

GATES, from page 8

their safety when entering favelas."

I was very grateful for the opportunity to be in Brazil, for the chance for my children to explore a new language and culture, and for the time to celebrate with my brother and his new family. I wasn't about to court risk for its own sake. But it felt wrong to visit a beautiful, complicated country and not dare to learn about the rougher parts of life for people who existed beyond the gated apartment where I lived. I left my kids with my family and set out to explore the other Brazil.

The rendezvous point for the favela tour I signed up for was the immense and white-pillared Copacabana Palace. It was an uncomfortable irony to hail a taxi to a posh area of town so that I could be driven to visit a devastatingly poor one. I walked through the marbled entrance and found a seat in the lobby. After a moment, a woman entered wearing a crisp white polo shirt that read "Favela Jeep Tour." Behind her was parked a very military-looking black jeep with no roof. My heart sank — had I accidentally booked a tour in which the poor become the exotic wildlife on display?

"Here for the favela tour?" she asked.

I nodded.

"Room number?"

"I'm not staying here," I told her.

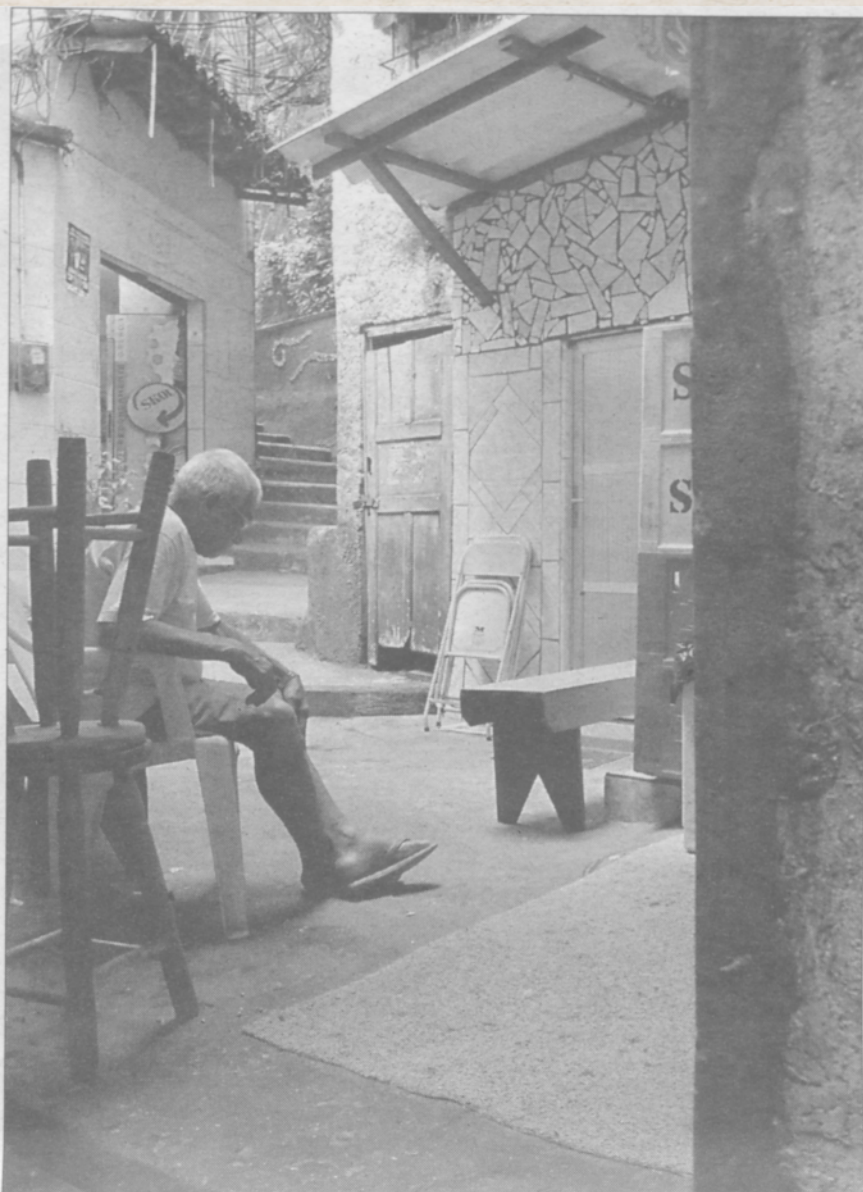
"Then you're with the other tour," she said.

