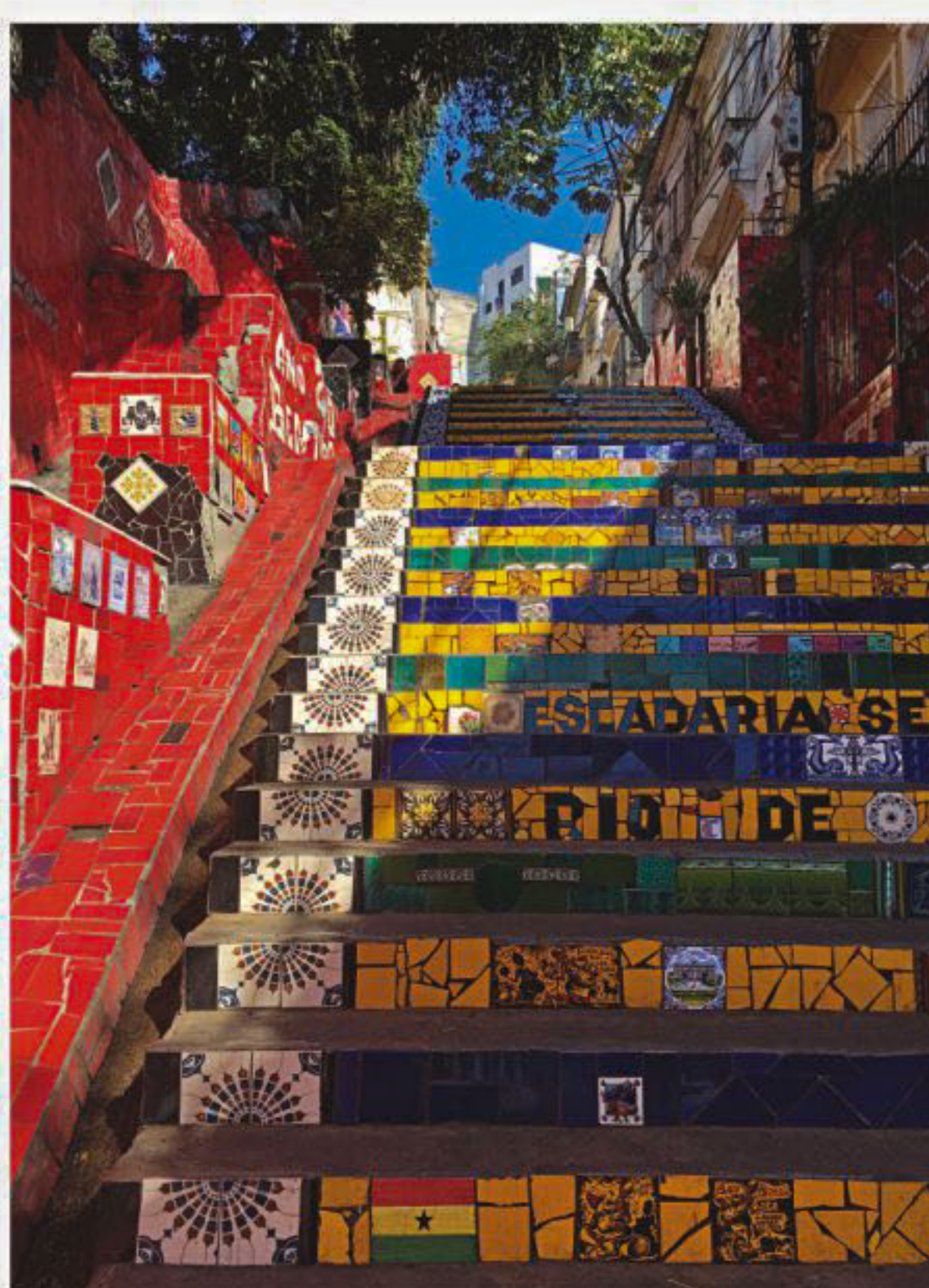


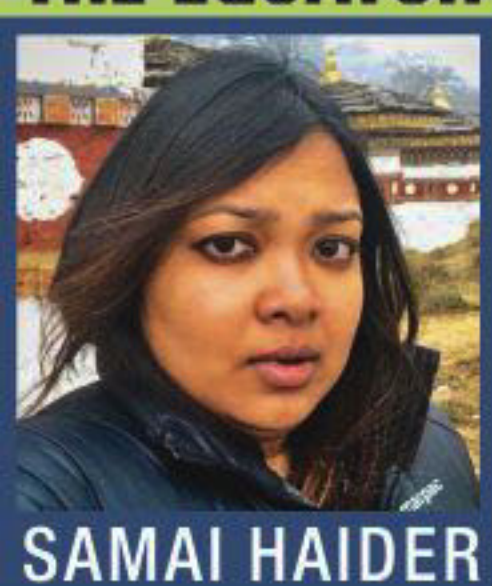
Inside the Royal Portuguese Reading Room



Escadaria Selarón

ROUSING RIO

SOUTH OF THE EQUATOR



SAMAI HAIDER

Rio is a city of varying extremes, encapsulated in wild rainforests and beaches; a metropolis of skyscrapers and shantytowns; a cosmopolitan steeped in history. I explore its many aspects through a series of articles on the city. This is the second of three.

