

Living Routes Brazil Summer Program Assessment, 13 July-2 August 2009

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Executive Summary

Living Routes is a non-profit, educational organization which offers ecovillage and sustainability-related study abroad experiences in collaboration with the University of Massachusetts at Amherst and with various host institutions and sites overseas. The Permaculture in Brazil program has been offered for several years, and is one of the most well-subscribed programs in the Living Routes catalog.

The on-site assessment was conducted by Karl Schmidt, who was also a full participant in the Brazil program, thus offering him the unique opportunity of seeing and experiencing the program in its entirety. In addition, the assessor had also previously attended a Permaculture Design Course in Australia, co-taught by Bill Mollison, and so was able to evaluate the content of the course and program as well as its delivery.

The assessor consulted with Living Routes staff, particularly with Daniel Greenberg and Gregg Orifici, before going on the program. He received past student evaluations of the program and was able to review previous student weblogs and other information before departure.

On-site Administration

The site is administered by the staff of IPEC: Lucia (Lucy) Legan (Co-director), André Jaeger Soares (Co-director), with assistance from Rebecca Nathan (Program Coordinator).

- **Lucy Legan (Co-director):** Lucy was an excellent co-director of the program, with a depth and breadth of experience. She was engaged with the students, and was often available outside of class time to visit with students who may have had questions. For the many students in the group, Lucy was clearly a positive role model. Lucy was responsive to student concerns (what few developed) and was also adept at handling lack of student participation in certain ecovillage activities, such as cleaning, feeding livestock, among others. She seems to have a good working relationship with LR and was responsive also to any concerns LR staff may have had. She considers the LR connection to be a valuable one and clearly enjoys having the students come on this program.
- **André Jaeger Soares (Co-director):** André was equally engaging as Lucy, and provided the students with the contrast of a Brazilian perspective on many matters (Lucy is originally from Australia). Although André was a little less visible on a day-to-day basis outside of class time, he was easily accessible in the IPEC office, or occasionally during mealtimes. He always participated in off-site field trips and even participated in the frequent social events staged by the IPEC staff.

- Rebecca Nathan (Program Coordinator): Rebecca had volunteered at IPEC for some years in the past and then had returned to work and live at the site. She served as Program Coordinator and was tasked with overseeing the many day-to-day activities, such as organizing field trips, managing the class, mentoring students, solving problems, facilitating class activities, and a host of other functions, including some teaching. I would describe her as a factotum—an employee with various duties. Being a little closer in age to the students, she connected easily with them and they looked to her for advice and guidance on many issues.

In addition to the main staff, others on-site, who worked in the office, the kitchen and the shop/book store were all very helpful and eager to assist the students as best they could.

On-site Advising

On-site advising came primarily from the three principles: Lucy Legan, André Jaeger Soares and Rebecca Nathan, with some assistance from Hildegard Magdalena Klever Krause, a psychology professor from the local university in Pirenópolis. All but Dr. Krause lived on-site, and so were readily able to serve the advising needs of the students throughout the day. All seemed interested in the overall welfare and well-being of the students and were quick to informally assess the needs of students early in the program, so as to provide maximum advising during the critical first days.

From my observations, it is clear that the advisors are experienced with university-aged students, having run this program in conjunction with Living Routes for several years now. They are particularly attuned to the needs of students from the United States, and are amply able to cater to them without engaging in excessive hand-holding. IPEC offered a unique form of advising for students, based on the Permaculture principle of guilds. Each of the principles, plus Dr. Krause, took charge of a small group of students for a weekly ‘guild’ session, during which students were asked to reflect on how they were feeling, what they were learning, and any other issues they wished to bring up. Dr. Krause led my group and I was impressed by her handling of one student, who clearly had some interpersonal issues the first week or so. These issues eventually faded and became less problematic to the cohesiveness of the whole, but could have been more lingering without the expert intervention of Dr. Krause and the others.

