
Coming in to Rio is so spectacular that throughout the centuries, for anyone arriving by plane or ship, it has set off these alterations in perception. It must have been the same in summer 1502, when a Portuguese fleet commanded by Gonçalo Coelho came into Guanabara bay for the first time. Its chief pilot, the Florentine Amerigo Vespucci, thought the bay was a river mouth. And, since it was 1 January,
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he called the place Rio de Janeiro – a name we all love, and immediately shorten to plain Rio. Still today historians ask how Vespucci, a pilot who had sailed the seven seas, and an ace in cosmography, managed to confuse a bay with a river. Well, maybe he was bowled over by the setting, and if that’s the case, he wasn’t the only one – just the first. Another theory is that in old Portuguese, ‘rio’ was just another word for a bay. In that case, Vespucci
made no mistake. A quick look at his c.v. might persuade us not to underestimate him when it comes to naming things. For example; Columbus might have discovered America – but who invented the expression ‘New World’, and ended up giving his name to the new-found continent? The daring Amerigo Vespucci – the same man who baptised Rio.

If Vespucci returned to the city today, 500 years on, what would he think? In 1502, when he faced the Sugar Loaf, he saw in Guanabara something very like the idea the ancients had of Paradise: a riotous display of hills and mountain-ranges, beaches, inlets, islands, dunes, sandbanks, mangrove swamps, lagoons and forests, all this under an endless blue sky. A masterpiece of nature, inhabited by happy, sunburnt and amoral people: men and women who spent all their time singing and dancing in the sun, everybody naked, cheerfully fornicating in the woods and on the sand, sleeping in hammocks by moonlight or in romantic straw huts, and surrounded by an abundance of fruit, birds and

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fish, all within reach – you didn’t have to plant, just pluck, as long as you lived. It was a life so idyllic, so like Paradise, that it left little room for the idea, then current among the Jesuits, that the savages didn’t have a ‘soul’.

In 2002, Vespucci would see both similarities and differences to this unbeatable collection of picture-postcard views. The bay would be as spectacular, only now, if he looked at it closely, he would find it fouled by foreign bodies such as plastic bottles, old tyres or 1,000 tons of oil emptied into the sea by a tanker. The outline of the coast would still be astonishing, but Vespucci, who knew it when it was virgin, would notice it had been altered – where had all the dozens of delightful inlets, tiny islands and beaches gone? The big mountains would still be there, firm as sentinels, though their green covering had receded a great deal. The temperature would have gone up a lot too, and he’d be dying to take off those tight velvet breeches and his Elizabethan jacket. But he wouldn’t condemn every human intervention on the landscape – he would certainly love the cable car, hanging from its wires, going up and down the Sugar Loaf. And wherever he looked, he would find the explanation for all these transformations: instead of the village with its scattered huts, a city has arisen, with high, white buildings, inhabited by 5.8 million people called cariocas – almost all of them with souls.

Vespucci would also recognise some old customs. Many of the natives would still live half their lives
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on the beaches, practically naked. At a certain time of the year, they'd do nothing else but sing and dance to drum music, except they'd be covered with strange costumes, and seem to obey a kind of choreography. And the huts that now invaded the hills would no longer be built of straw, but wood and masonry. If he got off his ship and wandered through the streets, Vespucci would find himself in a city that is old and modern, welcoming and impersonal, restrained and permissive, civilised and barbarous – with contradictions that, maybe more than in other big cities, would make him feel as if he was in heaven and hell at the same time. And even for him, used as he was to the lairs of the most ferocious buccaneers, it would be enormously exciting.

