

You Can Run
Gay, Glam, and Gritty Travels
in South America

Jesse Archer



Harrington Park Press®
The Trade Division of The Haworth Press, Inc.
New York • London

Acclaim for
You Can Run:
Gay, Glam, and Gritty Travels
in South America

“If Bob Hope and Bing Crosby were gay, not dead, and actually funny, *You Can Run: Gay, Glam, and Gritty Travels in South America* is the road movie they’d make. Hilarious, sophisticated, and soulful, Jesse Archer writes with an inescapable charisma.”

—Josh Kilmer-Purcell
Author of the *New York Times* bestseller
I Am Not Myself These Days

“If Che Guevara and David Sedaris had a hunky love child wet-nursed by drag queens, it would be Jesse Archer. More than a funny, sexy, and fiercely entertaining South American adventure, it’s an inspiring challenge to consume life and live it to its fullest. Archer’s witty and penetrating observations offer delicious insight of not only South American and Western culture, but life itself. In the first few pages, it will compel you to pack a wig, hop on a plane, boat, or moped, and read the rest along the way.”

—Q. Allan Brocka
Writer and Director,
*Rick & Steve the Happiest
Gay Couple in All the World;*
Boy Culture; Eating Out

“One could argue that Jesse Archer redefines what it means to be a gay traveler. But really, *You Can Run* stops at nothing short of redefining how to live one’s life. Wildly funny, crazy, and truly inspirational!”

—Casper Andreas
Actor, Filmmaker,
A Four Letter Word,
Slutty Summer

More Acclaim . . .

“From Evita’s palace to Chilean volcanoes and beyond, Jesse Archer takes us through South America with wit, wisdom, and lots of outfits.”

—Michael Musto
Village Voice columnist

“A stirring tale of lust and wanderlust that travels along more than just the sexy streets of the Zona Roja in Buenos Aires and the Via Apia in Rio. *You Can Run* includes vivid trips up the Amazon and into the jungles of Bolivia, proving that it is not where you go, but who you go with that makes a journey fun. Archer is an excellent tour guide—fueled with quick wit, a pink wig, and plenty of Diazepam. He makes the search for an anaconda or just a clean bathroom an adventure.”

—Gary M. Kramer
Author, *Independent Queer Cinema:
Reviews and Interviews*

Accepting Never-Never Land

Dora, the hunchbacked, one-eyed maid, is trying to tell me that the hourly room rate is extra with a television. What Dora doesn't understand is that I'm trying to forgo the hourly rate, with or without television, to strike a bargain on a week's accommodation. Dora just squints, perplexed, unable to comprehend why I'd want to stay in a whorehouse for such a long time.

I've gone beyond the decency of guidebook listings and past the indecency of unlisted stinkholes to find the most basic room at the barest of all prices in Salvador da Bahia. Every penny I pinch provides another moment far from the responsibilities of what they term "the real world," and I'd much rather be here, in a whorehouse if necessary, vagabonding through Bahia—a Brazilian state reputed to be the happiest place on earth. Entering my quarters I want to know why.

Raised on a corner platform with a clawed-up pad on a board is what purports to be a bed. The walls alongside it are bordered with white tiles, presumably to facilitate spray and wipe washing. Judging from smeared lipstick, greasy smudges, and blood across the tiles, Dora does the bulk of her cleaning using only the swirling white marble of her bad eye.

A cockroach the size of my palm skitters across the floor and I instinctively quash it just as I'm attacked laterally by a flying water bug. I whack and pounce and spill its guts onto the decaying wooden floor beside the cockroach and then sit, battle weary, on the flattened pad or "mattress" to spot the interior decoration—a sign reading "Not responsible for items kept in room." Really. Am I supposed to stay here and watch them?

A stream of miniature ants materializes from beneath cracks and crevasses in the floor to bathe in the milky innards of the insects and though I haven't touched anything, I take out my antibacterial sani-

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doi:10.1300/5846_10

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tizer and perfunctorily slather down my hands. The ants work industriously on the insects and I stare mesmerized as they dislodge a roach leg at the joint and carry it off down below while more and more and more of their avaricious compatriots smother and swarm the cadavers.

The ants remind me of the children and the music here because they, too, come out of the woodwork to flood the streets of Salvador. You can't utter the only universal word (no!) before another kid has tied a string bracelet around your wrist with an imploring nasal "um real," and once that colorful string is tied on who can deny them a coin? Not me. When I first arrived I flung my hand away from a skinny girl before she could tie on that bracelet. Unsuccessful in one pursuit she tried another, gleefully insisting to help me find a hostel.

