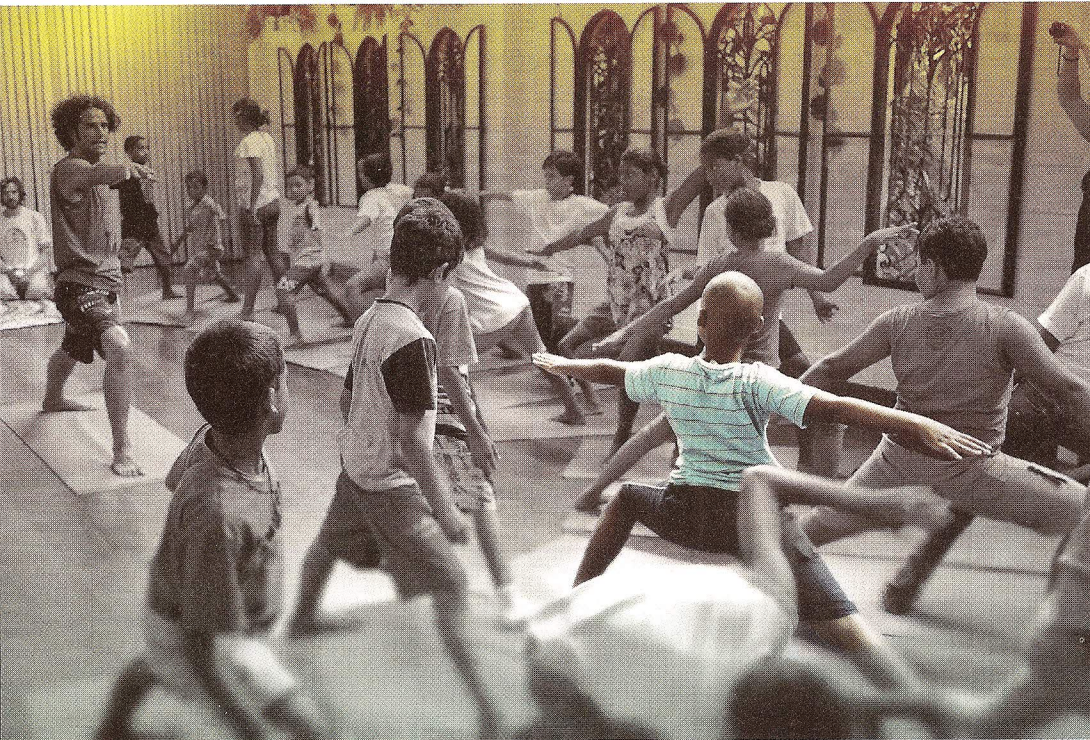


Yoga in the Favelas

Bringing a sense of calm to the slums of Brazil. **By Kristin Barendsen**



São Luis—on the southern outskirts of São Paulo.

On the edge of the Triângulo da Morte sits Casa do Zezinho, a progressive school for the area's young. "Because of the lifestyle here, with police coming to the house and shootings at night, the kids are so agitated," says Dagmar Rivieri Garroux, founder and president of the school. So Garroux was delighted when Guilherme Figueiredo Nascimento visited the school in 2007 and offered to teach yoga classes. She asked him if he could start the next day.

A former corporate lawyer, Nascimento became a yoga therapist and teacher after realizing he didn't know many happy lawyers. Now 36, he heads Casa do Zezinho's yoga program, training other volunteers and teaching weekly classes to about 40 kids, aged 9 to 10. Some of

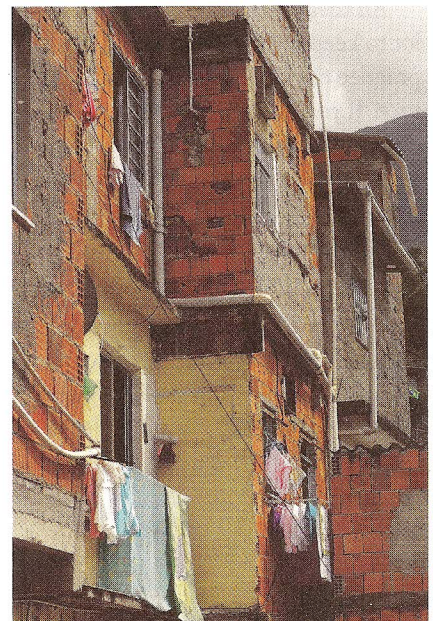
I had been duly warned about visiting the *favelas* of Brazil. "Don't go in without a guide," everyone said, "and take only what you are willing to lose." After watching the rather terrifying films *City of God* and *Favela Rising*, I was determined to follow this advice. It's true that these brick-and-concrete shantytowns are lawless places, run by drug lords and corrupt cops, where many children start their trafficking career by age 12 and are dead by 20. Often cramped and squalid, the living quarters typically lack even basic sanitation and are overrun by rats.

