

Whispers in Rio

When I feel overwhelmed, outnumbered, or cornered in a foreign land I mutter to myself. Not so loud as to be heard, but just enough that people around me get nervous.

The bar I found myself in was one of the many time capsules that give Rio de Janeiro the unmistakable feel of a photo from a jazz album cover. Exposed beams overhead and a wall-to-wall mirror behind the bar hinted at former grandeur. The staff wore collared shirts with sleeve garters in the brilliant green and yellow of the Brazilian flag. Elderly men stood outside on the street corner sharing cigarettes and frying fatty pieces of beef on a wood grill made from a shopping cart. The smoke-stained walls were randomly dotted with black and white photos of former owners, favored customers, and, most interestingly, ocean liners – including a series dedicated to the visit of the *Cap Arcona* in 1929.

From what I could gather from the photos, the German-built *Cap Arcona* sailed from Hamburg Süd to Buenos Aires, with a short stopover in Rio's iconic Guanabara Bay. Even in colorless prints Rio is as naturally picturesque and proportionally chaotic as any place on earth. According to a framed ticket, the *Cap Arcona* made its way to South America on the Hamburg Südamerikanische Dampfschiffahrts-Gesellschaft route. Try saying that three times fast after a couple caipirinha's.

The photos of the giant German ship were arranged chronologically – a small detail that people who mutter to themselves appreciate.

"Tudo bem?" was the standard greeting, posed by one of the outdoor beef chefs who'd made his way inside.

I did my best to reply that I was.

He pointed at one of the photos I'd been examining on the wall and let loose a full paragraph of Portuguese. I stared back with same nonunderstanding eyes that your military friends use when you tell them you're too tired to work out.

The man pounded the picture glass as he became more animated. He repeated his story, only this time louder and with more hand gestures.

"I don't know. Desculpe! Não Portuguese," was the best I could muster while holding up my palms in the international sign for confusion.

"Olhar! Olhar!!!" which clearly instructed me to look more closely at this particular picture.

Again, the man repeated his story, and this time added the finger gun sign with a couple of explosion noises. In a city with a murder rate that ranks among the highest worldwide, this was worrying. I began muttering.

As the man had gradually raised his voice during the multiple telling's of his story, his friends from outside had slowly migrated into the bar and were now surrounding my table like schoolchildren watching a playground fight.

"No habla!" I kept muttering. When in foreign lands Americans inevitably revert to Spanish.

"He tells you story of picture," came a comforting voice. A young man had obviously overseen the burgeoning ruckus, and had come over, beer in hand, to translate the man's tale.

I asked what the gun gesture meant.

"The story of the picture! The navio...uhh...the...the boat! Story of the boat."

"Is he mad at me?" I asked.

The young translator and the picture-puncher exchanged words in blazingly fast Portuguese.

"He tells you the story of the picture. He thinks you say that you don't care."

Figuring that discretion was the better part of valor, I asked the youngster to apologize to the man and offered to buy them both another beer. This seemed to calm things down and the group slowly filtered their way back to the shopping cart grill outside.

After I returned home I researched the *Cap Arcona*. After its service as a civilian liner on the North-South route from Hamburg to South America, the *Cap Arcona* was taken over by the *Kriegsmarine*. The vessel was used to evacuate German soldiers from East Prussia during Operation Hannibal before it was repurposed as a prison ship. Just three days after Hitler shot himself, the *Cap Arcona* was sunk in the Baltic Sea following a sustained attack by three squadrons of RAF Hawker Typhoons. British Intelligence were under the impression the ship carried members of the SS who were on their way to Scandinavia; not the thousands of starving prisoners who were being transported from Neuengamme concentration camp in Hamburg. Almost all were killed.

I hung my head and muttered. The man had been trying to explain the fate of ship whose name the bar had adopted.