Of course she hustled me into a bodega the first chance she got, threw a can of condensed milk on the counter and claimed she needed it. I couldn't turn down a request for milk because a skinny girl needs it to build her bones so she can grow and everyone knows that, especially her, so she got me good because I'm not going to be held responsible for stunting her growth.

After the milk extortion thing she kept showing me bus stops and hostels and I didn't quite understand why she didn't maximize her profits and run off to scam another traveler out of some calcium rich dairy product, but I guess she didn't want to grow *that* tall, because she just kept smiling and giving the thumbs up until finally we unearthed the world's smarmiest whorehouse, and all I can think now is that my rate here plus the price of a can of milk could have bought a room somewhere without blood stains on the wall.

Everyone in Salvador is like this girl. That is to say, incapable of leaving you alone. All the happy people with their thumbs up and joyous smiles and that exuberant "*tudo bom*" really make me want to carry myself under the floorboards with the ants and insect scraps because it's too taxing to always answer the questions of inquisitive locals, always return the smiles of strangers, and to give that unbearably goofy thumbs-up. Salvador is really the happiest place on the planet. Way too happy.

In Pelourinho Square, I race for private peace into an ochre church. The church charges admission—something I've never seen and can't

believe and makes me want to gag. Inside there are statues of black saints—something I've never seen and can't believe and kind of love. I snoop around and sneak up the tower to crouch behind a giant bell. I look down on all those cheerful people going about their business in Pelourinho Square, which was not always so cheerful a place. Not so long ago Salvador was the anchorage of the African slave trade, and this square was the site of slave auctions and whippings.

Leftover from slavery is a martial arts dance called Capoeira, which the slaves developed surreptitiously, under the guise of dance, to fight oppression. Troupes of fit dancers mix gymnastic handstands, sparring jabs, and whirling kicks to rhythm. Capoeira is graceful aggression, and in the afternoon I sit admiring their art until one of the dancers comes over to me because, naturally, he can't leave me alone.

But I don't really mind because he is beautiful and wants to show me his big *berimbau*. This is a one-stringed instrument used to make the Capoeira music now dribbling out of a small ghettoblaster. He wants to sell me a cassette of his compositions. I decline, and he must figure if I don't buy it someone else will because he doesn't get bitter or beg or keep on pestering. He just gives me a thumbs-up, rambles about Capoeira being "*multo bom*," and runs back to rejoin the dance.

I wake up in the whorehouse to a buzzing hum. More bugs? I glance at the floor and the only evidence remaining of the vanquished critters is the carapace of the cockroach, too big to fit under the wooden slats. I examine my watch (6:00 a.m.) and hear it again, a low scratching. I spot a shadow through a small hole in the flimsy door. A prostitute lurks on the other side. Her résumé is beckoning.

"No," I say. "*Obrigado*." I decide to thank her anyway, but this has no effect, and maybe it's true that *no* sometimes means *yes*, because she keeps up the pithy pleading, not a knock or a word, but a moan and a scratch. The solution to an itch I don't have? I can't quite decide if this is sexual aggression or harassment or some sexual intimidation as yet undefined, but I wish Walter were with me because then it would be funny. Right now I am afraid. Frozen, like when I see a spider in the bathtub.

Yet behind those earnest sobs for employment I do detect and appreciate a marketing wizard. I picture her alarm sounding at the crack

of dawn. She stretches her arms over her head and rises with the sun to slip on a pair of dainty slippers with ostrich feathers and a little heel, expertly apply jungle-red lipstick without the benefit of a mirror, and pucker up thinking, *I'm an irresistible genius, a self-made man-trap*. And she really is genius, hooker genius, because who isn't horny at 6:00 a.m.? Unfortunately for her, she isn't that strapping Capoeira dancer.

Salvadorians put me to shame with their money-making schemes. They use everything at their disposal to outmaneuver, out-hustle, nickel and dime, even charging admission to church, and they do it all with a broad genuine smile. I need a gimmick like this proactive prostitute, something foolproof and clever. I must be hungry, because the only idea I've got is to import peanut butter to the people who miss it. The matter clearly calls for further thought.

When I'm sure the prostitute has left for greener pastures, I dash out of the whorehouse and head for the elevator that leads to the lower city. There I order the juice of another fruit with an exotic name. Sipping on an umbu juice, I try to conjure up an infallible business venture that will allow me to continue roaming the open road. I'm finally alone and able to do some thinking, Thoreau-at-the-pond kind of thinking. I'm blessing solitude when a long shadow is cast over me. I look up and this gangly guy is beaming me a smile. It really is impossible to be alone in Salvador. A Styrofoam cooler hangs from a strap around his shoulder. He is selling popsicles, but not to me.

