

# National Post

The New Year's detritus: Tractors are called in to shovel away mounds of garbage from the beach after millions flock to the ocean to pay homage to the Afro-Brazilian goddess of the sea

Mon Jan 3 2000

Page: A9

Section: News

Byline: Cori Howard

Column: Millennium Postscript

Dateline: RIO DE JANEIRO

Source: National Post

Illustrations: Black & White Photo: Htu Htu, National Post / Rio de Janeiro's garbage cleaners were out in force on Saturday to clear away the evidence of millennium celebrations.

RIO DE JANEIRO - At an outdoor cafe along an outlying beach here, three sports fishermen are expressing their disgust with the garbage that litters the shore.

Barra da Tijuca beach is about a half-hour drive from the city centre in a suburban area that is seeing rapid development of shopping malls and high-rise condominiums, and the beach is supposed to be less crowded and less dirty than Ipanema and Copacabana beaches which lie in the heart of the city. But today, at Barra beach, there are condoms floating in the water, broken bottles on the sand and a layer of pink grime at the high-tide mark.

"There has always been some garbage around," says Nelius Marujo, a civil engineer with the municipality of Barra and part-time sports fisherman. "But this year it's so much worse and it's only the fifth day of summer."

During the austral summer, Marujo and his friends come to angle for fish from the beach every night and on weekends. They point to the men with their lines trying, despite the filth, to catch a fish, and they shake their heads in disappointment.

"The only thing they're going to catch is a plastic bag," he says.

One of the reasons they say the garbage is worse this year is because of the heavy rains that have brought the garbage ashore. But it is also because of the Afro-Brazilian New Year's ritual in which millions, dressed in white, bring their offerings of flowers, candles and food to the beaches all over Rio in honour of Iemanja, goddess of the sea.

What they leave behind are the plastic wrapping for the flowers, candles, champagne bottles and the little boats they set out to sea, made with batteries inside to operate the tiny lights, and often, containing everything from make-up to mirrors.

It never used to be so bad, says Marujo, but the number of people going to the beach and performing the New Year's ritual has gone up by about 30% in the last few years, and they never clean up after themselves.

That leaves lots of work for the tin-can collectors and for the 2,500 municipal garbage workers who, by 10 a.m. on Jan. 1, had removed almost all evidence of the

New Year's celebrations that ended just hours before.

Tractors were shovelling mounds of garbage into nearby receptacles and a long line of people, from old ladies to young kids, were waiting in line to exchange their cans for money. One teenager said he had collected three garbage bags full of cans between 10 p.m. and midnight. That's about 300 cans, worth \$15 (US). Bleary-eyed and exhausted, he says it wasn't hard to spend it all last night.

For Moses Oliveira Costa, a garbage collector with the city, the detritus left on the beach this year wasn't as bad as last year. "Because of all the garbage, it's more than double the work load, but not double the pay," he said.

Costa is standing around with a half-dozen other garbagemen in their orange overalls, almost ready to go home for the day. "I'm not upset to be working on New Year's Day," he said. "But the problem is that we're not well paid for what we do." He explained that municipal garbage workers are upset this year because they haven't had a raise in six years; their union has sold out to the government and their benefits aren't good enough. They earn the equivalent of \$140 (US) per month, which is barely enough to live on in a city where the cost of living is equivalent to that of New York or Tokyo.

But it's more than New Year's that contributes to the amount of garbage on the beaches of Rio. It's partly the number of people who use the beach; in a city of six million sun worshippers, on a good day the beaches here are as crowded as a shopping mall on Boxing Day with people shoulder to shoulder on the sand and in the water.

It's also partly awareness; women here can be seen slathering themselves with a toxic hair depilatory and then going to wash it off in the ocean.

Marujo says it's also government responsibility. He says many of the buildings in the suburban neighbourhood of Barra have clandestine sewage that runs into the lake, just across the highway from the beach and when it rains, the lake water spills into the ocean. Plus, a few months ago, the sewage pipe that runs four miles out into the ocean broke and hasn't been fixed, so the untreated waste is now going straight into the ocean. And, he says, last year, five new shantytowns opened in the area. Not only do the shantytowns not have garbage collection, he says, but they have open waterways that run into the city's lakes and lagoons.

