Brazil, recalls a saying associated with one of the most popular Brazilian soccer teams, Flamengo. Its followers assure everyone that "uma vez Flamengo, sempre Flamengo"—"once you’re for Flamengo, you’ll always be for Flamengo." Thus sums up my fondness for Brazil, "once Ipanema, always Ipanema." Since Ipanema—and Brazil—harbor for me the memory of so many magical moments, I find it easy to recall each one beginning with another wonderful phrase: "Once upon a time...."

Many years have passed since I first strolled into Ipanema. Its unique atmosphere immediately struck me. Its tidy houses, casual cafes, and well-stocked shops gave a sense of comfort and domestic security. At the same time, beautiful scantily-clad bronzed bodies strolled leisurely from the homes to the nearby beach, giving an electric sense of sensuality and serene openness. Never before had I known a place with such a wonderful air of the familial and of the exotic. The beautiful people were often taking toddlers to the sea, trailed by maids and pets.

What for me was then a duality, for Brazilians was a long-standing synthesis. They possessed a sophisticated balance, a bossa, between domesticity and pleasure. The signature song of bossa nova (the "new beat") was "The Girl from Ipanema" ("A Garota de Ipanema"), written at a café-bar in the heart of the neighborhood, the lyricist inspired by a physical beauty that was commonplace in the vicinity. (Though as a young teenager in the American Midwest, first hearing this song and knowing nothing of Brazil and its language of Portuguese, I imagined Ipanema was a city in Mexico!)

Ipanema made me re-examine the words cosmopolitan and sophisticated. I had always thought of them as virtually synonymous, but I came to see they were actually quite different. Brazil was not generally cosmopolitan in the sense of having a singular variety of cultural institutions, museums, symphonies, and ethnic groups. However, many Brazilians were quite sophisticated. They possessed a variety of liberal perspectives from which they viewed the world.

Why is it we’re comforted to discover certain spots are exactly as promoted? Somehow, dipping my toes into this renowned sandbox brings the same Pavlovian response of wonder as stepping into the postcard views of the Taj Mahal or Tiananmen Square. In mankind’s symbolic language, there can only be one church called Notre Dame, one skyscraper called the Empire State Building, and one beach, Ipanema’s contiguous Copacabana.

—John Krich, Why is This Country Dancing?: A One-Man Samba to the Beat of Brazil

Ironically, economic and language limits
provoked it. As a country economically dependent for centuries on exporting agricultural products (sugar, cotton, coffee, rubber, etc.), its economic elites always had to divine the outlook of their customers, the foreign buyers. Further, as speakers of a relatively obscure language, Brazilians had to learn the languages of others, particularly English and French, in order to communicate in the world. Learning these languages also meant absorbing the others’ cultural perspectives, even assuming some of their postures. Moreover, Rio was an especially liberal city, like many world ports of call and tourist meccas, and Ipanema was its chic core.

Most memorable about Ipanema was the beach, and the fondest memories I have are of lying on it, my head resting in the hand of my upraised arm, looking out over the sand to the sea. It is a late summer afternoon. Sea and sky almost match each other on the faint, aqua line of the horizon. Land’s end, paradise begins. There is a breeze; and the rays of the waning sun fall in long, resonant golden shafts. Gray and white doves flutter over the beige sand seeking scraps left over from snacks and picnics. As they land, the edges of their outspread wings are caught translucent by the radiant sun. The mountains, lightly covered in haze, stand as an ethereal backdrop. Those who earlier were strolling by the water’s edge, whose eyes then met someone who returned their glance, recline now paired off in conversation—and, who knows, perhaps making arrangements for a later tryst.

Ipanema made me realize two things about Brazil that so contrasted with my memories of American life. I can hardly remember ever hearing, as is so common in the United States, the word sex linked to the word violence. In Brazil I almost always heard the word sex followed by the word love. This, of course, did not mean that people drawn together stayed so. Such comings and goings were much the same as anywhere. The association did mean, though, that intimacy was not associated with assertion and taking but with a certain tenderness and warmth.

Warmth also determined time in Brazil. South of the equator seasons were reversed; the year began in warmth, not cold. Seasons had no meaning, were but waxing and waning periods of heat. The
followers must offer her gifts of perfume, flowers, and mirrors, set in small candle-lit boats launched at midnight. Everyone is in white. More people crowd and jostle here on the beach this night than do sunbathers on any day of the year.

As midnight explodes with fireworks from the windows of the apartments bordering the beach, the jubilant worshipers of the goddess of the sea launch their offerings. They then continue the night with music, dancing, and trances until dawn. The first light reveals sprays of flowers all along the sand, returned with the tide of a beneficent goddess, pleased with the homage of her faithful.