To foreign eyes, during its 500 years of history, Rio has been, in succession: an Eden dreamt of by utopianists; the failed Antarctic France; a port for pirates and corsairs; a market for gold and slaves; the capital of a European empire; a court out of an operetta; the Marvellous City; the land of Carnival; and always, even if on the quiet, a kind of sexual Mecca. It has also upheld the tradition of happily receiving and giving shelter to whoever had arrived here: soldiers, missionaries, victims of racial persecution, political refugees, religious rebels, immigrants from all over the place and even fugitives from justice. Ronald Biggs, the Great Train Robber, wasn’t the first to ask himself: ‘What if I ran away to Rio?’ Long before him, in 1950, Alec Guinness had already had the same idea in Charles Crichton’s film The Lavender Hill Mob – the difference is that Biggs did really come down here. Curiously, Brazilians who rob others’ money, whether it be public or private, go in the other direction: they flee to Miami or Europe.

Rio welcomes everyone, and asks no questions. The city – a strip of land entrenched between chains of mountains and a coastline with nearly fifty miles of beach – is a permanent promise of sun, good humour and freedom of movement. And, except for an occasional rainstorm, a defeat for the Flamengo football team (which anyway cheers up half the city), or some other little local difficulty, it always fulfils its promises. Recently, in 2003, it was elected by the New Scientist as 'the friendliest city in the world'. Just for the record, the 'least friendly' was New York.

If you count the period between 1640 and 1763, when it shared the responsibility with Bahia, Rio was Brazil’s capital for 320 years – until 1960, when Brasília was founded, a theme park given over to politics and wheeler-dealing. During all this time, Rio was also the country’s official entrance-way and its main symbol. The mere sight of images like the Sugar Loaf, the pavements along Copacabana beach, Christ the Redeemer or the Maracanã stadium let the foreigner know what country this was. This didn’t change when it ceased to be the capital: Rio is still the city by which people identify Brazil.
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This has its good and bad sides. Geography is not one of humanity's favourite subjects, so that anything, for good or ill, that's going on in Brazil's 3.3 million square miles is thought of outside Brazil as happening here. A forest catches fire in Amazonia and it's thought someone in Rio has something to do with it - no one's obliged to know that Rio is further away from Manaus than Lisbon from Moscow. For the same reason, there are people who think cariocas have to grapple with alligators in broad daylight, or that snakes get into apartments and wrap themselves round the legs of little old ladies while they're doing their knitting. Of course such things don't happen, but it is comforting to know that it's true that, in some of the more hidden, seductive areas of the city - like the Horto, the Gávea, Urca and Cosme Velho, all of them near the forest and still full of houses with verandas and backyards - one can still see gangs of small monkeys swinging on the electric wiring or chatting with the locals a couple of feet away from their windows. These monkeys must be the great-great-great-grandchildren of the ones Charles Darwin caught when he came to Rio in 1832 with the Beagle, and from which sprung some revolutionary ideas about the origin of species. Rio is also frequently visited by sea-otters, dolphins and penguins, and the other day a pair of capybaras was seen swimming in the Rodrigo de Freitas lagoon, among the pedalos and sailing boats. The best visitor in recent times, however, was a five-foot-

long turtle, weighing 660 pounds, which laid thirty-eight eggs on Macumba beach. Since we know that, wherever they migrate to, turtles come back to their native beach to lay, here we have, in the twenty-first century, a true carioca turtle, with a respect for tradition.

However much men have tried to destroy it over all those centuries of its existence, Rio has resisted the uricide which has laid other cities waste. Of all the great modern cities, it's one of the few that can be easily recognised on seventeenth-century maps and engravings - there one can see the mountains that to this day form the carioca skyline. There's no lack of that kind of iconography, though many of the originals are in European museums and private collections. From its very early days, Rio has been visited by English, French and German painters, who felt the power of its natural setting, and were thrilled by the opportunity it gives to portray it from above, with the artist perched on top of a mountain. It wasn't just painters; later, photographers did this too. Rio was the first city in the world to be photographed from the air - in 1840, almost seventy years before Santos-Dumont invented flying. When they climbed mountains like the Corcovado or the Tijuca with their equipment on mule-back, they were able to take their photos more than 2,000 feet up, higher than any of the pioneer planes were able to go. There are books and more books full of these photos.