"It's not only the favelas," he says, the Brazilian term for shantytown. The pollution problem is equally attributable to the rich. Whoever is responsible, Marujo is paying the price.

"After 40 years coming to the same place, and thinking of the way it was before and the way it is now makes me very emotional," says Marujo. "I don't want to imagine what it will be like next year."

© 2000 Postmedia Network Inc. All rights reserved.

# National Post

## Two million throw party on Rio beach

Sat Jan 1 2000

Page: A7

Section: News

Byline: Cori Howard

Column: The Year 2000: The Americas

Dateline: RIO DE JANEIRO

Source: National Post, with files from The New York Times and Agence France-Press

RIO DE JANEIRO - The sky over Rio turned red at midnight as 20,000 mortars exploded over Copacabana Beach.

There was no violence, no terrorism, and the only shadow on the city's renowned beach party was the rain.

But thundershowers, which began shortly before midnight and tapered off as the fireworks began, did little to stop people dancing on the beach or making offerings of flowers and food to Iemanja, the goddess of the sea. The ritual is performed on all the beaches of Rio, making the New Year's celebration here much more than just a big party.

There were two million people along the 4.6-kilometre beach -- not the three million expected.

In the exclusive beachfront apartments and hotels that line Atlantic Avenue, the shadows of celebraters could be seen on balconies, throwing balloons, confetti and champagne into the air. And then, the singing began. By 1 a.m. the crowd was singing along like a giant karaoke and jumping to the live music playing on four stages along the beach.

Dancing on the beach was not expected to end until the sunrise confirmed that the new year was well and truly under way.

Marlene, a samba star in her 70s who is the Cher of Rio, says she never thought she would be singing in 2000. "The turn of the millennium is a unique thing," she said. "To perform my music is very common."

Marlene laughs when asked how she feels about her 50-year career at the turn of the century. "It's a turn," she says. "I've been working for 50 years. What more can I expect?"

A half-dozen cruise ships and assorted yachts and sailboats floated just offshore, hundreds of jet-setters and political dignitaries joined Fernando Henrique Cardoso, the Brazilian president, in a special tent set up at Fort Copacabana.

The president's menu was printed in the daily papers, along with his promise that there would not be any electrical problems in Rio.

He also noted proudly, in his millennium address to the media yesterday, that Brazil's population had grown from 17 million 100 years ago to 160 million today. He did not mention that the percentage of rich and poor has predominantly remained the same, with new shantytowns popping up on the hillsides of Rio at an alarming rate.

But on New Year's Eve at Copacabana Beach there was an equality of sorts: everyone wore white to honour Umbanda, the Afro-Brazilian religion that worships the goddess of the sea.

Men and women carried bouquets of roses, lilies or carnations and tossed them into the Atlantic as offerings to the goddess. Other worshippers threw wads of money or even jewelry into the sea, or let the waves wash over them.

Maria Maia sits in white shorts and T-shirt beside a sand pit she has made just a few feet from the waves. She says the idea that New Year's breaks down Brazilian class barriers is only partly true. "The rich people come to make their offerings to Iemanja," she says. "But then they go back to their fancy parties and the poor stay here, doing samba on the sidewalk and celebrating the best they can."

For many of the city's poor, the night was primarily a chance to make a little money. They circulated among the revelers, selling coconuts, ears of corn, beer, soft drinks and even bottles of champagne. "Whether it is 1999 or 2000, I still have to put food in the mouths of my children," said Jose Ovidio Ramos Mendonca, a vendor of grilled meats. "I can always rest tomorrow."

© 2000 Postmedia Network Inc. All rights reserved.

# National Post

## Flowers for Iemanja: New Year's Eve belongs to Umbanda -- the religion of the poor that holds sway in Rio's shantytowns

Fri Dec 31 1999

Page: A18

Section: News

Byline: Cori Howard

Column: Millennium Countdown

Dateline: RIO DE JANEIRO

Source: National Post

Illustrations: Black & White Photo: Htu Htu, National Post / Marlicene Figueiredo, an Umbanda priestess, invokes the spirit of Vovo, the old grandmother, to offer her millennium blessing.

