

## Episode 123: Favelas

### Summary

Nick and Wendy talk about visiting two favelas, the famous slums of Rio de Janeiro. In particular, they discuss the security situation and the level of development in the favelas.

### Transcript

Nick: Last time Wendy and I talked about some general highlights of our return to Rio de Janeiro. And this time we'd like to talk about another aspect of the city, which are the city's favelas, or slums. And that's the great contradiction of Rio, is that it's the most glamorous and famous place in all of Brazil, with these beaches like Copacabana and Ipanema, but yet also you have these slums which are also the most famous slums in Brazil and among the most famous in the whole world. And this all interacts together in the same city.

Wendy: Yeah, and there's a lot of misinformation and, you know, misconceptions about the favelas. I ... I did actually take a favela tour the first time I was in Rio, umm, when I was 19 years old. And I have very hazy<sup>1</sup> memories of that. But, you know, I think I still had some wrong ideas about what a favela was. And this time around, we spent quite a bit of time in two different favelas and, I think, got to get a better understanding of what life is like there.

Nick: Yeah, so we went to the Vidigal favela and we spent two nights there. We stayed in a guesthouse there. And Vidigal is considered to be, I guess, favela-lite<sup>2</sup>, if you like. It's considered to be one of the safest, or maybe the safest, favelas, and apparently some people say it's not even really a favela anymore, which I still think it is. Umm, but this is the favela that rises up from Leblon beach. It's below the Dois Irmãos peak that we talked about last time. And so we stayed at a guesthouse that was right at the very top of the Vidigal favela, and that made it right at the, kind of, bottom of this hike up to the Dois Irmãos. And so we stayed there for a couple of nights, and that was our introduction to the favelas. And it was quite interesting. The first thing we tried to do, because we had our bags, was that we tried to get an uber there, and uber doesn't go to favelas, which we didn't know. But basically you put in the location, and then it comes back and says, 'Location inaccessible'. Uhh, so we got a taxi instead. Umm, but I think, yeah,

---

<sup>1</sup> hazy: unclear, vague

<sup>2</sup> lite: not as extreme/advanced/deep etc as usual

maybe we were a little bit apprehensive<sup>3</sup> about going in there for the first time, but it was all perfectly fine and safe while we were there, for sure.

Wendy: Yeah, once we were there, I felt very safe. And, uhh, there was something that the owner of our guesthouse told us, and then we heard this later on, uhh, in a different favela, as well, was that in terms of, you know, personal safety, in terms of the danger of you being robbed or assaulted, the favelas are actually the safest place that you can be in Rio. Because there are kind of unwritten rules that apply in the favelas, and those rules include that, you know, no one steals from each other, no one, umm, beats each other up. You know, it's actually, it's a very safe place. You're much more likely to be robbed in Copacabana or, you know, one of the other wealthier areas. Umm...

Nick: Right, so we also went to Rocinha, which is the most famous of the favelas, and we did a kind of day trip or day tour, in there. And it's not really a tour in the way that you usually think of it, but basically someone who's local to the favela basically takes you around and answers your questions and just tells you a little bit about life in the favelas. So we can talk about Vidigal and Rocinha together, really. And, so, yeah, back to your point, that was really quite fascinating. Because of course, you think it's quite dangerous. And it can be dangerous if there are drug wars going on between the different gangs, umm, and, you know, there are shootings and things like that related to that. But it's very specifically related to that, and so it was quite fascinating to hear the way that they, the people who live there, talk about it. They don't even call it a favela. They call it a community. And they talk about how it's almost a self-governing or self-policing community. And there was one example that, uhh, that, umm, Dembore, our guide, gave us where, uhh, there was, it was discovered that there was a man who was beating his wife, and basically a bunch of other guys from the favela came and, basically, dealt with him of their own accord<sup>4</sup>, rather than just going to the police. 'Cause they don't trust the police anyway. But that was just an example of how they basically said to him, 'Look, this is not how you're supposed to treat your wife.' And so they taught him a lesson, so to speak<sup>5</sup>, so that he wouldn't do that again.

Wendy: Yeah, uhh, so it does seem like, you know, people are really looking out for each other in the favelas, and that it is a really strong community, and people have really come together to create something that I think is really impressive and really beautiful in a way. So, yeah, the reputation of it being a dangerous place comes from the fact that the favelas are controlled by gangs and these are drug trafficking gangs. Umm, and then in recent years, the police have tried to come in and do what they call 'pacify'<sup>6</sup> the favelas, which means, basically, get the control, take the control away from the gangs and force them out, so that the police are actually

---

<sup>3</sup> apprehensive: nervous, uneasy

<sup>4</sup> of their own accord: on their own, without being guided or told by someone else

<sup>5</sup> so to speak: in a manner of speaking, figuratively speaking

<sup>6</sup> pacify: make peaceful

in control of the favelas. Umm, that hasn't really worked, so now you have this really interesting situation where you do see police there. They do have, umm, you know, small headquarters or small offices there, and you'll sometimes see them standing in the streets. But then we also saw gang members standing in the streets holding their big guns too. So they're kind of both there, showing their power, showing that they're in control. Umm, and when there are shootings, it's either between the police and a gang, or it could be between two rival gangs if an outside gang decides to come in and try to take over from the one that's currently, uhh, in control of a particular favela. So, so that's the security situation. And that's why it has this terrible reputation and so many people are afraid of the favelas, including Brazilians, including, you know, locals who live in Rio. Umm, you know, we spoke to an uber driver - like you said, uber has a company policy of not going there - but one of our drivers told us, you know, 'Yeah, they're at war there, and I would never drive there.' Umm, when really, yeah, we felt totally safe walking around.