It was this stockpile of memory that saved the
city. Though thousands of buildings from the colonial period have been knocked down, whole neighbourhoods thrown into the sea and the edge of the bay very much altered, the past is present in every street. In Rio there are more baroque churches than shopping malls, more museums than motels, and incontestably more French fountains and statues cast in the Val d'Osne than public lavatories — in fact, after Paris, it's the city with the most French statuary in the world.

But, since Rio is in Brazil, a country where the rich are ridiculously rich, the poor frighteningly poor, and the majority fall into the latter camp, the city has always reflected this disparity. Even so, at least until a short time ago, it was the city that had best learnt to live with the problem. Here, over the centuries, rich and poor have kept friction to a minimum by frequenting the same spaces, like the beaches, football stadiums, bars, samba schools, and Carnival clubs — there's no one more democratic and less apartheid-minded than the carioca.

No one is more used to danger, either. In the eighteenth century, as the historian Maria Fernanda Bicalho has shown in her book *A cidade e o Império* [The City and the Empire], Rio was already living on high alert. At night, the streets were taken over by men wrapped in cloaks, armed with knives and daggers — footpads, assassins, tramps, beggars, gypsies, slaves either on the run or practised in the arts of *capoeira*, all of them with the worst of intentions. It's hardly surprising that, even on a moonlit night, social life in the colony was a fiasco. Smuggling was part of daily life, with ships being relieved of their cargo and bodies left to the mercy of the tides, all with the already efficient connivance of the police. And then there was the external menace; the gold that flowed out from Minas Gerais came through Rio, which turned the city into a consumer’s dream for foreign pirates; invasion was a frequent possibility. It only actually happened twice, in 1710 and 1711, but even when the pirates didn’t come, the rumour-mongers spread panic and then ransacked abandoned houses. Little by little, the carioca population incorporated these perils into their lifestyle, learning to recognise whether the danger was real or not. By the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, they had achieved a savvy enviable even by the standards of much more violent cities like Chicago and New York.

Lately, this savvy has been put to the test by the same plague that's reached other places: drugs and the violence associated with them. The steep — at times almost vertical — hills (called *morros* in Portuguese), which provide the city’s unique topography and have inspired thousands of sambas, have been occupied by drug-trafficking gangs and have become the setting for battles with the police, or between the gangs themselves, making life hell for the honest, poor people who live there. Each favela is a kasbah, only without the charm of Pépé le Moko’s hideout — quite to the contrary, the local
bandits have not an ounce of class. From time to
time, one of them is promoted to being the big boss
of organised crime, and the press dedicates head-
lines to his accomplishments (strangely enough,
only in Rio are bandits famous). Once caught in
the shack where he lives and duly put away, we
discover that he is a guy without a shirt on his back,
with a large belly overhanging his threadbare ber-
mudas – a belly produced by the pizzas provided
daily by suppliers outside the jail. Does anyone
believe that someone like that can ‘organise’ crime?
It’s more likely that this role belongs to one or more
brains of the Professor Moriarty or Dr Mabuse
variety – men in blazers and scarves who control
the flow and the laundering of money, the reception
and distribution of drugs, the purchase of arms and
the corruption of the legal system from their three-
storey penthouses in the posh parts of town. In
countries like the United States, these things are
dealt with on a federal level. In Brazil, until a short
while ago, each state had to look after itself.

Rio doesn’t manufacture arms, doesn’t refine
cocaine and doesn’t have even a single flowerpot
in its gardens to grow marijuana. But it all flows in
and out over its borders, generating fortunes used
to polish and lubricate an arsenal worthy of an
army, and to bribe policeman, lawyers, judges and
politicians. When they’re jailed, the foot-soldier
traffickers are installed in ‘maximum security’ cells
where they have mobile phones, the Internet, radio,
cable TV, newspapers, magazines, a microwave,
air-conditioning, champagne in the minibar, ‘inti-
mate’ visits and legal assistance that would make
large companies envious – in 2002, there was one
case of a prisoner who was visited by seven different
lawyers on the same day. With all this comfort and
security, they manage to run their businesses from
inside their cells, selling big allocations of drugs,
monitoring operations from a distance, and allow-
ing their jailers to trade their car in for a new one
twice a year. It’s even thought that, if there is such a
thing as ‘organised’ crime, it’s to be found inside the
police force. Not that this is any protection – the
Rio police kill and die at a rate comparable with the
highest in the world.

