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Rio's hidden trail reveals breathtaking views and economic hope

In Rio de Janeiro, tourism has been hit hard by the coronavirus pandemic, but neighbourhood guides are showing locals and tourists a new side to the city.



Rio de Janeiro's Babilonia neighbourhood may be a far cry from the ancient city of Babylon after which it was named, but the shantytown boasts its own lost hanging gardens and breathtaking views of the city [Credit: Monica Yanakiew/Al Jazeera]

By **Monica Yanakiew**

15 Jan 2021



Rio de Janeiro, Brazil – There were no fireworks on Copacabana Beach to ring in the New Year, and Carnival festivities have already been suspended. These are just some of the ways Rio, known as Brazil's "Marvelous City", has been stripped of its joy and wonder by the COVID-19 crisis.

Brazil recently marked a grim milestone in its battle with the coronavirus: more than 200,000 people have died, giving the South American nation the second-highest death toll in the world after the United States.

But amid the dark headlines, one Rio de Janeiro favela seems to be benefitting from the pandemic by nurturing tourism in its back yard.

The Babilonia neighbourhood may be a far cry from the ancient city of Babylon after which it was named, but the shantytown boasts its own lost hanging gardens.

It's a modern-day marvel that Brazilians and foreigners are discovering thanks to the coronavirus – and it's helping locals put food on the table during uncertain economic times and a record-high 14.6 percent unemployment rate.

“When the pandemic began, national parks were closed and beaches were off limits, so people started looking for places to exercise safely outdoors,” activist Adriano da Silva told Al Jazeera.

“Suddenly, there were 60 or 70 people showing up here, wandering around Babilonia’s hidden forest trails, not knowing what dangers they may face,” he said.



Tour guide Adriano da Silva is one of the activists transforming the trails in his neighbourhood into a paradise for hikers during the pandemic [Credit: Monica Yanakiew/Al Jazeera]

Like many of Rio’s favelas, Babilonia and neighbouring Chapeu da Mangueira sprung up at the foot of a mountain with lush vegetation.

Above the neighbourhoods, a four-kilometre circular forest trail passes through six different lookouts that boast some of the city's most breathtaking views.

Hikers can take in a panorama of green hills, blue seas and white sandy beaches while listening to chirping birds or being watched by cautious tribes of small monkeys.

The two-hour hike also features bunkers built by the army to defend what used to be the Brazilian capital after the country joined the Allied forces in World War II.

But local residents like da Silva want hikers to enjoy the area safely.

"What most tourists don't know is that there is another war going on here. Drug gangs sometimes fight for territory in the forest or use it as an escape route from the police," he explained. "It's only safe to hike here if you go with a local guide — and that is where we stepped in."

Local guides

Resident associations from both favelas teamed up with the police to create their own tourism agency, Amastour.

Amastour guides not only know the trails, but also how to keep hikers safe.

Tour guide Milena Costa used to work in a hotel before COVID-19 forced it to close. It was only one of 50,000 Brazilian tourist establishments that went out of business between March and August of 2020, according to a study by the National Confederation of Commerce, Services and Tourism.

"I consider myself to be among the lucky few who were able to find work. I have a four-year-old son to feed and food prices have gone up," Costa told Al Jazeera.



Beaches are now packed with people who act as if the pandemic has ended, and I needed someplace safe to exercise with my daughter outdoors. I never thought I would find the safety I was looking for in a forest behind a slum.

MARIA APARECIDA FONTES, HIKER

Every weekend, when it's not raining, she leads 60 to 70 people up the Babilonia trail. Many are Rio residents themselves, like Maria Aparecida Fontes, who has lived in the city for the past 30 years but never thought of exploring the mountain overlooking Copacabana.

“I used to stick to the beach, but the pandemic changed my habits,” Fontes, who works as a receptionist in a vaccine research centre, told Al Jazeera.

“Beaches are now packed with people who act as if the pandemic has ended, and I needed someplace safe to exercise with my daughter outdoors,” she explained. “I never thought I would find the safety I was looking for in a forest behind a slum.”

Costa said that aside from leading tourists like Fontes up the Babilonia trail, “the prospects for 2021 are looking pretty grim.”

“At least I have something to rely on, unlike millions who were left unemployed and depended solely on the emergency aid, which has just been discontinued,” Costa said.



Tour guide Milena Costa leads a group of hikers along Babilonia's trail [Credit: Monica Yanakiew/Al Jazeera]

Hard times

In January, the government of President Jair Bolsonaro pulled the plug on financial emergency aid it had been providing to some 68 million Brazilians since the beginning of the pandemic.

At the time, the benefits reached 60 percent of Brazil's population, reducing the number of people in poverty to a historic low of 50 million, according to the Getulio Vargas Foundation, a Brazilian think-tank.

But without those benefits, millions will slip back into poverty.

“Brazil's handouts during the pandemic have been, until now, among the most generous,” Marcelo Neri, an economist at the Getulio Vargas Foundation, told Al Jazeera.

“In nine months, the government spent the same amount as in nine years of the Bolsa Familia [Family Grant] social assistance programme,” he added. “But the money has run out, and this year 16 million Brazilians will return to poverty.”



When the pandemic began, national parks were closed and beaches were off limits, so people started looking for places to exercise safely outdoors.

ADRIANO DA SILVA, ACTIVIST AND TOUR GUIDE

Not far from Babilonia, another mountain hosts the Santa Marta favela. Until the pandemic, Thiago Firminio made a living taking tourists to the spot where Michael Jackson filmed his music video for the song They Don't Care About Us 25 years ago.

A bronze statue now stands where Jackson danced with local residents — but the place itself is empty.

“We used to receive many tourists and Michael Jackson fans, but the coronavirus hit us very hard,” Firminio told Al Jazeera. “Most people here depend on emergency aid. People lost their jobs but had money to spend in the local commerce, and that at least kept us going.”

Aside from surging COVID-19 cases and a record level of unemployment, Brazilians also grapple with high inflation.

Prices of staples like black beans, cooking oil and rice have increased up to 30 percent.

“I honestly don't know how we'll survive with no work, no money and no vaccine,” Bruna Ferreira told Al Jazeera. The Santa Marta resident lost her job in a store at the beginning of the pandemic.

Compared to Santa Marta and other shantytowns in Rio de Janeiro, Babilonia is a small miracle.

Tour guides charge \$2 to accompany visitors on the trail, and the number of clients is steadily growing.

“After the tour, people hang around and end up eating at our local restaurants and getting to know the neighbourhood. Some are even booking places in our hostels,” da Silva said.

Many Brazilians fear Latin America's largest economy may be on a downhill path as it lags behind its neighbours like Argentina and Chile in vaccinating people against COVID-19.

But for those enthusiastic explorers seeking a respite from the chaos of the city below, a trek to Babilonia's hanging gardens provides both a breath of fresh air — and a sight for sore eyes.