I figured I could skip this part of the tourist itinerary altogether. Until I learned about three initiatives in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro—an alterna-

tive school, a yoga studio, and yoga-based workshops—that offer residents of slums ways to reduce the stress of their lives and respond differently to the violence around them. Then I knew I had to visit the favelas. With a guide.

Little Joe's House

From the roof of Casa do Zezinho, you can see favelas stretching for miles through the São Paulo mist. From afar, they hold a certain harsh beauty: a stacked geometry of tin-roofed dwellings, rendered in shades of rust with the occasional rectangle of yellow or blue. This is the *Triângulo da Morte* (Triangle of Death), the confluence of three particularly crime-ridden favelas—Jardim Ângela, Capão Redondo, and Jardim



Top: Huan Gomes; Bottom: Linda Epstein / iStockphoto.com

THE KEY IS TO BE PEACEFUL BUT SHOW THEM LIMITS AS WELL—ONE WITHOUT THE OTHER IS USELESS. NASCIMENTO'S STRONGEST WEAPON, HE SAYS, IS LOVE.

the hatha classes focus on alignment, while others incorporate partner poses, mantras, and mudras. "The kids can be a bit wild," he says, so he substitutes drawing practice for meditation.

"The first year was tough," he recalls. "One day, two kids were fighting hard during class and couldn't be separated. I was so frustrated I was almost crying. Then something dead inside me came alive, and I found strength I didn't know I had. I pulled those kids apart with a unique energy. The kids have seen me differently since then. I saw them differently, too." At that moment, Nascimento says, "I think we met, and I became their teacher. Today we deal with such situations with less effort."

Many of the kids lack family structure and supervision at home, says Nascimento, so he needs to set limits right from the start. "It's the opposite of a normal yoga class," he says. "I learned that just being the calm and peaceful yogi is not enough."

Whenever Nascimento wonders if the project is making a difference to these kids, he says something happens to show him that it is. He sometimes sees tears on their faces, or a child will thank him or want to stay in class after it's over. "You can tell something shifted," he says. "I'm showing these kids another part of their nature, which is peace."

Garroux, known to students and teachers as *Tia Dag* (Auntie Dag), is

a short, fierce, passionate woman in her late 50s, with a powerful hug. She started Casa do Zezinho informally in 1993 with seven kids making art in her home. Now, it's an NGO (nongovernmental organization) housed in multiple buildings, with basketball courts and a swimming pool. Its outer walls are bright yellow, and its inner walls vibrate with a colorful riot of kids' paintings, collages, and mosaics. Children run between classes, shouting and laughing. "Officially, we have 1,500 kids," Garroux says. "Unofficially, I have a big heart; they come, and I accept them." The majority of children are between the ages of 6 and 12, though some courses are geared to teenagers and young adults. >>

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Casa do Zezinho—*zezinho* is a whimsical word meaning “little Joe,” a common nickname for a child—offers traditional subjects as well as classes in the Brazilian martial art *capoeira*, ceramics, orchestra, website development, cooking, and journalism, among others. In Brazil, children attend public school for only four or five hours a day, so Casa do Zezinho fills the gap by keeping kids occupied with creative pursuits and off the streets for the rest of the day.

Garroux sees her curriculum as a counterbalance to the predominant view that children who grow up in poverty should just enter vocational studies early and learn how to work. “But they have to dream, to play,” she says. “When children dream, things start to change.”

Up on the Roof

Rainforested hills rise dramatically from the center of Rio de Janeiro, and partway up each hill, the favelas climb. Rocinha, the most populous slum in all Brazil, sits



basis, to residents of Rocinha, including parents and their children.

On mats stretched along the tiled roof, students salute the setting sun as it lights up the clustered dwellings and craggy bare rock behind them. Teacher Carlos Augusto D’Aguiar adjusts students, giving them ample personal attention. Here, the general din fades

ence similar to his own, he opened the studio in July of 2012. Interest has been high, and the studio attracts 70 regular students, about 10 people per class. D’Aguiar funds *Yoga na Laje* from his wages as a substance abuse counselor at Rio de Janeiro State University, where he also teaches yoga to his clients.

Yoga na Laje schedules most classes near sunrise or sunset to avoid practicing in the intolerably hot sun. When it’s too hot to practice, D’Aguiar or his co-teacher Cliva Sacani e-mails the students to cancel class. “All of them have smartphones now,” D’Aguiar says. Plans are under way to install a canvas tarp for shade.

“The students are so enthusiastic,” D’Aguiar says. “They tell me how yoga has changed the life in their homes. They say they feel more calm, friendly, happy. They learn they can ask for this good feeling of relaxation.”