Almost every day there is some violent scene,
with car chases using the latest models, shoot-outs
between the police and the drug-traffickers, an
occasionnul burnt-out bus, and innocent people
are caught in the crossfire. For anyone from outside
who only knows Rio from television, it’s as if no
one here has any respite. However, that’s not ex-
actly the real situation. The greater part of the
fighting takes place on the morros themselves or
on the motorways into the city. Just as in the rest of
the country, ninety-nine per cent of cariocas only
find out about it on TV. In Rio, unfortunately,
everything tends to be so visible for the rest of
the country that any occurrence is magnified.
‘I’m not afraid of the facts, only of headlines,’ as
the humorist Millór Fernandes says.

And then there’s the other side of the coin. While
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the police go up one hillside and exchange fire with a gang of traffickers, perhaps, on the neighbouring hill poor children are being taught drama under UNESCO's auspices. Or an Italian photography team is doing a fashion special for Benetton. Or a caravan of jeeps full of tourists are enjoying themselves in the Rocinha favela. And, far from the bangue-bangue (as Brazilians say), the beaches are full of people whose major problem is attracting the attention of the person selling beer or ice-lollies. But that's not 'news'.

The city is far too grown-up to allow itself to be engulfed in fear, and cariocas are born with the genes to face it. At the same time as, in some street in the centre of the city, there's a running battle between street-salesmen and the police, there are people 200 yards away researching sixteenth-century documents in the National Library, or hunting out rare bossa nova LPs in the open-air market on the Rua Pedro Lessa. On 30 September 2002, the day the drug traffic exceeded itself in daring and tried to force the shops in Ipanema to shut, the carioca poet Apicius launched his exquisite book A Baleia [The Whale] in a bookshop in that same neighbourhood. It was a splendid evening, with wine and canapés, and all his friends were there. 'Poetry's a form of resistance, don't you think?' he said to me excitedly.

Another poet, Ezra Pound, who went through much worse experiences, once asked, apropos of Venice: 'What do we have to pay for so much beauty?' In Rio, the payment is in a hard currency: excitement. It's one of the world's most exciting cities — perhaps a bit too exciting. It has to be — just because we don't have access to certain calamities that punctuate daily life in more peaceful cities. Here we're safe from volcanoes, earthquakes, avalanches, hurricanes, tornados, electric storms, seaquakes, tsunamis, geological faults and blizzards. It is true that this last possibility, sudden blizzards, can't be ruled out — many of the outdoor clocks, which give the temperature as well as the time, put a + next to the figure in centigrade. So, one glorious sunny afternoon in Copacabana, we are told that the temperature is +33°C. Which is comforting to know, when we're sweating on the beach — and if the sub-zero temperatures the clocks seem to envisage actually materialise, we'll all be caught in our swimming-trunks or bikinis.

Also, Rio has no suicide-bombers, radical separatists, young neo-Nazis who beat up immigrants, sexual perverts, men who strangle rich old women, spotty youths who shoot their schoolmates dead, psychopathic snipers and other dangerous maniax who contribute to the fame of Scotland Yard and the FBI. If it's any consolation, there aren't many madmen here — only gangsters. Daily life, incredible as it might seem, can be so uneventful that, the other day, the mother of a friend of mine excused herself, saying she had an appointment with her 'serial killer'. We all got a shock, till it turned out
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she’d made a mistake – she’d meant to say ‘personal trainer’!

But it remains true that, for a city where everything should encourage leisure and relaxation – men and women flat on their backs, sipping coconut-milk, fanned by cool sea breezes and whistling ‘The Girl from Ipanema’ – Rio does have too much electricity. This isn’t something that came about today, or yesterday. It’s been there from the beginning.

