

Sinéad's Travel Journal – Volume II

“I really enjoyed our few short days back in Lima because it gave me the opportunity to visit old friends and, especially, the school where I worked this spring. Peru is a wonderful country with a rich but often heart-wrenching history. Unfortunately, the children at the school where I worked, officially called "7230," are still living with the effects of that turbulent history. They are second and third generation internally displaced persons (IDPs, sometimes referred to as "domestic refugees") living on top of a former Lima dump. Their school is known in the community as "Flores de Villa" or "Flowers of the Town," a sadly ironic name for a school in the middle of a desert with no running water and almost no plant life in walking distance. The children, however, are amazingly resilient and were a joy to work with everyday. I miss them all so much and was very excited to go back to the school.

Unfortunately, January is the middle of the summer holidays in Peru so there weren't many children around but I was able to see the mountain of work that has gone on since I left in June. While I was at the school, the local NGO that organizes the international volunteers (INTEJ) brought running water to the school for the first time. The majority of the homes there are no more than cardboard, metal and wood scraps leaned together so the school is the only place that the children have running water. While I was at the school, I worked with a Peruvian volunteer to start a physical education program, which led to the Peruvian government hiring a permanent teacher. We were also able to raise enough funds to complete the school library. With the help of my family and friends both in the US and Ireland and the family and friends of a Swedish volunteer we raised enough money to finish the construction of the building, fill it with schoolbooks, and build a play area for the kindergarten-aged children. I had to leave before construction was complete so it was wonderful to go back and see the amazing progress. Today, the library is the only building in the school that is a permanent structure, but the school hopes to be able to build one classroom each year with the help of volunteers. Due to the amazing advances that the school has made in the last two years with the help of INTEJ and volunteers, the Peruvian government recently installed electricity for the school. Hopefully, the progress will continue because with 800 students in 18 makeshift classrooms, public school 7230 "Flores de Villa" needs permanent buildings, schoolbooks for all the children and more teachers.

From Peru we traveled on to Brazil where we visited Sao Paulo, Rio de Janeiro and Ilha Grande. Although we spent a little over two weeks there, the two most famous cities are only 9 hours away from one another and that distance is nothing in a country as massive as Brazil! Sao Paulo was very much a working city, with not much tourist infrastructure and a very high crime rate. This is a shame because there is a great variety of architecture, some nice pedestrian areas and a lovely rainforest park in the financial center. Due to the crime problems we moved on to Rio de Janeiro after a couple of days and were pleasantly surprised by the difference. Perhaps just to show us how wrong a judgment of a city can be, it was in Rio that we were robbed ... twice. Fortunately, we caught the first person trying to go through our backpack on a bus and nothing was taken. The second theft, however, was successful - somebody copied Andrew's ATM card - but,

fortunately, his bank reimbursed him. What is a world trip without at least one theft, right?

Other than the minor setbacks, we loved Rio. We were there right before Carnival and were able to go see one of the samba schools practice in the Carnival stadium, the Sambodromo. The music, colors and dancers were incredible but the crowd was even better! Although it was just a practice, all the fans were out in their supporting colors, singing along to the song and challenging the supporters of the other school practicing that night. The stands were packed and the atmosphere gave us a taste of what Carnival in Rio is like. Likewise, the atmosphere in Maracana stadium for the soccer match we went to was amazing. We saw one of the most popular Rio teams play, Flamengo, against a second tier team but the fans were no less invested in the outcome. The stadium, which held 200,000 people for Pele's last game was more than half full on that Wednesday night. Everyone seemed to have flags, team jerseys, costumes and fireworks. We had a great time as the Cariocas (people from Rio de Janeiro) around us welcomed our participation in Portuguese songs to which we didn't know the words and the general festivities as Flamengo trounced their rivals.

The beaches definitely live up to their worldwide reputation and the views of Rio from Corcovado and Pao de Sugar certainly make the case for it being one of the world's most beautiful cities - at least from above. Even the favelas [shanty towns] look beautiful from a distance with their brightly colored homes climbing the hills around the city. The city has a pulsating beat that is always on the move except no one ever seems to be in a hurry and there is always time for a caipirinha or guarana on the beach. The restaurants and bars of Copacabana and Ipanema provided nightly entertainment and a welcome relief from the humid 100 degree days. Behind the tourist havens of Ipanema and Copacabana are the other areas of Rio, some of which only come to life at night when samba street parties go from 11pm until the sun rises. Other neighborhoods, including the favelas, are very dangerous and did not make our list of places to see. Some tour agencies and hostels in Rio charge tourists to walk them through the favelas, so that they can see the "real" Rio, but it felt contrived so we gave that a pass.

We finished off our trip to Brazil with a week on a tropical island, Ilha Grande. We figured we would enjoy the beaches, go to different spots on the island by boat, do some snorkeling and generally enjoy the gorgeous weather before we headed to Europe in the winter. It rained every day that we were there. We enjoyed our stay regardless and still managed to sneak in some snorkeling.

From here, we head to Europe for two and a half months. We're really looking forward to the next phase of our trip and will be sure to keep you updated!"