



Introduction

There is a city in Brazil so blessed by nature, so sublimely beautiful, that even poets and artists struggle to describe its charms. Frank Sinatra, Barry Manilow, and Amy Winehouse have all sung homages to its world-famous beaches. Tourists flood in year-round for Carnival, New Year's Eve, and other fabulous festivals. What locals proudly call "the marvelous city" has, over the past two centuries, bewitched kings, TikTokers, and billionaires alike.

Sorry, but this book is not about that city.

Instead, some 230 miles to the west, there lies another, even bigger city, one that could be described as an endless sprawl of skyscrapers clustered around a winding open sewer. This city has no beaches and, until recently, not much of a Carnival either. It is blanketed in indecipherable graffiti that seems to have been left behind by aliens, and so strangled by traffic that it supposedly has the largest privately owned helicopter fleet in the world.

This city, São Paulo, is inevitably compared to the beauty down the road, like two siblings who drew opposite lots in a tragically varied gene pool. Rio de Janeiro has Copacabana Beach and its statue of Christ the Redeemer; postcards of São Paulo show a bridge over a polluted

river, or neon TV towers mounted on skyscrapers. Rio is sun and surf; São Paulo is smog and malls. Its short list of ostensible tourist destinations is mostly underwhelming and sad; some travel guides to Brazil omit it almost entirely. The late, great Anthony Bourdain once described the city as what it might look like “if Los Angeles threw up on New York.”

But believe it or not, many people, including me, actually prefer São Paulo.

Some of us even think it’s one of the world’s great cities.

Yeah, it’s kinda weird. But hear me out.

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Truth be told, São Paulo sometimes seems to be *trying* to chase away visitors. Within moments of leaving the international airport by taxi, tourists are greeted by not one but two high-security prisons, a sewage treatment plant, and then the Tiete River, which, unfortunately, they smell long before they see. Visitors headed into the city’s core will spend the next forty-five minutes—or two and a half hours, if it’s a particularly bad rush hour—on a highway hugging the Tiete River’s edge, inhaling its raw sewage and contemplating exactly what mistakes they made in life to have ended up there.

The initial reaction of many first-time visitors to São Paulo is confusion, and it’s hard to blame them. On a

big enough map, São Paulo looks like it might be close to the beach—and in fact it is, with the Atlantic Ocean just thirty-five short miles away. But, surprise, there's a mountain range between here and there, and getting to the shore can take hours, unless you're lucky enough to own one of those helicopters. The city's geography is so strange that the Tiete River flows not south to the nearby ocean, as any reasonable person might assume, but in the *opposite* direction, its water (and less savory contents) flowing in a long counterclockwise arc until it reaches the sea near Buenos Aires, more than a thousand miles to the south... raising the vexing question of why on earth this city is here at all.

When the by now completely shell-shocked visitor finally arrives at their hotel or Airbnb, a very friendly paulista—as São Paulo residents are known¹—will often enumerate a list of things they absolutely *cannot* do while in town: do not wear jewelry. Do not hail a taxi on the street. Do not pull out your mobile phone in public. If, despite all these precautions, you are held up anyway: do not resist. And for the love of all things holy, do not walk anywhere... unless you ask if it's okay first.

At this point, our visitor has a choice to make: curl up in the fetal position and order room service? Hire an armored car? Start saving to buy a helicopter? But if they are bold enough to ignore some of those warnings

1. Any resident of São Paulo state is a *paulista*, while residents of the city specifically are called *paulistanos*. To avoid confusion, I will mainly use the first term in this book.

and venture beyond the hotel premises, the real surprises will begin to reveal themselves.

