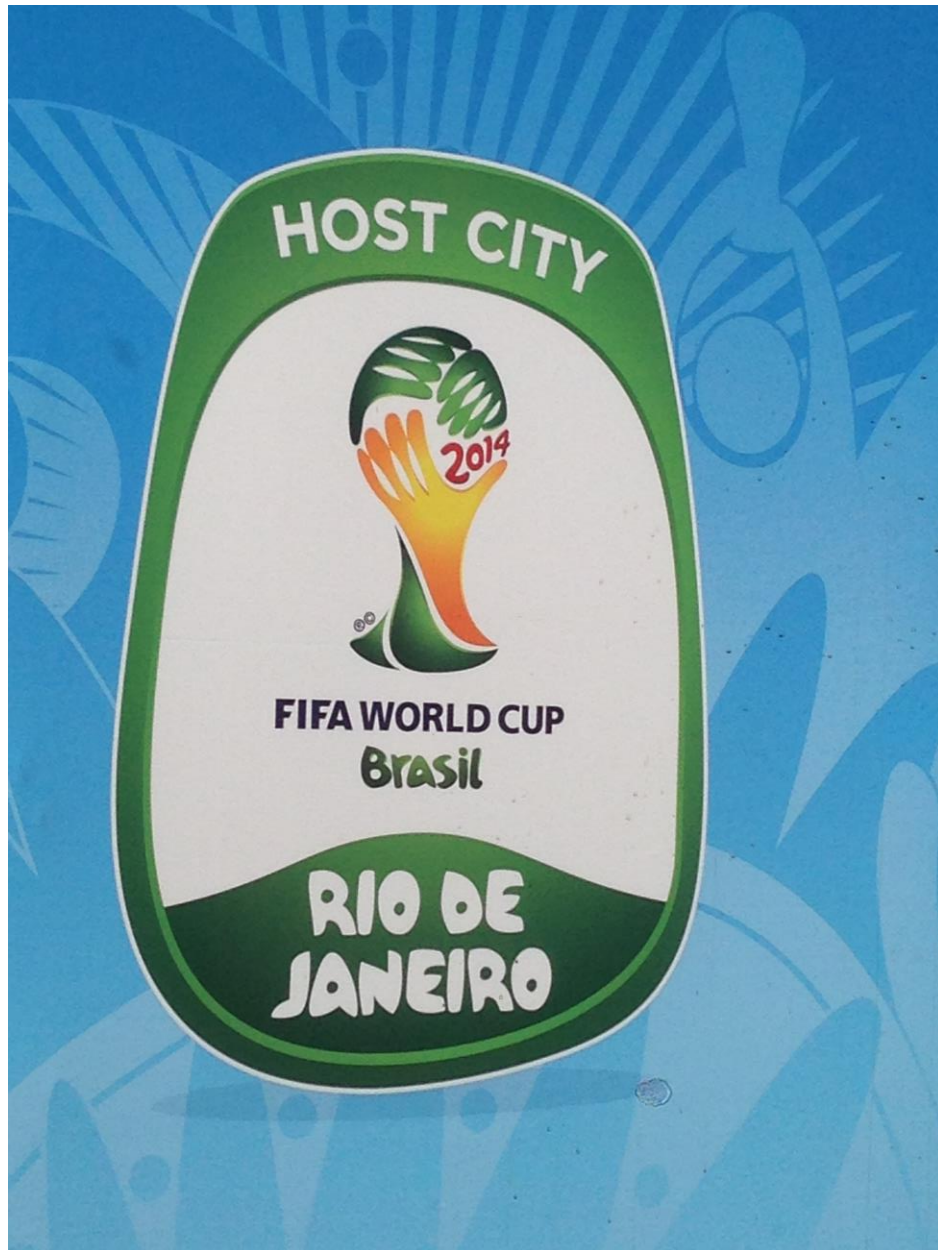
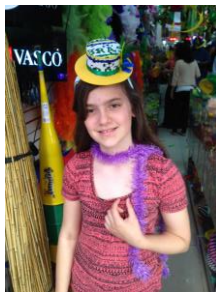
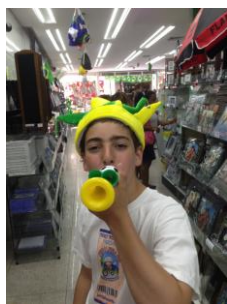




**The soccer fanatic's ultimate
fantasy dream**

What if you get to attend the World Cup of Soccer in the country that gave birth to the Jogo Bonito the Beautiful Game in the city that houses the Mecca of the soccer world, the Maracanã stadium and the birth place of my hero and inspiration the majestic Pele;.



But this is only the beginning. To attend the 2014 World Cup in Rio de Janeiro with my oldest son, a soccer fanatic in his own right, and his son, as well as one of my granddaughters, three generations of Zohars, and to do all this for nine of the most memorable days of my life with all expenses paid by FIFA with a \$2000 left over profit, now that is beyond a dream. This is more like a fairy tale. This is my story and it all happened in July 2014 when Eyal, Zach, Jaime and I went to the 2014 World Cup of Soccer in Rio.



