

Beira Grande Hotel: Hell with 5 Stars



By Eric Lafforgue and Constantine Savvides



Built in 1954, the Beira Grande Hotel in Mozambique was once the most luxurious hotel in Africa. Meant for wealthy businessmen and tourists, it was both the pinnacle of luxury and of colonial folly. There was no demand for it so they shut it down in 1963.



To reach it, you just follow the nice cornice along the sea, leaving Beira's old colonial villas behind. The huge building appears, nothing special from the outside, apart trees growing from the roof with their roots cracking the structure.



Since shutting down, this colonial dream has become a nightmare. After being used initially as military base during Mozambique's civil war (1977 – 1992), the squatters moved in.



Despite the abhorrent conditions, some elements of community and order emerge. They have a “secretary”, Joao Goncalves, whose job it is to resolve residents’ problems. He is very busy...



The living conditions are atrocious. Drugs, disease, and trash are ubiquitous. People have removed much of the plumbing, electrical, windows and even concrete to sell on the black market. This weakens the building but provides them with another meal.



In a makeshift room sit a few dozen teenagers and children, watching Chinese Kung Fu movies on a small TV, the only one in the hotel.



Since there is no electricity, the darkness inside is overwhelming. Only the natural light coming through where windows used to be illuminates the hotel. Clothes are hanging where the giant reception used to be.



After the hotel shut down, the pool remained open. The Mozambican Olympic Swimming Team trained there. Now, filled with no more than a dirty puddle, it is used by inhabitants for bathing or washing laundry.



Children play around open elevator shafts with... no elevator in sight! "No one knows when the building is going to collapse," says one resident, "It's going to collapse on top of our poverty".



The former helicopter pad has become an open air bathroom...



Kids are learning to play tag a hundred feet high with no barrier preventing them from falling. Every year, some kids fall to their deaths reported one mother...



“We are all are poor, but poor together,” says Karina, who has been living in the hotel for as long as she can remember. “My family came here because of the war,” she continues, “Most people are here because they lost everything in the fighting. We must make room for everyone.” She currently shares a room with 8 family members. She tells me she lives in a (former) luxury suite!



A few political posters cover the walls. "The politicians only come here when they need our votes," he says, "but after we do not see them again. They never do anything for us". The walls are a canvass for the inhabitants to express their anger through graffiti.



“There is no hope as nobody has a salary, except for the drug dealers,” says a woman who has a little shop in a dark corridor. You need a lamp to see what she is selling.



“I came to stay here temporarily... that was 16 years ago,” says one inhabitant. Between 2,000 and 3,500 impoverished people like him now crowd the Grande Hotel. There are approximately 700 families in residence.



The giant complex had around 120 suites, a cinema, an Olympic-size swimming pool, a helicopter pad, restaurants, a bank, a post office - it was a city in itself.



Drug addicts get high on the grand spiral staircase, and without the presence of the Secretary, I would have said goodbye to my cameras....



Rosanna wears a huge smile on her face. At 16 years old, she dreams to leave this place, become a teacher and get a real house. She is in a hurry to get to the beauty salon located at the ground floor of the hotel.



“We are all are poor,
but poor together”

lafforgue@mac.com
www.ericlafforgue.com