



NIGHTLIFE CELEB RISHI KANHAI HAS A VISION OF THE FUTURE: HE IS ADAMANT THAT WITHIN TEN YEARS, SURINAM WILL HAVE TRANSFORMED ITSELF INTO A GAY HEAVEN. AFTER A SUCCESSFUL INAUGURAL COMING OUT DAY IN 2011, HE IS WORKING TOWARDS HIS ULTIMATE PROJECT: THE CARIBBEAN GAY PARADE. IT LOOKS LIKE HE'S IN FOR A BUMPY RIDE THOUGH. WITH ONE CONSERVATIVE MEMBER OF THE SURINAMESE PARLIAMENT STATING THAT HOMOSEXUALITY IS SOMETHING THAT MUST BE ERADICATED, THERE'S STILL A LOT TO DO.

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★
NO SPANG!
RELAX!

SEX AT THE TRAFFIC LIGHTS IN SURINAM

In other Saturday nights, the Zsa Zsa Zsu discotheque is the scene of heterosexual locals trying out their most enticing dance moves in an attempt to find a way into the hearts and panties of masses of Dutch female interns. Tonight, however, is all about gays and she-males. After months of waiting, a huge party has been organised on 30th April – which is traditionally Dutch Queen's Day – where they can finally and freely express their sexual preference. The party is well underway, and a model bares his chest button by button, while organiser Rishi dances behind him. Also occurring onstage, but on the other side, are piercing sessions. One man staggers off stage, still in shock following his own decision to have a piercing, whilst tugging away at his freshly placed nip-

NOT ALL PEOPLE PORTRAYED IN THE PHOTOS ON THE NEXT SEVEN PAGES ARE DIRECTLY RELATED TO THE PEOPLE MENTIONED IN THIS ARTICLE.

THIS PAGE: A BOY TAKES A DIP IN THE RIVER NEAR THE REMOTE COMMUNITY OF PALUMEU. THE DANGER IS NOT APPARENT UNTIL WE SEE HIM FISHING FOR PIRANHAS AT THE SAME SPOT AN HOUR LATER.



A BOY WITH HIS FATHER ON SUNDAY AFTERNOON, FISHING NEAR THE JULES WIJDENBOSCH BRIDGE THAT CONNECTS PARAMARIBO AND PLACE MEERZORG IN THE COMMEWIJNE DISTRICT.

ple ring. The audience, which is predominantly male, daggers around, totally sans gêne. As a surprise, special goodies are handed out, which Rishi had stocked up on earlier at a sex shop. The winners beam with childlike glee as they receive two enormous dildos, a naughty outfit, massage oil, and other playthings.

Anyone stranded here by accident might get the idea that Surinam is some sort of gay utopia, but it's a far cry from that just yet. With a population of around half a million, the former Dutch colony is rather sparsely inhabited. Most of its inhabitants reside in the capital Paramaribo, with the remaining surroundings being mostly tropical rainforest. Tolerance towards homosexuals is reasonably high in Paramaribo, but people further inland tend to be predominantly homophobic. Although there is still a lot wrong in terms of the acceptance of gays, party organiser Rishi is convinced that good times lie ahead for people who are bold enough to be open about their sexual preference in the country run by President Desi Bouterse.

THE GREEN-EYED MONSTER

Rishi (34) starting clubbing at quite a young age, and has been the organiser behind Pink

Nights in Rendezvous every Friday night, which is the only the gay night in Paramaribo. The neon blue lighting and the remote setting of the streets of the Zorg en Hoop district (Dutch for 'care and hope', ironically enough) give off a vibe you'd expect from a seedy drug den. But step through the door, and it's a dif-

