

Excerpts from Personal Notes From the Field, 2005

The Northeast of Brazil is a land of opposites---of luxurious tourism and extreme poverty, or modern cities, and rural customs with no running water, of local participation and democracy, and powerful circles and government control--Of blue skies and intense heat and drought, and flash floods. I am here in Natal, the very tip of the Northeast of Brazil and the closest point of South America to Africa and Europe. This region was spotted early by Europeans and later the Americans as a strategic base for the military (as the US saw in WWII), and a region rich with history of colonialism, conquer, and the mixing of indigenous with European blood. Further south, in the State of Bahia, you see more mixture with African descendants, which of course, is everywhere, but in the states of Ceará and Rio Grande do Norte, one tends to see more people with this background, of course with many migrants from the Southern States.

I am here in June, which I thought was the end of the rainy season (or that it ended in May, in that that was what it said in all of IRI's documents concerning the local climate), however, I was soon to learn that May and June are the wettest months of the year. The rain here comes in heavy spurts. I have not seen days of, what we call in the US "drizzle"; Blue skies are neighbored by intense, thick clouds of rain. According to some locals "people don't do much when it rains", which is understandable, in that there are torrential downpours and flash floods everywhere, with the telephone lines often going down, I have seen two days of intermittent blackouts in three weeks, as well as three feet of water in the streets (in chic motorcycles and cars alike passed through without hesitation.). During this time, the air is thick with water. You feel as if you're breathing in raindrops an, even when it is not raining. And everything in the house is damp—molhado—a word I learned quickly. Overnight, I found that my leather sandals had molded as well as my backpack—covered in green and black patterns of fuzzy slime.

In addition to this, this is a time for many of little work. One issue is that Natal and Fortaleza are both very dependent on the tourism industry from Europe and the South of Brazil for their economies. So, during these times of rain, there is very little tourism, and little income. After a rain, in my apartment, I have smelled the distinctive odor of sewage, which is understandable since most of the city is on septic tanks, which undoubtedly overflow during heavy rains and wash down the streets, straight to the ocean. Accordingly, there are numerous large pipes leading to the beach, which are full with streams of water during and after one of these heavy rains. When walking on the beach with a friend, he commented that we shouldn't walk in that water---evidently it is common knowledge that it's not just water coming out of these drains.

Understandably, during these periods, when the sun comes out—everyone is fast at work. All of the windows are open, the houses aired out, all of the mattresses are on the balconies, drying, all of the laundry is hanging, pillows are beaten, and repairs are often begun. I went to see one apartment building to potentially find a place for rent, and all of the walls were flaking off, and they maintain a persistent smell of mold and dampness. As Guilherme pointed out, "those houses that aren't built well or aren't high enough have a lot of damage". Even those houses that are, often succumb to associated problems. My own apartment, which is on the second floor, very well ventilated, and very well built, was full with an inch of water when I came back from three days of travel to the Sertão and Fortaleza. And I am living on the beach, in Natal, "The city of sun". So, there are no certainties here: things change, the wind blows, the waves break, and life goes on.