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In Newsweek Magazine

Carlos Saldanha Reflects on the Rio de Janeiro of His Youth

Feb 13, 2012 12:00 AM EST

Carlos Saldanha on reconnecting with the hidden quarter of his youth.

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I grew up in Marechal Hermes, a small working-class suburb named for the Brazilian president who built it in 1913. You won't find Marechal, as we called it, in your guidebook, but it represents a lost part of the city many Cariocas—as

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Rio's residents are known—have never seen, or have forgotten. Marechal was one of Rio's first planned neighborhoods, with tree-lined streets, schoolhouses, a movie theater, a cultural center, and a grand -European--style train station that provided an easy connection to downtown. It was known as "Little Portugal" for the numerous Portuguese immigrants who settled there.

□

After years of neglect and hard times, Marechal fell into disrepair and became just one more rundown neighborhood on the scruffy north side of town. But it still triggers some of my fondest memories. I spent my childhood in the trees picking guavas and mangoes, playing on cobblestone streets, and flying kites with my cousins and friends—far from the picturesque beaches that made Rio famous.

Life is different for me now. I make a successful living as a filmmaker and have been in [New York City](#) for more than 20 years. My wife, Isabela, is Brazilian as well, but my children were born in the United States, so we both try our best to keep our cultural roots alive by teaching them Portuguese and spending our vacations in Rio. And when in Rio, my family vacations in Ipanema. With its elegant apartment buildings, sidewalk mosaics, sleek storefronts, and stylish bars and restaurants that tend the Carioca jeunesse dorée, Ipanema is where newcomers fall for this storied seaside city. Vibrant and trendy, expensive and cosmopolitan, Ipanema is Rio—maybe even Brazil—at its best. And for my kids, a perfect day is a day at the beach, which is only a few minutes' stroll from our door.

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Rio de Janeiro is famous for the beaches of Ipanema, but the city has its distant "lost" neighborhoods as well. , Marcos Semola / Getty Images

With the passing of my mother last year (my father died 14 years ago), I started to fear that some of our ties with Rio would begin to fade, so last summer I decided to strengthen the bond by giving my kids a taste of the Rio I remembered as a child. So one day I loaded them into a rented van and, against their protests, struck out for Marechal to visit my grandmother. She still lives in the house my grandfather built, and I wanted her great-grandchildren to experience a part of Rio they'd never known. As we bumped along the traffic-clogged freeway that connects the affluent South Zone with the blue-collar North Zone, I watched my kids' eyes bulge like Scrat, the anxious squirrel in Ice Age. Tony hotels and shimmering malls gave way to abandoned factories and sprawling *favelas*, or slums.

After an hour's drive, I started to recognize the old neighborhood. I was surprised to find even the little neighborhood street carnival had survived. To the 8-year-old me, this was Disneyland. And there was the train station, old and

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drab now but still splendid to me. I told my kids how I used to cut through the tunnel below the train tracks to the movie theater—we made sure to time our crossing just right, stopping underneath to feel the walls shake around us as the train roared overhead.

When we finally pulled up to Grandma's house, I was relieved to find everything looked exactly the way I remembered it, except for the cobblestones, which had been paved over. Bumps and progress don't match, I guess. We got out of the car and were immediately surrounded by old friends and neighbors who have known me since I was born. For me and my wife, it was the warmest of reunions. But the kids were bored.

They were tired and couldn't wait to put this detour behind them and get back to Ipanema. But then something caught their eye. Dozens of colorful kites dipped and swooped across the sky. I asked around and was surprised to find the same neighborhood garage shop that had been building handmade kites for 30 years. As we sat together preparing the kites for flight, my kids doubted I still knew how to fly them. To be honest, so did I. But with my Carioca honor at stake, we waited patiently for that vital gust of wind and finally—whoosh! They watched, amazed, as the flimsy ensembles of paper and stick lifted off, and soared. As I watched my U.S.-born Cariocas play with my childhood friends and relatives, a wave of déjà vu washed over me. Sharing one bit of my childhood, one moment from my life in this place, felt so natural, as if we belonged, all bound together by something more than paper and string: roots. For me, the only thing missing was my mother and father.

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Carlos Saldanha is the director, most recently, of *Rio*. A song from the film has been nominated for an Academy Award.

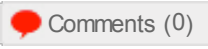
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