RIO DE JANEIRO - Umbanda is the unofficial religion of this city's poor, and tonight is their night. Millions of followers will head down to the ocean dressed all in white to offer flowers, candles and food to Iemanja, the Umbanda goddess of the sea. It is a beautiful ceremony, and one that has brought this faith -- a mix of traditional Afro-Brazilian religions -- a small measure of notoriety.

But Marlicene Figueiredo, an Umbanda priestess, will not be taking part. A gentle 56-year-old woman with flowing blond hair and a rope of crystals around her neck, Figueiredo says the rituals performed on New Year's Eve have lost their meaning. She had her own modest ceremony with a private group at a quiet beach two weeks ago. "On the 31st," she says, "there are too many people, too much confusion, too many people doing things they're not supposed to do."

These are not easy times for Umbanda, or for the shantytowns where it has long held sway. Known also as Macumba or Candomble, Umbanda dates back centuries. Believers worship a wide array of gods that were brought here from Africa with the slaves. It incorporates Indian animism and French spiritism and, in

practice, Umbanda followers enter a trance state that allows the gods to "descend" and speak through them.

Now, though, hucksters and quacks are everywhere, selling sham advice and worthless readings for profit. Evangelical churches have invaded the slums, or favelas, seeking to take advantage of a weakened Umbanda faith, and poverty and violence often overwhelm age-old spirituality.

Figueiredo is doing what she can. Figueiredo is not just a seer, but a social worker as well. Her small house, an hour southeast of Rio, past the shopping malls and high-rise developments, past the lush mountains, is both a place of worship and an education centre for teenage girls.

Figueiredo's Umbanda shrine, inside an empty, cool room with a marble floor, contains dozens of colourful, plaster cast figurines. There's the patron saint of the house, Saint Cipriano, a bearded man, kneeling half naked on a tree stump, who has the capacity to undo black magic. And there's Iemanja, of course, smiling with a blue dress and a star on her head. When it's not being used for worship, Figueiredo draws a curtain over the shrine and the

room becomes a school for teenage girls from the nearby favela.

Figueiredo's role in the favelas, teaching young girls skills and self-esteem is unusual. She doesn't preach to them, yet in a way she has become their inadvertent spiritual leader.

She acknowledges that her religion may influence her social work, but as she recently led a visitor through the computer room, the beauty salon, the doctors' offices (they treat people here for free) and the sewing area, she explained that she keeps the two strictly separate so as not to scare away any of the girls, or their parents. So far, more than 4,000 local girls have come through her centre, financed in part by Shell and the Inter American Development Bank.

"Ten years ago," she says, "I was just a mother of a saint [an Umbanda priestess]. Then I received a message from a master that the rituals I was performing were only helping one or two people. We were doing animal sacrifice and offerings of food to the gods and that was giving me anguish. And the only way to get rid of it was to give food to the saints who are little kids in need, instead of to saints who cannot eat."

So she went to work in the Favela des Almas -- the slum of the souls -- so called for its proximity to a cemetery, taking girls off the street and off drugs and putting them back into their families. But it's been an uphill battle because this favela, like many of the 600 that blanket the hillsides around Rio, is becoming increasingly fraught with violence, addiction and drug gang rivalry.

Ellen de Souza, a tall, lanky 17-year-old

wearing jean cutoffs and a white tank top, is sitting in the home she shares with her mother, her brothers and sisters and their children. It's a simple brick structure, with electricity for the fans and the TV, but it is cramped and hot and ridden with flies.

De Souza has just returned home after several months of living on the run with her drug-dealer boyfriend. She has dropped out of school and she cries as she recalls the time she was pregnant and he beat her so badly that she lost the child. She now goes to Figueiredo's centre every day where she is learning to make beaded bracelets. That, she has decided, is how she wants to earn a living.

Josiane da Silva, 14, wants to find a job sewing. But for now, tenuously free from her cocaine habit, she is more excited about her New Year's Eve plans. A thin black girl wearing a gold necklace and earrings, she says her mother has decided to take her and her brothers to Copacabana Beach for the big party. They don't usually go, she says, because it's far and expensive to get there. But her grandmother, who is standing beside her on the street flanked by naked toddlers and apologizing for her poverty, wants to go throw flowers in the ocean. And her mother wants to get her boys out of town.

De Souza will be staying in the favela, having a barbecue at her brother's house. But she says the girls will call each other to go watch the fights.

Do they like watching the fights?