Because this is a big city of little paradises: bustling bakeries, world-class samba and jazz clubs, steakhouses serving all-you-can-eat *picanha* until the wee hours. Exceptionally creative museums, pockets of pristine Atlantic rainforest, bookstores in which you can lose yourself for hours. In a city like Rio, or San Francisco or Cape Town, there is little incentive to create such places; the natural beauty is enough. In São Paulo, it's as if the sheer horror of the urban landscape has compelled people to spend extra time and effort to build these little oases in the urban desert. Sometimes the oases are hidden behind ten-foot walls, and you may need a friend or a guide to find them, but they're there, they're unique, and they're usually far more fabulous than anything available down the road. "Rio is a beauty," the Hollywood icon Marlene Dietrich once said. "But São Paulo—São Paulo is a *city*."

She was right. But let me go a step further: the true essence of São Paulo's appeal does not reside in any one place or places—these are the product, not the source, of the city's magic. No, what really sets the city apart is a certain *energy*... and look, I know that sounds like travel book pablum. New York has energy, Manila has energy, every giant megalopolis has energy. But I insist there's something unique about São Paulo. This vibe, this paulista spirit, is what has attracted so many people from all over Brazil and the world, transforming what

was a middling provincial capital just over a century ago into the biggest metropolis in the entire Southern Hemisphere today, with nearly twelve million residents—or twenty-one million, if you include the surrounding metropolitan area. That makes it slightly larger than the New York City metro area, and almost as big as greater Mumbai, Cairo, or Seoul.

São Paulo is the city with the world's largest Japanese-descended population outside Japan, the largest Italian community outside Italy, and a Lebanese community so large and influential that the city's recent mayors have had names like Haddad, Kassab, and Maluf. São Paulo has attracted people from Brazil's northeast and from the Amazon region, and (surprise) a sizable number of exiles from Rio as well. Today the city continues to bring Haitians and Venezuelans, Ukrainians and Argentines, and investors and opportunity seekers from all over the world. Something brought them here, and made them decide to stay. It was not collective lunacy, a desire for self-punishment, or a doomsday cult. It was something else.

I know this because I, too, have fallen victim to the city's mysterious charms. I lived in São Paulo as a reporter from 2010 to 2015 with my wife, Erica, and our two kids, Stella and Adrian, who were just two and three years old when we arrived and who became little paulistas themselves. We all live in New York these days, but I continue to go back several times a year in my current role at the Americas Society and Council of

the Americas, sister nonprofit organizations dedicated to greater understanding among the countries of the Western Hemisphere. A big part of my job is trying to explain Brazil to foreign investors, political leaders, and students—and, sometimes, Brazilians themselves. It's not an easy task!

Among the many elusive Brazil-related topics that I'm regularly asked about, São Paulo is at or near the top of the list. It's a city that receives more than 2.3 million international visitors every year—many of them for business, but also for events like its magnificent art biennial, which rivals that of Venice, or the annual Formula 1 race at the track in Interlagos. Yet, uniquely among global cities of its size, most visitors to São Paulo have utterly no idea what to expect, where to go, or how to understand what makes this place tick. Many are shocked they could know so little about a city with such obvious vitality and importance. When Margaret Thatcher visited for the first time, after she was no longer prime minister, she turned to the British ambassador and asked: “Why did no one tell me all this was here?” (“We did,” he replied.) It is also, for similar reasons, probably one of the most frequently misspelled global cities. “sau paulo is a giant sprawling wild fucking city and i love it,” Flea, bassist for the Red Hot Chili Peppers, posted on social media in 2023 (although the time stamp, 4 a.m. local time, may have pointed to other reasons for the typo).

Even for many Brazilians, São Paulo can be something of an enigma, different in so many ways from the rest

of their country. Caetano Veloso, the legendary Brazilian singer and songwriter, once sang of the city: “When I arrived here I understood nothing / About the tough concrete poetry of your corners [...] About the ugly smoke that rises, erasing the stars.” That song, “Sampa” (an affectionate nickname for the city), is ultimately an anthem about how Veloso learned to love São Paulo anyway—thanks to its people, its culture, and its energy.