As much as I wanted to hole myself up in the warm sandy beaches of Copacabana, there was an entire city left to be explored. And so, I ventured out.

Rodrigo de Freitas Lagoon

The neighbourhood of Lagoa lay just beyond our little beachside enclave of Copacabana. The centrepiece was a serene saltwater lagoon set amidst steep, rain forested mountains. The distant silhouette of Christ the Redeemer loomed over us as we set off on the 7.4km path that circled around the lagoon. Dotted along the way were a myriad of lakeside restaurants and carts, serving up fresh coconut water and chilled *chopas* (beer). Lycra-clad joggers and skateboarders passed us by as tiny white dinghies skimmed over the blue lagoon.

Upon hearing music and high-pitched children's laughter we gravitated towards a group of pre-schoolers and their parents. A *fête* was underway by the edge of the water. My toddler rushed up to the children gambolling amidst crafts tables and toys. Aghast, and unsure whether we'd be welcome, I tried to rein him in, only for a kindly lady to interject in broken English, reassuring me that it was fine. It was their end of year school party, but all children were welcome. She ushered me towards a table piled high with *pão de queijo* (Brazilian cheese bread) and *brigadeiros* (a local chocolate dessert) and asked us to help ourselves. Suddenly we found ourselves embraced by the local community, chatting about raising children in different parts of the world.

Lapa

Known for its vibrant nightlife, many tourists flock to this gritty quarter to take selfies on the Escadaria Selarón—a series of stairs connecting the neighbourhoods of Lapa and Santa Teresa. Each of the 250 steps are covered in colourful tiles, some depicting countries and languages from around the world. Entrepreneurial residents of the houses adjacent to the steps also offer their photography

services. For a small fee they will advise you on the best angles and even take photos for you—truly an Instagrammer's delight!

The Lapa Arches (or *Arcos de Lapa*) is a striking 18th century aqueduct that also serves as a bridge connecting the tramway between the neighbourhoods of Santa Teresa and the city centre. The stark white Roman style aqueduct stands in contrast to the filthy streets below. I had ventured out to the site mid-morning. It was fairly deserted save for the odd homeless person. I must admit, I didn't feel particularly safe. However, they do say Lapa has a thriving nightlife. But alas, as a parent to a toddler, I wasn't able to test that theory.

Rocinha

Built into a steep hillside, Rocinha is the largest *favela* (urban slum) in Brazil. Having grown up in Dhaka, one would think I'd be fairly acquainted with slums and would want to steer clear of them. But I felt compelled to visit. Maybe it was

hand with slum tours—when you're whizzed around in air-conditioned cars and dropped off at the token orphanage and/or crafts stall for a photo-op. I researched long and hard till I found a company that promised both safety and authenticity. And that's how I met Pedro—tour guide by day, high-schooler by night.

Born in Rocinha, Pedro's early years were typical of most children growing up in *favelas*, marked by violence and poverty. Pedro introduced me to the *favela* life. His style was not so much a guided tour as friendly banter amongst friends who were simply travelling together. As our small group walked through the meandering alleyways of Rocinha, climbing down impossibly steep stairs, through concealed doorways and ducking under coils of wire, he educated me on the ways of the *favela*—how residents don't kill, rob or rape one another, and how they rely on the gangs, rather than the police, for protection. Gang lords



PHOTOS: SAMAI HAIDER

the notoriety brought about by films like *The City of God* or maybe it was simply because I wanted to learn how regular folk in Rio live—afar cry from the fancy beachside kiosks of Copacabana. However, I also decided that this would be one of those excursions I'd do without the little one in tow.

I didn't want to play into the exploitation that often comes hand in

have a high sense of morality when it comes to residents on their turfs. They are the keepers of peace in the *favelas*, the ones who step in to curb domestic violence and sort out petty crimes. It isn't for lack of police presence though. Armed police patrol the streets of Rocinha, their armoured vehicles cruising up and down the main road.

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