Episode 118: Colonial Cities

Summary

Nick and Wendy continue their trip in Brazil and visit three colonial cities in the northeast of the country: São Luís, Recife and Olinda. They talk about their experiences in each city.

Transcript

Nick: Today Wendy and I are talking about colonial cities. There are, of course, many colonial cities which were built by European powers on other continents. And we've obviously seen many of them in Spanish America and even in Africa and Asia as well. Uhh, but we were particularly interested to see colonial cities in the Brazilian context, because the coloniser is Portugal and that's where we live, and also because as we talked about last time, we were a little bit disappointed with Brasília and we were looking to get back to something that we thought was the real Brazil.

Wendy: Yeah, or at least something closer to our idea of what Brazil is like.

Nick: And so we travelled to the northeast of Brazil, and in particular we visited three colonial towns: São Luís, Recife and Olinda. And they're all quite different in their own way, even within that category of being a so-called colonial town or a colonial city. And so it will be interesting just to talk a little bit about each of them and compare them.

Wendy: Mmm-hmm. Yeah, so São Luís was the first one that we visited, and that one is the one that … where you can see the mark of the Portuguese the strongest. Honestly, sometimes it felt like I was back in Lisbon. The architecture is so similar, all of the buildings are covered in azulejos, which are the famous tiles that you can see all over Portugal. And definitely Lisbon is a great example of that. And, yeah, it was really very much like Lisbon. It was a bit more run-down and, you know, kind of, umm, not kept up that well. A lot of the buildings were, umm, in poor repair and could … definitely needed to be renovated. But to be honest, there are a lot of buildings like that in Lisbon too, even now - much more so the first time that I visited Lisbon 20 years ago. And there's been lots of renovation in the past few years, but you still see a lot of buildings that, umm, you know, that are abandoned and haven't been maintained. And so that was definitely what São Luís reminded me of.

Nick: Yeah, São Luís is not very well known, or I don't think it's that well visited, certainly by foreign tourists. Brazilian tourists do tend to go there a little bit more

because it's close to a particular natural sight that's very popular, that they like to visit, but they tend to stay outside of the colonial centre of São Luís and don't think that much of it, but gosh, I loved it. It felt like Portugal, as you said, but it also felt, umm, more like, uhh, a Caribbean city. I just loved walking around it. A lot of the colonial centre is residential, so it's not these enormous palaces and churches, although there were a couple of those. But there are several streets where you just walk down and there are just these one or two-storey houses and they were just so charming, and the whole place was just so charming. In this way that it was run-down like you said but in a … not in a way that made it ugly or that made it seem dangerous or anything like that, but just this kind of faded way, umm, that made you realise that the heyday[1] of the city was probably a couple of hundred years ago and the world has kind of passed it by, but yet it just still retains all of this charm. So when you walk down these residential streets, you see, uhh, men playing board games on the side of the road. Umm, the old men like to play checkers and the younger men like to play dominoes. And then you see these women just kind of chatting outside their door and outside their windows and they just kind of while away[2] their afternoon like that and it's just really appealing to see it. It's just … there just seems to be a bit of old world aspect to it. Umm, and I think they probably thought it was strange that I was walking around taking photos and thinking that this was great, umm, where it's just their daily life. But it just … there was just something about it that in our modern world with all of our electronics and all this kind of stuff, it just, umm, had a great appeal for me.

Wendy: Yeah, there's definitely a slower pace of life there. And it is a place that, I'd say, was much more important, you know, in a different period in history, a few hundred years ago. Umm, now it's become kind of a sleepy backwater[3] that's kind of forgotten. So it is this really interesting contrast to see these formerly, you know, important buildings that have, like I said, kind of fallen into disrepair. But I agree that that is really a big part of a the charm of the place. And if everything was completely renovated and, you know, shiny and new, it wouldn't have the same appeal that it does.

Nick: Yeah, not at all. And - who knows? - maybe in 10 years, that's be what it'll be like. But, yeah, you walk down these streets and you see a building and you think, 'Oh, this could do with a new coat of paint, or, uhh, there's a, you know, the wooden bar on the window is broken, maybe they should fix that.' And then you think, 'No, it actually looks really nice the way it is.' Umm, just kind of, uhh, left to gently decay[4], uhh, I think is a decent way to put it. Uhh, and so we loved it, we were there for six days and we just kind of walked around and spoke to some people and just had a really nice time there.

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[1] heyday: high point, peak

[2] while away: cause time to pass, usually in a pleasant way

[3] backwater: unimportant and/or peaceful place

[4] decay (verb or noun): decline, deteriorate

Wendy: Yeah, we had a daily date with the sunset. Umm, we had our favourite little bar right on the water and we would go there, uhh, every evening to have a drink and watch the sunset, sometimes over the water and sometimes not, because interestingly, uhh, there are huge variations in the <u>tides</u>[5] in São Luís. So the first day that we arrived, umm, you could see that the tide was out and that there wasn't that much water in the bay but as we sat there and watched the sun go down, the tide was coming in. And so by the time it was time for the sunset, the bay was filled up with water. But every day that we went, uhh, the tide went further and further out. And so eventually there wasn't any water, uhh, which was an interesting aspect, something that you don't see that often. Uhh, but, yeah, we really loved it, we loved, yeah, the slow pace of life and just, uhh, wandering around and soaking it up.

Nick: Right. And so from São Luís, we travelled to Recife on another overnight bus. And Recife is a very large city with, uhh, this colonial centre, umm, which is actually on an island, called Recife Antigo, and that's where we stayed. And it was a different feel, you had the idea that probably 10 years ago, Recife Antigo was really dangerous and nobody went there at all. Umm, but now there's a large police presence which keeps the peace there and they're renovating a lot of the old buildings, and so the kind of activity that's not really happening at all in São Luís is starting to happen in Recife Antigo, that it's starting to get kind of <u>gentrified</u>[6] and built up for tourism.

