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THE WORLD'S COOLEST HOTEL

by Kevin Raub

São Paulo citizens knew something unique was underway. But they had no idea it would be so outrageous. Step inside the world's coolest hotel.



It's as if a giant slice of fruit fell from the sky and transformed a dilapidated parking lot in São Paulo's upscale Jardins district into a modern work of art. At least that's what the locals would have you believe. • Du to its likeness to the seedy fruit, Paulistanos dubbed the five-star Hote Unique the "Little Watermelon" during its three-year construction. Speculation in this gargantuan city of 18 million was rampant as to wh the monstrosity that eventually became the \$40 million property was going to be. Would it be a museum? Would it be a hotel? Was it a glimpse into the future of urban architecture? Well ... yes. • It's a wong in a city where wealth and prestige are worn on one's sleeve (Paulistan are every bit as image-conscious as their neighbors in Buenos Aires or the fashionistas of Europe) that nothing like Hotel Unique has ever sprung up in this Brazilian megalopolis. Hotels here have always been c the major chain variety, not of the Ian Schrager and Philippe Starck ilk. Until now, only one of São Paulo's 30,000 hotels, the Emiliano, fell unde the category of "boutique" or "design." But the introduction of Hotel Unique has the financial, trade, and fashion capital of Latin America — along with much of the rest of the world — abuzz. • Even months after receiving its first guest, Hotel Unique still inspires awe in travelers and locals alike, who marvel at its 25-foot-high, 650-pound double-door entrance as if they are walking into a museum exhibit. A single person behind a single desk with a single glass of Veuve Clicquot champagne greets guests. Mouths, more often than not, are agape — all the bette to receive the libation. • The spacious lobby is beyond imagination. To the left is the hotel's glass facade facing Avenida Brigadeiro Luís Antônio and the hustle and bustle of this vibrant city. Straight ahead is the 300-bottle, 36-foot-high Lobby Bar and adjacent library, stocked full of books on architecture, design, and fashion. Punctuating the space are minimalist Italian chairs by Fendi and additional hip loungeware by Gaetano Pesce and Hugo Franca. Shoot a glance upward and you'll see the hollow center, topped by a "water mirror" on the top floor. The who thing feels much more MOMA than motel.

Once inside, you will rarely, if ever, see more than one hotel staff memt

São Paulo Black Book STAY

Hotel Unique, Avenida Brigadeiro Luís Antônio, 4700, 011-55-11-3055-4701, www.hotelunique.com.br. Rooms from \$280

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Ellus, 011-55-11-3061-2900
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VR, 011-55-11-3081-2919

EAT/DRINK

Barbacoa, 011-55-11-3168-5522
BrÁz Pizzaria, 011-55-11-5561-090
Don Pepe di Napoli, 011-55-11-5055-3627
Pizzaria Castelões, 011-55-11-3045-9556
Posto 6, 011-55-11-3812-4342
Tostex, 011-55-11-3898-1265

at a time. This is because all hotel business takes place behind the scenes. There are no multiple phone lines firing up, no printers, no fax machines. The hotel stocks a hospitality staff of 15, all of whom are skilled in the fine art of concierge, check-in and check-out, and anything else in the world you might need.

As it turned out, as I arrived in my room, I needed water. But the moment I reached for the minibar to grab a typically overpriced *agua sem gas*, there was a knock at my door. Into the room strolled a hotel staffer with a fresh and perfectly chilled *coco*, a Brazilian coconut (the juice is one of the country's finest thirst-quenching treats). Hollywood could not have scripted it any better. It was the first and only time I would see a staff member in the dark and winding halls during my entire three-day stay.

To get an idea of just how rare and special Hotel Unique is to São Paulo just let a local know you are staying there. That person, along with five of his or her closest friends, will be lining up to check out one of the 95 rooms, all of which feature more gadgets than a Sharper Image store, including a \$2,500 Panasonic flat-screen LCD television, a DVD player, and a Philips cordless phone that works anywhere in the hotel and even some 50 yards off the premises.

Each room has a circular window (these form the "seeds" of the water-melon from the outside), which can be opened and closed via an electronically controlled motion wall — so cool it hurts. From the Jacuzzi-style bathtub you can watch television or close off the wall separating the bathroom and bedroom for privacy. Gorgeous rain-style showers, stocked with intoxicating L'Occitane bath products, inspire envy as well. I had six Brazilian friends in there at once — just to look, mind you.