“THE YOUNG PEOPLE THERE WERE UNBELIEVABLY BADLY BEHAVED: HAVING IT OFF IN ALLEYWAYS, SMOKING MARIHUANA AND PICKING FIGHTS. THE FIGHTS WERE NEARLY ALWAYS CAUSED BY JEALOUSY; MEN STEALING MEN FROM OTHERS”

ferent world entirely. The top 40 hits blasting out of the speakers are enough to cave your chest in, and two barmen built like brick houses set shots of sambuca ablaze, which the customers are supposed to suck up through a straw as quickly as they can. A peek behind a column reveals a couple doing some serious necking. The bouncer looks on with a smile. "Would you like a drink?" he says, and we get

talking. He's been working at Pink Nights from day one, and before that, he was on the door at the failed Kekemba Resort: a safe haven that was meant to be Paradise for homosexuals. The two Dutch owners weren't up for an interview when asked, but the bouncer doesn't hold back. "Kekemba was set up in 2004, but the owners probably underestimated what they were getting into. The young people there were unbelievably badly behaved: having it off in alleyways, smoking marihuana and picking fights. The fights were nearly always caused by jealousy: men stealing men from others. There came a time when they were left no choice but to close down before things got totally out of hand. I would have expected that at some point in time, someone would have been stabbed or had a gun pointed at their head."

The gay bar Xpo, which had also opened its doors around that time, was one of the other bars where the bouncer regularly kept an eye on things. "It was great fun there. I only went there to do security, as I'm straight myself," he says in a serious manner. "My little brother was gay, but my parents and my other brothers couldn't accept that. I did though, and often went out for a drink with him." The bouncer looks down at the ground for a second. "Unfor-



RISHI KANHAI.



HOLLANDIA BAKERY IN THE JODENBREE STREET.



THIS MAN HAS JUST CAUGHT A CATFISH IN THE SURINAME RIVER.

tunately he died of dengue. I always stuck with the gays after that." He blames the closing down of Xpo in 2007 on the same reason that the Kekemba Resort was a failure. "Suddenly, things got out of hand there too when a group of youths started to misbehave again. There was a lot of fighting, and a lot of jealousy. That place had to close too before something really bad happened, because you could see that happening a mile off."

The fact that Rishi is able to handle this group of rioting youngsters, is down to what he calls his special tactics. "If you can't behave, we'll teach you how to behave. It's like a kind of education," he laughs, while sucking his Coke through a straw on the patio of the Tangelo bar and restaurant. "Surinamers are critical when they go clubbing. They're not drawn by a nice club or music, but by the personality behind the party. The other gay clubs didn't get anywhere because the organisers didn't have a network. I do, everybody knows me. I'm always getting smothered in kisses." After the first successful Coming Out Day, which is comparable to Gay Pride, he's ready for his neighbouring countries embrace homosexuality too. "Within the next ten years, Surinam will be a gay heaven. I'll stick my

neck out to say it. I'm brimming with plans to achieve this, but everyone has to cooperate in a decent manner. Society has to get used to it slowly." After establishing connections with neighbouring French Guyana, he wants to incorporate all of the Caribbean islands. "I can see it all taking shape. This year I'm working

THAT OLD AND FAMILIAR SURINAM GREETING “PSSSS-HHTT” IS HEARD CONTINUOUSLY. EVEN THE COUNTLESS STRAY DOGS ARE IN ON THE ACT, AND PUT ON A DISPLAY SEVERAL TIMES A DAY THAT WOULD BE THE ENVY OF ANY PORN STAR WORTH THEIR SALT

with the French Guyana foundation, which has asked me to organise a gay party there. And Coming Out Day in October is going to be a massive event. It should become the Gay Parade in Surinam." He stares dreamingly into the busy street full of beeping cars. "My aim is to organise the Caribbean Gay Parade within five years. Non-stop partying for a week!" My

suggestion the he might be jumping the gun slightly is brushed aside. "Surinam's ready for it, I know that for sure." The waiter removes Rishi's empty glass from the table, and stares at him for a moment. A kiss on the cheek ensues. "Look, they're everywhere," he giggles.

SEX RULES

By day and by night, sex and passion seem to engulf the city like a super-sized steamy mantle; the public man-on-man affection is no longer visible by day however. Men sit at a practically horizontal angle in their cars, on pavements, or sporting a glass of Parbo beer at one of the many outdoor drinking establishments. '*No spang*' (don't worry) is the reaction offered to virtually every problem. All eyes are firmly fixed on any foxy females. There is constant horn-honking, wolf-whistling, and that old and familiar Surinam greeting "pssshhtt". Even the countless stray dogs are in on the act, and put on a display several times a day that would be the envy of any porn star worth their salt. Despite their incorrigible flirting routines, the Surinamese still manage to view themselves as unobtrusive and introverted. Fiery French-kissing couples are not found on the streets by day, but there is plenty of red-hot action going on behind the facades of



NO SPANG.