The other tour guide, Alfredo, strolled in wearing surfer shorts and a red t-shirt, sporting a plaid Gilligan hat and Converse tennis shoes. I noted with relief that he looked like someone you could go skateboarding with and seemed no more at home at the Copacabana Palace than I was. His van carried a handful of people, Brits and Americans, a couple of Canadians. As we began the drive he told us about the two favelas we would visit: Rocinha, the largest favela in Rio, and the smaller Vila Canoas, home to a non-profit school called Para-ti. Even though Alfredo didn't belittle the other tour company, he made it clear that his operation was different. They invested thousands of dollars a year in Para-ti, he said, and a portion of the money tourists paid to go on the tour would go to residents of the favelas. They did not just drive around and look.

As we moved through the heat and crush of traffic, Alfredo gave us a quick history lesson. In the late 1800s, a group of soldiers and refugees from the Canudos Civil War set up an encampment on a hillside above the city. If the government couldn't house them, they would house themselves. The thorny-leaved, hardy favela plant growing on the hillside next to them was an apt metaphor for their own resiliency, so they christened their camp Morro do Favela, and the first favela was born.

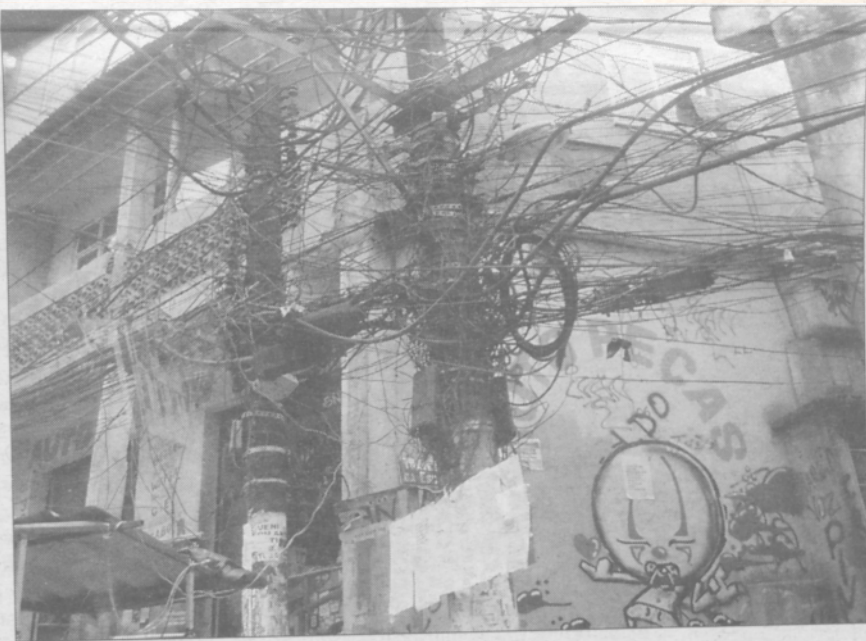
Alfredo said the current mayor of Rio, Eduardo Paes, and his public security officer, José Mariano Bletrame, had been aggressive in ordering dwellings in the favelas to be torn down, and people to be relocated.

"Two reasons," he said. "World Cup in 2014 and the Olympics in 2016." He told us there were already five favelas formerly ruled by druglords that had been taken over and were now run by the police. He was



PHOTOS BY BEN PARZYBOK.

Above, a man rests outside his apartment in the Vila Canoas favela. At right, the electrical grids in the favelas are a mish-mash of amateur wiring.



hopeful that change was on its way, but acknowledged that there would be many challenges.

"Brazil is a beautiful, beautiful country," he said. What most needed fixing was the social discrimination and disparity of wealth and educational opportunities for the people. "If they fixed these things, whoa, it is heaven," he said. "It becomes perfect."

