

FAVELA TOURISM IN RIO HIT BY INCREASED VIOLENCE



During the Rio Carnival of 2018 taking place between 9th and 19th of February many tourists who come to enjoy the 'Marvelous City' may wonder if visiting some of the poorest neighborhoods will be possible without being at risk. While favela tourism has grown steadily in popularity, the tourist safety is not that secured.

Thousands of tourists from all over the world have arrived to Rio de Janeiro to join the festivities of the famous annual carnival. **Many of the visitors however plan to explore the possibilities of favela tourism and explore the curiously self-built housing structures in the poorest slums of the city**, right next to the neighboring market and its street food fairs.

Tourist safety however is an important question when joining these special Rio tours. Visiting the favelas can be quite dangerous compared to sightseeing in other neighborhoods in the city, but many organized tours take place there with no incidents.

In any case, the rise in violence is not evident only in the poor communities. In January, there were 500 shootings in Rio, according to the 'OTT' Application that keeps track of these incidents. Many locals report that they rather stay at home at night because they are afraid of violence.

Since 2014, the situation in the favelas near the tourist districts of Rio has worsened. In 2016 and right after the Olympic Games, it became even more troublesome, and in recent months the shootings incidents have spiked in favelas where people could live with relative peacefulness, that used to be even quieter than some of the city's downtown neighborhoods.

There is hardly any trace left of the peace dream that seemed to take off back in 2008, with the ongoing installation of fixed police stations in the favelas through the project of the Pacifying Police Units (UPP) to recover territories lost to drug trafficking.

Out of the nine favelas with the highest shooting incidents in the city, four have UPP, and it's symbolic that the most affected one by the clashes between drug dealers and police units (with 41 registered shootings) is Cidade de Deus [City of God], considering that a police intervention in 2009 managed to secure a truce for a few years and seemed to leave behind a tumultuous period, masterfully recorded in the film named after the favela, in 2003.

The sound of gunfire is heard again in favelas like Vidigal, known as the "cool favela", scenery for recording music video clips, and home of fewer and fewer students, as well as middle class workers who won't or can't pay the prices of better neighborhoods in the city.

The charm of small town at the foot of a rocky and jungle mountain, with exceptional views to the Atlantic, loses its appeal in a favela where violence rises again after years of peace.

Today, the main danger of visiting a favela is not being assaulted, an incident that is probably less likely there than in any other neighborhood. The drug dealers impose as a law that there will be no robberies inside their community in the favela, since their business is strictly drug trafficking, and any robbery or assault near their homes can scare away potential foreign consumers.

If a drug dealer or a policeman sees you walking around wearing expensive European clothing on the streets of the neighborhood, it is more likely that he will first ask you to identify yourself. However, if the person is in the middle of a tense confrontation between factions, or during a police operation, their response to your presence may be unpredictable, or even be unfavorable.

That is the main danger in the favelas, even more than a voluntary assault against you: the fact that you find yourself in the middle of a confrontation and get hit by a stray bullet, as it happened a few months ago to a female Spanish tourist, who was killed by a policeman in the Rocinha.

That is why Riotur, the municipal agency that manages the city's tourism, recommends that any visit to the favelas should "be done with tourist guides registered through the Ministry of Tourism."

According to Ritour on an official tour, the visitors are safe although they recommend "paying attention to the news, since, like any other country, we are not free from violent incidents."

Although the trends of each neighborhood point to more or less safe places, it is impossible to predict when an armed incident may begin or end. Between 2008 and 2013, despite some early failures and criticism among neighbors and peace activists, the initial phase for the implementation of the UPP's seemed to succeed: the armed drug dealers stopped being present in the streets of several favelas and, in return, the number of incidents and homicides decreased.

The goal of the project was clear: to minimize the collateral damage of police operations by replacing them with a constant presence of police officers in areas where drug trafficking was prominent, prioritizing the expulsion of the drug dealer from his territory over his detention, which could pose a risk for civilians. The project began with the most iconic favelas and those closest to the tourist neighborhoods.

But in 2014, the UPPs already showed signs of exhaustion: the police lost what little legitimacy they had by murdering innocents (even children) in allegedly 'pacified' favelas, and the drug dealers executed raids in some of these to regain the territory. With the relapse of the economic crisis in 2016, the funds for armament and police operations diminished.

And in a system already destroyed by corruption and precariousness, the economic blow was fatal: to this day, few favelas are safe from the wave of violence and confrontations among different drug trafficking factions, between these groups and the police, or even against the militias, as the new violent renegade groups are known, composed by both members and former members of the police units, as they spread terror by illegally collecting a tax in exchange for the civilians' protection.

The shadow of violence has never left Rio, but in the recent months, the danger has been increasing compared to the previous years when it seemed to stabilize. **Tourist safety is thus much less secured than before.**

This trend naturally negatively affects the favelas and favela tourism. For most of the two million inhabitants approximately, that live in the favelas of Rio, the caution and extra care is part of their daily routine; whether they are about to leave their house, or even when relaxing on the sofa.

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