Let's first dispose of the mystery of the FIFA (the International Football Federation Association) "sponsorship" of our trip. A few months before the World Cup FIFA announced that it will hold a world -wide lottery for World Cup tickets at face value. All my family members signed up for it and weeks later only my wife were informed that we were the winners of 40 tickets to 5 matches at a face value of \$100 per ticket, to be held at the Maracanã. Fast forward, a few weeks before the games were to begin, I sold 32 tickets to a reputable event ticket company for an average price of just over \$500/ticket. Can I be accused of sculpting? By the letter of the law, may be, but by the spirit of soccer passion, absolutely not. With a tidy profit of \$11,000 we were headed to Rio.

Our first evening landing in Sao Paulo was a bit tense. As the head of our delegation I directed the team to the international instead of the domestic terminal for our connection to Rio. My geography is fine, thank you. We almost missed the flight to Rio while the security staff was scrambling to escort us to the domestic terminal.

Ignorance is (sometime) bliss. We booked in advance a one bedroom apartment in Rio Centro (downtown) through Airbnb. While we heard about crime and violence in Rio little did we know that Rio Centro is considered to be an outright dangerous neighborhood, especially for tourists. So much so that on the way back from the famous Copa Cabana beach the next evening a taxi driver refused to drive us there for fear that we would be violated somehow. As it turned out choosing this location turned out to be a highlight of the trip.





The apartment itself after the first night was OK once the landlord Barbara delivered an air mattress for the kids and bug spray to get rid of the parade of ants in the kitchen. Airbnb now advertises something like “don’t just travel there, live there”, exactly as we did.

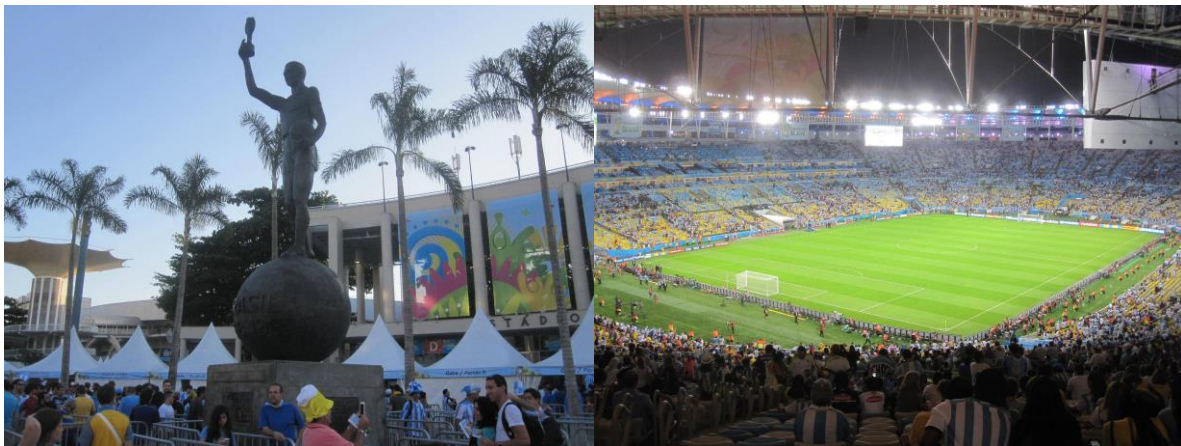


The neighborhood was just fine while with the park, the market, the shops, the bars and we could experience and breathe the air of the “real” Rio. There we discovered the restaurant cobblestone alley with tons of quaint places, great food, a great atmosphere to watch matches on TV or to just chill to the Samba sound of street

musicians. We also took a guided walking tour of Rio Centro and learned about its history, evolution, monuments and overall charm. We finally understood why our neighborhood was considered dangerous. Downtown Rio is going through a rapid transition from an old residential to a new commercial centre. Old apartment houses are being demolished and being replaced by office towers. The remaining citizens are the ones who still can't afford to move out.



But this is not the reason we came to Rio. The next day we were headed for the Maracanã to watch Argentina beat Bosnia Herzegovina 2:1 highlighted by Leo Messi 's spectacular goal. Walking toward the Maracanã, soaking the pre-game buzz and the electric atmosphere in the stadium, was a culmination of a dream come true for myself, my son and my grandchildren who couldn't possibly understand the significance, but were caught up in the excitement of the spectators in the stadium.



Two days later we were back at the Maracanã this time a bit smug of having been there before, to watch one of the better matches of the World Cup with Chile beating the pre-tournament favorites Spain 2;0. As for quality and excitement, especially the deafening noise of the Chilean fans this was by far the soccer aficionado's best.



Contrary to prior predictions of potential crime and violence the atmosphere in the city in general and on Copa Cabana's fantastic fan zone where we watched most of the other matches in the tournament, was electric. Watching and mingling with soccer fans from all over the world is outright exhilarating. On our days and evenings at the fan zone we and especially the kids fun meter was off the charts culminating with the Canadian team of Eyal and Zach losing to a Brazilian team in beach soccer volley ball (a national sport on the beaches of Rio and the playground for some of the greatest Brazilians soccer players in the history of the sport).