This book is for anyone who is hoping to love, or at least better understand, São Paulo and its unique spirit. I have organized it into five chapters, each of which focuses on a place that reveals the city’s history and character in a different way. In these pages I will try to explain São Paulo’s unlikely rise from Jesuit outpost to global metropolis, its incredible ability to attract and assimilate people from all over Brazil and the world, and its glaring modern-day challenges and inequalities. I will try to show why São Paulo is truly one of the world’s great restaurant cities; why its work ethic is so strong that even its prison gangs are known for being organized and efficient; and why many old stereotypes, including those repeated ad nauseam by locals, don’t really apply anymore. (You actually *can* walk places!)

São Paulo’s work ethic is so strong that even its prison gangs are known for being organized and efficient.

In doing so, I promise not to oversell. Because the truth

is, almost no one is going to pass up Paris, or Tokyo, or even Rio, for a chance to visit São Paulo.

But if you do have the good fortune of coming here, you might end up loving it. Perhaps even more than those preening divas who get all the world's attention.

Like I said, it's a little odd.



The Immigrants' Inn

On our family's first full day living in São Paulo, one of the city's greatest mysteries presented itself.

I was at an electronics store, engaged in a seemingly impossible mission: buying, and then activating, a new Brazilian cell phone. My Portuguese at the time was good, but not *that* good. I stood at the counter, a booklet of baffling instructions splayed out in front of me, helplessly poking at the device and holding it to my ear, not understanding much of anything, until a store employee took pity and asked if she could help.

“You’re living in São Paulo? Seriously?” she inquired with a huge smile. After I explained that I was a journalist and that, yes, my family and I would be living in the city for a few years, she looked positively thrilled, like she had just won the lottery. “*Sejam bem-vindos!*” she declared. “Welcome!”

Before long, a small crowd of store employees had gathered to help us decipher the phone—and hear the

story of this strange visitor. My new friend, having now appointed herself my official spokesperson, presumably for the sake of efficiency, excitedly explained to her colleagues that I was very happy to be in São Paulo, that I intended to stay for a while, and that I already loved Brazilian culinary delights like feijão, queijo minas, and picanha. They all nodded with great enthusiasm. I heard “*Sejam bem-vindos!*” at least a dozen more times, and returned home with a fully operational phone.

What extraordinary customer service, I marveled to Erica. We’ll have to go back to that store again.

Yet in the ensuing days and weeks this sort of thing inexplicably kept happening. On our first Saturday night, we went to Figueira Rubaiyat, an iconic steakhouse built around an enormous fig tree, with branches extending throughout the restaurant. Our waiter heard my accented Portuguese and politely inquired about our story. Within minutes we had yet another coterie of people gathered around our table, proudly telling us their own families’ immigration stories: grandparents and great-grandparents who had come from Italy, Lebanon, and elsewhere. A few of them gave me big, effusive claps on the back as we left. “*Boa sorte em São Paulo, meu caro.*” Good luck, friend.

I suppose it was one thing for this to occur in a five-star restaurant. But we also had neighbors who offered to help us move furniture or keep an eye on our children as we ran errands to get settled. At the taxi stand next

to our new apartment, we quickly learned the names of the drivers: Toninho, Denilson, Gustavo, Cicero. They would jump out of their cars in the mornings, shake hands with our kids on their way to school, and ask if we were all still enjoying São Paulo, as if terrified that we might not say yes.

Until finally, one day at home, I blurted out:

“Why are these people so *goddamn nice* to foreigners?”

The longer we lived in São Paulo, the deeper the mystery grew. We discovered that, yes, people all over Brazil are in fact quite friendly. (A sometime exception is Rio de Janeiro, besieged by so many tourists that people there just shrug.) In cities like Belo Horizonte and Porto Alegre, and in smaller towns throughout the Brazilian interior, we always felt well received. But when it came to making foreigners feel welcome, São Paulo really did seem to be in a class of its own. Which made no sense at all to me: why would the country's biggest, busiest city be like this? I thought of New York and London, Mexico City and Buenos Aires, all cities where I had lived or spent considerable time... all cosmopolitan, all with proud histories of immigration. But I could not imagine asking total strangers in those cities for directions and having them insist on escorting me to my destination, even if it was a block or two away. This happened to me, and to other foreign friends in São Paulo, more than once.

