

A stroll through Olympic Park reveals real Rio is a world away

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8/10/2016



RIO DE JANEIRO – It's high-noon Tuesday in Olympic Park, the hot sun is inescapable, and the atmosphere amounts to somewhere between bland suburban shopping mall and mid-summer baseball game.

You know, if both were heavily guarded by [Brazil's](#) Natural Public Security Force's finest.

Buzz? Better chance to hear a mosquito – every once in a while the odd one feels adventurous enough to get close – buzz past your ear than feel an energy befitting the world's greatest gathering of athletes.

The latest hit pop music – English songs, not Portuguese – blares from the speakers. There are long lines for the concessions and the official Rio 2016 megastore, though they're not as long as the lines to get in to the park itself. Selfies are being taken everywhere you look outside, because of course.

And everywhere you look inside, you'll see rows of empty seats. Of all the concerns that were voiced heading into the Games, the one about poor attendance has proven to be the most accurate. Organizers said there were 1/3 of available tickets remaining when events began and as of Monday that number was 20 percent.

Anecdotally, it bears out. The rugby stadium was maybe half-full over the weekend for the Olympic debut of rugby sevens. The aquatics centre fills up some for the diving Tuesday afternoon after hosting a sparsely attended water polo contest, but plenty of empty seats still abound. Even at the judo venue, Brazil's most successful Olympic sport, the crowds are less than stellar.

The spectacle of the state of the art stadiums is long gone, replaced with sensible questions about what to do with a third basketball arena or a velodrome when the Games are gone and whether it's the best use of state funds.

But that's the deal when the Olympics come to town. Build them and the IOC will come and bring along all the Olympic spirit and branding that they promise will be transformative over the two weeks of the Games and beyond.

It's the same for FIFA and its World Cups. And there was a time where the glow of the fun and the games towered over everything else, like they did in Vancouver and London. The lustre of Olympics and World Cups, though, lessened by years of questionable morals and corruption allegations, is wearing off, even for the diehards.

About 30 minutes away – well, on a good day on these narrow, busy roads – is the Rio we foreigners have seen on television and heard about in song: The awe-inspiring mountain vistas, picturesque beaches, and cozy bars and cafes with the iconic Christ the Redeemer statue standing tall off in the distance.

There are Olympic events being held at Copacabana beach, except, when ferocious winds force the rowing to be postponed. The night sessions of beach volleyball have felt like a party, but you get the feeling that has more to do with where than what. While the eyes of the world were fixated on Maracana Stadium through their TVs for the Opening Ceremony, locals frolicked up and down the boardwalk at the beach like it was any regular Friday night.

The vibe here is authentically Brazilian. Lively. Striking. Charming. Dangerous.

Yes, dangerous. There have been a number of reported muggings and robberies in the Copacabana and Ipanema beachfront neighborhoods. Cellphones and cameras are especially popular with the thieves. Selfies are to be taken here at your own peril. This is Rio, for better or worse.

A slice of another part of Rio did make its way in Olympic Park on Monday night, when Rafaela Silva won Brazil's first gold of the Games in judo. Silva hails from the infamous City of God favela and her rise to Olympic gold-medallist is a uniquely Rio story. Enough to get her fellow Cariocas' attention? No, probably not.

Not as long as the men's soccer team continues to flop and the women's team, led by its legendary star Marta, finally gets the recognition it deserves. This is Brazil, after all, and those will be the top sports headlines in this country now and forever.

Some things never change. And it's hard to see this changing: the Olympic Park doesn't feel like Rio and Rio, at least the one we think we're familiar with from afar, doesn't feel like the Olympics. On one end is the world's edgiest art gallery and on the other, half-hour away on a good day, is a trendy, but soulless shopping mall. In Rio, a Rio that's been overtaken by the world for two weeks, they feel worlds apart.

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