

Inothim, twilight of utopia

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Visiting the Inhotim Park in the Brazilian province of Minas Gerais means confronting a twofold constraint. On the one hand, fleeing the syndrome of a commercial amusement park where works of art replace pseudo-cultural activities. On the other hand, ambling through a venue which has already become legendary. Although or natural suspicion should have led us towards the first of these, the exceptional quality of the site won over in the end. True, there is no escaping the constraints of the exercise of a tourist itinerary with marked paths everywhere, service golf carts, threatening signs and endless queues. Yet, Inhotim differs in a singular manner from traditional artefacts of this type, revealing the influence of landscape architect Roberto Burle Marx, who imposed his elegance and fluidity.

Of the 1,000 hectares (~2,500 acres), 100 are open to the public: gardens, arranged without interruption and constantly changing, harbour some 1,600 different plant species, most extremely rare. Not to mention a great variety of animals you can feel and hear and which makes this park one of the world's largest plant reserves. Sixteen pavilions punctuate the itinerary, each one with its own architecture, designed in relation with a work devised and produced in situ. Impossible to list them all, but we can single out a work by the American artist Doug Aitken, where visitors can hear the sounds of the Earth in a hemispheric building. It is somewhat New Age but truly captivating.

Obviously, one cannot help but think of the park's founder: Bernardo Paz, an industrialist linked to the exploitation of ore, should have spent his fortune in projects more social in nature or, why not seek to compensate for the thousands of hectares devastated by his company here and there? But, where most rich industrialists squander their money on ostentatious projects, overvalued art collections stored in the reserves of impersonal foundations, this man created what may be an incomparable utopia. With the crisis in Brazil, you can sense in the lack of upkeep of certain pavilions that his fortune is slowly dwindling. Unable to estimate how a State in full economic recession can maintain or develop so ambitious a project, we can imagine that all this beauty will shortly fall into ruins, a vestige of an old romantic belief in the fusion of Man, Art and Nature.

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