

RIO DE JANEIRO

Taking tourism to the edge

The slums of Rio are famous for violence, drugs and poverty. But some are far safer than the city centre – and offer visitors peerless views. *Tom Phillips* charts the rise of favela tourism

The crackle of gunfire fills the air as we make our way down the gloomy, winding alleyway. Clusters of black-clad police special forces crowd into the street, gibbering busily into two-way radios and scanning the surrounding streets for the enemy. We advance slowly and the piercingly loud shots continue. Children scurry past, apparently oblivious to the noise.

Even in the notoriously violent city of Rio de Janeiro, this isn't the average hotel reception. But then the Maze is no ordinary hotel.

Lodged deep in the Tavares Bastos favela high above the city's glitzy South Zone, the Maze is one of several swanky shantytown hotels opening their doors to foreign visitors this year. With breathtaking views of the raucous cityscape below, the hotels provide front-row seats from which to take

in the New Year fireworks or escape the relentless hedonism of the city's annual carnival, which is expected to attract no fewer than 700,000 tourists when it begins later this month.

One of the gatekeepers to this hidden world is Bob Nadkarni, an eccentric Englishman and former war correspondent who swapped Beirut for the slums of Rio in the early eighties. On arriving in the city, Nadkarni immediately fell in love with the hilltop slums that litter Rio's undulating landscape. He soon hatched a plan to build a hotel there with his Brazilian wife. Twenty years later his dreams had become reality, though perhaps not quite as he had imagined.

"Don't mind the noise chaps," he quips as a police squad files past, ushering us into his towering mansion, which doubles as the Maze.



Built from undulating sweeps of white concrete, intended to mimic Rio's rolling hills, the hotel towers above the rest of the city, providing a stunning viewpoint from which to survey Sugar Loaf mountain and the glistening Guanabara Bay which fans across the horizon.

The 14 double rooms, filled with an array of curious antique furniture, back onto spacious patios on which visitors can take in the sun while sipping Brazil's lime-soaked national drink, the caipirinha. The weekly barbecues organised by Nadkarni and his wife, meanwhile, are becoming legendary across the city.

"Do I miss anything about Britain?" he asks, guiding us around the hotel's roomy corridors. "Well ... Indian food, definitely."

At times Tavares Bastos can be a noisy community, not least due to Nadkarni's deep, booming voice. But in Rio it is as safe

as they come. Known as a comando azul (blue command) slum, it is controlled by the police rather than drug traffickers, unlike many of the 800 or so favelas spread around the city. Twice a week, special forces use its labyrinthine alleys as a training ground, rehearsing their battle routines – although fortunately only with blanks. Many of the Brazilian United Nations peace-keeping troops currently stationed in the slums of Haiti were trained here.

A stay at the Maze provides a noisy but fascinating insight into the conflict-ridden underbelly of what is known here as the cidade maravilhosa (marvellous city), and the seductive slopes of Tavares Bastos attract visitors from all over the world. Nadkarni is playing host to one guest from Holland, two Germans and two Danes – all have been there for three months.

The favelas have a central role in the



recent history of Rio. The first shanty town, Providência, sprang up in 1897, as homeless soldiers flocked back from the battle of Canudos in the north-east of Brazil.

During the thirties and forties, dozens more favelas appeared, as Rio's wealthy middle and upper classes searched for a low-cost workforce to build the luxurious apartment blocks that now tower over the South Zone beaches. Fresh off the trucks that had brought them thousands of miles from home, many of the nordestinos – the penniless construction workers who poured in from the rural north-east – set up camp where they could: in the favelas. Even today, buses run by specialist operators make the treacherous 40-hour journey from the interior direct to the favelas, bringing thousands of immigrants every year.

Around 20% of the city's population now lives in the favelas but despite – or perhaps

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because of – their size, the slum districts are often seen as no-go zones to outsiders. Many are controlled by heavily armed teenage drug traffickers, while 20 or so are in active conflict, with three rival cocaine factions engaged in a bloody turf war that claims thousands of young lives each year. It is not uncommon to see automatic rifles on the streets of the favelas, where the flip-flop-wearing traficantes are often better armed than the police.