"But we keep a distance," says de Souza. "There are guns sometimes, so you have to be sharp and pay attention."

Meanwhile, Figueiredo carries on. In late afternoon, she is invoking the god Vovo, the spirit of the old grandmother. Sitting at a table beside a life-size statue of an old black woman, Figueiredo crosses herself and lights a candle and a stick of incense. On the table in front of her, there are beads and shells. She shakes a little bell over the table, rubs her hands together, shakes them in the air, shakes out her hair, and begins to murmur in Portuguese. Her eyes roll back in her head as she begins to pray, a millennial offering for a visitor.

"In the next year, the powerful, like judges, will begin to fall from power," she says. "That might generate conflict, but the corruption needs to be eliminated so a more sensitive and equal society can evolve."

Christ will come back, "for sure," she adds.

© 1999 Postmedia Network Inc. All rights reserved.

# National Post

Mexico's first ray of light: The Maya believed that Isla Mujeres, which means Island of Women, was sacred. Tomorrow, it will be the site of an elaborate New Year's Eve party. But not everyone is invited

Thu Dec 30 1999

Page: A16

Section: News

Byline: Cori Howard

Column: Millenium Countdown

Dateline: ISLA MUJERES, Mexico

Source: National Post

Illustrations: Black & White Photo: Cori Howard, National Post / A group of lobster fishermen on Isla Mujeres celebrate a new motor for one of their boats. They will likely spend New Year's Eve fishing.

Black & White Photo: Cori Howard, National Post / Isla Mujeres is where the first ray of sun will hit Mexico on New Year's Day and where thousands of people will gather to celebrate the new year.

ISLA MUJERES, Mexico - The first ray of light to hit Mexican soil on Jan. 1 will be on the southernmost point of this island -- a rocky outcropping, surrounded by a turquoise ocean teeming with fish.

A sacred site for the Maya, who say the ancient ruins here used to be a temple to the goddess Ixchel, Isla Mujeres, which means Island of Women, will be the site of an elaborate New Year's Eve party.

But the expensive millennial bash, sponsored by the Mexican company Aquimia and produced by a Canadian circus troupe, has been the subject of some controversy. Aquimia, a company that has been developing lucrative "eco-parks" up and down the Yucatan peninsula, recently opened El Garrafon, a country club, which many locals say is infringing on their green space. The country club, which features several restaurants and offers snorkelling tours to foreign tourists and wealthy Mexicans, is prohibitively expensive for many local residents here who say they used to enjoy the area for free.

"I don't think they're doing the right thing,"

says Lilia Robles Martinez, owner of Na Balam, a small hotel on the island. "Most people here don't like their attitude, and the fact that with the creation of the park they're now charging for something that used to be free."

The same services -- snorkelling tours, access to one of the island's best beaches -- used to be available for free before El Garrafon opened two months ago and began charging \$40 (all figures in U.S. dollars) to visitors.

On New Year's Eve, El Garrafon will charge \$250 per person for a party produced by Canadians Miguel Rodrigue and Debra Brown of Cirque du Soleil. Mr. Rodrigue, who was in Les Grands Ballets Canadiens before moving to Mexico 15 years ago and opening his own ballet school, has put together an event that will commemorate the best songs of the century.

"I want to remember the most important music and dance," he said as he was putting the finishing touches on a stage overlooking the Caribbean Sea.



But residents here who went to battle with Aquimia over the development of El Garrafon do not share Mr. Rodrigue's enthusiasm. Although they say they are not interested in attending the millennium party, they do plan to have their own parties and watch the sunrise.

Maria Elena Sanchez Montalbo, who has lived on Isla Mujeres since she was born, will usher in the new year with her husband and children in their boat, La Angela.

"It will be the first year we go out in the boat," she says. Usually, they stay home for dinner, then go visit friends and family for the Mexican New Year's ritual of "burning the man." An effigy of a man, which represents the old year, is filled with firecrackers and set on fire at the stroke of midnight in the town's central plaza.

"This year, I'm going to get a whole flotilla of boats to go out to the point for the sunrise," Ms. Montalbo says. "There are 400 fishermen on the island and over one thousand boats. There are going to be a lot of people out there."

