

# Latin American Borderlands: Exploring the Favelas of Rio de Janeiro

Rio de Janeiro is the second largest city in Brazil and holds a great amount of the country's new-found wealth gained from the many offshore oil and gas fields that have been discovered over the last fifteen years. It has also been a major point of international discussion in recent months as the world anticipates the 2014 World Cup and 2016 Olympics, both to be held in Rio de Janeiro. However, in the midst of such excitement and economic growth, this city is also home to hundreds of illegal tenement settlements known as *favelas*. Many of the Brazilians who live in these miserable conditions experience daily confrontation with crime and violence, with little to no intervention by authorities.

## Why are there so many favelas?



Squatter's rights in Brazil have made it easy for favelas to develop. Brazilian law allows a resident who has lived on a tract of land for five years to legally own that land. The steep hills that surround much of the coastal area in Brazil have become the home for many who live in destitute poverty, building their homes with materials that others have thrown away. Most of the people who build in the favelas bring arms to defend their

makeshift homes in hopes of surviving the time necessary to legitimize the settlement. However, if the land these neighborhoods are built on becomes desirable for any reason, they are shut down and residents are forced to pick up their lives and move to government housing facilities with conditions often worse than the favelas. If the residents are not forced to move, the businesses inside the favelas are often shut down, increasing unemployment and putting the favelados in an even worse position than they were already in.

## Rocinha Favela

Rocinha favela is the largest favela in Latin America with just over 300,000 inhabitants. Rocinha is one of the most famous favelas due to its size and location on the outskirts of Rio. The photo to the right gives good representation of the disparity that exists between the favelados and the middle and upper class Cariocas (citizens of Rio).



Rocinha is actually a relatively safe favela and tour companies have begun to explore the idea of ghetto-tourism, offering tours into Rocinha. An accessible location and has a comparatively low threat of violence. On the tours, the guides point out that many of these settlements are funded almost entirely by drug money. Water pipes, security, and other amenities are nearly all provided by drug lords that rule these marginalized societies (Williams). Some communities have embraced their drug trafficking rulers as necessary, and even helpful, as Officer Azeredo of Brazil states, "People who live with something bad for so long end up seeing it as something good since they don't know anything else" (Daniels). Yet these citizens, whether they

