

Brazil's capital of finance, fashion, and fine food is showing that even the world's largest cities can fight pollution with fervor

the greening of são paulo

BY KEVIN RAUB
PHOTOGRAPHS BY JAVIER PIERINI

IT'S A TYPICAL THURSDAY NIGHT in Vila Madalena, a bohemian neighborhood in São Paulo that's home to cutting-edge art galleries and fashion-forward boutiques, cafés, and restaurants. Inside Ekoa Café a sizable group of Paulistanos, as residents are known, has taken over the second floor to bat around ideas about sustainable design while sipping exquisite coffee and Uruguayan wine, both organic. Fábio Souza, director of Brazil's Design Institute for Sustainable Development, oversees the conversation.

The group sits at a wooden table in chairs made from certified ecologically harvested teakwood. The lampshades around the room are fashioned from used coffee filters, sustainable bamboo, and recycled coconut shells. The stairs leading down to the bathroom were telephone poles in a former life, and the toilet flushes with rainwater. Outside, Ekoa is surrounded by an all-natural food market on one side and a modern lighting store on the other selling wares that were once shower drains, kitchen bowls, and plastic soda bottles. Five years ago, nothing of this sort would have been here.





Away from the hustle and bustle of São Paulo, relax on the banks of a lagoon in Parque Ibirapuera.

São Paulo is full of such surprises. In fact, despite being the world's third-largest metropolitan area, the city is often overlooked on many fronts — it's absent from CNN's televised world weather forecasts, for example, and few outsiders realize São Paulo is Latin America's capital of finance, fashion, shopping, and nightlife. There's no Zagat food guide, despite the city's position as a worldwide gastronomic hub. And forgive me, Italy, but São Paulo, where 6 million people claim Italian heritage, may also be home to the best pizza (and pizza culture) in the world.

The reality is that very few people outside Brazil know much of anything about São Paulo — and a shocking number have never even heard of it. What should come as no surprise to anyone, however, is that Sampa, as the city is known, is a monster, a gargantuan, traffic-snarled, skyscraper-saturated megalopolis that's dizzying in its density and baffling in its blueprint. Trying to work out the bus system here, one of the world's most complex, with more than 1,300 routes, is about as easy as hands-free yoga. To put it bluntly, São Paulo can be intimidating.

I recently walked across a downtown plaza that on my first visit to the city, many years ago, seemed so chaotic and confusing that I scampered back to my hotel room, tail between my legs. Nowadays, as a São Paulo resident, I shuffle through the same square like a born-and-raised local. But the city never ceases to offer new surprises. Just the other day, for instance, I learned there are no billboards or outdoor advertisements of any kind. None. Last year the city's mayor, Gilberto Kassab, ordered the removal of all such signage — a monumental task in a city of this size — in an effort to squash visual pollution.

A far bigger challenge, however, for a metropolitan area of 3,067 square miles, 77 shopping malls, and countless skyscrapers, is mitigating the damage that such a large urban concentration does to the environment. As it turns out, São Paulo is something of a role model for other large cities. It has been a pioneer in setting green municipal policies, and has taken drastic steps to improve air quality, tackle sanitation problems, and altogether do its share in helping to repair damage caused by years of environmental neglect.

Not Easy Being Green

On an average day, São Paulo produces 15,000 tons of waste, much of which inevitably ends up in landfills. But between 2005 and 2008, the city reduced its greenhouse gas emissions 20 percent by installing

biogas power plants at two of its biggest landfills. Not only is the release of methane gas in the atmosphere diminished, but the energy that the plants produce provides enough power to serve the needs of 700,000 people. It's all part of a city initiative that's intended to drastically reduce greenhouse emission levels by 2012.

Brazil was a world pioneer in biofuels, having begun efforts to promote their use as far back as the 1970s, and the country is now the world's largest consumer of plant-based biofuels. São Paulo led the way as the first Brazilian city to introduce compulsory emissions inspections for vehicles. Most of the city's motor vehicles run on ethanol produced by sugar cane. And while converting sugar cane to ethanol creates its own ill effects, Brazil is addressing that issue too. According to Roberta Buendia

SÃO PAULO HAS BEEN A PIONEER IN SETTING GREEN MUNICIPAL POLICIES, REPAIRING YEARS OF ENVIRONMENTAL DAMAGE.



This page, clockwise from top left: the interior of Ekoa Café; dine at a bistro on Rua Oscar Freire; a bird's-eye view of the bustling city from atop the Copan building. Opposite page: the lush surroundings of the Praça da Sé subway station.