Luciano Garcia Delgado, a lobster fisherman, says he may have to go out fishing on New Year's Eve. "We're fishermen," he says, drinking beer with a bunch of his friends to celebrate his new motor. "Many a new year we have spent on the water away from our families."

He's hoping he'll make a big catch before then, he says, so he can "celebrate big." In that case, he'll join the rest of his friends at the south point of the island. "I knew the first ray of light would hit here," he says. "And I know a lot of people will be coming from all over the peninsula." Like many of

his fellow residents, Mr. Delgado said he is not interested in going to the El Garrafon party, even if he could go for free.

Trinidad Carreno, director of marketing for El Garrafon, acknowledges that the island people do not like the country club.

"They have a strong history," she says. "They don't like outsiders."

She says El Garrafon's party was never designed with the locals in mind. "Most don't have the money to come to the party," she says.

The company, which has so far sold half of its 300 tickets, is hoping to attract some tourists, but mostly wealthy Mexicans. "It's not really a show for tourists," she says. "They will come, but the show will offer more than just mariachis."

But Mr. Delgado and his fishermen friends don't seem to care. They are on their second and third beers. One of them is trying to argue that the south point of the island won't see the first ray of light, that it will hit the east. But a friend points out that the east is most visible from the southern point.

Mr. Delgado laughs and says this year has been good for him, despite the increasing difficulties finding lobster close to shore. He had a baby daughter and landed a big catch a few months back.

"It's a special year for me whatever I do," he says. "So I'm really looking forward to the year 2000."

© 1999 Postmedia Network Inc. All rights reserved.

# National Post

## Young clergymen in Brazil 'ploughing the fields with music': Rejuvenating religion: Churches are using concerts and CDs to reach new followers

Thu Dec 30 1999

Page: A15

Section: News

Byline: Cori Howard

Column: Millenium Countdown

Dateline: RIO DE JANEIRO, Brazil

Source: National Post

Illustrations: Black & White Photo: Cori Howard, National Post / Father Zeca, standing on Aprozador Beach in Rio de Janeiro, used to surf here. Now he's trying to save souls.

RIO DE JANEIRO, Brazil - Father Zeca is walking along Ipanema beach, looking out longingly at the waves. A 29-year-old Catholic priest, Father Zeca hasn't surfed in the last eight months. "I've been paying for my sins," he jokes.

But the truth is he has been too busy. His rock band, God is Ten, has been releasing CDs and performing at wildly popular concerts. Father Zeca, whose full name is Reverend Jose Luis Jansen de Mello Neto, has also been hosting a daily radio program and holding Mass.

There aren't many priests in the world who surf, let alone sing in pop bands that perform in front of thousands of adoring fans. But on the eve of the millennium, Catholic priests in Brazil have had to resort to some pretty creative methods as they find themselves on the front lines of a battle for the nation's souls.

Father Zeca's methods of reinvigorating interest in Catholicism in Brazil -- the world's largest Catholic country -- may seem rather unusual, but they have made him a local hero. In the last few years, his work has had a huge impact on young people, who he says are resisting the strong

pull of evangelical churches and returning to Catholicism.

Over the last decade, Protestant evangelical groups have had phenomenal success in Brazil, a country of 170 million people. Several years ago, only 65% of the population considered themselves Catholic, down from 85% in 1970. In order to draw stray Catholics back to the fold, the Catholic Church here began an aggressive movement, dubbed the New Missionaries. The movement has borrowed some of the tactics of evangelical Protestants, such as mass rallies and pop concerts, to lure people back to the Catholic Church.

In recent months, evangelical Protestant leaders have been locked in battle with Catholic priests on the Rio concert circuit.

Last October, a Catholic rock concert, hosted by Marcello Rossi, a priest who has sold more than 4.5 million copies of a religious pop album here, drew some 160,000 people. A similar evangelical Protestant event was staged a month later by evangelical leader Marcelo Crivella, who has sold more than 1.5 million copies of his latest evangelic pop CD.

Moreover, in a desperate effort to win converts, the Universal Church, one of the fastest growing evangelical groups in Brazil, has made Father Zeca the target of their latest offensive, publishing mocking comic strips about him, among other things.

But Father Zeca says that battling the evangelical church is not the purpose of his work. At a recent Catholic concert, he invited an ecumenical rapper and a Lutheran pastor to perform. "It was a beautiful moment, especially because we have a sort of war in Latin America," he said.