At the same time, I understood from day one that there was a hell of a contradiction going on here. In numerous other ways, São Paulo is not a place anyone of sane judgment would call welcoming. It is also a city of walls and razor wire, of ubiquitous security guards and armored cars. Behind the wheel,

The people here really are very nice, except when they're trying to kill you.

paulistas drive as if they want to murder you for sport. It's a city where tens of thousands live on the street, and hundreds of thousands more live in favelas, informal settlements that often lack access to basic services like plumbing or trash pickup. Armed robbery, carjacking, and other violent crimes are rife. "The people here really are very nice," a French friend agreed, "except when they're trying to kill you."

Over the years, some friends would suggest I was treated well in part because I was white, American, and, at least by local standards, wealthy. "You look exactly like the gringo from central casting," a paulista friend who had lived in the United States told me. "Of course everybody's nice to you." In a country that abolished slavery only in 1888, later than any other in the Americas, and has huge and complex divisions of race and class, there is an obvious truth to this. My being able to speak Portuguese, the world's ninth most spoken language (just behind Russian) but not one many foreigners bother to learn, also opened doors—even if I made frequent basic mistakes. "The Brazilian will laugh at everything," the American traveler L. E. Elliott

wrote in 1917, “except a stranger who is speaking bad Portuguese.”

But it’s not as simple as any of that, either. In the course of my work as a reporter, and later during research for this book, I would meet dozens of immigrants from places like Korea, Haiti, Bolivia, and Ukraine. People of all colors, some of whom arrived in the city with literally nothing but the clothes on their back. Many did suffer discrimination, and far greater economic hardship than I ever did. But the majority, when asked about their overall experience in São Paulo, would soon begin talking, in the same tone of stunned disbelief that I so often felt, about the hospitality of their hosts.

“I truly don’t understand it,” a Palestinian immigrant named Rabih told me. He had arrived in São Paulo a year earlier, following thirteen years in Nigeria, speaking “not a word” of Portuguese. “People would pull out their phones and open Google Translate and then wait patiently until they understood exactly what I needed,” he said, shaking his head. Now he owns a successful ice cream shop called Al Kaseem in Jardins, one of the city’s wealthier neighborhoods, where people line up outside to sample his pistachio ice cream. “Every day I give thanks to God for the generosity of these people.”

In recent years, São Paulo has received people from one of the world’s biggest diasporas since World War II: Venezuelans fleeing economic collapse, hunger, and dictatorship. Some went to the United States, but the

vast majority migrated elsewhere in South America, including about half a million who ended up in Brazil. Despite the language barrier (Portuguese is harder to learn for Spanish speakers than many assume), most were absorbed quickly into the workforce, often explicitly sought after by Brazilian companies, while enduring little of the discrimination they faced in places like Peru or Chile. “No country has treated Venezuelans better than Brazil, and no city has received us better than São Paulo,” Blanca Montilla, head of Casa Venezuela, a nonprofit group that helps migrants find housing and jobs, told me. “It’s incredible. I have no words.”

For me, at least, there is no doubt: São Paulo is a city with an incredible talent for absorbing new people and making them feel welcome. Over time I have come to see it as one of the city’s two or three most distinguishing characteristics. It’s something that compensates, at least in part, for the soul-crushing traffic, the pollution, and the... well, lack of aesthetic appeal. Even visitors in São Paulo for a short time on business tend to experience some version of this, and return home appropriately charmed.

But as to my original question, blurted out in my apartment that day, the *why* of it: that would take time and effort to figure out. It would lead me through São Paulo’s early history, and the stories a city tells itself about its origins and character, including the ones that aren’t entirely, 100 percent true. Indeed, as I would eventually

discover, a lot of São Paulo's magic seems to hinge on how paulistas think about, and define, immigration itself.