The van entered Rocinha and it was as though we'd passed over an invisible line, with the sudden appearance of a giant pile of garbage. The streets were filled with people coming and going, and they paid

little attention to us. We pulled to a stop along the main road, and got out to look at the paintings and handmade jewelry for sale by residents of Rocinha. Alfredo had prepared us for this stop in the van, and reminded us that buying their work was an immediate way to help financially. The street we were on had the most developed infrastructure in Rocinha and allowed for garbage pickup, electricity, running water and sewer. But the further one ventured into the favela, the more it became a vast network of houses upon houses, accessible only by foot, tiny paths with no organized postal service and sewage that ran to an open ditch. He led us up the hill and through a garage to a balcony overlooking the valley, where we saw the mind-boggling sea of tiny apartments built one above the other, constructed of brick, wood, garbage, and tin, whatever people could find. It was a kind of architectural miracle. And nightmare. No wonder the landslides could be so devastating. In a few months, after heavy rains and flooding, a mudslide in the Morro Bumba favela would entirely cover more than sixty houses, as well as a daycare center, a church, a pizza parlor. More than two hundred people died.

"Follow me, guys," Alfredo said.

We took a walk through Rocinha and discovered a city within a city. Amid the graffiti-covered cinderblock walls and uneven sidewalks, a makeshift, improvised commerce thrived. At an Internet café, patrons sat on plastic chairs in front of computers. A man got a haircut at a barbershop, and tiny fans from the repair shop next door blew little black puffs of his hair into my path. A cat groomed itself next to an enormous pothole, and above it hung tiny wooden cages with bright flashes of colorful birds inside. An incredible network of tangled wires overhead was evidence of electrical wiring Alfredo said was tampered with by "gatos," or those who borrowed electricity without paying for it. Everywhere around us life crackled with energy. Rocinha boasted its own newspaper, banks, a radio station, video stores, beauty parlors. I stopped at a stall and bought shoelaces for my father.

The next favela we visited was quieter. In the dim, cool alleys of Vila Canoas we stepped down improbably steep steps, between the narrow corridors formed by the corners of apartments almost touching. The dark passageways featured tiny bars with friendly proprietors, one-room restaurants, and a small courtyard with bright murals painted by children. Up above, a group of policemen in matching gray uniforms ate lunches of meat, rice and black beans next to the "Bem Vindo (Welcome to) Vila Canoas," sign. Everywhere we went, the people greeted Alfredo warmly, joking with him and smiling at us, and it was a relief they did not view our visit as an intrusion on their privacy.

In the van on the way home, people were quiet. Alfredo said, "Well, guys, that's the tour. You now know more about favelas than most of the people living in Rio."

In a way, I understood this. In a city with such an overwhelming disparity between rich and poor, sometimes it must have been easier not to look. In fact there were plenty of warnings against looking. Warnings from the media, and from the U.S. State Department. Those who lived in the apartment complex warned me about the favelas before I went. Nobody should go there, they said. It's too dangerous. And so none of us goes, except the poor who can't afford to live anywhere else. Media

shapes our perceptions, and stokes our fears. And what develops is a fear also of poverty, of people who live in the slums, who have less. It is true that life in a favela can be miserable and fraught with danger. I'm not here to claim otherwise: that a druglord called Fernandinho doesn't dismember rival gang members, that police aren't executed and innocent people caught in the shoot-outs. All of that is probably true. But all of what I learned about and saw in the favelas is also true: There's a woman named Shayla who makes lovely necklaces and bracelets in Rocinha, and she will gladly sell them to you. Next to her, a handsome young kid will greet you and invite you to look at his colorful paintings. Down in the interior of Rocinha, there will be a stall that sells shoelaces, and a woman will greet you warmly and count change back into your hand.

No place is rotten to the core. In the most forsaken places, there will be a beauty parlor, an Internet café, people hurrying to a birthday party, balancing a cake on a bicycle. Their lives will be unfolding, small triumphs and some tragedy, whether or not anyone sees.

Incarceration

by Shannon Andrews

A thought for a thought
Time edges on the brinks of
The road like a ticking time bomb
Petrol fuel
infuses the brain of the mechanics of clockwork
Beginning inspirations
from day to day
it's a daily humdrum
of the cycle of life
Keep walking, stay alive