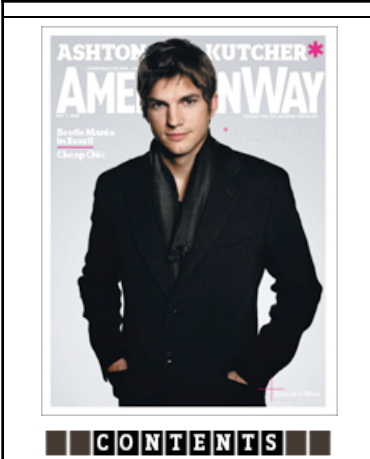


AMERICANWAY



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BEEBLE MANIA

When Herbie the Love Bug hits retirement age (in 2028), where will he go? Pirenópolis, Brazil, that's where. By Kevin Raub. Photographs by Sean McCormick.

Scratch the surface of Pirenópolis, one of Brazil's most unique and beautiful (though lesser-known) colonial towns, and you'll find all sorts of idiosyncratic ticks that are at odds with the surrounding country at large: an alternative, vaguely new age-y movement saddled here since the 1970s; a wholly out-of-place Slow Food delegation; a religiously followed sustainable-tourism conviction -- and that's all without even getting into the town's peculiar mix of art deco and colonial Portuguese architecture or its world-renowned permaculture eco-village (an intentional green community that teaches people from around the world how to live in a self-sufficient and environmentally responsible manner).



But the strangest thing of all about Pirenópolis isn't one of the aforementioned, nor is it something that lurks beneath the surface -- rather, it's the first thing you notice as the surrounding countryside, laden with soy plantations, waterfalls, and termite mounds the size of tool sheds, begins to yield to the town's sleepy

form the love affair of a lifetime with Milan than to follow these famous locals as they take you on a personal tour.



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perfectly preserved historic center: Crossing every intersection, waiting at every stoplight, parked in front of nearly every house, supermarket, and restaurant, are classic Volkswagen Beetles. They are everywhere.

This is where Beetles go to die.

Except the *Pirenopolinos*, as locals here are known, won't let them die; instead, the Beetles are kept on life support. It's a startling sight. The first time you see traffic seize up here, double and triple takes are required: Lines of Beetles can run six to eight deep, in various colors and states of preservation, forming a picture-perfect kaleidoscope of color against the backdrop of the town's multihued colonial walls.

Pirenópolis is quirky like that. Located in the Brazilian state of Goiás, just a few hours outside the Brazilian capital, Brasília, this quaint town is not typically on the traditional tourist path, though it should be. Piri, as locals affectionately call it, is the town of Brazilian dreams: slow-paced, colonial, and full of things that make you go "Hmm." On Brazil's *Patrimônio Nacional* (National Heritage) register since 1989, Pirenópolis is set upon the striking red earth of the Brazilian Cerrado, the country's largest bioregion and the most biologically rich savanna in the world.

But the Cerrado, like most of Brazil's unique ecosystems, is under threat, which accounts for the influx of forward-thinking, socially conscious folks who began descending on Pirenópolis in the '70s. Piri has since become one of Brazil's premier ecotourism destinations and a leader in permaculture (led by the Institute of Permaculture and Ecovillage of the Cerrado, or IPEC, an experimental educational design center and international community located just outside town).

But the quirkiest statistic about Piri is that in a town whose population last clocked in at 21,000, there are an estimated 1,500 Beetles -- an astonishing statistic that's said to be the highest per capita in Brazil. At last count, there were only 1,987 automobiles in the town, period (only Cunha, a town in the interior state of São Paulo, comes even close to Piri's number, but it's not nearly as interesting to visit). As it turns out, the Beetle -- called a Fusca in Brazil -- is the best car for navigating the steep, rough-and-tumble cobble-stoned streets of this gem of a town. "Only the Fusca can properly handle the roads of Pirenópolis," says Jonas "Biti" de Siqueira Filho, 72, a local mechanic who has worked on VW Bugs for more than 55 years. "The suspension system of the Fusca is not a coiled spiral. It's a twisting system that lasts longer. And incomes [are low] here -- people can always afford a Fusca. It's the only old car that still works well and is reliable."

And that is exactly what Adolf Hitler -- yes, Hitler -- envisioned when his Nazi regime commissioned and financially backed the Volkswagen Beetle in 1933. Though the cars were first manufactured as an experimental prototype, Hitler foresaw a "people's car" (hence the German name *Volks* "People's" and *Wagen* "Car") that would be available to citizens of the Third Reich for a mere 990 Reichsmark, which was the price of a small motorcycle back in the day.

World War II took its toll on the vehicle, though, when Allied forces bombed the Fahrvergnügen out of the factory in Wolfsburg, Germany. It wasn't until late



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1945 that the Beetle began its civilian run -- and it went on to become the longest-running and most-produced automobile of a single design in history. From a mechanical standpoint, it was made as simply as possible, so less could go wrong. "The Fusca is a car for wartime," says Siqueira Filho. "They're easy to maintain and fix. Even with a piece of wire and gum you [can repair] it temporarily, till you can get it to a shop."

During the Beetle's implausible 58-year production run (the 21,529,464th and last classic Beetle rolled off the production line in Puebla, Mexico, in 2003), it became an automobile icon, heralded first by hippies, and then by Hollywood (Disney's *The Love Bug*, Woody Allen's *Sleeper*), and finally by Hasbro (*The Transformers*). Perhaps most famously, a Beetle appears on the cover of the Beatles' 1969 album *Abbey Road*.