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Just east of downtown, in the traditionally Italian neighborhood of Mooca, next to an Evangelical church, a Japanese fast-food restaurant, and a small public university, sits a grand two-story building in the neo-Renaissance style of the late nineteenth century. Its majestic columns and arched windows open up to a lush garden of fig trees, palm trees, and flowering begonias and orchids. A few stray cats wander the grounds, boldly sidling up to the groups of schoolkids who seem to be constantly arriving by bus.

This is the *Hospedaria dos Imigrantes*, the Immigrants' Inn. Over the course of nearly a century, the Inn received about 2.5 million people from more than seventy countries all over the world. Many arrived in Santos, the nearest port city on the Atlantic coast, and took a train up and over the coastal range of mountains, disembarking directly at the Inn. For about a week, the new arrivals received food, shelter, and medical care, all courtesy of the São Paulo state government. The Inn closed in 1978 and became a museum, where tourists can still go for a short ride on an antique steam train and visit the vast, well-organized exhibits inside.

At first glance, it all looks very familiar, especially to anyone who has ever visited Ellis Island in New York. There is



Five Itineraries

Scan the QR code at the end of each route to access the map on your phone. (Google Maps required)

1. Avenida Paulista



In a frequently pedestrian-hostile city that tends to shrug at its past, walking down Avenida Paulista can feel like a sublime act of rebellion. Its 1.3-mile length provides the

best window into São Paulo's history as a capital of coffee and industry, as well as the energy that continues to attract migrants from abroad and within Brazil itself. Weekdays are great, but on Sundays Avenida Paulista is a particular treat, as its six lanes close to car traffic, filling instead with street performers, cyclists, and food and drink carts—this landlocked city's closest thing to a beach.

Any good day here starts at a *padoca*, one of the bakeries that are São Paulo's uber-cafeinated version of the British corner pub. In the Avenida Paulista area, the best in class is the lively, twenty-four-hour **Padaria Bella Paulista** with its vast display cases of bread, chocolate, pies, and fruit. If you want the full padoca experience, you're welcome to steal my favorite order: *um minas quente, uma média, e um suco de mamão com laranja*—a grilled Minas cheese sandwich, a large coffee with steamed milk, and an orange and papaya juice. If you manage to successfully order this without fluent Portuguese, you may be granted Brazilian citizenship on the spot. Alternatively, just point to the words above and your server will, with classic paulista generosity, help you figure it out.

Starting at the avenue's northwest end, take a quick detour through the **Conjunto Nacional**, the massive cultural and commercial complex offering several bookstores, cultural spaces, and juice bars—representing a 1950s ideal of a more egalitarian Brazil, with covered indoor sidewalks and an iconic winding ramp. Continue on to **Parque Trianon**, one of the city's true miracles: two square blocks of impeccably preserved Mata Atlântica,

the region's original Atlantic rainforest. Here the sirens and traffic noise somehow disappear, swallowed up by the (helpfully labeled) palm trees, gigantic ferns, orchids, and a cacophony of birds large and small.

Across the street lies the **São Paulo Museum of Art (MASP)**, a modernist structure resembling a thick glass tabletop with red legs whose opening was attended by Queen Elizabeth in 1968. The museum's permanent exhibit mixes Picassos, Rembrandts, and wonderful Brazilian artists such as Tarsila do Amaral in a truly unique, creative display. Before going inside, take a moment to explore the plaza underneath the museum, peer over the edge, behold the skyline in all its concrete, um, glory—and consider that the canyon directly below was once a river.

The last stop, a few blocks farther southeast, is the **Casa das Rosas**, the only one of the remaining mansions on Avenida Paulista to have been properly and faithfully restored (though if for some bizarre reason you want to see the one they transformed into a McDonald's, it's not hard to find). Renovated and then reopened in 2023, the Casa das Rosas boasts an excellent photo exhibit that tells the story of how coffee and factory wealth made São Paulo one of the fastest-growing cities of the twentieth century, a helpful timeline, and a charming little garden as well.