MOTEL CD.



places such as the typical short-stay motels. The many different types of peoples that constitute Surinam, such as the Hindustan, Maroons, Chinese, Surinamese, Creoles and Brazilians, are all very much family-oriented, with many men still living at home until well into their twenties. Because some of them have not yet come out or do not have any privacy, they tend to take their lovers somewhere else. Sex is had in motels where the men (or women) rent a room for a couple of hours.

RUSH HOUR

"This one's my favourite: the Happy Day Inn." Rishi is driving us around in his silver car to show us the famous motels. He points intently at a building on Granietstraat, which at first glance looks like any other of the houses in Surinam. Large, white and with flaking paint. In front of the house on the other side of the street, I spot a row of white garages, with a light in the shape of a ball above each door. "If the light is red, it means people are still busy in there. Green means it's vacant. You park your car in front of it, the garage door opens, and you settle up the bill afterwards. It looks like it's rush hour right now."



COMING OUT DAY.



STRIPPER IN RENDEZVOUS



PINK NIGHTS.



COMING OUT DAY.



PASSENGER WAITING FOR THE FERRY THAT CROSSES THE CORENTYNE RIVER: THE BORDER BETWEEN GUYANA AND SURINAM.

Just like the hotel rating system, there are various grades of luxury within this type of motel. For 80 SRD (around €20) you can spend two hours in a room with a jacuzzi, for 35 to 40 SRD (around €10) you get a shower with hot and cold water. We go over to look at motel CD (named after an old abbreviation for condom), located on the W.L. Lothlaan. The white structure encompasses a small booth and a large row of garages. If we really want to go to town, we can book a room for seven hours, as the price list at the booth indicates. The minimum rental slot is two hours for 45 SRD. We go with this option, and are supplied with two towels, along with a condom and small bar of soap. In between the gaps in the curtain, we discover a few parked cars belonging to the guests in the rooms with the doors closed. There is no moaning and groaning, or coughing. In fact it's deadly quiet.

The room itself looks like something out of a low-end bordello, but one where they bothered to use some sort of air freshener. A long rectangular mirror has been stuck onto the wall next to the bed, for those who like to see what they're doing. A red sheet has

"IF THE LIGHT IS RED, IT MEANS PEOPLE ARE STILL BUSY IN THERE. GREEN MEANS IT'S VACANT. YOU PARK YOUR CAR IN FRONT OF IT, THE GARAGE DOOR OPENS, AND YOU SETTLE UP THE BILL AFTERWARDS. IT LOOKS LIKE IT'S RUSH HOUR RIGHT NOW"

been placed on the double bed, presumably to provide a sensual atmosphere, but this is then completely negated by an adjacent sign with the words 'staining the bed linen costs 5 SRD extra'. If you're looking for something other than porn on the TV you're out of luck, and a further sign in the bathroom dictates that the condom we were handed should ultimately end up in the bin. All in all, there are plenty of passion-killers in this setting, but the Surinamese seem to accept it. Upon exiting, someone sneaks out of one of the garage doors. He catches our eye for a second, waves, and starts whistling. He's just done, but fancies having another go.

STANDSTILL

Basically, there are plenty of areas where you can get intimate with a friend or lover, or get to daggering in the disco. The overwhelming feeling you get here is that anything goes. The question of why it is then that homosexuals still do not enjoy the same status as they do in Holland, is put down to political apathy and entrenched attitudes by the Surinamese. "After its independence in 1975, Surinam didn't move forward at all on the matter of homosexuality, while Holland continued to make progress in this direction," Floris van Eijk, Secretary of Human Rights at the Dutch Embassy, explains. Having just left work for the afternoon, and still in his suit, he sits at one of the many wooden tables at cafeteria Zus en Zo. "In 2012, men who want to live together cannot be registered as partners. If one of them dies, then the other must vacate the home they shared immediately, and has no rights whatsoever. Also, if their partner is in hospital, he is not allowed to visit because he is not officially one of the family, and hasn't got a leg to stand on."