Our Indians, for example, had been here for more than 1,000 years, quiet as mice, happily killing and eating one another, when they saw the silhouette of a sail on the horizon – Vespucci’s, in 1502. And that was it. Their lives were changed for ever. And the lives of their ‘discoverers’ too, as we’ll see.

There is a thesis that it was the Guanabara Indians, the ‘Tupinambás, who inspired In Praise of Folly by Erasmus of Rotterdam (1508), Sir Thomas More’s Utopia (1516), one of Montaigne’s Essays (the famous ‘On the Cannibals’ of 1580), the treatises on Natural Law by German and Dutch jurists in the seventeenth century, and, on into the eighteenth, the works of thinkers like Montesquieu, Diderot and Voltaire, till we come to Rousseau’s ‘noble savage’ and from there to the motto of the French Revolution itself: ‘Liberty, Equality, Fraternity’. Strange, but true.

The idea that our own dear Tupinambás should have set off such a political and philosophical riot in

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Europe seems absurd even to us cariocas; we’re more used to seeing them represented each year by the members of a traditional Carnival bloco, the Cacique de Ramos. But the thesis makes sense when we trace the genealogy of these books: they all start from a famous letter sent by Amerigo Vespucci to the banker Lorenzo de’ Medici in 1502 and which was read throughout Europe in the ensuing decades. No tourist agency would ever produce anything to match it – for Vespucci was almost selling tickets to heaven.

The idea of a kind of earthly branch of the biblical Eden, where no one would need written laws to be happy for evermore, existed long before 1500. The problem was that no one knew where this Eden was, or what the visiting times were. But with the great voyages came the discoveries and the first contact with the peoples of tropical lands. Finally, here was an Eden on show, even better than the one in Genesis – and, from what Vespucci said, it was in Rio. Why?

Because, here, amid the most exuberant natural setting one could imagine, there lived a sweet, innocent people, with no notions of government, money, material goods or private property, without greed, envy or selfishness, and remote from any idea of good or evil. Without sin, too, for in Guanabara’s everlasting summer, men, women, children, and old people went around naked day and night, without a single eyebrow being raised. And, contrary to what one might think, they weren’t wild
beasts with their bodies covered in hair or a third eye in their forehead, but a pleasant, sociable people of great physical beauty and enough health to make any European envious. ‘Natural man’, the direct descendant of Adam, really did exist, and this should be a lesson for European man, suddenly crushed by the rise of the great powers, the emergence of capitalism and by the rapid spread of individualism – such is the message of More’s Utopia.

All this was confirmed by the French pirates, Normans and Bretons, who began to appear in Guanabara in 1504, only two years after Vespucci, and who went back to tell the tale. They said that when they came near to Rio, as soon as their ships got into the bay, they were surrounded by the Tupinambá canoes and greeted with VIP treatment. The natives went on board, caressed them, offered fruits and presents, and even gave them their women. Could anyone ask for more? Imagine these ravenous creatures, after months condemned to each other’s company on the high seas and sometimes having to eat even the ship’s rats, reaching a place where all they had to do was stretch out their hand to eat the most exotic delicacies. In the case of the women, they didn’t even have to put out their hand: extremely well-groomed, with long tresses, firm breasts, stout thighs, robust bottoms, shaven in their intimate parts, and already naked – they flung themselves at them. It’s not surprising that several of these sailors never went back to France. They preferred to stay here, in the shade of the Sugar Loaf, with as many wives as they could satisfy, procreating children galore, and treated as wizards of the highest order. Some of the French even followed the savages’ example and adopted the practice of having a daily bath.

