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Meet the Worshipers Who Believe They're Aliens in Human Form

Vale do Amanhecer followers believe they have taken on many Earthly roles, including Spartan warriors, Maya princes, and Egyptian leaders.



A Sunrise Valley follower gives praise in front of a statue of one of the practice's spiritual leaders, Chief White Arrow.

PHOTOGRAPH BY GUI CHRIST

BY YE CHARLOTTE MING

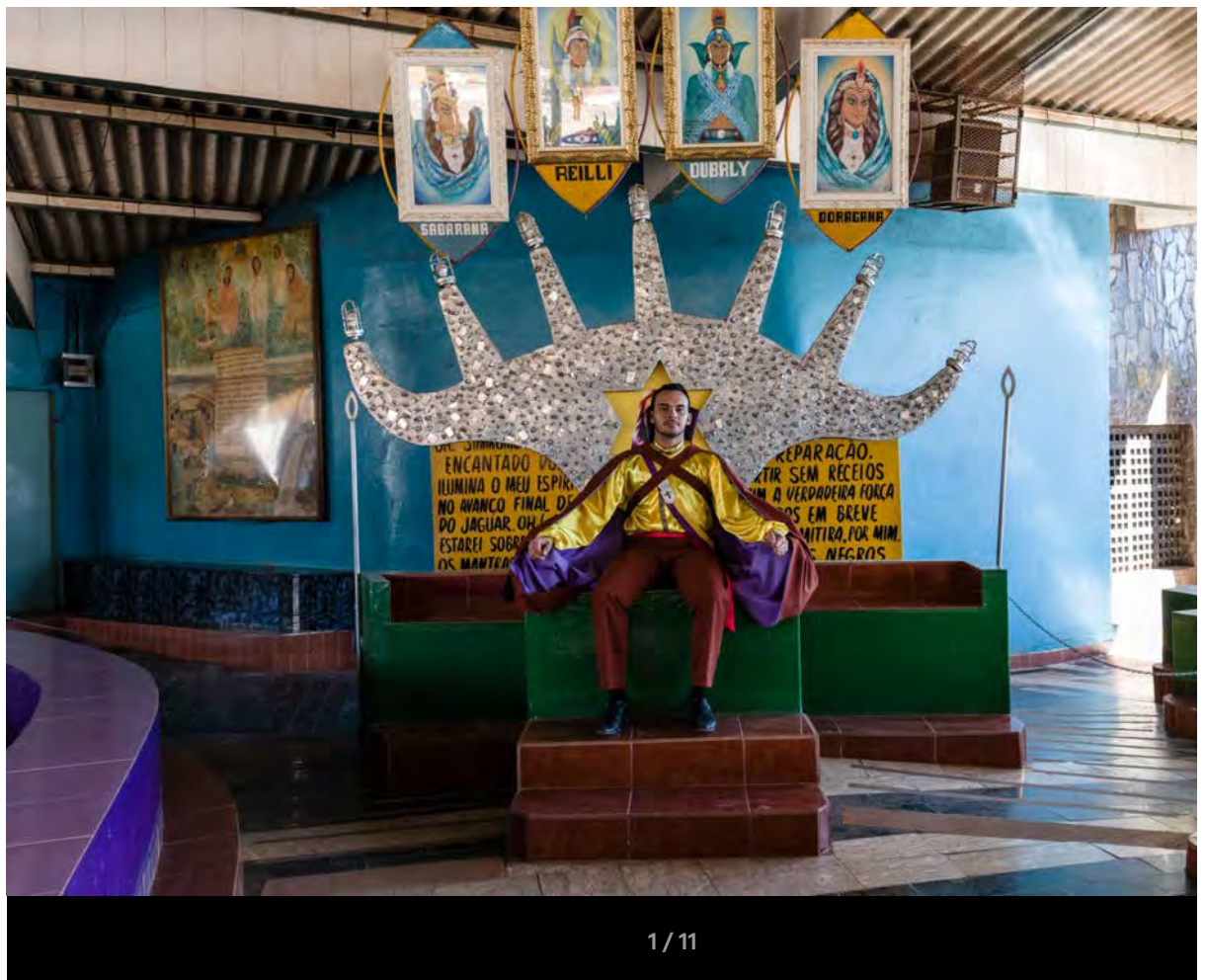
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An hour outside [Brazil's futuristic capital](#), Brasilia, lies one of the country's spiritual capitals: [Vale do Amanhecer](#), which translates to Sunrise Valley or Valley of the Dawn.

