



From left Fight for Peace founder Luke Dowdney prepares Roberto for a fight; the Academy is helping children out of poverty; young hopefuls watch Roberto train; boxing memorabilia is also a source of inspiration

Dusk falls over Rio, and it's big fight night at a boxing gym in the heart of one of the city's favelas. The referee brings both fighters together. There's no slow start here. One of the fighters, Roberto Custódio, immediately starts to outwork and outmanoeuvre his obdurate opponent. Round after round, he snaps his opponent back with jabs; his wiry body delivers a flurry of left-right combinations. He's a force of nature: as graceful as a butterfly, as stinging as any bee. The bell rings. His opponent has succumbed to the unavoidable energy of his little tormentor.

There are more than 700 favelas (or shanty towns) in Rio. On the streets outside, kids as young as 14 lean against walls, machine guns swinging round their necks where satchels should be. Tupac plays on a stereo. These boys are working for the drug traffickers who have made Rio's favelas their dominion. The children patrol the streets and work as foot soldiers, lookouts and drug sellers.

The favelas sit cheek by jowl with Rio's bustling centre, blond crescent beaches and tourist attractions. The clichés about Rio all are true. It has an attitude, a vibe, a sense of exuberance and beauty to which few places

can aspire. Women in tiny bikinis lounge on sandy white beaches, there's samba in the streets, the austere Christ the Redeemer looms portentously over the city.

In stark contrast, the favelas are a scramble of ramshackle homes, teeming, clustering and clinging improbably to hills. To say Rio is divided is a bit like saying Brazilians play football. It's not so much a tale of two cities, more a tale of two worlds. Originally settlements established by former slaves, the favelas grew on the hopes of struggling migrants drawn to the city in search of work and a better life. Throughout the 20th century, the slums grew from pockets of privation to islands. There was no investment, sanitation or electricity. When the drug bosses took control, in return for the residents' silence, they began to maintain order and keep the streets free of crime, excluding their own. Now the favelas are home to one in three of Rio's six million inhabitants.

The boxing club is in Complexo da Maré, the nearest slum to Rio airport. A massive wall was recently erected to separate and hide it from the main airport road. Some 125,000 people live in Maré, divided into 17 different favelas. These days, Maré has

medical centres, schools and even a local museum, but it's still a place ruled by two rival drug factions. Movement between territories is limited and drugs are sold openly on corners.

It's here, in Rio's largest and poorest favela, that Luta Pela Paz (Fight for Peace) is attempting to bridge the gap. Founded by Londoner Luke Dowdney in 2000, it gives the children of Rio a way out of poverty. Luke became fascinated by the favelas after moving to Rio while studying for a master's degree in anthropology.

The first thing Luke does is school me on how to behave. I'm not to stare at anyone, especially anyone with a gun. And I'm not to take any photos. If anything untoward happens, I'm to do exactly as I'm told (Tim Lopes, a high-profile Brazilian reporter was kidnapped and murdered while investigating a story in Favela da Grota in 2002). What I'm not prepared for is the energy of the favelas. There's an overwhelming sense of warmth and strength about the community. As Luke and I drive to Fight for Peace's academy, children play football in the streets, neighbours laugh and shout out to one another. 'It's a small

percentage that's involved in violence,' Luke says. 'But everyone suffers.'

This is where boxer Roberto Custódio, now 23, grew up. Fighting at light welterweight (64kg), last year he won the Brazilian National Championships, adding to a long line of victories. It's been quite a journey. In many ways, Roberto was one of the luckier ones. His parents both had jobs, although his mother's long commute to the city, where she worked as a maid, meant he rarely saw her. Even after his parents split up, his family remained tight-knit and supportive. But then, when he was 13, his father was murdered by a trafficker. 'I knew who it was who had done it. I would see him around and think, "I have to kill him",' Roberto remembers. 'Then one day a friend came

“ KIDS AS YOUNG AS 14 LEAN AGAINST WALLS, MACHINE GUNS SWINGING ROUND THEIR NECKS WHERE SATCHELS SHOULD BE ”

into the shop where I was working and told me about the Fight for Peace Academy. And I realised over time that building a life for myself was the best revenge.'

Boxing gyms have a long history of rescuing adolescents who would otherwise slide into crime. As an amateur boxer himself, Luke had witnessed firsthand how boxing could overcome division and violence, and bring out the potential of marginalised young people. Something about the ring, its training and courage, instils a self-respect and focus in kids.

Everyone is welcome at the academy. Now nearly 1,000 young people – a third of whom are girls – are supported by it. But Fight for Peace takes the social aspect of the gym as seriously as the boxing. Children learn how to access education and find work, and are placed on mentoring schemes. And some, like Custódio, go on to fight professionally.

