

Brasilia, Brazil, 2007 – Dianne Parslow

Why travel to Brasilia? Because it is there. It is remote from any other locations attractive to tourists in the Brazilian highlands in the central western region. It was founded on April 21, 1960, to replace Rio de Janeiro as the capital and has become Brazil's third-most populous city. The city has a similar history to Canberra but, unlike Canberra, it does not seem to have developed a life outside of the government departments. However, it is a treasury of display items for national pride, largely due to the eccentric vision of Oscar Niemeyer, who was commissioned to design a grand city of the future.

It was very quiet on the weekend when we arrived, but came to life on Monday. Many people live outside the city and either commute in or stay in the hotels (there are lots of them) during the week. The city was designed in the shape of a plane; the wings are all high rise housing and there is a very large green belt down the centre of the body – except it's not very green. Located inland, 1,000kms north of Sao Paulo, a reasonable analogy is that it is in a similar position to Longreach in Queensland. It is much dryer and lower humidity than further north and the soil is red, like that in central Australia. Our hotel was close to the city centre where there is a TV tower which has a lift to a platform which gives a great 360 degree view of the city.

There are very few street vendors and much less poverty here. However, they still seem to have really uneven footpaths and maintenance on buildings is non-existent. It is hard to know what the natural flora of the area is because much of it has obviously been planted. There are palms, bougainvillea, lemon scented gums and lots of other unusual trees that I could not identify. We saw a museum and statue dedicated to the president of Brazil whose idea it was to build the new city. The design of the museum and many other buildings seemed totally over the top to me, but that's Brazil.

Everything is a long way apart here, the city was designed for people who have cars, but of course many of them don't. We walked a very long way and come to the conclusion that the city planners did not do a very good job. To walk across the main 'green' belt through the centre of the city you have to cross 5 lanes of traffic all going in the same direction, then 300 metres across 'grass' then across another 5 lanes in the opposite direction. There are very few traffic lights or pedestrian crossings so there seems to be an agreement between the drivers and the pedestrians: when the traffic is light in the first couple of lanes you start walking across and the traffic in the other lanes will slow down and then you run! It works, but not without a considerable surge of adrenalin. We just followed the locals.

At one end of the main drag there are a number of buildings that house the government and high court. The architecture is modern and interesting but all the buildings are a long way apart with lots of concrete and stone in between – very stark. There were several impressive modern churches and other buildings along the route back to the hotel (which we walked) but more concrete in between; no shade, no seats and not many street vendors either. So, the architecture is really impressive but the town planning is awful.

I felt rather pleased with myself about our accommodation here. We did not pre-book it but selected one from the guide book, asked at the tourist information, and then turned up. I had heard that you could get good deals on the weekend when it was quiet and I managed to do just that. Internet connection is included in the price as well and that is usually 20 reals (\$12) extra per day. We were across the road from a shopping centre which had lots of restaurants. There were two main styles of restaurants; both are buffet – either a fixed price for all you can eat or dish up what you want, they weigh it and you get charged by the kg. That means that I could get a big plate of salad for lunch for about \$5 -6 Australian. There is no particular cuisine here – they have a mix of rice dishes, pasta dishes and meat and potato. The coffee was good in Argentina and Chile but the Brazilian coffee is more bitter (they have a lot of awful coffee in Brazil). I also had trouble getting a decent cup of tea. Unfortunately none of the hotels have tea and coffee making facilities in the room.



These photos show some of the unusual architecture and sculpture which is everywhere. The one above is a church. The soldiers in the final photo were just for show. Their helmets were plastic! If anyone got up too close, a 'real' soldier in camouflage gear, carrying a side arm, would quickly appear and make it clear that you had to stand back.

A most unusual city.