The Dutch Embassy provides funding for various LGTB projects. Precisely at the time when those projects were set up (July 2011), parliament member Ronny Asabina sent a shock-wave through the gay scene with his statement that homosexuals must be exterminated. Although his outburst caused a lot of commotion, it was also rather convenient, as Van Eijk points out. "His statement sparked off an entire process. We were just looking at how we'd be able to engage people in what we were doing. But after his words, all of the NGOs wanted to get started right away." Van Eijk seems satisfied with how that panned out, as he takes a sip of his Parbo beer, which loses its froth completely in little more than a minute. "Incidentally, the political parties never actually took an official stance in that respect, it was only a few individual members of parliament. The population is not demanding it either. They're not concerned with things like that really." This last remark touches upon the decision regarding the recently passed amnesty law, which states that suspects of the country's 'December murders' (the execution of 15 opposers to the military rule in 1982), which include current President Bouterse, can no longer be prosecuted. For the first time ever, a silent march was held openly opposing the law, but unfortunately only a small percentage of the population took



THE SIGN SAYS: "NO URINATING OUTSIDE."



THE WATERFRONT, BORDER BETWEEN THE SURINAME RIVER AND THE HISTORIC CENTER.

part. The most frequently heard answer to the question of what people think about the law is: "It all happened so long ago, we should move on from that really."

The fact that homosexuality is still a highly charged issue, is proved by Juan Pigot's story. He's a business economist, chairman of the tennis federation, and son of the former minister for education. Juan sits down in his office, armed with a glass of Fernandes. The now 36-year-old was afraid to come out in Surinam, and decided to move over to Holland in 1995. "I was really afraid about the disappointment my parents would feel. My father had good social standing. I thought it would be better to come out in Europe. Also, there was no internet in Surinam at the time, so I couldn't find out a lot about being gay. It wasn't until I got to Europe that I started reading up on it. Just before I was due to return for a holiday, I decided to send my parents an e-mail, which didn't go down very well. He rubs his forehead

"EVERY TIME THE MARTINAIR STAFF WERE IN THE COUNTRY, I GOT A CALL ASKING ME IF THEY COULD COME ROUND. AFTER A WHILE, THE KLM CREW ALSO STARTED TAGGING ALONG"

and looks down. "My parents thought it was just dreadful, and wondered how I could do this to them. They thought it was perhaps because I was in Europe, and told me to come back to Surinam as soon as I could. I had expected a different reaction from them, because we also have a lesbian in our family. They don't seem to have a problem with that. When it concerned their own child though, the reaction was completely the opposite, and there was a massive row." Gaining acceptance from his parents took years, but it worked out all right in the end. "My

father decided to accept it, and the rest soon followed. What is amazing though, is that my friends and parents came to my wedding over in Europe, and even paid for everything." Despite this complete turnaround by his parents, the marriage failed miserably, after which Juan decided to return to Surinam.

VERANDA NIGHTS

"It was tough when I came back. There is a huge gay scene in Europe, my partner was the director of the Cirque du Soleil there and my life was filled with glamour. When I returned to Surinam, my world collapsed. At one point I got a job working for the airline company Martinair, and things started to look up. I had this idea of organising a party at my place, so I invited all kinds of people. We sat for hours on the large veranda upstairs here." What started as an innocent initiative went on to become the infamous Veranda Nights. Juan walks outside and looks up. The large white wooden construction stands like a silent witness against the night sky. "Every time the Martinair staff were in the country, I got a call asking me if they could come round. After a while, the KLM crew also started tagging along."

The parties became increasingly popular among the crew and inhabitants of Paramaribo, but those who are envisaging some sort of wild bunga bunga party couldn't be more wrong. "No, they weren't bizarre parties at all. We just loved having endless discussions."

When the sun has finally sunk beneath the palm trees, the nightlife slowly starts to gather pace once again. On the corner of Marie and Leliestraat, the first queues are forming outside Rendezvous. There is plenty of Borgoe rum flowing, and the volume is turned up to the max. Rishi is once again the centre of attention, and is showered with kisses from the many clubbers. Juan is standing at the bar with his boyfriend from French Guyana, with Floris standing close behind him. An 18-year-old walks in, with a somewhat unsure gait, but soon finds his way and merges with the rest of the party crowd.

If this is supposed to be the cradle of gay heaven, then things aren't looking too dandy for Surinam. This part of the world is still stuck in a dim and distant past, and it will be a slow process to change things, unfortunately. ■