

After the oil boom: Luanda faces stark inequality – photo essay

The next 15 megacities #8: Photographer Sean Smith captures the extremes of life in the Angolan capital

Main image: Downtown Luanda, where wealth and extreme poverty exist side-by-side. All photographs by Sean Smith for the Guardian

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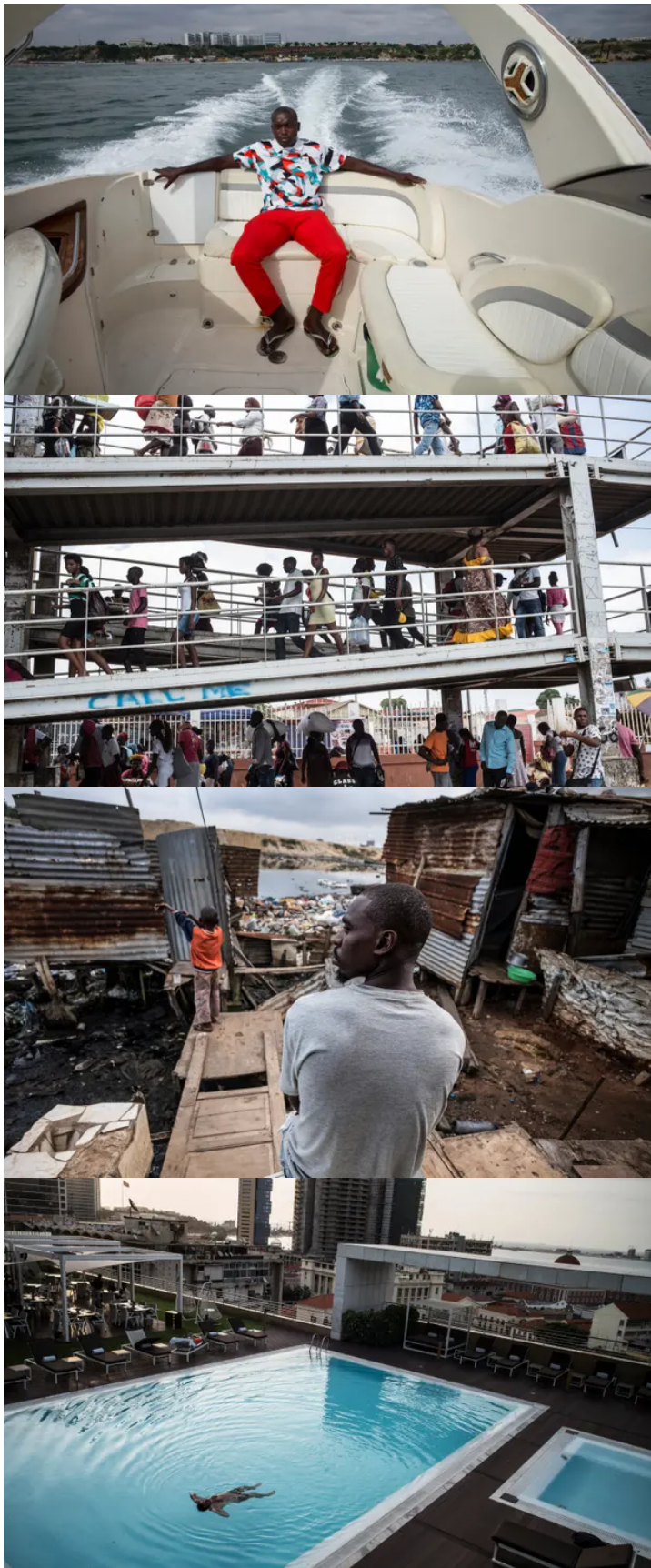


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The route from London to Luanda, the capital of Angola, used to be one of British Airways' most profitable, ferrying people involved in the country's lucrative oil and diamond trades during a remarkable expansion of the city from 2002, after nearly three decades of civil war.

In recent years it has competed with Hong Kong and Tokyo for the title of world's most expensive city for expatriates. Cranes dominated the downtown skyline and homes in the surrounding areas were demolished to make way for Chinese-backed housing projects. Wealthy firms reportedly paid millions to fly in pop stars such as Mariah Carey and Nicki Minaj for private concerts.