There is Copacabana on cloudy days, not at all depressing. The sky is tinged an elegant, pearl gray. One can gaze at it while listening to piano music and lounging in the tea room of the Copacabana Palace Hotel, a tropical cream replica of the hotels lining the beach esplanade in Nice.

Copacabana and Ipanema are seaside neighborhoods. However, Rio, similar to San Francisco, is situated on both the ocean and a bay. The Bay of Guanabara harbors the port and downtown areas in one of the most thrilling urban landscapes imaginable.

A bayside parkway curves through this landscape, hugging the water’s edge. From the water on one side rises Sugarloaf (Pão de Açúcar) and other low mounds across the bay. On the other side, behind and within the city, rise towering mountains draped in lush greenery. The highest mountain peak is called Corcovado, the pedestal for Christ the Redeemer.

I took this route almost every day, sometimes several times a day. Always it was a thrilling, dramatically changing sight. It was so extraordinary that there could be such a combination of mountain, water, and verdure in a metropolitan habitat, regularly, subtly transforming itself with the changes in duration, angle, and strength of light. A small, wayward cloud would sometimes wander over the top of Sugarloaf; and a wreath of clouds might cover the top of Corcovado, leaving Christ levitating with outstretched arms over the city. I once actually saw the rainbow end at a stone base behind Sugarloaf.

Sometimes I took this route accompanying former President Juscelino Kubitschek from his home in Copacabana to his office downtown when I worked as his secretary for English correspondence. To remain anonymous, he rode about in a chauffeur-driven Volkswagen beetle. Seated with him in the back seat and with the car ripping along the parkway, its windows open, we shouted over the wind to communicate, endlessly grasping at maddeningly flapping papers.

Moving from the port area of downtown into the heart of the city is a trip through several architectural and historical periods. There is the late colonial and early imperial period, represented chiefly by the old palace and cathedral.

Then there follows narrow blocks of 19th-century houses and shops, some intermixed with new commercial highrisers. The older buildings have wedding-cake façades, many freshly painted thanks to an extensive historical restoration and preservation project. Entering some of the stores quickly gives away their age, the wooden floors creaking underneath as one shops for valises here, stationery there, and pastries down the street.

There is also a quite modern, late-20th-century area of downtown, reminiscent of Brasília. Most striking here is the state petroleum company’s headquarters, a mammoth glass cube with some floors left as hollowed-out spaces for hanging gardens.

Yet just behind this striking building is the last cable car station
in the city, its route climbing into one of the first residential suburbs built in Rio during the last century, Santa Teresa. Set on a hill, Santa Teresa offers riders breathtaking vistas. As the car resolutely winds its way up, you spy beyond the gardens and roofs of gingerbread mansions and cottages growing views of the bay lying on one side and the ocean on the other.

This neighborhood also has one of the most striking museums in the city, the Chácara do Céu (roughly meaning, “Heavenly Manor”). It was originally the residence of a wealthy industrialist, built after the Second World War. He decorated it with furnishings and artworks of an astonishingly pure taste, achieving a spare, elegant balance of Brazilian Baroque, Chinese Classical, and Brazilian and French Modern. Upon his death, he stipulated that this home be converted into a museum.

A visit to it proves a cleansing experience. One lingers in its rooms, absorbing their refined ambiance, and gazes out the wide windows onto the luxurious grounds of the house. Beyond them lie the expansive vista of the city and water below. It seems a primitif painting, possessing the striking force of elemental images as in Garcia Lorca’s vibrant gypsy ode to “green” nature: “El barco sobre el mar / y el caballo en la montaña.”

Never did I meet the museum’s founder, but I felt such a kindred spirit with the ambiance of his home that I recall the place as if it were a tasteful companion of my Brazilian days. The Romans held that there were gods or spirits of home and hearth, called lares. A Portuguese derivative from this, lareira, is the word for fireplace. A spirit does live on at the Chácara.

All parts of Rio intrigued me, and a small adventure I often liked to pursue was to get on any bus and stay on it to the end of the line. Looking out the moving window, I delighted in the parade of shops and houses. One block held a sequence of barber shop, bar, shoe repairman, hardware store, pink house, yellow house, green house; the next was a bakery, fruit store, pharmacy, church, garden, green house, yellow house; the next... I enjoyed it like a sequence of scenes in the toy village of department store windows during the holidays.