Rio's National Treasure

Brazil's other famed beach destination, Rio de Janeiro, is just a quick one-hour flight from São Paulo. If you can tear yourself away from the gorgeous tanned sunbathers on Rio's Ipanema Beach long enough to take in anything other than sun and sand, Tijuca National Park hovers over the Cidade Maravilhosa — Rio's nickname, from a popular song — like a green giant with welcoming arms. The 9,800-acre patch of rain forest, part of the Mata Atlântica Biosphere Reserve, dates back to 1860 when Emperor Dom Pedro II of Portugal, in a miraculous bit of environmental foresight, ordered the area reforested to offset damage from years of coffee and sugar cane production.

But since its inauguration as a national park in 1961, Tijuca has provided a much-needed swath of shady coolness for Cariocas — as Rio's residents are known — and tourists alike. The largest urban forest in the world, Tijuca is also a refuge for some 400 threatened species — toucans, capuchin monkeys, and other creatures who live freely among its mountainous peaks. Tijuca helps to preserve Rio's microclimate and offset air pollution as well.

Beginning this year, Brazil's government is investing \$18 million to restore and expand trails and gardens throughout the park. But then again, under the watchful eye of the iconic *O Cristo Redentor* — Christ the Redeemer, a 124-foot-tall statue overlooking Tijuca — it's hard to get away with anything other than preservation, lest the Cariocas find themselves condemned to environmental purgatory.

— K.R.

Continental now offers direct service to Rio de Janeiro from its hub in Houston.

Sabbagh, assistant to the secretary of the environment of the state of São Paulo, the burning of sugar cane scraps was scheduled to be eliminated by 2031, but the government and sugar cane growers forged an agreement to end the harvest burning by 2013.

Sabbagh's office, since 2007, has also implemented a set of 21 green initiatives — *Projetos Ambientais* — in the state of São Paulo. They include rules on sanitation practices and air, land, and water use throughout the state's 645 municipalities, covering everything from restricting construction near water sources to the reforestation of native woodlands to an extensive education program in the state's public schools.

Parks in the Works

In 2006, São Paulo had only 32 parks for its inner-city population of 11 million. But in the three years since, 21 new parks have been added, and another 30 are under construction. The goal is to have 100 parks by 2012. The city's most culturally important park is the massive Parque Ibirapuera, an equivalent to New York's Central Park in terms of its significance and its location within the city.



TWENTY-ONE NEW PARKS HAVE BEEN ADDED TO THE CITY OVER THE PAST THREE YEARS, AND ANOTHER 30 ARE UNDER CONSTRUCTION.

A Slice of Heaven

Whenever I tell people how good the pizza is in São Paulo, they almost always react with great skepticism. Pizza? In Brazil? But pizza Paulistana, one of the foundations of São Paulo's gastronomic culture, is so shockingly good that you'll soon forget the marriage of dough, cheese, and tomato sauce originated anywhere else.

On any night Pizzaria Bráz, one of the city's 5,000-plus pizzerias, is flooded with revelers. White-jacketed waiters serve ice-cold *chope* (Brazilian draft beer), *pão de calabresa* (loaves of sausage-stuffed bread, served piping hot), and the tastiest pizza ever to emerge from a brick oven.

"Do not eat it with your hands," I'm told. That's not the Brazilian way. Here, pizza is eaten in a more refined manner, with a knife and fork. "Do not serve yourself!" I'm scolded again. As the waiters navigate the floor, they serve your next piece with the grace of ballerinas.

I devour the four-cheese pizza (taleggio, pecorino, caciocavallo, and gorgonzola) and another, called Fosca (smoked ham, mozzarella, and a Brazilian cream cheese known as Catupiry). My level of satisfaction hovers between giddy schoolboy first kiss and college commencement post-graduation cap toss. It's that good. People here say this is the best pizza in the world — that even the Italians are jealous. I have no rebuttal.

Which brings up the topic of superlatives. Try as you may, it's nearly impossible to avoid them anytime you're describing São Paulo. The biggest this, the best that, and so on. For instance, along Rua Oscar Freire — Brazil's equivalent to Rodeo Drive, in the leafy, upscale Jardim Paulista neighborhood — sits a shop called O Melhor Bolo de Chocolate do Mundo, which translates as The Best Chocolate Cake in the World.

