

## **Favelas of Rio de Janeiro: cities within a city**

**by Kelly Boyles**

When you gaze upon the hillsides of Rio de Janeiro you will not find multimillion dollar mansions overlooking the city. Instead, you will find that many of Brazil's poorest citizens occupy the land with the most incredible view. These shanty towns have become known as "favelas," which takes its name from Morro de Favela, the first hillside where they were reported to exist. The first favela was occupied by over 800 individuals, however today you can find almost that many different favela towns in Rio alone.

One of the most interesting things about favelas is how misunderstood they are by fellow Cariocas. Very few Middle class citizens of Rio can say that they have ever stepped foot in a favela; however, many middle class citizens have a very strong opinion of them. Many people blame the favelas for gang activity and other violent occurrences.

They view favelas as unsafe and stay far away from them. I must admit, I had my reservations about taking a tour through two Rio favelas. The information available about favelas is mostly negative, focusing on drug wars, stray bullets, and poverty. However, one thing I realized during my visit to Rocinha, Rio's largest shanty town, was that the town was actually very controlled, despite the fact that the police do not have much authority in the community.



View of a favela built into the hillside of Rio de Janeiro.

An interesting aspect to many of Rio's large favelas is that drug gangs are actually a positive aspect of favela life. This may seem like a strange concept to someone from a country like America where gangs of all capacities are viewed negatively. In this case, however, drug gangs provide security for the community, insuring that no crime takes place inside the parameters of the town. The drug lords do not want to run the risk of police intervention inside their town and take drastic measures to keep criminal activity under control.

Recently, outside agencies have been allowed to breach the walls of favela towns, however, to make positive changes for the people who live within. Through a program know as Favela-Barrio, or "Slum to Neighborhood," the Inter-American Development Bank has donated money to make vast improvements to the living conditions and to create more opportunity for the poor to make decent

wages. We were able to witness some of these changes in the second favela we visited in Rio. In this community, money from Favela-Barrio was used to create small courtyards and to put house numbers and “street” names on the alley ways so that favela dwellers may receive mail.

Another positive opportunity in this favela was a supplementary school for the children. Since elementary school is only half a day in Brazil, students attend this school either before or after their real elementary school. Although resources are still limited, this school showed that there was hope for students to gain the education necessary to achieve a different way of life for themselves and their future family.

Surprisingly, however, very few people ever move out of their shanty town, even if they gain the monetary means to do so. There are too many positive aspects within the favela which, for some, out way any negatives. For example, many residents do not pay for power, but instead connect their power wire illegally to wires already existing.

Although this creates a maze of power wires, it saves a great deal of money for residents each month. Residents also save money on rent while living in a favela. Since favelas are unofficial “squatter communities” they do not have to pay rent or taxes to the government. Instead of power bills and rent, inhabitants of these communities spend their money on cellular telephones and satellite dishes. Television is such an important part of their culture that it becomes a first priority when budgeting money.

In fact, soap operas and soccer are two things which are able to unite all the social classes in Brazil.



Illegal power wires also known as “gatos” attach to formal wires to provide residents with free power.

Being able to visit two favelas in Rio gave me a much greater insight to the life of residents in these towns. Despite the negative view many people have toward these towns they are actually quite miraculous. The feeling inside the town is positive and upbeat. Favela traditions such as Carnival and Samba school help to share their vibrant flare with the rest of Brazilians.