Wendy: Yeah, gentrified is a good word, I would say. And, yeah, there was a lot of activity there, especially on Sunday. I would say that if you're going, Sunday is the best day to go, because, uhh, they block off all of the streets to traffic, so everything is pedestrianised, and there's lots of musical groups, drumming bands and things that are performing around the city and the streets. And lots of people around. Umm, it seems to be becoming popular with Brazilian tourists. We still didn't see very many foreign tourists, I don't think the word has really gotten out yet that Recife Antigo, the old town of Recife, has been <u>refurbished</u>[7] and it's a safe place and a fun place to go. I don't think, umm, foreign tourists really know too much about it, but, uhh, the domestic tourists are starting <u>to catch on</u>[8].

Nick: Yeah, and the reason is that the third of our towns, which is Olinda, is actually now within the city boundaries of Recife. And it's actually only about seven kilometres from Recife Antigo. And so basically all the foreign tourists essentially go to Olinda, because it's a quieter, more relaxed place to stay. It's this strange situation where it's this little village that's kind of within this larger city, umm, but you certainly don't have the impression that you're inside a large city at all because

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[5] <u>tides</u>: rise and fall of the water, caused by the sun and moon

[6] <u>gentrified</u>: the cleaning up and altering of a decaying urban neighbourhood. See also: Episodes 32 and 79.

[7] <u>refurbished</u>: renovated

[8] <u>to catch on</u>: to realise, to understand

it's sort of its own little place, umm, within greater Recife, I guess. And so we went there and spent a couple of nights there as well.

Wendy: Mmm-hmm.

Nick: And that was definitely the most touristed of the three. We saw tour groups there that we hadn't seen before and just a lot more artisanal shops and there were more bars and restaurants and things like that. And what were your impressions of Olinda?

Wendy: It's a really beautiful place and, umm, a lovely, you know, quiet, peaceful place to hang out for a couple of days. Umm, coming off the back of[9], you know, our experiences in Recife Antigo and even more so in São Luís, I felt … it felt a little bit too touristy to me, uhh, because there were so many handicraft stores and *pousadas*, you know, guesthouses for people to stay in. Umm, and if you want to buy arts and crafts and souvenirs, it's a great place to go. We're not really into buying souvenirs so that didn't interest me, and it just made it feel a little bit less authentic to me.

Nick: Yeah, but certainly it's very beautiful. There's only, gosh, a couple of streets really that make it up, umm, probably three or four streets and, you know, it's very uniform in terms of the colonial architecture. For example in Recife Antigo, there are also some skyscrapers[10] that are kind of in among the colonial buildings, but in Olinda it's very uniform, umm, and it's just a really nice place to wander for a couple of days. But it's not very large so there's not a huge amount to do there, umm, but certainly we enjoyed that as well.

Wendy: Yeah, for sure. And we stayed in a lovely guesthouse, umm, and I think there are probably lots of great places to stay there, whereas in Recife Antigo, there really weren't. There were only three hostels, uhh, as far as I know, that's what the owner of our hostel told us, and, uhh, whereas in Olinda you have a lot more options. And, yeah, we enjoyed our time there. And actually we enjoyed our time in all three places. They were all very different but they each had something different to offer.

Nick: Yeah, definitely, I would agree with that.

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[9] coming off the back of: after, following on from

[10] skyscrapers: high-rise buildings, very tall buildings. See also: Episode 73.

Comprehension Questions

1. What were the two reasons Nick gave for wanting to see colonial cities in Brazil?

2. What did Wendy find interesting about the sunsets in São Luís?

3. Why is Sunday a good day to visit Recife Antigo, according to Wendy?

Exercises

Use the words and expressions in the footnotes of the transcript to fill in the gaps.

1. _____ their impressive victory last week, they were expected to win again this week. But they played poorly and lost.

2. The old warehouse area used to be completely abandoned. But now it's been _____ and there are a lot of artists living there now.

3. The building is only 10 years old but it's already seen quite a lot of _____. It will have to be renovated soon.

4. Athens was a hugely important city in Ancient Greece. But by the time of the Roman Empire, it had become a _____.

5. It was raining, so they decided to _____ the afternoon by staying inside and playing board games.

6. The _____ of the hippy movement was in the 1960s. Nowadays you don't see nearly as many hippies.

7. The apartment was recently _____ in a beautiful way, so it was the perfect choice for us.

8. Portugal used to not see that many foreign tourists compared with Spain or Italy, but people are starting _____, and now it's quite popular.

9. New York is famous for its _____. Because Manhattan is an island with limited space, the city expanded upwards, rather than outwards.

10. The _____ in São Luís affect the ferry schedule for trips across the bay, because the boats can only go when there's enough water.

Discussion Questions

Discuss these questions with a partner or in the [English in 10 Minutes Listeners group on Facebook](#):

1. Have you ever visited a colonial city? If so, what did you think of it? If not, is there one that you would like to visit? Why or why not?

2. Do you think run-down areas should be gentrified, like Recife Antigo, or left alone, like São Luís? Why?

3. Do you like watching the sunset? Where is the most spectacular sunset you've seen?

Answers

Comprehension Questions

1. To see Portuguese colonial cities, specifically, and to get back to the Brazil that they wanted to experience after visiting the atypical city of Brasília.

2. That the water levels were different each day because of the tides.

3. Because the streets are closed to traffic and so it's a nice place to walk around and to enjoy street music.

Exercises

1. Coming off the back of
2. gentrified
3. decay
4. backwater
5. while away
6. heyday
7. refurbished
8. to catch on
9. skyscrapers
10. tides