But if Brazilians have continually sought to ignore the favelas, the outside world has been fascinated by them for decades. These shanty towns have been on the tourist map since the eighties, when the guidebooks timidly suggested taking a bus ride past the sprawling red-brick communities scattered across the lush hilltops.

Awareness of the favelas was raised by the 2002 film *Cidade de Deus* (City of God),

Young cariocas play near one of the many churches in the favelas. Climbing the steep hillsides to reach the slums is said to be more perilous than facing the rifle-carrying drug gangs that loiter on the street corners. Picture: Douglas Engle

based on Paulo Lins's disturbing novel, set in the slum of the same name.

These days, hordes of 4x4s stream up their vertiginous slopes each day, giving tourists a fleeting glimpse of favela life, where an estimated 1.1 million cariocas (residents of Rio) scrape by, surrounded by open sewers and armed drug traffickers.

There is, though, another side to slum life, rarely glimpsed in the headlines. It is the world of the spontaneous samba de roda – an improvised musical circle –

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Rio bursts into gaudy colour during the carnival every spring, top. City of God, above, gave a grim account of the city's slums, but hotels such as the Maze in Tavares Bastos, right, offer a tranquil experience of the favelas. Pictures: Antonia Scorza/AFP/Getty/Douglas Engle



which animates the small, meticulously stocked street-corner bars all year round. This is a world of affectionately shouted conversations that drift through the shady alleyways day and night; of intense religiosity and solidarity; and of curious, smiling children fascinated by the gangly gringo in their community.

With several hotels like the Maze now established in the favelas, tourists have begun to experience these brighter sides of slum life. Last month a bed and breakfast opened in the Babilônia favela above Copacabana, while not far from Tavares Bastos, nestled above the upper-class apartments of Laranjeiras, another favela pousada, or hostel, opened last year.

The Favelinha – little shanty town – is a three-storey building teetering at the peak of Pereirão, another hilltop shanty town which began life as a quilombo, an autonomous community set up by fleeing slaves. Founded by Andréia da Silva Martins and her German ex-husband Holger Zimmerman, the Favelinha was booked solidly last summer and now has reservations stretching well into the spring.

Voyeurs hoping for a glimpse of the cocaine trade won't find it in Pereirão –

police closed down the drug gangs there six years ago. Since then, the worst dangers have been the sporadic dog waste that litters the winding stairwells and the bloodthirsty mosquitoes that descend at night. Here you're more likely to hear the varied bird life twittering in the Atlantic rainforest that engulfs the shanty town, and perhaps the occasional cock heralding the new day,

than gunshots. "Thank God none of that exists here any more," says Andréia. She is standing on the pousada's rooftop veranda, which by day becomes a makeshift sun deck for her clients, who come from as far away as Switzerland and France.

"Visitors don't need to worry. There's no way the old problems will come back," she explains confidently. "It's much safer for

tourists here than in Copacabana. Here there is no way you'll have your wallet snatched by a pivete [pickpocket] like down there."

With the new hotels opening, favela tourism as a whole is undergoing a facelift. Rio's authorities recently invested R\$14.3m (£3.6m) in the creation of an open-air museum in Providência, which focuses on the area's historical ties to slavery and its role in the history of samba, rather than its cocaine-related infamy.

Other tours of Rio's slums now seek to show off their historical charms rather than focusing on their poverty. Marcia Regina Alves da Silva is one of the guiding spirits behind this movement, battling to turn Rio's oldest slum into the city's principal tourist attraction. As the president of the residents association in the Morro da Providência, she has taken it upon herself to whisk foreign visitors up the slum's steep inclines in search of Brazil's past.

"They [the tourists] can't believe how much history there is up here," says da Silva, outside the colonial-style home of samba queen Dodô da Portela, which has been turned into a museum as part of the project.