"Peter Pan," he blurts out in English.

He says he saw a version of Peter Pan on television and I was the lead actor. When I disagree, he doesn't believe me. I look just like Peter Pan, he says, standing there and imposing his friendliness. *What?* Am I wearing green spandex? Popsicle guy says that Peter Pan has a "syndrome" and my ears prick up to discern a message within the riddle of his Portuguese. He says Peter Pan has parents that don't understand him, that he doesn't want to grow up, and that he's afraid of commitments.

He switches the popsicle box to his other shoulder. "You look exactly like Peter Pan."

"How does Peter Pan cure his syndrome?" I'm curious for more.

“Want a popsicle?” He says, opening the cooler filled with homemade berry popsicles.

“Yes.” I say to keep him talking. I rummage through his selection and settle on a tangy *goiaba*, for a dime. For days I’ve interpreted Greta Garbo—wanting to be left alone, but not now. As surely as I can detect and appreciate a marketing wizard, I can detect and appreciate a prophet when I see one and this prophet must keep speaking. He does. Of course he does.

“Before Peter Pan can cure his syndrome, he must first admit he has it,” he says. “That’s the only way out of never-never land.”

Maybe that’s it, maybe I can’t dream up a prosperous business venture because I’m sick. In denial and sick with a syndrome. I wander with the popsicle prophet around the lower city, past huge women shucking *jaca*, a spiky fruit as big as their breasts, the size of a healthy watermelon. They pluck and bag and sell little rubbery yellow squiggles from within the massive fruit. Another man urges a wheelbarrow over the bumpy cobblestone, its load of parrot-green limes in stark contrast to his ebony skin.

We make our way to the ocean, where a vendor carries an open tin container with lit coals on the bottom. He roasts and sells long slender pieces of white cheese to sunbathers in the sand and then I watch him put down his wares, remove his shirt, and (in cutoff jeans) run into the crashing waves. He swims around for a spell and eventually returns, picking up his bucket of coals to continue peddling cheese down the beach.

He couldn’t help diving into the sea, it was like he had to. He sells cheese, the dancer sells his music, little girls get milk from tourists, and they all seem to enjoy the process because work is intertwined with their lives, not separate, not a drudgery of nine to five. Their real world is living, making a living, in the most literal sense.

We head back to the city center, slipping down a side alley and onto a plank that leads to the favela slums. Wooden houses are built onto a hill that slopes down to Cidade Baixa. Some are on stilts precariously mounted atop heaps of garbage. Children in rags are scavenging with stray dogs. This is Salvador: slums behind the tourist façade. At night they turn dangerous. The popsicle vendor mentions that one

night he was robbed of all his popsicles back here in the favela, along with his entire day's earnings.

Popsicle man accompanies me home by way of Pelourinho Square, the former slave auction block. Past the pretty pastels of the central square each block becomes progressively less appealing. The whorehouse is many, many blocks away.

"Peter Pan," my new friend cautions. "Very dangerous." And he disappears with a smile into the night. I will see him again because if you stay long enough in Salvador everyone repeats, revolves to return on this cheery chatty carousel.

When he goes, it occurs to me that he didn't sell one popsicle the whole time he spent showing me his city. The people here aren't wealthy for a reason, but they respond to the realities of their real world with a great attitude. The sun shines on this tropical latitude despite its dark past and impoverished present and I realize I can learn from them. I don't have to hide away. Entering the whorehouse, Dora is mopping. She winks at me with her one good eye. I give her the thumbs-up.

Days later I'm ordering at a sugarcane cart on the street just above Barra Beach. The vendor stuffs a tall stalk of cane into the maw of his grinder and cranks. Out the other end comes the ravaged husk, and the juice. He's pouring the glass of sugar water when I think I hear my name being called. I don't turn around because often I think my name is being called when I'm alone in South America. It's simply the ego insisting you're valuable, still somehow significant in a strange alien place. But then I hear my name again, louder, with a honk. I turn, shaken from a reverie. How did they find me?

An arm is waving from inside a car across the street. It belongs to Zane and he's with Nikki, Jen, and Buta, the Carnival crew from Rio so far away. These three are soon departing, returning to friends and family and corporate entities. Not everyone can stay in never-never land forever. But Zane and I are still here, this is our home, this non-mad thing, and that makes me smile like a Salvadorian.

Zane is dying to conquer the Amazon and I hear the invitation in his voice. I'm unsure if it's with Tinker Bell or Captain Hook, maybe their lovechild, but Peter Pan is off again.

