

Rio Fashion Week

Nicola Copping

As the glamazonian model sashayed down the catwalk to the bossa nova beat, she pulled awkwardly at her slashed Lycra mini skirt. The skimpy little thing was barely bigger than an Elastoplast and simply wouldn't sit still. For the cluster of international journalists facing the parade of bronzed flesh laced in scraps of stretchy fabric, this was exactly what we had expected from Rio Fashion Week: great bodies, microscopic beachwear and sizzle factor.

In only its third outing, Rio is a young fashion capital, one proud of its beach culture and the scorching designer styles it inspires. But beyond the hot Brazilian bodies in hot Brazilian bikinis, there's also a significant ka-ching factor: ABIT, Brazil's textile and apparel industry association, reported a \$47bn (£32bn) turnover in the sector in 2009; despite a worldwide economic meltdown the numbers were up 4 per cent on the year before. The UK's clothing and textile industry's turnover in 2008, incidentally, was \$13bn. The message is clear: this is a fashion capital vying for that coveted fifth spot (after New York, London, Milan and Paris) – bikinis were only a starting point.



Designs from Triya, left, and Lenny

They were, however, an impressive one. Each fashion capital has its unique selling point; swimwear is Rio's. Suffice to say it makes Marks & Spencer's bathing costumes look like widow's weeds. Take Lenny Niemeyer, a former landscape gardener turned beachwear creator who joined the design game when she started to provide friends in São Paulo with more grown-up (less dental-floss thong) styles. Stocked in Europe, the US, Japan, and with 17 stores in Brazil, she is arguably the country's most credible beachwear designer.

Bringing high fashion techniques to her swimwear – fluid cowl necks, crisp silk ruffles, even snoods – Lenny believes: "Beachwear means everything used during, before and after the beach – not just bikinis. Why can't we do prints like we do in clothes and evening dresses and use these on the beach? Why does the beach have to come second?" Two other beachwear

brands – Triya, responsible for the aforementioned micro mini plus several fantastic safari-inspired swimsuits, and Salinas, whose strong show revolved around Club Tropicana prints and 1950s shapes – underlined the national talent.

Rio's youth as a fashion capital, however, is still tangible. It caters almost entirely for internal demand. Paolo Borges, head of Luminosidade, the group responsible for Brazil's fashion events, says: "Ninety-five per cent of everything Brazil produces stays in the national market." When daywear made its way on to the catwalk, you could tell. It was all very pretty and wearable but it was also lacking in new ideas. Walter Rodrigues showed prints on very safe silky separates; Juliana Jabour, a designer who created a range for Uniqlo, took her trademark hibiscus print and applied it to playsuits (a big Brazilian trend); while familiar feminine jumpsuits and floaty maxi dresses appeared at Maria Bonita Extra.

When someone broke with convention, as Melk Z-da did by chopping up the traditional crisp white shirt and putting it back together with exaggerated proportions, it felt different – courageous, even. And it caught the eye of a British buyer. David Pirnia, of Pirnia Collections, thought the show similar to a British art school collection. "I want to use the pieces but make them more wearable," he said. "I am attracted to Brazilian designers because the styles are different – there are a lot of options, they are willing to alter lengths and create several colourways. My clients want something that is not available in their own countries or in the other fashion capitals."

International exports, however, are still relatively marginal and if anything halts Rio's bid to be fashion capital number five, it is this: of the \$47bn turnover in 2009, only \$1.85bn was in exports. One of the country's most successful designers, Isabela Capeto, has had to fight hard for recognition outside Brazil. Closing Fashion Rio with the last show of the week, she displayed heavily embellished dresses and kaftans replete with the kind of traditional appliqué craftsmanship for which she is acclaimed – in her home country and abroad.

"Two years ago, when I started doing my Paris showroom, people would see a Brazilian brand and they would run away," says Capeto. "They were afraid we wouldn't deliver on time; they thought Brazilians were very disorganised. Today Brazil fashion has come to be respected internationally. There is better organisation here – not only in fashion but in every other aspect. International exports have in the past represented 40 per cent of my sales."

As increased global focus beckons – Brazil will host the World Cup in 2014, the Olympics in 2016 – its fashion industry is set to take advantage. "Look at South Africa. Look at the big push from luxury brands – Louis Vuitton, Dolce & Gabbana," says Bruno Medeiros of the retail group Inbrands. "When it comes to the Brazilian World Cup, this movement will be stronger. The fashion from the provider will really benefit from this synergy."

Fonte: Financial Times, London, June 19th 2010, Arts & Leisure, online.