Anecdotally, students seemed pleased with the level of on-site advising. My position as fellow student made them relax in front of me and they were not shy about expressing their opinions on a whole range of issues. I was not aware of any major concerns with advising from any of the students during the course. Several of them commented on what great people they met while at IPEC and how Lucy and André were great role models. Rebecca got accolades, too, for her approachability and accessibility.

Academic Personnel

As mentioned earlier, I was in the unique position of participating as a full-fledged student in this course, but also as an observer. I am also an experienced classroom teacher with 20 years of teaching behind me, so I was well-positioned to view the academic personnel from a variety of perspectives.

In addition to the staff already mentioned, additional teachers appeared during the course to handle the teaching of discrete elements of Permaculture design. These adjunct teachers included:

- Luciana, who gave an afternoon talk on Permaculture on the Table, a food-centered lecture/demonstration, including information on local foods and food preservation techniques
- Juliana, the resident herbalist, who lectured at IPEC's extensive herb garden on a variety of herbs and their uses. She also gave a workshop on how to prepare herbal drinks and remedies.
- Flavio, who gave a talk on composting techniques. Flavio was also instrumental in teaching the group about super adobe and swale building during the community action project.
- Liberalino, who gave a talk on bees, including a demonstration of how different native bees make combs and produce honey.
- Nena, who gave an informal talk to a small group about geodesic dome construction.

All of the teachers were passionate about their subjects. Lucy, André, and Rebecca (who also coordinated and helped teach the Portuguese language lessons), in particular, were excellent instructors and really seemed to enjoy connecting with the students.

Academic Coursework

The Permaculture Design Course (PDC) is a standard curriculum, recognized worldwide, largely through the efforts of Bill Mollison who, in collaboration with David Holmgren, originated the Permaculture concept. Mollison formulated the first PDC nearly 30 years ago, and that course is the standard by which others are typically measured. The PDC at IPEC covers the standard curriculum very well, but goes into additional detail during the three-week course (the standard PDC is only 12 days) and also includes other specialist content areas, such as food preparation, use of herbs, as well as a community action project. The latter was an opportunity to work with a local Catholic school in Pirenópolis, designing a Permaculture garden and play area for the young students to use. The students in the PDC enjoyed this chance to apply their growing skills first-hand. We had three visits to the school over the three-week period. Students also helped design the project.

The course assessment was as follows:

1. Active Participation – 20% of final grade

2. Learning Journal – 20% of final grade
3. Weblog - 20% of final grade
4. Design Project and Presentation– 40% of final grade

The course was a good mix of theoretical and practical knowledge, with the living laboratory of the IPEC ecovillage all around the students. This is, of course, the real advantage of having this course taught at IPEC. Permaculture isn't just a theoretical subject, but rather can be experienced first-hand every day on-site. I availed myself of this opportunity fully, and photodocumented the site in great detail.

It was clear that the teaching team had developed a solid program for the PDC. Their forethought in planning was obvious and maximized the benefit of the program to the students.

Most students in the aggregate seemed to take the coursework seriously and were enthusiastic about the learning opportunities. As the program progressed, however, some few students stopped participating in some of the optional learning activities, such as capoeira, and the Portuguese language lessons. Three students also spent one full afternoon and evening on a day assigned to the final design project getting tattoos in Pirenópolis, which impacted the quality of the work of three of the five design groups (including my own). It is unclear what could be done about this situation, as students are adults making their own decisions.

Learning and Academic Support Facilities

The learning and academic support facilities were more than adequate to serve the needs of the program. Classrooms included the main rotunda building, the Praça de Arte (a covered open-air space), the mango tree (seats built from super adobe and centered around on old mango tree), and the community kitchen. Students were thus exposed to a wide range of learning environments. Some workshops also took place at other locations on-site, including a session on compost-making at the compost site near the plant nursery and herb-use lessons at the herb garden and the community kitchen.

To support connection with home, loved ones, parents, and to upload text and documents to the LR weblog site, students had access to a computer lab. Some problems associated with the lab included small children who would use the facility during peak times, limited access to the lab (mostly an hour after lunch during siesta and an hour after dinner), and some computer malfunctioning which resulted in one or more of the computers being unavailable to the students. For general use, such as checking e-mails, computer access was sufficient, but in order to comply with LR requirements of blogging, uploading, etc., computer access needs to be enhanced.