Mr. Popular

We delight in the exotic only while it remains rare. The prized pet store parrot is the pestilence of rural Australia. Statuesque purple fields of lupin are a Patagonian plague, and Africans don't stop to admire a common zebra. In parts of the world, white men were idolized as gods. Civilizations have since learned to hate and despise white invaders, but schoolgirls in South America are not catching on.

Schoolgirls in skirt-and-tie uniforms hypnotically follow the tuft of Zane's blond hair across the continent. A lone schoolgirl is demure and tame, a stray dog skittering away afraid, but a schoolgirl is almost never alone because she has this uncanny ability to metastasize into a pack of roving she-wolves. It must be an internal magnet.

Sometimes the bravest of the bunch is elected to approach and, avoiding our eyes at any cost, will ask for "*la hora.*" We give her the time even though she is wearing a watch, and the entire agglomerate then explodes into a fit of giggles. More often, though, there is not a bravest. The schoolgirls just follow behind whispering to one another in an ambulating team huddle, impertinent, like the infernal pop culture they proliferate.

At the mouth of the Amazon River, Zane and I are being tailed in the drizzle of the rainiest city in the world: Belém. The schoolgirl chatter picks up with our pace. We turn corners, we cross the street, but they are tenacious with a scent. Suddenly they are screaming behind us, a new approach, a new tactic, we think, this rapacious mating call. It is a booby trap.

The screams are echoed overhead and when Zane and I look up we comprehend, in dreadful shock, that we've been led to the hive. Masses of schoolgirls flood the second-story windows of a school, ado-

lescent breasts smash against the glass in a giant wave of wailing estrogen.

Schoolgirls aren't the only ones who like Zane. At the disheveled Bar do Parque we sit on a raised outdoor patio beside some rough trade. A scraggly pirate type stands hunched in a corner, the indistinct hollows of his eyes aimed in our direction. I suck on a caipirinha and notice Zane nod knowingly at the pirate.

"You know him?" I ask.

"Kind of," Zane hides behind his light beer.

Apparently Zane met this character when he was wandering the town earlier. He "thinks" he agreed to meet him later for a movie. Zane doesn't know for sure, he only "thinks," because he is left to interpret the outcome of his own foreign language battlefields. Put plainly, Zane has to decode grunts, jabs, and mime.

"I think he wanted me to see a straight porno," adds Zane. The plot thickens.

"Why didn't you go with him?" I ask facetiously.

"Eww," Zane wrinkles up his nose.

"So why did you agree to see a porno with him?"

"He looked like he needed a friend," says Zane. "And I didn't want to hurt his feelings."

I glance at the man in the corner. He needs a bath a lot more than he needs a friend, and someone else hurt more than his feelings. He's got a scar up his forearm and a black eye, more than a few days old. It's more yellow than anything when I see it up close, and I'm seeing it up close now because he is sitting down at our table, gazing at Zane. The man starts with something cordial to the effect of Zane not being at the movie.

Zane should have said he couldn't make the porno because he got caught up in a frenzied fanatical schoolgirl orgy. Or because he fainted after a Brazilian bikini wax that left the torn follicles of his pink skin gushing with blood. But Zane doesn't come up with a good excuse, he just says he "forgot," and for this the pirate has little sympathy.

"I no crazy!" rails the jilted porn pal. Then he asks in a hushed snivel of an already drowning "English" if Zane and I are boyfriends. I

emphatically deny. Zane can bail himself out of this one. The pirate squints, glaring, griping, and flashes a fifty dollar bill.

“Pansy,” I raise an eyebrow. “He wants to buy you!”

But Zane wants to leave, so we head out of the Bar do Parque and make for our hotel. A few blocks later the headlights of a car swerve into our eyes. A taxi is screeching to a halt and out scrambles the same black-eyed pirate.

“You are lie!” The man is furious, intent on Zane. And what does he do to people who lie? “I kill the lie people!”

He hollers and grabs a shocked Zane by the shirt collar. I shove him off and he stumbles, dragging Zane with him to the ground where they tussle. The pirate fumbles into a pocket pulling out something shiny and in a flash we all understand. He really does kill the lie people. The taxi squeals off. Zane’s shirt rips. A shimmering knife skids on the street.

We’re in a dead sprint.

“I kill you!” The attacker gives chase and our incessant athletics may now be useful, actually saving our lives, but when we reach Hotel Central it’s locked with iron bars.

“*iRapidoooo!*” I scream for the attendant to open the security gate that is keeping us very insecure. True to Brazilian form, he takes his sweet time. We are jumping up and down because someone special is fast approaching, and as we rush inside the lunatic is there, yanking on the clanging iron bars.