Examples of stark inequality abound in Luanda

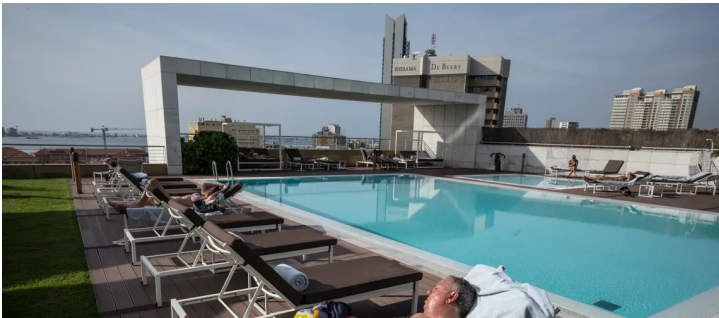
In June British Airways closed the route, the latest sign of a downturn that has rocked the city since the price of oil began to crash in 2014. As inflation spiralled, new governors of the Angolan central bank have tried to rein in the local currency, the kwanza. Now there's a currency shortage and a disparity in value on the black market, which is driving crime and medicine shortages.

Despite this, Luanda continues to expand south and east from the south Atlantic Ocean. The city is home to a population of about 7.8 million, which the UN estimates will double by 2030,

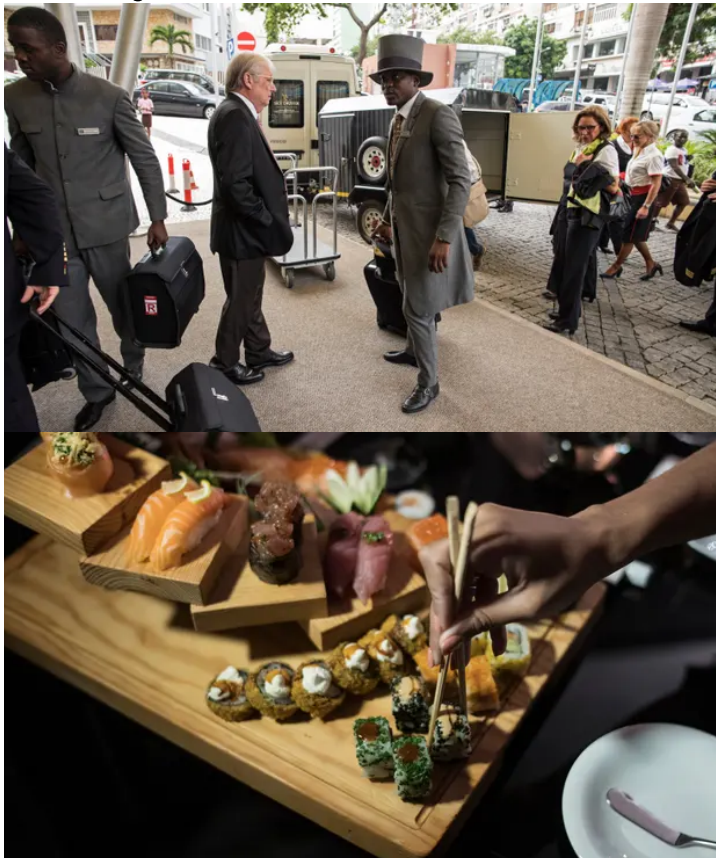
giving Luanda megacity status.

Luanda is expensive to visit and visas for journalists are hard to come by. Government bureaucracy is obstructive and relentless, and the chance to document ordinary life relatively rare. Angola was once looked to with hope: having shaken off the yoke of colonial Portuguese rule in 1975, could it use its clean slate to put socialist principles into practice? Decades on, inequality is stark: wealth has been hoarded by the elite and the rights of ordinary citizens are trampled on. Many are forcibly evicted to create new developments where they can't afford to live.

In last year's election, José Eduardo dos Santos, the president for almost four decades, was replaced by João Lourenço, a former defence minister. There appears to be some appetite for reform in parts of the new government: most notably, several lucrative contracts given to Isabel dos Santos, the former president's daughter and Africa's richest woman, were annulled by the new president.



The Epic Sana hotel: the lap of luxury





Scenes from the Epic Sana, one of Luanda's top hotels

The modestly titled Epic Sana is a Luanda landmark, one of the city's top luxury hotels located in the heart of the downtown district. During the oil boom it was teeming with business people; oil companies used to block-book dozens of rooms for their employees. The hotel boasts several restaurants with chefs from Portugal; sushi appears to be the current fad.