Once Upon a Time in Ipanema

At any point one could alight and refresh oneself. Everywhere one roams in Rio, or any Brazilian city, there appear every few blocks or so botequins, cafê-bars somewhat like Paris bistros that are tropical urban oases. They are usually open-air, like almost all stores in Brazil, with the side fronting the street having a metal screen that rolls up into the ceiling. At the bar, bordered by stools, one can have a drink; at tables along a corridor or in the back, one can order a meal. A coffee urn usually rests at the end of the bar near the street, serving cafèzinho, the demitasse of strong coffee with sugar Brazilians drink numerous times a day. Near it there is also almost always a case of freshly baked pastry snacks stuffed with chicken, shrimp, or ground beef. Sitting for lunch or taking a quick coffee break, one gazes out on the world strolling by.

Invariably botequins are neighborhood watering holes, especially for men. Given the ease with which Brazilians enter into conversation with anyone, I always enjoyed these places for the welcome they gave into the local affairs of the neighborhood or into the average Brazilian’s view of the country and the world. It was in one of the myriad botequins I frequented that I believe I heard the ultimate Cold War putdown. A stentorian voice near me declared that “if communism was such a good thing, they’d have it in the United States.”

One of the most charming places in the Bay of Guanabara was the island Paquetá. Butterfly-shaped and with a small village at the point where the wings met, its charm was due to several factors. Just over an hour by ferry from bustling Rio, it was like some remote, tranquil fishing village far from anywhere. Moreover, no car traffic was allowed on the island so that everyone got about either by walking, riding a bicycle, or in horse-drawn buggies. In summer (December through March—thus, you wore a tan to holiday parties, not overcoats) flamboyant trees blossomed along the beach. They appeared as exotic Christmas flora. The branches were fernlike and had flowers very similar to crimson poinsettias.

At one time the boat trip to Paquetá offered an exceptional scene: dolphins leaping in the water, accompanying the ships. These centuries-long residents of the bay, however, have disappeared in
recent years due to oil pollution from tankers. They are remembered though on the seal of the city of Rio, bordered not by pompous lions or impossible unicorns but leaping, delighted dolphins.

Eventually a day came I had not imagined. I had a wrenching decision to make, whether to leave this country that had so enchanted me. I remembered Robert Frost’s poem on the fragility of nature and paradise: that “Eden sank to grief” because “nothing gold can stay.”

The first culture we come deeply to know outside our own is so memorable because, like first love, it takes away our innocence of the world. It is the first we cherish for having revealed and then lightened our ignorance.

Edward A. “Ted” Riedinger is on the faculty of Ohio State University and has published extensively on Brazilian politics and cultural history. Currently he holds a Fulbright scholar award to complete field research for a book, Renaissance in the Tropics, an analysis of the achievement of Brazilian culture in the 20th century. He is a founder and the secretary of the Brazilian Studies Association (BRASA), an academic organization that supports Brazilian studies in the humanities and social sciences. The association has a free Internet list, BRASANET: brasa@umwvmu.unm.edu.

I’ll never forget the first time I met the Carioca spirit face to face. Several years ago, I was sent by a magazine on a dream assignment—to join a samba school in Rio and dance in Carnaval. Since I would be staying on for several months, I rented a small room in Copacabana from Dona Vitória, an elderly widow who rose at dawn every day to bake cookies for high-society parties. One night, when we were discussing whether she should leave the door unlocked for me, I muttered something about having found a new boyfriend, and was perhaps—well—not coming home. For a moment she looked confused, then suddenly she threw out her arms and hugged me. “Ah, querida, go! Have fun, eat, dance, laugh, make love! Life is so short!” In that brief moment, the joy of her Carioca spirit blazed through me, and, as I shut the door behind me, I felt somehow I’d been blessed.

—Pamela Bloom, Brazil Up Close: The Sensual and Adventurous Guide

RECIFE, OK. I WILL WALK ACROSS TOWN AND LOOK FOR A REEF. The town’s harbor, lined with rusty freighters and incredibly old coastal steamers, is like a wide river with the reef, now covered in a long, thin line with huge rock chunks, forming the river’s far bank. The ocean breakers crashing against this long stone wall throw up spray that shines in the sun where isolated figures of boys in swimming trunks with long cane poles throw lines into the surf. Their poses as they wait are as languorous and studied as Whistler drawings. Everything, even the distant boys, the boats, the docks, the street deep in the shade of mangos, the piled rocks at the reef, has a timeless, frozen look. Something planned by Englishmen, something built to last, a memorial to a decent past, that old vanished world of my grandfather’s “where a man’s word is his bond.”

This section of town where the sailors hang out is a barrio of neglected and seedy one-story buildings, narrow streets, and old trees. In a way it reminds one of San Francisco’s Haight-Ashbury district during the ‘60s, a place that reflects the passions and vices of another time. The bars are as menacing as opium dens; no movie set could capture the sense of danger and violence that these façades suggest. Looking into their dark entranceways one is surprised at