Brazilian-Japanese architect Ruy Ohtake, designer of more than 200 buildings in Brazil and throughout the world — including the Brazilian embassy in Tokyo — is responsible for Unique's, well, uniqueness.

"The owners wanted a different hotel, a landmark for São Paulo," says Ohtake. "Contemporary architecture in Brazil is very important, [but] in my opinion, just recently the minds of people here have become more open to this kind of project. So we must seize these chances."

Ohtake's arc design for the hotel was created to accommodate more rooms on the higher floors, allowing for better views of the city's 395-acre Ibirapuera Park to the south and the upscale neighborhood of Jardins Europa to the east (the most expensive piece of land per square meter in the city). But while the views from the rooms are certainly stunning, it's the Skye bar and restaurant, located on the roof, that truly dazzles.

When you emerge from the elevator serving the roof, there is no question why this has been the place to see and be seen since day one. While Skye does decent Japanese- and French-inspired cuisine, and even better *caipirinhas de frutas* (a fruitier take on Brazil's national drink, it contains strawberries, pine-apple, *maracujá*, and kiwi crushed with sugar and *cachaça*), the main attraction is the vista.

The whole of São Paulo's enormous skyline is laid out before you in all its looming glory. Breathtaking is the only word that comes to mind. But don't get so lost in the view that you stumble in-to the red-tiled lap pool.

— unless, of course, you want to dance. It features an underwater sound system.

Hotel Unique's magnificence notwithstanding, it would be remiss to stay completely within its confines. Much like Hong Kong or Paris — but with less impact on the wallet — São Paulo is a gastronomic and shopping paradise.

Anyone with money to spend and an appreciation for the finer things should head straight for a street called Rua Oscar Freire in Jardins, São Paulo's Rodeo Drive. You won't find cutthroat deals on international brands like Hugo Boss and Armani, but the latest fashions from high-end Brazilian boutiques like VR, Forum, and Ellus can be had at laughable prices. As if the city needed any more style credibility, Brazil's Fashion Week is held in savvy São Paulo, and Hotel Unique hosted last year's production. It just doesn't get much hipper than this.

But your mind and body will eventually turn from shopping to eating. If luck would have it, there are few cities better to dine out in than São Paulo. The city's large Italian population has assured its pizza is amazing so much so that Italians are often floored. There are brick-oven pizzerias all over town and Paulistanos fill them up by the hordes on the weekend. Almost any will do, but two standouts include Bráz Pizzaria in Moema and Pizzaria Castelões in Itaim Bibi. The latter has been serving up mouthwatering pies since 1924. At both places, locals wash down the excellent pizza with carioca chopp, a half-light, half-dark draft beer. Do not sweat the abundance of foam, which Brazilians consider a sign of a good draw on the tap. For more traditional Italian fare, you can do no better than the extra-large portions at Don Pepe di Napoli in Moema. Try the excellent filet mignon à la parmigiana, a Brazilian invention.

While it's quite possible to never tire of São Paulo's Italian offerings, you must tear yourself away for at least one meal at a traditional Brazilian meat restaurant, or churrascaria. Barbacoa, a churrascaria in Itaim Bibi is particularly noteworthy. Nine different cuts of perfectly grilled beef sizzling and dripping from the rotisserie grill just keep coming and coming until you say "Uncle." Don't miss the salad bar, either. The choices are mesmerizing.

For a trendier evening out, hit up Tostex in Jardins. Here you'll find all the beautiful people sipping mojitos and dining on tasty toasted sandwiches. Afterward, head for the bustling nightlife area of Vila Madalena, São Paulo's version of SoHo. There are a slew of bars in the area, but one not to miss is Posto 6. Paulistanos spill out into the street at this watering hole, considered a "Rio bar" because of the tiled floor's resemblance to the famed squiggly sidewalk designs of Copacabana Beach.

Regardless of where you go, top your evening off back on the roof of the Hotel Unique, which will still be hopping in the wee hours. After all, there's no place quite like it. Just ask a local. "I live in São Paulo and I stay at the Unique," one Paulistano tells me over drinks. "I think it's the most beautiful hotel in the world."

KEVIN RAUB is a San Francisco-based travel and entertainment writer whose work has appeared in *Travel + Leisure*, *Maxim U.K.*, *FHM*, and the *New York Post*, among numerous other national magazines.

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Photography by Tuca Reines

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