



## The psychosocial impact of volunteer tourism in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro

*'Slum tourism' is a growing trend in 'exotic' and 'yet-to-develop' contexts. In this post, [Jessica Aquino](#) discusses her research into the psychosocial impact of the interaction between tourists and favela dwellers on favela communities. By comparing the impact of volunteer tourism and slum tourism, she shows that while the former has the potential to foster self-esteem and community pride, the latter tends to reinforce negative representations of the favela.*

There has been increasing news coverage about Brazil because of the 2014 World Cup and the 2016 Olympic games, and tourism is predicted to increase in Brazil because of these events. Slum tourism has gained popularity over the years, directing attention toward its impact on the community. However, a study on the effects of volunteer tourism on slum communities has been lacking. To bridge this gap, in 2011 we conducted such a study on volunteer tourism in Rio de Janeiro, tapping into how community residents feel about tourism vis-à-vis their pride and self-esteem.



Photo courtesy of Jessica Aquino

Volunteer tourism is defined as the process of involving visitors as "volunteer[s] in an organized way to undertake holidays that might involve aiding or alleviating the material poverty of some groups in society, the restoration of certain environments or research into aspects of society or

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### Book

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### Social media



environment” (Wearing, 2001: 1). In the case of Rio de Janeiro, many favela-based NGOs have organised themselves to help alleviate some of the effects of poverty and, to this end, have chosen to work with volunteer tourists. Volunteer tourists interact directly with the community in a range of roles such as language teachers, sports and physical activity coaches or tutors, with others working on refurbishing the NGOs or building community gardens.

For comparison purposes, we contrasted the effects of *volunteer tours* against those of *slum tours*, which are short guided tours through a community. Slum tours are described by **some tourism agencies** as an ethical or alternative way of visiting slum communities while creating encounters that promote mutual understanding and respect. However, researchers have argued that just like other forms of tourism, it does not automatically create a positive cross-cultural experience, may not be as ethical as claimed, may reinforce stereotypes, and turn community residents into a commodity (Freire-Medeiros, 2009).

### Volunteer tourists: friendship, community pride and knowledge exchange

Both the NGOs and community groups agreed that they enjoyed working with volunteer tourists and saw the benefits of volunteer tourism. While some indications of negative impact were found, here we focus on the constructive perceptions of the community.

Community members expressed that they had made life-long **friendships** and hoped to get to know more volunteers in the future. One community member explains it best when asked about how she felt about the volunteer tourists in her community:

*I think it's wonderful, because through that everyone has the opportunity to exchange experiences; make new friends. From there a world opens up for you, the doors open for you, because you sometimes make a friendship in a short time but it is for the rest of your life... (24 year old female from Rocinha)*

According to the accounts of favela residents the contact between volunteer tourists and community members also **stimulated self-esteem and community pride**. For example, many mentioned that they enjoyed hosting volunteers in their community because they have a chance to show them all the good things about their community and about themselves, which is often conflicting with media portrayal of the favela. They acknowledged that those in power are the ones creating the images of their community. By having volunteer tourists in the favela and presenting their community to them, favela dwellers are able to offer their own image to the rest of the world and challenge outside representations. Volunteers, in turn, may help empower the community by actively trying to get to know its residents and by later spreading the word about their experiences.

The community especially valued the **exchange of knowledge** and ideas with volunteer tourists. It was reported that volunteers not only come to work and teach, but that it is more of an exchange of ideas in which the knowledge held by the community is also valued and considered on equal footing to that of outsiders. This exchange is seen as reciprocal: the community learns just as much from the volunteers as the volunteers learn from them. As one of the residents noted:

*Very important. This exchange of information, and of experiences, this exchange in life habits, is very enriching for us, to the children and I believe that it is to [volunteers] too; it's an experience that they acquire here too... (60+ year old woman volunteer from Barreira do Vasco)*

### Brief comparison with favela tours

The perception of volunteer tours as largely beneficial stands in stark contrast to how the

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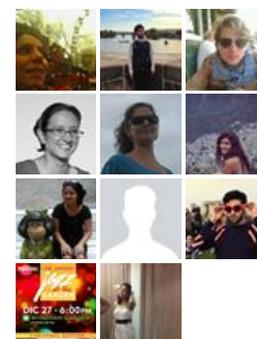
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community perceived favela tours. For example, because of the aforementioned 'exchange', the community felt that there was equality between the volunteers and the community, whereas in their accounts they referred to favela tours mostly as exploitive of the community. Similarly, when observing slum tours, we noticed that on some guided tours community members would try to talk to the tourist but because of the language barrier they could not establish a dialogue. Within volunteer tourism, in contrast, volunteers were able to circumvent the language barrier by spending more time interacting and using other forms of communication such as hand signals, pictures, and others who could translate.

Our findings show that volunteer tourism helps recreate the negative way favelas are often portrayed by fostering a more realistic social representation, thereby improving self-esteem in the community, helping break down preconceptions, and aiding in creating community pride. Favela residents feel as equals with the volunteers and describe their interactions as friendships, sharing of cultural experiences, and exchanging of knowledge.

Conversely, while some residents noted the economic significance of favela tours to the community, the majority of them described favela tours as dehumanizing and felt that their community was being sold as a commodity. "We are not an attraction" stated a 32 year old woman from Barreira do Vasco, echoing expressions from other residents who referred to favela tours as 'safari tour' or 'zoo tour'.

Overall, community members saw more positive benefits with, and preferred volunteer tourism over, favela tours. They felt that the more time a person spent working or interacting in their community the more able they were to understand their realities. Slum tourists, unfortunately, only see what the tour guides want them to see.

#### References

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**Dr Jessica Aquino** is a Postdoctoral Scholar at the School of Community Resources and Development, Arizona State University. Her research focuses on tourism experiences from the perspective of residents and tourists and the potential contribution that tourism has on community development and conservation of protected areas.

**Professor Kathleen Andereck** is the director of the School of Community Resources and Development at Arizona State University, where she is also a Senior Sustainability Scientist with the Global Institute for Sustainability. Her research focuses on tourism experience from the perspective of both visitors and residents, particularly as it applies to sustainable community tourism development.

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favelas@lse.ac.uk

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