At first sight, Sunrise Valley looks like a miniature theme park—where visitors can see copies of the world's wonders without having to travel to the actual sites. Built in Planaltina, a satellite city of Brasilia, the lakeside temple complex features a pyramid, a spaceship-like temple, a six-pointed praying center, and several ellipse-shaped sculptures.



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A Sunrise Village follower—dressed in a Maya prince outfit—sits on a throne used during the ritual of the Turigano, based around the belief that the Jaguar community was once incarnated as Spartan warriors and citizens. Drawings of four spiritual princes, who followers b... [Show more](#)

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Left: Pamela Rondon wears a Nytiama outfit, which represents the fire used in ancient Indian rituals.



Right: Magally Pereira, wearing a Greek outfit, stands with her cousin, Italo Moreira, wearing a Jaguar outfit.

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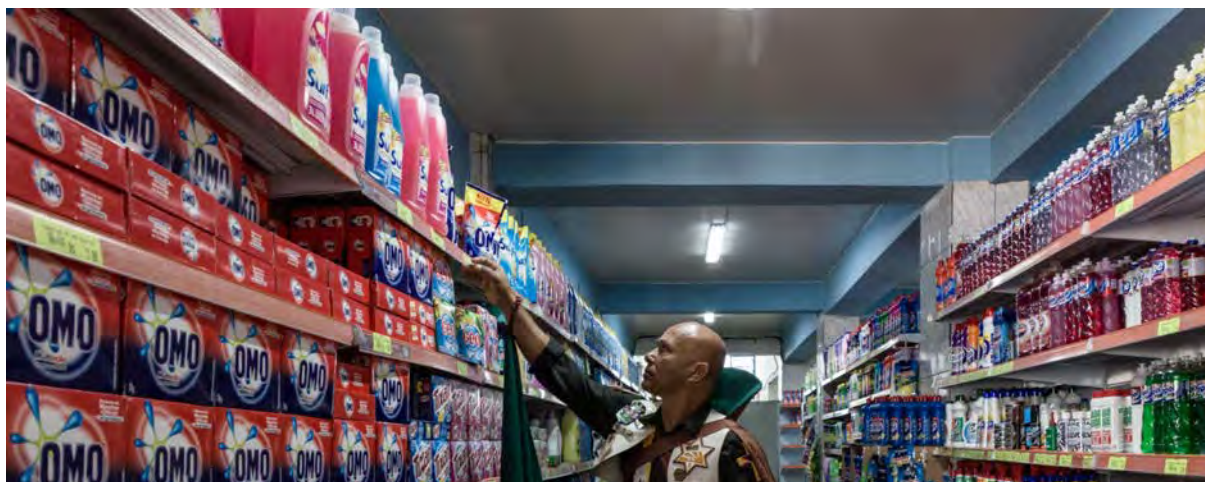
While the valley's physical setting can feel disorienting, it is not accidental. Meticulously designed, it is reflective of the religion's intricate, all-comprising doctrines and beliefs—drawn from a diversity of religions and civilizations, including Christianity, Hinduism, Judaism, the Inca, and ancient Egypt.

According to Sunrise Valley followers, extraterrestrial beings landed on

Earth 32,000 years ago to advance human civilizations. The beings then returned to Earth through successive incarnations across various cultures and eras. Valley members, known as mediums, believe themselves to be the beings' latest incarnation, the Jaguars.

Sunrise Valley was established by Neiva Chaves Zelaya, known as Aunt Neiva, in 1959. A widow with four children, she was working as a truck driver in Brasilia, then under construction to replace Rio de Janeiro as Brazil's capital. There, she said, she began to experience psychic episodes, which she later believed to be visits by spirits from the extraterrestrial world.

Neiva said she was primarily guided by Pai Seta Branca, or "Father White Arrow," a spirit emissary who is depicted in statues and drawings today as a native South American leader.





A Sunrise Valley follower, dressed in a master outfit, shops at a local store.

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Left: Joana D'arc, a Sunrise Valley follower, dresses in a Samaritan outfit—inspired by the story of the woman who met Jesus at a well in the Gospel of John.