Thanks to the economic crisis, the hotel is quieter these days. Some airlines and diamond companies put their staff up there, but the high-rollers have gone.



Zango: farmland seized for pricey apartments



A former farming community now lives in makeshift homes after their land was seized for a housing development

These shanty homes in Zango, in the south of the city, belong to former farmers whose land was taken in 2006 for the housing development in the background. They were given a week's notice. They have a constitutional right to compensation and rehousing, and were advised to stay close to the new development or risk being forgotten. But communication from officials and developers is poor, and the former residents have no certainty about their fate. Legal battles over rehousing can sometimes take more than a decade. SOS Habitat, a group supported by Christian Aid, works with those who have lost their homes and livelihoods.



The Mangais golf course: a surreal green oasis



The exclusive Mangais golf resort, where Luanda's elite while away their weekends

The Mangais golf resort is also in the city's south, next to the Cuanza river, and is where rich locals and foreign businessmen spend their weekends. It is a surreal place - lush and green. During my visit, a group of Korean businessmen were playing a round, caddied by young men

from the area. There was also a group of wealthy locals playing; the women in the group seemed to have dressed up for the occasion.



The lagoon: displaced families face health crisis



The Areia Branca shanty village, where fishermen have been forcibly moved and their houses bulldozed to make way for a development

Nearly all of the men I met living at the Aiera Branca shanty village, to the south of the city, were fisherman. The man in the main photo is looking for worms among the plastic trash to use as bait. The men fish the black waters of the lagoon, with their children playing next to them.



Children living by the lagoon

The child in the final photograph has pneumonia. There is a severe shortage of basic medicine that, years ago, would have been available at clinics. Now they can only be found on the black market and most people can't afford them. Malaria has also become a huge problem, with infection rates rising alarmingly.

Under the country's constitution, people have the right to running water and electricity. Clearly there's a disparity between the official promise and the reality, and that gap is where many ordinary Luandans are forced to live.



Kilamba: a ghost estate comes to life



Police and students at the Kilamba housing development

A new housing development in Kilamba, to the south of the city, is one of many neighbourhoods constructed by Chinese developers. Existing homes were razed, with former residents offered spaces in the new buildings. In one development we visited, the rent was four times the average monthly wage. For a while developments like these lay empty, dubbed ghost towns. Now, they are beginning to be occupied by skilled professionals working for the government. By local standards, those people are wealthy.



Saturday night: how rich and poor unwind



Dancing to kizomba music at the Povoado bar in Bitá

The Povoado bar is in the old neighbourhood of Bitá, not far from Kilamba. It is the type of place most people earning normal wages can head to on a Friday or Saturday night to unwind without breaking the bank. Kizomba music blares from its speakers - it is the most popular modern Angolan dance music. It became a craze in French-speaking countries and parts of South America.



The upmarket Docks nightclub has been hit by the downturn

In the city centre there are upmarket nightclubs such as Docks, where the wealthy go. During the boom years, business was good here. But they are feeling the financial squeeze now too.



Weapons of war: leftover AK-47s drive crime



Police on a Friday night patrol

Luanda has a crime problem. It is difficult to get any official statistics, but everyone talks about frequent armed robberies. There are a lot of weapons around, mostly AK-47s left over from the civil war. At the time, they were handed out to people to defend themselves.



A police officer stops a car to look for weapons or drugs

I went out with a police patrol on a Friday night. They would stop cars, searching for weapons or drugs, or to see if the driver had been drinking. I noticed the police always travelled in groups at night. One man they stopped was a bit affronted and asked why he had been stopped; generally though, people seemed to be polite and wary of the police, but not intimidated by them.



The great leveller: beloved beach unites the city



Scenes from Ilha do Cabo, the main beach, which draws Luandans of all stripes

Ilha do Cabo is the real heart of the city, where everyone goes to relax: rich, poor, homeless. It is mostly a weekend spot, but during the week you might find students having picnics or celebrating a birthday. Further up from where these pictures were taken, there are expensive beachfront bars and restaurants that largely cater to expats. Everything they serve is imported from Europe - apart from the beer.

Interview by Aidan Mac Guill

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