Several "soldiers" from the local drugs

TRAVEL NOTES

How to get there:

Air France flies from Aberdeen to Rio de Janeiro from £450 return. Call 0845 0845 111 or visit www.airfrance.co.uk. Lufthansa flies from Edinburgh to Rio de Janeiro from £767 return. Call 020 8750 3460 or visit www.lufthansa.com

Where to stay:

The Favelinha, a pousada in the Pereirão favela, has double rooms with private balconies from R\$75 (£20) a night. The Favelinha offers an airport pick-up service. Visit www.favelinha.com or e-mail info@favelinha.com

The Maze hotel in the Tavares Bastos favela on the hilltops over Catete has double rooms from R\$60 (£16) per night including breakfast. For carnival and New Year it offers a five-night package for two people at R\$600 (£157). Call 0055 212 558 5547 or e-mail malunadkarni@yahoo.com.br

Other information:

To organise a tour of the Providência favela, write in the first instance to Marcia Regina Alves da Silva, Morro da Providência Residents Association, Rua Barão da Gamboa, 21, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, or call 0055 219 395 8923.



faction slump against the street corner, cracking jokes. One of them, carrying an automatic rifle in one hand and a carton of washing powder in the other, smiles as we pass.

"Don't worry about them – they don't bother anyone," says da Silva. "It's the stairs you need to worry about."

Providência is immersed in history. The staircase leading up into its main square was built by slaves in the 19th century and its church, the Igreja de Nossa Senhora da Penha, balanced on the favela's peak, features religious imagery from the 18th century. From here, there's an unrivalled view over the Sambodromo stadium, due to erupt with percussion and strobe lights when the carnival begins on February 21.

"It is basically an open-air museum," explains an out-of-breath da Silva, as we reach the first of four viewpoints on the fringe of the community.

"You can see the four corners of Rio from up here. People down there can't imagine what it is like." She is visibly exhausted from the climb.

"They have the impression the favela is just a place of violence and poverty," she stutters, "but just look at all this."



The favelas of Rio grew on the hillsides above districts such as Catete and Copacabana as poor construction workers arrived from outlying areas.

WHAT IT FEELS LIKE TO ...



Swim on the brink of Victoria Falls

Would I have taken the plunge if the temperature hadn't hit 48°C? If I hadn't seen the British ambassador, dripping but composed, climbing back into his pinstripe trousers? If a family member had been around to tell me to act my age? Probably. I now realise the urge to get intimate with Victoria Falls had been germinating for years.

How do you swim on the brim of the world's widest curtain of falling water without plopping over its 330ft drop? When the Zambezi is in full flood, you can see little but spray – known as "the smoke that thunders". By the end of the dry season the water level has fallen, the tower of spray dwindles and the curtain parts between the main cataracts to expose the cliffs.

Which are fearsome enough. I first saw them from the Zimbabwe side and watched, transfixed, as half a dozen people in swimsuits picked their way across Livingstone Island, disappeared at the top of the precipice and reappeared to lean their elbows on a ledge overhanging the drop. "Who are these idiots?" I asked myself. I'm about to become one of them.

The Zambia-Zimbabwe border places two-thirds of the falls in Zambia's stewardship, and Livingstone Island is a World Heritage Site run by a celebrated lodge called Tongabezi, which controls visits to the island. On my first visit to the Zambian side the current was too strong to do "the Devil's Pool swim" but I inspected the route, a channel of about 10 yards between Livingstone Island and an islet on the brink.

Ten months later, at the end of the dry season, I'm back, on the 150th anniversary of the day when David Livingstone saw the Zambezi. The commemorative events – hence the ambassador's presence – include a lunch party on Livingstone Island and an invitation to bring swimsuits. James, the Tongabezi guide, leads volunteers in parties of four into the water, where I feel a modest tug of current and minnows nibbling my legs. The edge of the falls is only a few feet away but I keep my eye on James and find the swim easy. The barefoot totter across rocks to the Devil's Pool is more difficult, but I'm so excited I ignore the stab in my foot.

Then we slip into the death-defying swimming hole, which is deep enough to allow James to demonstrate his diving skills. Heart fibrillating, I clutch the narrow wall of rock which is the only restraint between me and the Boiling Pot below, and peer into the void. The wind pushes the current, which playfully hints it might enjoy tipping me over. But by this time I'm daft with delight. It's only when I see gobbets of blood on the rocks I realise I've gashed my foot. The scar remains, a badge of honour. I quite enjoy the thought that I've left some of my blood on the cusp of Victoria Falls.

JULIE DAVIDSON