The small library at IPEC was a real gem, and despite its small size had a good collection of books, many in English, to serve the needs of students interested in learning more about Permaculture, sustainability, or just casual reading of fiction. Former students donated books on departure, and some of us brought books to contribute to the library as a gift.

Student Housing

Housing for the students was in main housing area, close to the center of the IPEC campus. With the exception of one student, who had come for the Bioconstruindo program earlier and preferred to stay camping in her tent, all of the students were housed together. Rooms were shared on a double-occupancy basis. Furnishings included a bunk bed, chest of drawers and a small bookcase. Bed linens and towels were provided, and could be exchanged weekly. Toilet and shower facilities were close by. Toilets were of the composting variety, and gave the students the chance to learn that their wastes could be used to enhance the fertility of the site.

Three meals were provided on-site, prepared in an inspected industrial kitchen. Occasionally, lunches were eaten off-site, picnic-style, during weekend excursions or during the community action work in Pirenópolis.

Post-departure Orientation

The staff at IPEC provided a detailed orientation on the first full day of the program. Students got the chance to introduce themselves to each other and the IPEC, and learn about the various staff members for the program. Lucy, André, and Rebecca provided a detailed overview of the course and activities. The day ended with a short visit to Pirenópolis and a tour of IPEC. The orientation was successful in providing the background the students needed to find their way around town and IPEC, as well as in navigating the course.

Student Intellectual and Cognitive Development

From my various conversations with students over the course of the three weeks, it was clear to me that students came to this program from a variety of different backgrounds (both social and educational), ages, and maturity levels. With the exception of myself, all of the students were in the range of 19 to 27 years of age. Two of the students already possessed their undergraduate degrees and were pursuing this program as a way of enhancing their background in sustainability. There were occasional tensions within the group, but nothing which interfered or adversely impacted the course or a sense of collegiality overall. In fact, in my long experience with students abroad, this was by far the most congenial group I have encountered. In many ways, the differing backgrounds, ages and life skills added greatly to the experience.

The teachers were particularly cognizant of the needs of the group and held daily ‘roda’ check-ins to see how everyone was doing and feeling. They also repeatedly stressed the importance of realizing that IPEC was also home to many people and that part of the ecovillage experience was sharing in the work as well as the pleasures. Lucy made the comment more than once that this group of students was particularly well-behaved and relatively ‘problem-free’ when compared to earlier groups on the LR program.

Safety and Security

The IPEC site is extremely safe and no one I encountered expressed any feelings of being unsafe during the experience. The IPEC staff cautioned students against hiring motorcycle taxis to travel to and from IPEC. To my knowledge, no one used such transportation. Most students who traveled into town went by foot or the occasional taxi if they came back in the evening. The IPEC staff cautioned students early in the program against using illegal drugs in Brazil, as the penalties can be quite exacting.

Health

Basic health needs were addressed adequately. As part of the first day's orientation, students were made aware of basic procedures should someone fall ill or need medical attention. An extensive first aid kit was stocked and available on-site at all times and also taken along on any off-site visits/field excursions. Pirenópolis has a hospital.

Students were also encouraged to keep themselves clean to avoid issues of ill-health, such as scratching mosquito bites and thus infecting them with dirt on their feet or legs. Interestingly, several times students were encouraged to take short showers daily or even more frequently if they needed to, as this was the custom in Brazil. Students were told a cautionary tale about previous students from the UK who seemed to wear a badge of pride in not bathing for more than a week at a stretch. Two students—one male and one female—in the LR group seemed not to take the advice to heart, avoiding bathing entirely for several days!

Other than mosquito bites, and occasional scrapes, minor cuts and bruises, no one in the program had any noticeable health issues or accidents to report.

Perceived Satisfaction of Students

Student satisfaction with the program at IPEC seemed very high, as evidenced not only by anecdotal information, but also by the post-program evaluations. Many reported that the program was a transformative experience.