

“Come to Brazil!” A Queer girl falls in love with São Paulo (Sept. 24, 2019, Bella Media Channel)

No one was more surprised than me when I got an email in the early morning hours of July 4th from the CamaraLGBT (LGBT Chamber of Tourism) in São Paulo, Brazil, inviting me to visit and speak at a conference on tourism and culture. I had met one of the chamber members, **Marcelo Michiletto** of [MH Tours](#), a few months before at the CMI Tourism Conference in Florida, and was delighted to hear from him again. He was eager to have queer women’s perspective on travel and culture represented, and I was excited to find out that I’d also be attending the conference and trip with **Merryn Johns**, editor-in-chief of Curve Magazine, and **Meg Cale**, the queer travel writer and influencer behind [Dopes on the Road](#). **Lindsay Cale**, Meg’s wife and partner in travel writing, also joined us. (Definitely check out Dopes on the Road for incredible queer travel coverage.) Queer women are too often left out of these kinds of conversations when it comes to travel, but the truth is, and the CamaraLGBT is very aware of this, is that queer women travel...a lot. We are just looking for different things when we travel than our gay and bisexual male counterparts. Experience, cultural events, local cuisine, outdoor activities are all high on queer women’s vacation and travel goals. (For more info, check out [CMI’s 23rd Annual LGBTQ Tourism and Hospitality Survey](#).)

Before I tell you why you should consider going to Brazil and São Paulo in particular, let’s address something. In the last couple of years, Brazil has gotten a bad rap when it comes to LGBTQ issues, which has affected its hospitality industry and continues to do so. Brazil is a country where same-sex marriage has been legal since 2013, and holds the world’s largest LGBTQ pride event, Parada do Orgulho. They have laws against LGBTQ discrimination. What I also learned from the friends I made on this trip, those that live and work in Brazil, is what Brazil is experiencing isn’t all that different from what we are currently dealing with in the U.S. Both our countries recently elected conservative leaders and parties that do not have advancement of LGBTQ rights on their agendas. Their president, Jair Bolsonaro, has been outspoken with his negative views of the LGBTQ community, but as people in the U.S. see more pushback after so much progress ourselves, it’s impossible not to understand what queer and trans Brazilians are going through.



The view from atop Pergamon Hotel

My experience in São Paulo is one I'll never forget. From day one, I was treated with such warmth and kindness that it was rather bittersweet boarding the plane to come back home. São Paulo is not unlike New York City, a bustling cosmopolitan city with residents from all over the world. It's a city you could get a little lost in without some planning and the right guides. Luckily, I had both. Chamber members **Ricardo Gomes** and **Átila Paixão** joined us on all of our adventures and Átila was our unofficial and tireless translator for many stops. Ricardo's infectious enthusiasm and Átila's unwavering cool were a great combination. Both expressed to me how important it is to them the queer women travelers feel welcome in Brazil, something they are committed to as part of the Chamber.



São Paulo city hall lit up for Pride. Photo by Jurandy Regina

Before we kicked off the press trip part of the week, I had the honor of speaking with Merryn Johns and our lovely moderator, Marta, about travel for queer women on Tourism day of the conference. The audience listened as we spoke about the unique challenges that queer women face when traveling, and the industry's lack of attention to it over the years. There were many thoughtful questions from the audience, which was filled with people from all over South and Latin America in the tourism industry. The following day, I gave a solo presentation on queer culture (namely television) and how fandom has become international. I urged the audience to help push for more access to LGBTQ television and film. I left feeling energized and hopeful, and I hope they did too.



Conexão Mulheres do Brasil performing a teaser at the Cultural Conference,

Our little group of writers and professional travelers were treated to some very exciting and female focused events. The first was **Conexão Mulheres do Brasil**, a trio made up of artists [Sylvia Patricia](#), [Laura Finocchiaro](#), and [Nila Branco](#). The three women don't typically play together, but they came together for one night for this concert dedicated to queer women in music. The result was a rocking, entertaining concert with three powerhouse performers.



Source: [Siga Bem Caminhoneira Facebook](#)

The highlight of the trip for me, however, was watching [Siga Bem Caminhoneira](#) perform at queer bar, Bitu. Caminhoneira is translated to “trucker” which is a nickname for lesbians in the community, as is Sapatão, which means “big shoes.” Siga Bem Caminhoneira is a musical collective of queer women who perform songs about queerness with traditional Brazilian instruments, and lots and lots of drums. The concert only lasted about 30 minutes but it was so joyful and empowering, that it could have gone on all night. I had the pleasure of speaking to two of the collective members, Luana and Claudia, and the official photographer, Nina. All three were fiercely proud of the collective and their community, and they asked me to tell you something. “Come to Brazil!” Just as queer women are dealing with disappearing spaces in the U.S. and Canada, so are Brazilian lesbian and bisexual women. That’s why organizations like Siga Bem Caminhoneira are so important, and attracting a diverse following. Also, I mean, queer ladies with drums. It’s pretty cool.

