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## Sun, sea and supermodels

Florianópolis is the hottest beach resort in South America right now - a playground for Gisele and the gang. So why haven't we heard of it? Dominic Sutcliffe finds out

- [Dominic Sutcliffe](#)
- [The Guardian](#),
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Bright lights of Brazil... beautiful people are drawn to the coastal city of Florianópolis. Photograph: Christian Knepper.

It's Friday night at the Confraria das Artes, one of the hippest nightclubs in Brazil, and the crowded patio looks like a fashion shoot set in an antique store. Reclining on vintage couches and creaking rocking chairs under Moroccan chandeliers, dozens of long-limbed, honey-skinned blondes are sipping caipirinhas and flirting with tanned men in muscle shirts.

Supermodels Gisele Bündchen, Mariana Weickert and Alessandra Ambrósio are known to frequent the Confraria, as is local tennis star Gustavo Kuerten. Keen to discover who's who, I ask our waiter, Rogério, a dashing twentysomething surfer dude, to point out the bar's stars. But Rogério is of no use. "I don't know any of them," he shouts over the ambient dance track. "I just took this job to earn some money so I could surf all day. A few years ago no one cared anything about Floripa. But now it's gone crazy!"

If a local like Rogério is disoriented, imagine how I feel. I thought I knew something about hip Brazil - the chic resorts of Angra dos Reis, Búzios and Parati, where the likes of Mick Jagger, Naomi Campbell and Ronaldo hang out. But when a Brazilian friend in

London told me that the hottest place in the country - and the new Punta del Este of South America - was an island city in the south called Florianópolis, I almost laughed. Floria what? It sounded like a Greek island. Or a brand of toothpaste. If it was so popular, why hadn't we heard of it? Turns out millions of South Americans have - but they've been keeping it to themselves.

An hour's flight from São Paulo, not far from the border with Uruguay, Floripa, as it's known to locals, is the capital of Santa Catarina state. It lies on a gorgeous 300 square mile island made up of 17th-century fishing villages, jungle-covered hills, emerald lagoons and more than 40 pristine white sand beaches. Flying in from São Paulo, it looks like tropical paradise. Put a volcano on those hills, and it could be Hawaii.

Linked to the mainland by a single suspension bridge, for many years Floripa was - like the rest of Santa Catarina - a rural idyll. But in the past five years, the island's popularity has exploded. As crime rates in São Paulo and Rio soared, wealthy urbanites snapped up homes on its beachfronts and opened restaurants, clubs and bars on its lagoon shores. In 2002, when the current affairs magazine *Veja* declared Florianópolis the best and safest place to live in Brazil, others flooded in. Today, more Brazilian and South American tourists head to Floripa on their December breaks than anywhere else in the country except for Rio, and in summer the regular population of 330,000 swells to more than a million.