But nowhere on the planet, except perhaps the Volkswagen AutoMuseum in Wolfsburg, is the Beetle more revered than in Pirenópolis. "Fuscas are part of Piri," says Bheto Rego, Piri's secretary of tourism. "They are a part of the scenery and local history. They also add charm and joy with their colors and cute beetle shape. My first car was a Fusca, and I have had many since. I just sold mine, and I am now looking for an older one in better shape!"

"I fix about 30 Fuscas a month, and 300 a year," says Siqueira Filho. "I fix the same Fusca over and over again. Sometimes we tell clients it's best to buy a new one, and they insist on paying over \$3,000 to fix it, knowing that when they sell it, they won't get that money back from the buyer."



Scratch the surface of Pirenópolis, one of Brazil's most unique and beautiful (though less-remembered) colonial towns, and you'll find all sorts of hidden treasures. Kids that are at odds with the surrounding country of large, unaffordable, brightly new apartment buildings have found the town's colorful, built-in Fuscas. Show Food delegations a slightly different sustainable tourism experience -- and that's all without even getting into the town's peculiar mix of art since and original Portuguese architecture or its world-renowned permanent wine village. An industrial green community that teaches people from around the world how to live in a self-sufficient and environmentally responsible manner.

But the strange thing of all about Pirenópolis isn't one of the aforementioned, nor is something that looks beneath the surface -- rather, it's the first thing you notice as the surrounding countryside, lush with red pineapples, waterfalls, and serene mountainsides of red stone, begins to yield to the town's steep, cobblestone streets and perfectly preserved historic center: crowded, noisy, bustling, making an every night, packed in close of early every house, restaurant, and restaurant, and Pirenópolis. This is where Pirenópolis goes to die.

Except the Pirenópolis, as it is, is a beautiful sight. The first time you see it, it's a little town, double and triple times as required. Lines of houses can rise up in eight days in various colors and shades of preservation, forming a precise, perfect landscape of color against the backdrop of the north-south mountain walls.

Pirenópolis is a city like that. Located in the Brazilian state of Goiás, just a few hours outside the Brazilian capital, Brasília, this quiet town is one typically on the checklist for the rich, though it should be Piri to social responsibility and it, in the name of Brazilian drama: slow-paced, relaxed, and full of things that make you go "Howsa?!" (Brazil's Portuguese National Cultural Heritage) right after you, Pirenópolis is an open-air museum and one of the most beautiful and scenic of the Brazilian cities. The country's largest landscape and one of the most beautiful in the world.

But the Pirenópolis, the town of Brazil's unique experience, is under threat, which is why for the last of forward-thinking, socially conscious kids who began coming to Pirenópolis in the '70s, Piri has been the scene of one of Brazil's greatest environmental disasters and a battle to preserve it led by the Institute of Pernambuco and Environment of the Ceará, or IPEC, an experienced environmental design center and international community-based (see sidebar story).

But the truth has made about Piri is that in a town where population has doubled in a 2,000, there are no outdoor Lush Pirenópolis -- an amazing, natural state with so many beautiful things that it is the highest per capita in Brazil. As has been, since then only a few minutes in the town, packed with children, a scene in the distance.

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Brazil stopped producing the Beetle altogether in 1996, but during the car's heyday, the country was churning out four different sizes of engines: 1200cc, known as a Fusquinha ("Little Fusca"); 1300cc; 1500cc; and 1600cc, known as Fuscão ("Big Fusca"). In Piri, you'll find all sizes and colors of Beetles (white is the most popular, according to Siqueira Filho), and most of them range from between 1953 to 1996. Thalyta Ribeiro de Oliveira, 20, recently purchased a 1971 Beetle -- that is 15 years her senior -- named Celeste for \$1,300. "Nobody here is ashamed of their old Fusca. People love their Fuscas," she says. "When I bought mine, the owner started to cry! He asked me to take good care of it!"

Beetles with original parts are highly coveted. "Celeste is still well preserved, with [some] original parts, like the steering wheel, wheels, and dashboard," says Ribeiro de Oliveira. "Someone offered me \$150 just for the steering wheel!"

Of course, Piri isn't the only Latin American town to embrace the classic Beetle:

Mexico City's green-fleeted arsenal of old-school Beetle taxis are as much a part of the Mexican capital as tamales and Tenochtitlán. But Piri is unique in its staunch dedication to a single vehicle, preserved here as an icon of perseverance and pop culture by the Pirenopolinos. "I want to have a Fusca all my life," says Ribeiro de Oliveira. "I'll also buy another car -- something more modern and more fuel-efficient, but I'll never give Celeste away, my darling Celeste."

As you wander down Piri's lazy streets, the history is almost palpable. The town's oldest church, Igreja NS do Rosário Matriz (1732), stands sentinel over the town and its main street, Rua do Lazer, which is Fusca-free on weekends; cars are banned and lively cafés and bars throw open their doors and set up outdoor tables and chairs. The streets fill up with reveling weekenders from Brasília and nearby Goiânia, the capital of Goiás state. The cachaça, Brazil's local firewater, flows freely under these lantern-lit streets, which take on an otherworldly glow after sundown. But it doesn't take long to realize something is missing: A pedestrianized street means no Beetles, and no Beetles in this town just ain't right.

"It wouldn't be Piri without Fuscas," says Siqueira Filho. "There'd be lots of people walking!"

KEVIN RAUB is a Los Angeles-based travel and entertainment journalist and a contributing editor to *American Way*. His work appears regularly in *Travel+Leisure* and *Town & Country*, among other publications. The year he was born, 1,002,400 Beetles were sold worldwide.



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