So, where should you go when you’re in Sao Paulo? Here’s a list of places to eat, stay and check out while in the big city.

Where to go



[Bitu](#) (Rua Bartolomeu Zunega, 113) A large open garden, multiple bars and a small performance space make up this women-owned queer bar. Drinks are cheap (roughly a few USD thanks to the exchange rate) and the beer is cold. It's also a flutter with young queer women, chatting, laughing and dancing. An excellent reason to learn some Portuguese.



[Museu da Diversidade Sexual](#) (Rua do Arouche, 24 – Estação República do Metrô) Learn about the history of the LGBTQ community in Brazil at this small but powerful museum located in the

Metro station. In 2020, the museum plans to have most of the information available in Spanish and English as well as Portuguese, so you won't need a fluent guide to check it out.



Anna Bilenska



Some of the incredible art at MASP, and my friend Bruno deep in thought

MASP (Avenida Paulista, 1578) Museu de Arte de São Paulo is a smaller but impressive museum with art from Brazilian artists, as well as big names like Degas, Picasso and Warhol. Right now the museum has a special collection called Historias das Mulheres, which is all women artists from the 1600s to 1900s. The collection is incredible. A couple of the lovely men that were on the trip as well commented on how different the art felt, which led to a discussion on the male vs female gaze.

Frei Caneca Street Pronounced “free-ka-nee-ka” this is the home to the LGBTQ community in São Paulo. You’ll find a number of queer owned and focused businesses there, as well as many LGBTQ-friendly restaurants.



Beco De Batman ([Vila Madalena](#) neighborhood) Batman Avenue is named for the Batman-themed street art that appears, but the neighborhood is overflowing with all kinds of amazing art. Street art is everywhere in São Paulo, but Beco de Batman draws tourists and instagrammers alike for its vibrant, colorful and masterful art. It's also a very LGBTQ-friendly area with lots of shops and restaurants to enjoy after you've taking your share of photos.

Where to Eat and Stay



Castro Burger (1517 – Rua Joaquim Távora) The motto at this burger joint is “unity in diversity” and it shows in everything from the placemats (fruits and veggies holding signs about all families being equal) to the mostly queer staff. The restaurant is named after the very gay Castro District in San Francisco, and features lots of burgers and vegetarian options, plus a dedicated shrine room to LGBTQ icons.

Athenas Restaurant (1449 – Consolação) This LGBTQ-friendly spot has tons of outdoor seating for people watching and a Brazilian and Greek menu. Right across the street is Athenas to Go, so even if the original is too busy, you can still find a spot. Although, if you just ask nicely enough, they might just set up an extra table for you like they did for my party!

Accor Hotels: Accor is a large hotel group, which is very committed to LGBTQ-inclusion and even has its own LGBTQ outreach department, staffed with members of our community. I had the pleasure of speaking with two Accor LGBTQ employees at a cocktail hour. (They were awesome, btw.) Members of our group stayed at the **Pullman Hotel Ibirapuera**, **Pergamon Hotel**, **Novotel Jaragua**, and **Hotel Belas Artes**.



Hotel Unique's slanted suite floors, a favorite of guest Tony Hawk

Hotel Unique (4700 – Jardim Paulista): Unique is certainly the word for this funky and fascinating hotel. From the architecture to the commitment to the senses (the elevator and halls are purposely dimmed to play with your senses, a signature scent is purpled throughout) you'd be hard pressed to find a more "unique" place to stay. The rooftop, which is open to non-guests as well, features a nearly 360 view of the city, a terrific restaurant and outdoor pool/lounge. Hotel Unique has a roster of all-female DJs spinning on the weekend, and hosts many LGBTQ events.

A few more tips!

The US dollar is quite strong right now in Brazil, as is Canadian Dollar and the Euro. \$1 US is roughly \$3.25 in Brazil, so you get a lot for your vacation money there.

Don't assume everyone speaks or understands English. The official language in Brazil is Portuguese, and while many people do speak English, have a phrase book or the Google translate app handy. Also, just learn a few common phrases. It's only polite. Obrigada. (That means thank you.)

Cabs are pretty easy to find, as are Ubers, which you will definitely need because the city is huge and you will need help getting around. There is also a subway system that you can use.