This enticing sweet shop serves only its namesake item. But like São Paulo itself, this cake is not what you think. As I devour it, expecting a moist and dense dessert swimming in chocolate, my taste buds stutter-stop when it turns out to have a more cookie-like consistency, almost too dry if it weren't for the layers of oh-so-decadent, soft and gooey French chocolate. It turns out The Best Chocolate Cake in the World is both yeast free and flour free. — K.R.



NEW BUILDINGS ARE REQUIRED TO INCLUDE SOLAR-POWERED WATER HEATING SYSTEMS, ONE OF THE CITY'S GREEN INITIATIVES.

São Paulo is also participating in a Hybrid Bus Test Program developed in South America by the Clinton Climate Initiative, as well as the BioEthanol for Sustainable Transport (BEST) project. Brazil's first Scania E95 ethanol bus was delivered in late 2007, and it currently plies the streets running on 95 percent ethanol. Every new building and home it passes is required to have installed a solar-powered water heating system, another of the city's green initiatives.

"São Paulo is changing its image of being a polluted city to a city that's been finding and implementing modern solutions that result in better environmental conditions," explains Sérgio Oliveira, who directs the Ministry of the Environment's Department of Climate Change. "Unfortunately, most people overseas are not quite familiar with our actions. Brazil is committed to environmental issues, and São Paulo, due to its industries and large population, is taking on bold goals."

But the city's green initiatives aren't just a lot of political tail-wagging. The business community is onboard as well, particularly the food industry. In June, São Paulo's three biggest grocery store chains — French-owned Carrefour, American-owned Wal-Mart, and Brazilian gourmet brand Pão de Açúcar — announced a boycott of meat from Amazonian farmers who are illegally cutting down native rain forest to expand their pastures. It's estimated that some 80 percent of the Amazonian wood that arrives in São Paulo is illegal, with faked certification. Sabbagh's office is implementing technology to track and police all wood coming down from Brazil's north to make sure the certification is in order.

"It's very important to look for source-sustainable ingredients, especially in Brazil, but also to boycott the unsustainable ones," says Alex Atala, Brazil's most revered culinary star and the chef of restaurants D.O.M. and Dalva e Dito. "Gastronomy can be a tool for the conservation of our natu-



This page, clockwise from top: walk or ride through the esplanades of Parque Ibirapuera; grab a drink at Skye, the rooftop bar at Hotel Unique; the lush entrance of Tordesilhas; busy streets line the Bela Vista neighborhood. Opposite page: Savor a slice at Pizzaria Bráz.

tional cocktail. The restaurant, helmed by chef Mara Salles and raved about by foodies across the city, offers an interesting promotion designed to spotlight sustainable ingredients.

“In Brazil, it’s still difficult to work exclusively with sustainable ingredients,” explains co-owner Ivo Ribeiro between sips. “But the restaurant has a project called Yes, We Have It, But Soon It Will Be Over — it sounds better in Portuguese!” The special tasting menu features rare ingredients and is designed to show small farmers and producers that there is a market for what they are doing, and encourage them to continue their efforts.

Later that night, I pop into Skye, the rooftop bar at Hotel Unique. There’s nothing green about it, but it sure is a fun place to visit. Designed by Japanese-Brazilian architect Ruy Ohtake in the shape of an upside-down slice of watermelon, the Unique is an über-hip hotel that caters to fashionistas, rock stars, and plenty of folks who think they are both. And Skye, more than any other bar in town, puts all of São Paulo’s awesomeness into perspective. While sipping a Caipifruta Mista — a version of the caipirinha in which limes are replaced with passion fruit, tangerine, and strawberries, basically a spiked fruit cocktail — I take in the view of skyscrapers lined up perfectly like chess pieces on a board the size of Kansas, stretching across the horizon with no end in sight. I’ve seen it countless times and it still impresses.

But this time I notice something else. Rather than gawk at the endless concrete pawns and bishops that fill the sky, I look down, something I can’t ever remember doing. The neighborhood of Jardim Paulista, which translates as Paulista Garden, sits below. All I see is green.

Kevin Raub covers travel and entertainment for a variety of publications including Travel+Leisure and Town & Country.

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ral resources and to better the socioeconomic conditions of small producers.”

Green Brews and Views

Sitting at Tordesilhas, one of São Paulo’s best regional restaurants and a pioneer in the newly gentrified neighborhood of Baixo Augusta, I’m enjoying a pleasant buzz from a 100 percent organic cachaça, a firewater used in the caipirinha, Brazil’s na-