Nick: Right, so that's a little bit about the safety situation, or certainly as we observed it. Umm, the other thing that, I think, was surprising for us was the development level in the favelas. Because you just imagine that this is just this horrific<sup>7</sup> slum. Umm, but really, compared with other places that we've seen, in Africa, in Asia, even in Central America, umm, the development level was fairly decent, I would say.

Wendy: Yeah.

Nick: Certainly for a slum. I mean Brazil just has a higher base development level than many other countries. And so I think that contributed to it, obviously. Umm, but basically the favelas usually just have this one main road which snakes its way<sup>8</sup> up the hill, and there are these alleyways that go off that. But the houses are made with concrete and brick, umm, certainly in the two favelas that we went to. We were told that previously, there were a lot more shacks made with, kind of, tin and other lesser materials. But not anymore. Uhh, you do see - and it's actually really fascinating to hear this - you sort of see that the levels of the buildings seem different from each other, and they use ... they have different materials to build them and things like that. And so what you can actually do is that if you have the top floor of (a house in) a favela, you can sell your roof to someone who wants to build another story on top of it.

Wendy: Right.

Nick: And so that's led to this kind of haphazard<sup>9</sup> building, umm, where you have these buildings that are, I don't know, four-five-six stories high, and it's kind of this really unusual skyscraper because all the floors are different colours, uhh, in terms

---

<sup>7</sup> horrific: awful, dreadful, causing horror

<sup>8</sup> snakes its way: winds its way, goes up and down and/or around corners

<sup>9</sup> haphazard: random, disorganised

of painting on the outside, or they have different materials or they look different in terms of their style.

Wendy: Yeah, and I think it's ... it comes out really beautiful(ly) in an interesting kind of way. I think it's a much more interesting landscape than the skyscrapers in Copacabana or Ipanema. Umm, but, yes, I was definitely impressed with the level of development. Umm, the buildings all seem to be pretty well constructed, pretty sturdy<sup>10</sup>. Umm, it really is a whole community. It's not just living quarters, you also have all kinds of businesses inside the favelas. You have restaurants and banks and beauty salons and, umm, lots of hardware stores selling construction materials, because of course people are continually moving in and building new houses there. Although, legally, they're not allowed to spread any further out, so they have to just build on top of the buildings that are already there, which is why we have the situation that you described. Umm, but in general, it seems like a strong community. Uhh, there are lots of local community projects going on, different things for the kids and different kinds of classes that you can take for self-improvement and stuff like that. So, honestly, I think it'd be a great place to live. I would consider living in one of the two favelas that we visited if I were going to live in Rio.

Nick: Right, so that's definitely something that's changed, in terms of our impressions of favelas before we'd been into one and now what we think, having been into a couple. So it's good to see that, when you go in and you see something for yourself, uhh, sometimes you, umm, it opens your eyes a bit.

---

<sup>10</sup> sturdy: strong, solid

## Comprehension Questions

1. What happened when Nick and Wendy first attempted to go to the Vidigal favela?
2. What's dangerous and not dangerous about being in a favela, according to Nick and Wendy?
3. Why were they surprised about the development level in the favelas?

## Exercises

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

1. The Great Wall of China \_\_\_\_\_ across the landscape, through mountains and deserts, for over 20,000 kilometres.
2. South Africa is a good introduction to travelling in Africa because it's like Africa-\_\_\_\_\_. It's much more developed than most countries on the continent.
3. She had never been overseas before she so was a bit \_\_\_\_\_ before the trip began. But she found that it was not as difficult as she had thought.
4. Our house is old but it's very \_\_\_\_\_. It has survived earthquakes without any problem.
5. You can bring dogs into the restaurant, but it's an under the table thing, \_\_\_\_\_.
6. He was in a \_\_\_\_\_ car accident last week and he's still in hospital with many broken bones and other injuries.
7. The irony of the Roman Empire is that all its cities were built in a very planned and organised way except Rome itself, which was rebuilt in a very \_\_\_\_\_ way after the city was sacked in the fourth century BC.
8. He was called in for questioning by the police over the incident, but he had been drinking heavily that night and so his memory of it is quite \_\_\_\_\_.
9. Several students felt that their teacher wasn't helping them enough, so they decided to set up a study group \_\_\_\_\_.
10. After several days of large street protests, the president decided to send in the military to try to \_\_\_\_\_ the situation.

## Discussion Questions

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

1. Would you go to a favela if you visited Rio de Janeiro? Why or why not?
2. Did this conversation change your view on favelas? If so, how?
3. Does your country have slums or similarly poor areas? If so, what are they like?

## Answers

### Comprehension Questions

1. They tried to go with uber but uber doesn't go into favelas as a company policy.
2. The danger is the chance of a shoot-out between two gangs or between a gang and the police. But favelas are not as dangerous as other places in Rio in terms of being robbed or assaulted.
3. Because the buildings are built with concrete and brick rather than being tin shacks like they have seen in other countries.

### Exercises

1. snakes its way
2. lite
3. apprehensive
4. sturdy
5. so to speak
6. horrific
7. haphazard
8. hazy
9. of their own accord
10. pacify