These days, his main preoccupation is finding new ways to communicate with young people. "We have to speak their language," he says. "In Rio, the beach and music are very important so when we mix both, we get their attention."

Motivated by the Pope's visit to Rio in 1997, Father Zeca began organizing concerts. His first CD, which was released a year and a half ago, sold 150,000 copies. His second CD, released last month, has already sold 30,000 copies. His outdoor concerts have grown from 8,000 participants in 1997 to 50,000 this year. Next month, he is planning another concert to be held in Buzios, a popular beach town just outside of Rio where young people go to party.

Before joining the priesthood four years ago, Father Zeca was himself something of a party animal. "I used to be a normal guy," he says. "I had a girlfriend. I surfed. But I discovered I wanted to give my life to God and people and work for them. I have a big heart and I didn't want to share it with just one person."

It was a difficult and surprising turnaround for Father Zeca, who had shrugged off his family's Catholicism as an adolescent. "I used to dream of being a vet," he says. "But this vocation came not from myself. It was really strange and strong. My feelings were a surprise. I don't even look like a priest."

Indeed, the handsome priest, with his surfboard and revolutionary techniques, is something of an oddity, but he is having an impact on the church. He now preaches to a much wider audience, he says. "In the new millennium, people are going to be more open to this kind of message," he says. "They are searching for meaning in their lives. There is so much anguish in people's hearts, and depression. I feel I am bringing people closer -- back to religion."

To help them along, Father Zeca plans to step up his efforts in the coming years, "ploughing," as he says, "the fields with music."

© 1999 Postmedia Network Inc. All rights reserved.

# National Post

## Spirit, flesh are both welcome guests at Brazil beach party: 2.5 million expected: Beachfront room in Rio to cost as much as \$3,000

Wed Dec 29 1999

Page: A15

Section: News

Byline: Cori Howard

Column: Millennium Countdown

Dateline: RIO DE JANEIRO, Brazil

Source: National Post

Illustrations: Black & White Photo: Cori Howard, National Post / Wagner Oliveira Santos is building a sand sculpture of the Last Supper on Copacabana beach in Brazil -- at right is his image of Jesus. "Hopefully, I will finish it before New Year's Eve," he says. Santos lives on the street and makes his living from carving sand sculptures on the beach.

RIO DE JANEIRO, Brazil - Wagner Oliveira Santos is building a sand sculpture of the Last Supper on Copacabana beach.

Listening to Brazilian funk on his Walkman, he gently carves the gills into the fish he has crafted on the table. The centrepiece, Jesus, is already complete, with a heart, drawn child-like, on to his chest.

For Mr. Santos, the sculpture is an ironic comment on the big suppers people are having at this time of year, and on his own hunger. Mr. Santos, a 20-year-old, who lives on the street, makes his living from carving sand sculptures on the beach. He has set his Last Supper sculpture just off the crowded boardwalk here, and as far as possible from the ocean waves. Passersby gathered throughout the day to offer donations and watch Mr. Santos complete his monumental task.

"Hopefully, I will finish it before New Year's Eve," he said. Then, he plans to sit beside his work as an expected 2.5 million people gather on the beach for the city's extravagant millennium party.

Although it is billed as one of the biggest New Year's Eve parties in the world,

preparations seem to be coming slowly, even though the event is just two days away.

The stages, four of them on Copacabana beach and others on less popular beaches, such as Ipanema and Flamengo, are only now being constructed. Along the rooftops of the hotels and apartment buildings that line Atlantica Avenue, the oceanfront drive where residents will catch the best view of the celebrations, people are only now hanging lights and decorations. Street vendors have started selling sunglasses, licence plates and T-shirts in the shape of 2000.

If everything is not yet in place for the party, that's just typically Brazilian, jokes Armando Martins, spokesman for RioTur, the city's tourism agency.

"It's not like North America," he said. For the millennium party, his agency has planned fireworks displays at various locations, live music and broadcasts of the party to several different countries. There will also be a private party for 500, including Fernando Henrique Cardoso, the Brazilian president, and his ministers, at the old Copacabana Fort. But the schedule

will be changing up to the last minute, said Mr. Martins. On one stage, Mr. Martins said RioTur has booked acts of elderly musicians. "We couldn't book them two months ago because you never know what could happen," he said. Now he has a tentative list.