It is true that they only got this treatment because they were French. The Tupinambás, who had just been introduced to the Portuguese too, soon discovered who they preferred to root for as invaders. The Portuguese enslaved and tortured them and had not the least respect for their customs – they could only think of using them to cut cane and chop down as many as possible of the trees that produced a red dye – the so-called pau-brasil from which Brazil got its name. The French, on the other hand, who also had their eye on the pau-brasil, soon saw that it was a good idea to treat the natives well and indulge them – even if it was only to have them on their side in case Portugal should get seriously interested in Rio (in those early times, the Portuguese were blind to Guanabara, and fixed their sights on Bahia and Pernambuco to the north, and São Vicente to the south). This strategy worked, and there began a Franco-Tupinambá entente which would last some seventy years. Escorted by the Indian warriors, the French climbed off their ships, explored the beaches, penetrated the jungle, and, communicating by gestures and words, got on famously with the locals. By 1510, there were already bilingual people on either side – French
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who said: ‘Te mutimúti, aruá, kyábi!’ (‘I’ve got hooks, mirrors, combs!’) and Indians who exclaimed: ‘Bien sûr!’ and: ‘Ou-là-là!’ Before it became Portuguese by law, Rio was de facto French.

Surprisingly, another Tupinambá speciality observed by the visitors didn’t succeed in lowering their social prestige: cannibalism. Perhaps this was because their habit of eating human flesh was only motivated by revenge (it had nothing to do with meat shortages) and obeyed rigid rules of etiquette. First, they only ate their prisoners of war, and even then, only the strong and courageous – preferably the Temiminós, a tribe that they’d carried on a war with for so long (500 years) that it had almost become a sport. Secondly, nothing was done in a hurry: the prisoner had a series of rights and duties to accomplish before he died.

To begin with, the condemned man became the personal guest of the chief, who installed him in his own hut, where he was fed on the fat of the land. He was also obliged to marry a charming Tupinambá girl, and allowed to enjoy a decent honeymoon. No ‘civilised’ country treated its defeated enemies in such a way. The prisoner couldn’t even think of trying to escape – it would be the height of shame for his tribe. On the day set for the execution, the neighbouring villages were called together for the feast, and came in huge numbers. After a lot of singing and dancing, the guests sat on the ground in a great circle. The prisoner was called into the middle, his body was painted and he was given stones and bits of pottery to throw at his captors. It was also part of the ceremony for him to curse them as vehemently as possible and swear that his brothers would avenge him. Just as he reached the climax, he got a hefty blow on the skull with a club, which smashed his cranium, just to teach him a lesson, and he died with a flourish, to the sound of applause and: ‘Encore!’

Then his body was lovingly taken apart. The tougher parts were hung in front of a fire to smoke, and later given to the warriors; the brains, entrails and other viscera were cooked into a stew, which was served to the women; the blood, still warm, went to the children. For my readers, who doubtless prefer escargots, a cassoulet or a bouillabaisse, food like this might seem revolting. But the Tupinambás ate, drank and smacked their lips, and at the end of the meal felt stronger for having absorbed a powerful enemy. The meal, in fact, was almost symbolic. Because of the number of people present, the most each guest got was a toe or half an ear. The lunch itself must have consisted of armadillos, capybaras and wild peccaries, followed by quantities of cauim (fermented manioc juice) and a week’s partying.

The French, who invent culinary masterpieces out of the strangest of ingredients, were the last to be shocked by the feeding habits of Rio’s natives. So much so that their ships went back to the Channel carrying not only our first list of exports (Brazil wood, manioc flour, pepper, tobacco, monkeys, parrots), but also some specimens of ‘natural
man’ – Tupinambás who embarked willingly, certain they were going ‘to heaven’. And, so long as they didn’t die on the voyage, in a sense they really were. When they got to Europe, the natives were pampered and indulged, much more than the monkeys and parrots, and were paraded naked in sumptuous ‘Brazilian festivals’ for the kings of France. Two of these festivals occurred in Rouen, in Normandy: one, in 1550, for King Henri II and his mistress Diane de Poitiers; the second in 1562 for the young Charles IX and the queen mother, Catherine de’ Medici. At this second festival, one of the guests, notebook in hand, was Michel de Montaigne.