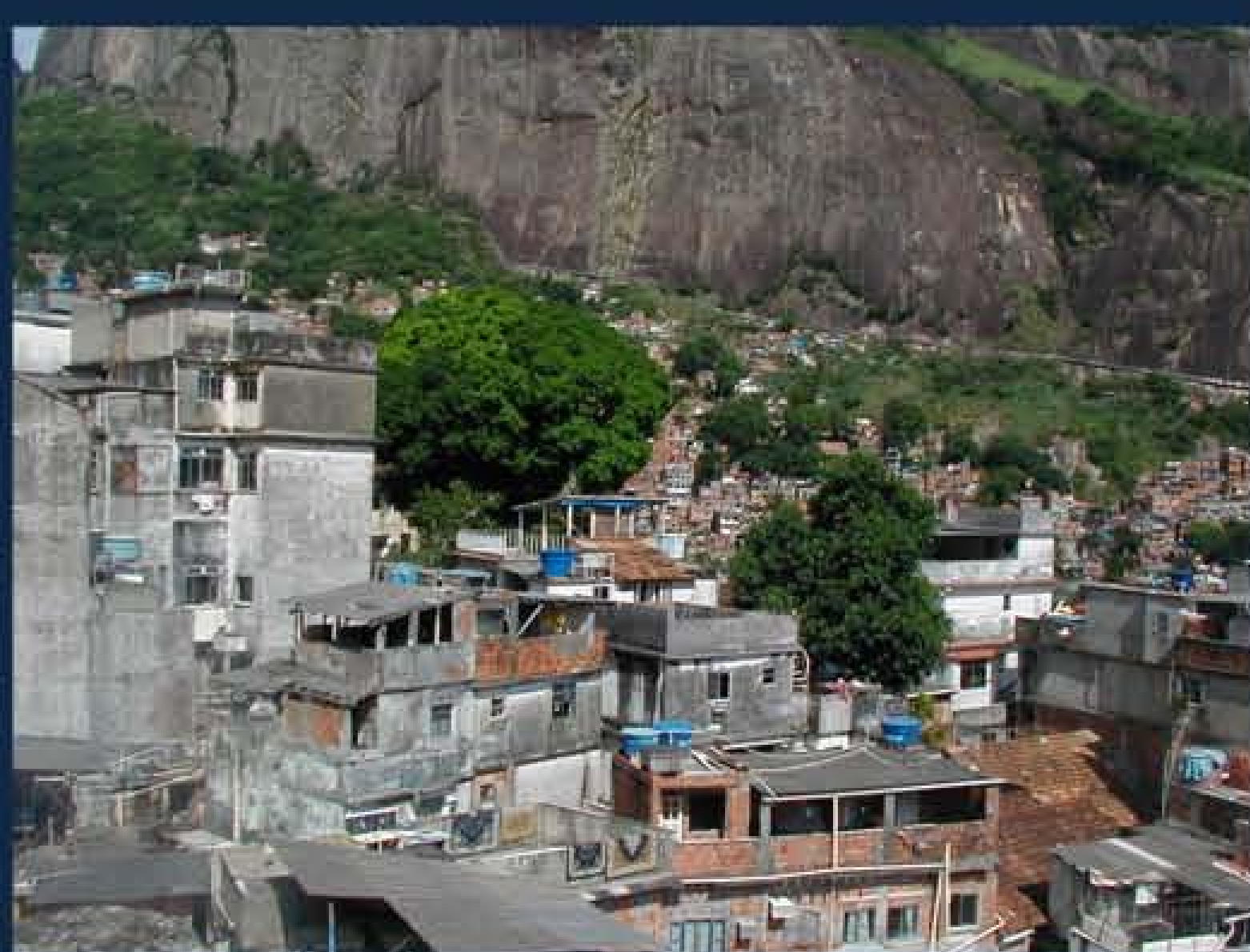


## Types of Favelas

There are two basic layouts, or types, of favelas. There are those built along steep hillsides, which have usually been deemed too dangerous to build on by contractors and city officials, and those built on fairly flat ground along the outer fringes of a large metropolitan area. The majority of favelas in Rio are of the first type, built on steep hillsides that have been left vacant by upper and middle class "Cariocas," citizens of Rio, who have opted to settle on the more stable ground within the valleys and along the beaches (Brazil, 2010). Jokes are often made that in Brazil, land ownership is the opposite of the norm; the poor have beautiful views off hillsides overlooking the ocean, while the rich live in the valleys with views of only their neighbors (Brazil, 2007).



## Favela Occupancy



Throughout the last fifty years, the population of these Favelas has grown at a greater rate than the city itself. In the decade between 1950 and 1960, which denotes the beginning of a marked global shift from rural to urban living, the growth rate of the city of Rio was 41.5%, a very high number in itself, while the favela growth rate within the city was a staggering 99.3% and the favelas have continued to grow at a greater pace than the rest of the city for

the past half century. From 1990 to 2000 the overall growth rate in Rio was only 6.9% but favela growth rate in the same area was 23.9% (Perlman). This extreme growth in favela occupancy has led to an increase in unemployment as well as other problems within the communities, including overcrowding and increased violence.

## Hope for the favelados

Within "Fome Zero," Brazil's zero hunger initiative, there is a program dedicated to improving education and providing incentives to families with children attending public schools called "Bolsa Familia," which provides stipends to families for each child who attends school and receives vaccinations. This program



has also evolved to greatly reduce the risk of corruption within the program by providing a "Citizen Card" to the female heads of households, which works like a debit card, instead of cash or checks used in the past, which made it impossible for the government to monitor where and how monies were used.