'Boxing became my life,' he says. 'My mother used to worry about me, but the academy was a place where I could talk to people, and I made many friends. I met my future wife, who was in the girls' class.' It was at the Fight for Peace academy >

Boxing in Brazil



that Custódio was discovered. He has just secured his place in the Brazilian national boxing team for a second year, is expected to represent Brazil at the 2011 Pan American Games and could storm the Brazilian squad for the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games.

At the academy I'm flanked by kids of all ages. Some watch Roberto as he starts to shadow box, their mouths slack with concentration, while others are mimicking his moves on the sidelines. Soon I'm adopted by Victoria, a chatty nine-year-old who is, she tells me, pretty fierce with her *capoeira* (martial arts combined with music and dance). Roberto still gives coaching sessions here when he is back from training with the national team, which means Victoria and her friends have a role model to aspire to. 'The favela kids don't have enough choice,' Luke explains. 'Our job is to give them options. But there needs to be a systematic approach to working with young people on a wider scale, and to overcome the endemic problems of guns and drugs. There needs to be a fundamental change at a policy level. It's much bigger than small projects.'

Small it may be, but Fight for Peace's formula has proved so effective that a London academy opened in 2007 and the idea is now being syndicated around >

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The gloves are on
Roberto goes through his moves on Rio's Copacabana beach



Aiming high
Roberto takes in the views on the way to Christ the Redeemer; the palm tree-fringed Copacabana Beach

“WHEN YOU GROW UP IN THE FAVELAS, YOU FEEL THE REST OF RIO ISN'T REALLY YOURS. THE CITY HASN'T CHANGED BUT MY VISION OF IT HAS”

the world. Luke also has a new sports and streetwear clothing range, Luta. It's modelled by Roberto and other favela fighters, and half the profits will go to the charity. 'Fight for Peace was always about seeing the kids as champions,' Luke explains, 'whether life champions or boxing. Luta is about marking these heroes on a bigger scale. They're inspirational young people who need to be celebrated, not vilified. There's so much talent, energy and vibrancy in the favelas. It's a bonus for Rio, and it needs to include them wholeheartedly in the 2014 World Cup and the 2016 Olympics.'

It's a relationship that works both ways. Fight for Peace presents a more positive image of the favelas, but it also gives the children access to the rest of Rio, and the world – although ask Roberto his favourite destination and he immediately says Brazil, though he admits Venezuela has its charms, too. And so – despite his training commitments, and the fact that he would no doubt rather be spending time with his wife Alexandra and their toddler daughter Rillary – now he knows Rio, Roberto agrees to take me on a whistle-stop tour.

We begin, as most people do, on the beach. Copacabana is arguably the most

famous in the world, and deservedly so. Stretching for four palm tree-fringed kilometres, it's beautiful. We share a drink from a fresh coconut from one of the tiny beachfront cafés, then Roberto is away, in his element – he splashes in the waves, before demonstrating some *capoeira* moves as people play football or volleyball, haggle with beach vendors, work out at the exercise benches or just hang out.

Next we take the two cable cars up to the top of Sugarloaf Mountain. Roberto first came here on an outing with Fight for Peace, and while he admits the views are stunning, he can't help but point out there isn't a great deal to do. Our final destination is the statue of Christ the Redeemer, the Art Deco statue that dominates the Rio skyline. It's a mixture of the sublime and the ridiculous (the stairway to heaven is an escalator) and at 700m, twice as high as Sugarloaf. The views – the mountains, the beaches, the lake – are breathtaking. Here Roberto is as much a tourist as I am, getting people to take pictures of us both. This is a popular backdrop for wedding photos, and the predominance of white veils lends an air of the carnivalesque.

As we stand overlooking the city together, >

Boxing in Brazil

Dizzy heights

Rio as seen from
Sugarloaf Mountain

I wonder how it must feel to make this journey from the poverty of the favelas to representing Brazil, and Rio, to the world? 'When you grow up with machine guns in the street, you think it's normal,' Roberto tells me. 'If you're from the favela, the rest of the city isn't really yours. Sure, we could say, 'Let's go to see Christ,' but that would mean we couldn't eat for the next week. You can feel excluded. But Fight for Peace taught me my rights, and now I have a different relationship with the city. It's not that the city has changed,' he concludes, 'it's more that my vision has.'■

Find out more at fightforpeace.net. Fight for Peace's London academy is supported by Comic Relief. Ask cabin crew how you can donate your spare change on board to Flying Start, British Airways' new partnership with Comic Relief. BA is proud to be the official airline of the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games. For details, visit ba.com/london2012. Luta's performance and streetwear clothing will soon be available at luta.co.uk. Journey Latin America specialises in tailor-made holidays to Latin America. Seven nights in Rio de Janeiro start at £1,533 per person, including flights, transfers and bed and breakfast in a boutique hotel (+44(0)20 8747 8315, journeylatinamerica.co.uk).

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SEE YOU ONLINE

Read Joanna Hunter's on-assignment blog about the London Fight for Peace academy at bahighlife.com.



*World Traveller return, excluding taxes, fees and surcharges