Because both the Catholic and Evangelical churches have strong followings

THEY TELL ME HOW YOGA HAS CHANGED THE LIFE IN THEIR HOMES. THEY SAY THEY FEEL MORE CALM, FRIENDLY, HAPPY. THEY LEARN THEY CAN ASK FOR THIS GOOD FEELING OF RELAXATION.

just a few minutes’ drive from Leblon, the toniest part of Rio. More developed than many favelas, it boasts banks, pharmacies, and an infrastructure that includes running water and electricity (in tangled webs of wires overhead). Over the past few years, Rocinha and several other slums have been “pacified”—essentially, a police occupation has run the drug lords out of the favelas located near tourist zones and the venues of the 2014 World Cup and the 2016 Olympic Games, which Rio will host.

Rocinha is a noisy place, with a constant clamor of engines, horns, music, and machinery, but halfway up its winding main road lies an oasis of calm. *Yoga na Laje* (Yoga on the Roof), offers 15 beginner classes a week, on a donation

into a kind of white noise, and the roof provides space and perspective, a way of levitating above it all.

In the late 1960s, D’Aguiar, now 63, was an accomplished surfer and surfboard engineer. But like many in the surfing scene, he got involved with drugs. “Eight years ago, I was in a serious situation with chemical dependence,” he relates. “I started practicing yoga, and from the first class, I felt an equilibrium like I felt when surfing. I learned that it is possible to have such good feelings naturally, without drugs, and to transfer these good feelings to normal life.”

After Rocinha was pacified, D’Aguiar decided to bring yoga to its residents. Hoping to offer students an experi-

within Rocinha, D’Aguiar includes the mantra *Om* in class, but no other spiritual elements. “I tell them that yoga is more than the physical aspect, but I leave it up to them to seek that out.”

Ana Angélica da Silva, a smiling woman with dyed-blond curls who works at a food stand in lower Rocinha, says yoga has helped her breathing problems, as well as her seven-year-old son’s hyperactivity. “Tawan loves yoga and always asks if we can go to class,” she says. “He says to me, ‘Now I can be still.’”

A Blend of Traditions

The Art of Living Foundation leads what is perhaps the broadest yoga initiative within Brazil’s favelas. An NGO founded in 1981 by the Indian spiritual

leader Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, Art of Living has offered yoga-based stress-reduction workshops and other programs in more than 150 countries. The NGO's Brazilian arm, *Arte de Viver*, currently has projects in two of Rio's favelas, as well as in the slums of São Paulo, Salvador, and Recife. In 2009, volunteers launched Breath-Water-Sound—an ongoing workshop that includes breathing, relaxation, and chanting—in the Cantagalo-Pavão-Pavãozinho favela, which borders Copacabana and Ipanema.

“At first it was challenging, because we were bringing something that was a diamond for us, but not for them,” says volunteer yoga teacher Beatriz Gaspar. “Some of the participants have needs on the level of survival, such as food and education. So it was hard to sustain the project.”

Workshop coordinator Carolina Jourdan notes that children in the favelas generally have access to physical art forms such as capoeira, hip-hop, and samba. “This has been their yoga—where they get their inner connection and elevate their energy, where they overcome body limits and realize their strength,” she says. So Jourdan and other volunteers created alliances with established music, dance, and theater projects in Cantagalo-Pavão-Pavãozinho and incorporated these elements into their yoga workshops. “This was a real turning point for us,” says Gaspar. “This time the kids really wanted us to be there.”

Arte de Viver's workshops are geared toward children and teenagers but are open to everyone (favela residents pay a reduced rate). A typical three-hour class begins with asanas, perhaps mixed with animal movements and dance moves. Other elements include meditation, chanting, singing, and working with stories about human values. To that end, the kids of Cantagalo-Pavão-Pavãozinho put on a play in early 2013 based on the children's book *O Planeta Está Com Febre* (The Planet Has a Fever) by Luciana Rosa. In the play, the kids discover that love is the remedy to global warming, and they gather to save the whole planet.

“The energy is really high in our meetings,” Jourdan says. “The workshops encourage young participants to connect with each other in a positive way, which increases their self-esteem and the will to change their reality.”

In each project I visited, my contacts mentioned *ahimsa*, the yogic principle of nonviolence, as a cornerstone of their program. They said yoga helps students reduce harm in their inner lives, which can have a ripple effect in the outside world. As Garroux put it, “People have two voices, the voice of the fighter and the voice of the heart. Yoga helps kids understand the voice of the heart.” ■

Kristin Barendsen has covered stories on five continents for YI and is co-author of the book Photographs: New Mexico. She lives in Santa Fe.

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