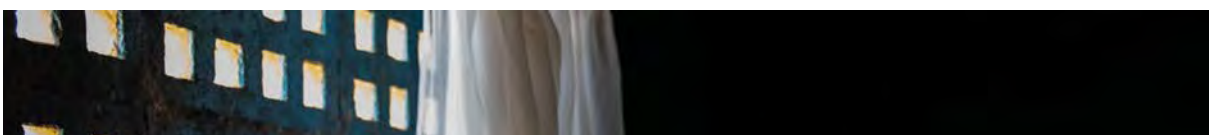
Right: A Sunrise Valley follower wears a Devas outfit. The Devas phalanx, or troop, is in charge of gathering information around the doctrine of Sunrise Valley.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY GUI CHRIST

Brazilian photographer Gui Christ was drawn to Sunrise Valley because of its fantastical origin story and the mediums' colorful, lavish garbs. He documented an array of rituals, some of them involving long hours of chanting while encircling the lake.

Two mediums usually work in pairs during the rituals. An *apara*, or reception medium, has the job of physically incorporating a spirit, be it benign or troubled, and an indoctrinator medium takes on the task of teaching the spirit and helping repel it back to the spiritual world. Followers believe the rituals also help mediums atone the karmic debts from their past lives.

A believer of Umbanda, a spiritual Afro-Brazilian religion, Christ felt struck by an indescribable energy while photographing the rituals. “I have seen many religions in Africa, Asia, and in Brazil but this is the first time I feel I was connected to something,” he says. “I need[ed] to get out of the temple because I was feeling dizzy.”





Francisca Antonia dos Santos takes a break in a prayer room called the Castle of Silence.
PHOTOGRAPH BY GUI CHRIST





Left: Helen Carolina stands for a portrait while dressed in a Greek outfit, inspired by the ancient Spartans and the Oracle of Delphi.

Right: Marileide Santana wears a Dharman-Oxinto outfit, which represents the sorceress of the Egyptian god Horus.

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Sunrise Valley is one of Brazil's fastest-growing religious movements, claiming 800,000 followers and 600 affiliated temples globally, according to Kelly Hayes, associate professor of religious studies at Indiana University-Indianapolis.

Still, mainstream society and religious communities in Brazil often shun Sunrise Valley, categorizing them and other spiritualist groups as cults.

Tension is especially rife between Valley members and the evangelicals who have built churches near the community, targeting members for conversion. "[The evangelicals] believe Valley members are under the influence of the devils," Hayes says.

Instead of dismissing the Valley as an innocuous cult, people should consider it in the context of its foundation, Hayes says. Established in the 1950s, the religion was popular among poor farmers and migrants who came to help build Brasilia. "Brasilia, at that time, signified Brazil leaping into the modern world and becoming a modern nation," Hayes says. But the hyper-organized concrete city turned out to be an inhospitable dystopia, plagued by overcrowding and crime.

The spiritual healing the Valley offers is therapeutic for some of Brasilia's discontent souls. "A lot of it is about re-narrating your life," Hayes explains. "Those narratives give lots of people a sense that they have some control over their lives ... that justice and equality are possible through your work."



Alexandre Alves lies down for a spiritual treatment inside the community's pyramid temple.

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See more of [Gui Christ's work](#) on his [website](#) or on [Instagram](#). 

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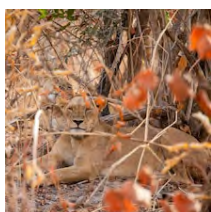
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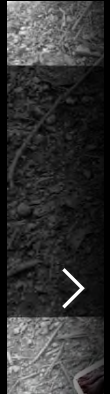
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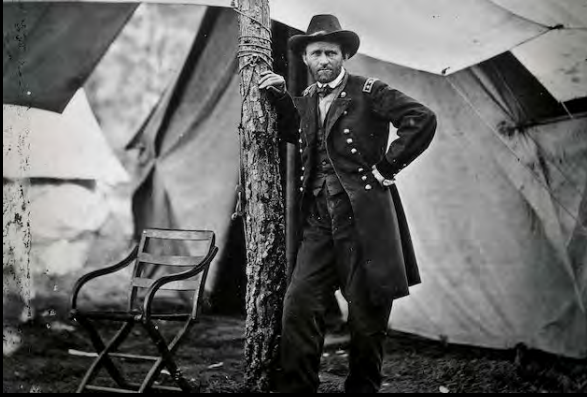
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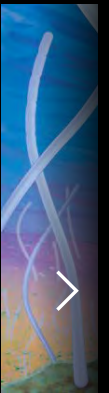
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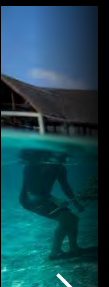
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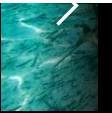
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