“I *kill* you!” he menaces from the dark sidewalk, eyes of fire torching Zane.

Inside the green of our spacious green art-deco room Zane sits stunned, his face flushed red, and I’m thinking his powers of seduction didn’t have to come to violence. He likes forward men, aggressive men, and this one had money. I should’ve done us both a favor and pipped him out for those fifty bucks.

“You saved my life, Dippy,” he says breathily, “I almost died.” Zane falls prey to his vivid imagination, ruminating on how he would’ve been killed, stripped, and repeatedly abused by a smelly, black-eyed necrophiliac. Zane looks himself up and down to see each appendage severed, tossed in a freezer, used as Amazon fish bait, his sex organs

preserved in formaldehyde on a mantle somewhere in the rainiest city in the world.

“You know how this could have been avoided?”

“Xanax?” Zane has his mind on sedatives. He can’t analyze because he woefully laments the probability that his ashes wouldn’t have been gracefully strewn from a helicopter onto the Napali coast of Hawaii as he so clearly instructed friends and family. Zane is not awake until, “The police.” he says. “We have to call the police!”

When the police arrive at the Hotel Central, I translate the events in Spanish with Zane performing pantomime at my side. We hop in the back of a patrol car and drive around a town of over a million to seek the suspect, one of several thousand, a very dirty man with a black eye. Ours is to be found foolishly where I met him.

Zane lags sheepishly behind when the two policemen and I head to the raised outdoor patio of the Bar do Parque. The pirate has already seen us. In the dank night he scowls from his corner, a moray eel guarding the lair. I mount the steps with a sneer and raise my arm resolutely. It’s my turn for drama. Bette Davis levels an incriminating index finger at the yellow-black eye.

“*Ele,*” I say. “Him.”

The police pounce at my word. Forget about innocent until proven guilty; they swat mercilessly in front of all his peers. He is awarded the dignity of a sewer rat, buckling as they batter him into the hatchback of the police vehicle. Zane looks on horrified.

“Now I feel bad,” pities the shipwrecking Siren.

The trial commences at headquarters ten minutes later. The defendant and plaintiffs are led to a big black woman behind a desk. We explain our case. Again, I speak in Spanish and Zane accompanies, using his hands to enact their original meeting, the clash on the street, and the apparition of the knife. The woman listens intently to this performance, and when we finish, she asks the defendant to speak his peace.

He gets in two sentences before the big judge of a woman bellows, clenching her fists to pound them virulently onto the desk. The pirate continues his argument, meekly now, but she doesn’t buy his yarn and again slams her fists down in a rage. Her large bosom rests atop

the desk and the force of her crashing fists reverberates from the desktop, up her breasts and down her Amazon arms in a visible ripple of power. She intimidates.

The pirate idles a few moments before trying a different angle. He stops denying the assault and blames us, saying we are gay. I know this because he is pointing rather scoffingly at us and repeating the word “homosexual.” The mighty Brazilian woman delivers two momentous blows of her black fists to the desk, ripples, and stamps her feet in furious punctuation. She has never heard anything so implausible.

“No, they are not homosexual!” She booms.

“Yes we are.” I contradict, because that shouldn’t matter.

She and the pirate turn from each other to look at me. The two policemen turn to me. Silence falls. I have effectively halted the Brazilian judicial system. Zane is the first to speak.

“This is not the time, Dippy,” he hisses between clenched teeth, “to be political!”

The defendant raises a supercilious eyebrow. “You see . . .” but the gavel that God gave this woman comes thundering down onto the unfortunate desktop. The verdict is in and the accused guilty. She sets to the paperwork.

One of the officers comes over to show me a button on the inside of his lapel that reads “Jesus is Savior” in Portuguese. He recites this on a loop with astonishing stamina in that blank belief that comes without query. He adds that the United States is powerful because it is more evangelical than Catholic.

“One day,” he continues. “Brazil will get there, too.”

The convicted pirate overhears this and snivels glum. Funny what’s important to people.

The woman finishes the sentencing papers, standing up to address the courtroom of her office.

“In Brazil,” she says. “We do not assault tourists.” And for the first time I’m glad to be called a tourist. She exits, and on her way out I notice her shoot Zane a smile. She was a schoolgirl once.

The new convict is handcuffed and escorted out behind her.

“What happens to him?” I ask the evangelical officer.

“Prison,” he says.

“How long?” I need to know how long we’re safe in Belém. He points to his Jesus button. “Only God knows that.”

At sunrise the next morning Zane and I swiftly buy hammocks and herd onto a boat heading up the Amazon. God likes Zane, too. But we aren’t pushing our luck.