Unlike in past years when the city's New Year's extravaganza was headlined by an international performer, there won't be any celebrity acts this year. Instead, there are many Brazilian groups that will be playing everything from rap to samba to jazz. Some say the big acts have refused to play because of disputes that erupted in the past over discrepancies in the municipality's payments to different celebrities. But Gerard Bourgeaiseau, secretary of tourism, disagreed. He said the government has booked local acts to celebrate Rio-based talent, and to allow the focus of the evening to remain on religious rituals.

Each year on New Year's Eve, Cariocas, as people who live in Rio are called, dress completely in white, gather at the seashore with candles and offer food, flowers and sometimes jewellery to Iemanja, the Afro-Brazilian goddess of the sea.

"That's our real success," said Mr. Bourgeaiseau. "We don't have to invent or organize anything."

Wealthier Brazilians who throw private parties in their upscale beachfront condos won't know what they're missing on the beach, Mr. Bourgeaiseau said.

"You have to go down in the street," he said. "Only there do you feel the people moving and walking and joking and dancing and drinking." According to Mr. Bourgeaiseau, the New Year's event is the

one time of year when people of all classes, religions and races party together in this deeply divided city that has the largest disparity between rich and poor in the world.

Although the millennium party will not be markedly different from past New Year's parties, Mr. Bourgeaiseau says the government expects it will be a little bigger. He expects that nearly three million people will attend and the city has made provisions for increased security and medical assistance. For the first time, public events will be staged in several parts of the city to avoid congestion on Copacabana beach.

Unlike in previous years, however, the hotel occupancy rate is only 80% this year. Although Mr. Bourgeaiseau expects it will go up to 100% by New Year's Eve, many say the tourists are not coming because the prices are simply too high. A room in a beachfront hotel costs \$300 to \$3,000 (all figures in U.S. dollars).

The cost is prohibitive for Brazilians from outside Rio who form the bulk of New Year's revellers here. Hobbled by an acute recession and an unstable currency, many Brazilians have opted to stay home instead of buying New Year's packages that range from \$500 to \$2,000 per person at such hotels as Le Meridien in Copacabana, which is the only one that is fully booked this year.

"Brazilians can't pay that," said a receptionist at the Hotel Grandville Ouro Verde, a small beachfront hotel in Copacabana where rooms average \$300 a night.

The Ouro Verde still has quite a few rooms

available and she expects they won't be filled unless prices are dramatically reduced -- something the hotel managers have said they will not do.

But down at the beach, business is brisk for vendor Paulo Cesar who is serving cold coconut milk at his street-side cafe. He predicts that New Year's Eve will be even better for business. But his customers won't be coming from Rio. "There's a recession in Rio," he said, hacking the top off a coconut before handing one to a little girl. "They're short of money and jobs so they're not too excited."

That is certainly true for Mr. Santos. He lives in a shantytown nearby, but spends most of his time on the beach these days, trying to protect his artwork from the destructive whims of children. He says he makes some money from his sculptures, but it's not enough. Even so, he's looking forward to celebrating the turn of the century on the beach.

"I don't think we'll go on after 2000," Mr. Santos said. "The whole world won't finish, but Jesus is coming to take those who are his." A non-practising Catholic, Mr. Santos says he doesn't believe in going to Church because they "brainwash you there," but he does believe in some of the stories in the Bible. He won't be one of the Chosen, he says, because he doesn't abide by what he perceives to be Catholic rules of behaviour.

"You can't have sex before marriage," he said. "You can't drink. You can't smoke and I don't like that."

He goes back to carving the Last Supper, while his friend sleeps in a sliver of shade left on the sand by a nearby billboard. Beside the Last Supper, Mr. Santos has left

another sculpture half-completed. It's a busty, naked woman -- a more sensual expression of his creativity.

When asked about the seeming contradiction in his work between the religious sculpture and the naked woman, Mr. Santos does not seem surprised. All around him the women of Copacabana pass by in tiny bikinis, flesh meeting crosses of gold or wood that hang from their necks. For Mr. Santos, the co-existence of religion and earthly pleasure seems to be reflected right back at him.

© 1999 Postmedia Network Inc. All rights reserved.