

Brazil touting its rich black heritage

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By Paulo Prada, Globe Correspondent | October 17, 2004

SALVADOR, Brazil -- Greg Jones sits on a sandstone bollard in the colonial heart of this tropical capital. As the bongos of a percussion ensemble echo through a window overhead, he smiles at a visitor and relishes the thought of another 10 days of vacation.

"I'm just trying to sit here and soak it all in," says Jones, an electrician from California. He's not talking about the sunshine.

Jones is on an African heritage tour. Arranged by an Oakland travel agent, the tour is designed to steep visitors in the culture and history of Afro-Brazilians, descendants of the millions of slaves brought to Brazil after Europeans arrived five centuries ago.

Brazil is booming with black tourists. Long a vacation hot spot, the country is now receiving legions of African-American visitors who are lured by more than its sunny resorts and the annual Carnival extravaganza. With more black citizens than any country outside Nigeria (Brazil is home to at least 70 million people of African descent), it is quickly becoming a destination of choice for black Americans interested in the history of the hemisphere and the plight of their enslaved ancestors.

On his second visit here in less than a year, Jones came back to Brazil to learn more about people like Anastacia, a legendary 18th-century slave who was killed after speaking out when she was raped by one of her owners. Others come to learn about candomble, a religion that blends Roman Catholicism with tribal African lore, or capoeira, a martial art that evolved when slaves disguised fight training as a dance.

"There's so much to discover, a lot of important history and culture," says Angela Wade, a health inspector from Berkeley, Calif., before heading to an Afro-Brazilian dance performance one evening here.

Marlene Melton, founder of African Ventures Inc., a New York-based tour operator that recently added Brazil to a once exclusively African roster of destinations, says African-Americans are eager "to embrace any semblance of culture linked to our own history. The African influence in Brazil is very intense and pervasive."

Many other US travel agents and tour operators are beginning to offer black-oriented packages to Brazil, too.

Clarence Smith, the African-American entrepreneur who founded Essence magazine, recently launched Avocet Travel, a New York-based company that plans next year to offer flights and tours to Salvador, a city on the northeast coast that is the locus of the African legacy in Brazil.

"This is one of the few places where people can go and find African culture replicated and unsullied," says Smith in a telephone interview from New York. "We want to build a bridge and make it easier to get there."

Travel itself is easier than ever for African-Americans. As blacks in this country become increasingly affluent, they are traveling more than Americans as a whole. From 2000-2002, a period in which economic and security fears kept overall growth in travel by US citizens to a mere 2 percent, travel by African-Americans grew by twice as much, according to a 2003 study by the Travel Industry Association of America.

And as they look beyond the United States, many black travelers are discovering Brazil as an alternative to the Caribbean, a region where the African culture, like that in the United States, is perceived to have become more diluted than it has in Brazil.

"There is an intensity to the African experience there that you don't get in the Caribbean or North America," said Thomas Dorsey, publisher of SoulOfAmerica.com, a Los Angeles-based website that tracks African-American travel.

African culture endured in Brazil, researchers say, because the country received more slaves over a longer period of time than any other country in the Americas. Its ports, particularly Salvador and the surrounding state of Bahia, took delivery of as many as 5 million Africans over three centuries; the United States received some 750,000 over roughly two centuries.

"You had a far greater presence and influence of native Africans for longer," says Stuart Schwartz, a history professor at Yale University.

Brazil today is eager to capitalize on its growing popularity among African-Americans. The Brasilia-based National Association of Afro-Brazilian Businesses, for instance, is working with domestic travel industry officials to develop a "Route of Afro-Brazilian Roots," which would feature quilombos, black settlements originally established by runaway slaves.

Also, the government, having pinpointed tourism as one of the sectors of the economy that offers the most promise, this year boosted its marketing budget to promote Brazil in the United States. Last month, it opened a Manhattan office that will host seminars for US travel agents to help them sell the country as a cultural destination.

"We can't just show beaches anymore," says Alexandre Raulino, chief executive of the Brazil Tourism Office in the United States. "We must speak about our culture, and you can't do that without speaking about the African influence."

The country, of course, is no paradise. Poverty in its big cities makes Brazil's urban crime rate one of the highest in the world. Blacks remain the poorest segment of Brazilian society, fueling a racist undercurrent that thrives despite the country's renown as a racial melting pot.

"There are a lot of issues that need to be addressed if this is to become a touristic ideal," says Handy Withers, an African-American from Virginia who this year opened A Casa das Portas Velhas, a 15-room luxury hotel in Salvador.

Still, he says, the potential was alluring enough for him to leave a decades-long career in fashion and invest more than \$1 million in the venture.

Tourism even inspires some African-Americans to work to improve the lot of their Brazilian counterparts.

Simone Manigo Truell, after working as a human rights volunteer in Zimbabwe, first came to Brazil for Carnival in 1998. After several return trips, she quit her job as a lawyer in Washington, D.C., and in June moved to Salvador to run Levantamos, a nonprofit organization she founded to

raise money for Afro-Brazilian community groups.

"I just had to give something back," she says. "I've never felt more African than here."

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