The HUGE screen on which the matches were broadcasted and live music performances were staged for the thousands of lightly clad fans on the white and soft sandy Copa Cabana beach is the definition of bliss.

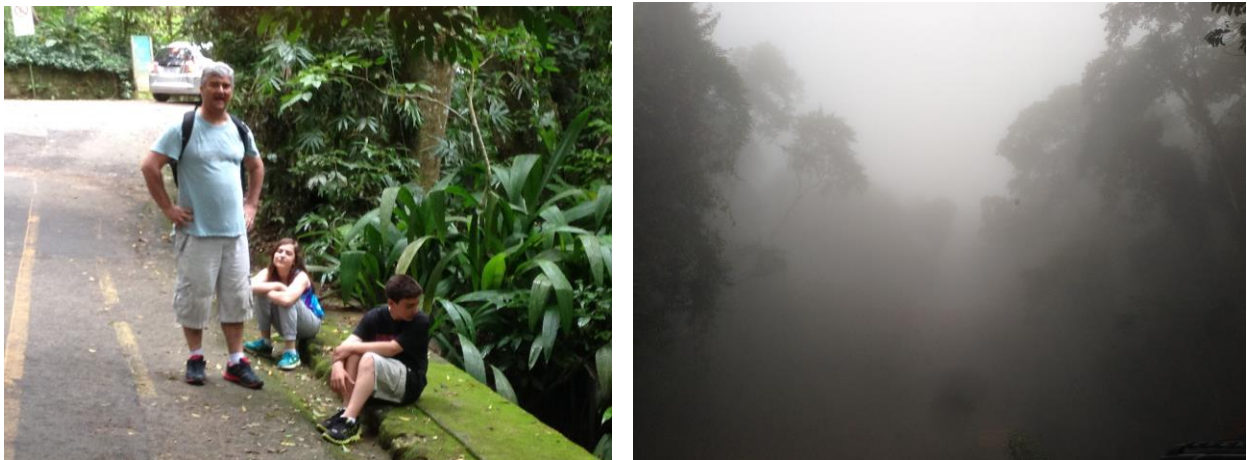


In between matches we sampled the fabulous beaches of Ipanema and Leblon. But all of this didn't come close to the highlight of the entire trip. We took a tour of the artist colony of Santa Teresa and a walking tour of one of the (now open to foreigners) Favelas. It was great. But as we completed our tour at the foot of the Favela the local crowd gathered in front of a large TV screen at the Favela's bar, sidewalk and the street to watch the Brazil -Mexico match. We were urged to board the bus to return to Copa Cabana but our instincts told us that we should stay and watch the match with the locals at the Favela. Of all the wonderful experiences this will forever be etched in our memory. Soccer is more than a religion in Brazil and watching and rooting for Brazil to beat Mexico, as equals among the fanatic crowd with high fives and cheers at every Brazil chance was and sipping beer with the locals is something we could not possibly plan in advance. As soccer fanatics for Eyal and I that experience was surreal, almost spiritual.





So what else could have happened to top what, as you can tell, was non-stop excitement? Could it be our trip to the Tijuca national park where our guided tour turned out to be a “Do-it-yourself” because of some confusion? We wouldn’t really know because two hours into the advertised one hour climb to the top which we hitched with 2 strangers we decided to turn around as the fog and our tired legs prevented us from climbing to the summit (in hindsight an excellent decision).



Or could it be our taxi ride back to Rio Centro which the taxi driver somehow construed to be something other the location of our apartment and after an hour and a half driving to “another” Rio Centro the driver erased the \$80 fare on his meter and finally drove us to our apartment. To Rio Centro! Si Rio Centro, No Rio Centro.

Or was it on the last day just across from the Copa Cabana Palace Hotel when I went over to see if we could rent a room for the afternoon before our 11 O’clock return flight home? No such thing. Security did not even let me in to the reception to ask the question as the Palace is where all the dignitaries, celebrities and other filthy rich people stayed. I was back in 2 minutes and realized that despite my warning to the rest of the team to stay put at this kiosk across from the Palace they disappeared. We were separated for almost an hour with dusk setting, Phone calls and text messages to Eyal, from a smartphone borrowed from a total stranger who was certain that I am going through a cardiac episode, remained unanswered and my panic attack in full progress only for a chance sighting of me by Zach to reunite us. At which time all I could say to Eyal was “I could kill you!” Turned out that an identical kiosk to the one they were staying put all this time was located just 10 meters from the one I returned to and with the thousands of fans my screams did not even travel that short distance.



Or is it that one night when we returned from the fan zone and being hungry we finally succumbed to check out what we thought was the seedy restaurant just below our apartment and not only was it a delicious meal but the warmth and hospitality of the local folks was heartwarming. This is what bias can do to you



In the end If for excitement, enjoyment, fun and adventure and most of all soccer this was the trip of all trips which all of us will remember forever.