The Tupinambás can’t have misbehaved either because, following the example of the French who stayed in Rio, some of them stayed in France for the rest of their lives, surviving the cold, learning the language, and (some of them) learning to distinguish between the 200 kinds of cheese. The majority went to work for the nobility in Paris, in domestic roles which forced them to wear silk stockings and wigs. The well-endowed (in every sense) even married the more daring Parisian girls and had children by them, the first cariocas born away from home. So, there was one moment, in the middle of the sixteenth century, in which the vision of a Tupinambá promenading in his long coat along the Rive Gauche was no more absurd than that of a Frenchman, naked, painted red and with a head-dress, fishing with a bow and arrow on Flamengo beach – that was the way many Frenchmen lived around here, and some of them even enriched their diet by converting to anthropophagy.

A few years later, Europe would devour the travel books of two French religious men, the Franciscan friar André Thévet and the Calvinist theologian Jean de Léry, relating their experiences in Brazil between 1555 and 1560. At different times, both of them had been in Rio with the Vice-Admiral Nicolas Durand de Villegagnon, when he tried to found the nucleus of a French colony in the tropics. For religious reasons, Thévet and Léry couldn’t stand one another. But both were fascinated, favourably and unfavourably, by our Indians and described their daily life in minute detail, with abundant pictures to illustrate it. Many writers were influenced by these books, among them Montaigne, one of the first people to see, in Rouen, some of the real-life specimens they were talking about. Montaigne also had a manservant who had been with Villegagnon in Rio – while he was brushing down his frock coats, the retainer told him intimate details of the natives’ existence that might have escaped the attention of the writer/travellers.

In his essay ‘On the Cannibals’, which would be read all over the world, Montaigne compared the natives’ social organisation to that of European civilisation. Montaigne would much sooner trust a native. To begin with, they didn’t wage wars of conquest – unlike the Europeans, who were tearing each other apart for a few pints of the Atlantic
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Ocean. They fought for nobler aims: honour, justice and revenge. If they were defeated, these savages didn’t run like rabbits, they were brave to the last – they might be killed, but not defeated. Agreed, they were polygamists, but so what? The Bible was full of examples of civilisations that practised polygamy. And they didn’t fight over inheritances, because for them, everything was common property, the land as much as the sea and the stars. In fact, Montaigne said, this primitive ‘communism’ was a godsend, and it was astonishing that it was being practised by barbarians. What was more, he went on, it would be a good idea to reconsider the concepts of ‘barbarian’ and ‘savage’, adopted by Europeans to refer to peoples they didn’t know, and merely because they had different customs. And, he added, cannibalism itself, as practised in Guanabara, was more humane than the executions carried out in European religious wars, in which wounded prisoners were thrown to the beasts or buried alive.

In essence, that was what Montaigne said, causing much ink to be spilled. Like everything that came out of his pen, it had a profound effect on the thought of his time. In later times, too – the seventeenth century would use our Tupinambás as a platform for the theory of the ‘natural goodness’ of man. Man was good, the theory went; it was civilisation that had corrupted him. So civilisation had to change, and so should notions of rights, justice and property.

As the decades went by, the image of the Indians

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of Guanabara bay was perfected by other writers. Now it was somewhat embarrassing to reveal that, contrary to the story the writer/travellers had disseminated throughout Europe, the Tupinambás were not exactly angels. They were always at war with their neighbours (fighting, in fact, was their work); they enslaved members of enemy tribes (and sold them to the white men); they did have certain forms of government, they had a legal system and were fully acquainted with private property. Even the supposed innocence of their women couldn’t hide their sensuousness and the variety of sexual techniques at their command, which competed with those of Parisian courtiers – practice makes perfect, as we know.

But already in those days, if a legend had turned into a reality, they went on printing the legend. And the legendary Indian was better than the real one. Towards the end of the eighteenth century, Jean-Jacques Rousseau transformed him once and for all into the ‘noble savage’. Free, equal and fraternal, just like the motto adopted by the French Revolution.

Pity that, long before this – after centuries of war, slavery, smallpox, alcoholism, hunger and Christianity – there wasn’t a single Tupinambá left in Rio to savour his own achievements.