

A GRADUATE STUDENT IN RIO DE JANEIRO

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In the summer of 2008, Erin Cooper was the first graduate student of Cal Poly's CRP department to participate in the exchange program with the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro. She spent a couple of months there taking classes, studying transportation and sustainability, and learning a lot about planning, life, and culture from a very different perspective.

I decided to investigate Cal Poly University's City and Regional Planning department's exchange program with the Universidade Federal de Rio de Janeiro. I had heard that it was going to be challenging and perhaps dangerous to travel to Rio. However, the opportunity to attend one quarter at the Universidade not only demystified some of my previous ideas I had of Rio, but proved to be one of the best decisions I have made about my educational experience with Cal Poly University.

Of Rio, I often thought of Copacabana, Ipanema, some sort of glamorous lifestyle, and at the same time, the favelas, or shanty towns, and some of the world's worst poverty in an otherwise "developed" country. These were my images anyway, and I wondered how they would fit into one city. As foreigners, we have many images of other countries. I like to see what images are true.

My first impression was slightly different. A friend who I had met while she studied abroad at Cal Poly, Gabriela, picked me up at the airport, and drove me to the house where I would be staying. On the way, I saw my first favela, which was far from being glamorous. High rises are mixed in with historic buildings in the Centro area; I could not make out any particular city order. I had no idea where we were going, but we ended up on a very pleasant street, with the statue of Christ the Redeemer just above us. The house was amazing and looked exactly like one would imagine in South America.

After lunch, Gabriela left me there. Because Gabriela had offered me a sense of comfort and hospitality, I was a little sad that I would not be staying with her.

After a little rest, a woman I was staying with, Cristina, took me to the symphony at the Teatro Municipal. We drove through the city at night, by the lakes and bays. The ocean is as beautiful as usual and the very steep rock hills covered with trees, called morros. Over the weeks, I found the city is defined by its landscape, but also a rich culture, which I was introduced to by Cristina. Free concerts and free art shows could be found almost every day of the week. However, that first evening also gave me a glimpse into Rio's far reaching informal side; we parked on a street near the theater and paid a man standing on the sidewalk to watch the car.

A few days later, I went to UFRJ for the first time. I caught the bus from the Zona Sul to the campus, about half an hour on a bus ride of terror. I honestly didn't think I would survive; I didn't know a bus could take an onramp at that speed, but I was proven wrong! The bus passes through a very poor area, on freeways, over a polluted and smelly river, to a campus and building that took me back to a nice modernist time period.

Upon entering the building and figuring out where I needed to go, I felt everything was a little disorderly, and the general administration of the college seemed somewhat out of control. Eventually, I had my first class. Students would wander

Figure 1

Erin and the statue of Christ the Redeemer at the top of Corcovado Mountain, Rio de Janeiro.



in and out as they pleased. They would chat with their friends if they wanted. Their behavior was surprising for an American student who is used to very strict order. Though this may seem inefficient to us, it definitely makes life more enjoyable. Generally, students were paying attention, but there was no sense of obligation, which I found relaxing.

I took three classes while I was there: a class on the history and development of architecture in Rio, a basic transportation class, and discussion seminar on urbanism. Though there were similar themes to those in the US running through the discussion of architecture and planning, I learned much more about South America. The development pattern of Rio seemed similar to many cities in California. It was a very small port town for many years. It was not until the 1930's that the city began rapid development and became something like the city we recognize today. The favelas, which are located everywhere, have a long history that was based on soldiers' and workers' living situation. There are also different laws and ideologies that govern the development of land, which create the background for many projects even today.

The transportation system that has evolved in the city is different than many transportation systems in American cities. There are more buses, which are more widely used. Cars are also very popular, but there is very little space on the roadways. In the class, we analyzed a plaza and the surrounding road network to make recommendations on how it could be improved. The plaza served as a major bus stop and transfer station, but was not originally laid out to serve this purpose. The surrounding streets were mostly two lanes, one way streets. In short, this is a situation that does not happen in the United States. Though I could make recommendations to make the area more efficient, this experience drove home the importance of having a cultural understanding of area before attempting to make improvements. People in Rio may want a more efficient bus station, but they may not want to give up what Americans often give up in order to have efficiency.

Gradually, I started meeting more people in my classes. They did not mind my less-than-perfect Portuguese.. I realized early on that I would never be able to relay my true thoughts in Portuguese when the discussions got very complex. It was unsatisfying when I could only respond to someone with a yes or no; but it was a nice change to focus on listening to conversations. Eventually, I was able to understand more complex thoughts, but I still had difficulty conveying these thoughts perfectly to another person.

This did not stop me from meeting many people. Because I was a foreigner, one professor gave me tours of some interesting areas. He showed me the port area, which is an area in transition. There are many plans to improve the area and create a more attractive port, as is done in cities across the United States, but the political will and funding are always in question, and therefore nothing is done. I also got to know the students who insisted on giving me rides home from school. Why would you ever drive yourself home from school alone when you could give three other people a ride? The Brazilians were open and friendly.. Where else can you hang out at the plaza until 4 am, listening to a Samba band, having a few drinks, and just talking with people? Brazilians love to talk; everyone has

Figure 2
Copacabana Beach.



to talk. I found the lifestyle in Rio to be very relaxed, but no Brazilians agreed with me on this point. Almost everyone goes to school and works and has exercise classes, along with a busy social life. In her free time, Gabriela took me to churrascos (barbeques). Cristina took me to different parties. The neighbors always had people over just to hang out. Without fail, someone played the guitar, someone started singing, and everyone else enjoyed the atmosphere.

For most of my time there, I was only with Brazilians, but I also met a few Americans. When we first started hanging out, I realized I had not spoken English in weeks, and it felt strange. They also loved Brazil, and talking with them helped me to understand what I had started feeling – that I did not want to go home.

Although I have spent time discussing the positive experiences of the trip and the city, there were also some aspects of Rio which were less than perfect. In general, there were many times when people asked me for money on the streets. Also, on most buses someone sold candy to the passengers. I also observed that many people of lower incomes commuted hours by bus to have decent jobs. Also, many people slept out in the open on the street. But despite experiencing this less than perfect vision of Rio, I didn't want to go back to a beautiful clean city.

In general, Rio de Janeiro and Brazil offer some things that the U.S just does not have. The further you get inside of Brazilian culture, the more Portuguese you speak, the fewer Americans and foreigners you hang out with, the more you see why the Brazilians are never surprised you wanted to go to Rio. You will also see how nice people can be. Perhaps there are problems, just as in any culture, but this is a place where you can almost always find someone who is willing to have a chat for a little while. They never seem offended if you do not speak Portuguese; in fact they are quite impressed if you do. They have a million more things to complain about than we do in the U.S, and yet few people complained or looked depressed. People seem more realistic about life, and yet, more content with their lives; it is a city where it is so difficult to be sad. Those are just some observations my American friends and I had.

It was over all too soon, and I felt I only touched on understanding of this part of the world which we learn very little about in school. I found myself in the evening at the airport. I had just had a cab ride through the city at dusk, and was happy that I was now able to have a conversation about politics with someone who did not speak any English. There was a little music and many people talking calmly while I caught up on some sleep. Then, like a glass crashing to the floor and breaking into pieces, I heard a group of Americans speaking the fast and loud way we speak. It shattered my little world of the winter in Rio de Janeiro. Of course, I have many more stories than what is written here, but I recommend you go for yourself and see what you are missing!