

## The Economist's Controversial List of 10 Most Livable Cities

Every year a ranking of the world's 10 most livable cities inspires a combination of pride from people who live in those cities and confusion about how exactly those cities were deemed to be the best.

The 2023 ranking recently came out and, as usual, European, Canadian and Australian cities topped the list.

First place went to Vienna followed by Copenhagen, Melbourne, Sydney, Vancouver, Zurich, Calgary, Geneva and Toronto with Osaka and Auckland tied for 10th place.

This list always seems to inspire more questions than it provides answers.

Most of those cities are expensive.

Can a city really be livable if regular people can't afford to live there?

How does Canada do so well?

Isn't North America a car-dependent hellscape that people are fleeing to move to Europe?

And no offense to Calgary, but how is Montreal not the other Canadian city on the list?

This ranking comes from the Economist Intelligence Unit, the research arm of the newspaper.

The top 10 list that gets all the headlines is part of a much bigger scoring of 173 cities around the world, which we can't see in full because it's a data product they're hoping to sell for the low low price of 11,000 US dollars.

The target market is international companies that relocate people around the world and want to know the level of hardship in each city to adjust pay.

You can think of the top 10 most livable cities list as a successful marketing effort for their business intelligence services.

And in the end, the index isn't really designed or scaled to compare cities within developed countries, so much as it's organized to quantify bigger differences across the world, mainly for expat salaries.

There's also a bottom 10 list of least livable cities, which includes places that are very poor or experiencing war or civil unrest, which justifies a 20% hardship bonus to employees relocated there, for example.

Each city gets a score from 0 to 100.

So what exactly are the scores based on?

25% of a city's score comes from stability, which includes crime, terrorism, and military conflict.

The next category is healthcare, including public and private, which contributes 20% of each city's score.

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The third category is culture and environment, at 25% of the index.

This includes a big mix of things like weather, corruption, censorship, and religious restrictions.

There's also education at 10% of the index, which focuses more on private education than public.

And finally, infrastructure is the last 20% of each city's score, including roads, public transit, housing, and so on.

They say the concept of livability is simple.

It assesses which locations around the world provide the best or worst living conditions.

But defining livability isn't simple at all, and actually measuring it is a whole other can of worms.

Their target audience is businesses relocating higher income professionals, and the index reflects that.

They focus on private healthcare and education more than a regular person probably would.

Availability of good quality housing, which might include housing affordability, but isn't even clear on that, is one of 30 total subcategories.

But for most people these days, housing is a severe limiting factor on the places they can even consider living.

The global nature of the scale also means that it includes factors like war, censorship, and religious restrictions that aren't as relevant if you're comparing developed countries to each other.

The index also obviously just doesn't include a lot of urbanist priorities and preferences.

They include road quality, and to be fair, public transit too, but not road safety, active transportation, parks, pedestrian streets, proximity of schools and stores, or all the intangible things that make just walking through a city a nice experience, from street trees to architecture, and the way buildings frame the streetscape.

Some of these can be subjective and difficult to measure, so it's hard to be entirely critical about them not being included.

But these details do explain why the top 10 list includes some surprises, with Toronto and Calgary beating out urbanist sweethearts like Paris and Amsterdam.

Another difference in perspective is that when urbanists and city lovers think about cities, they are usually focused on the built environment, urban planning, and urban design, things that most visibly distinguish cities from each other and that are, more or less, under the jurisdiction of city governments.

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They are not as focused on things like healthcare and education, which are typically controlled at higher levels of government and feel separate from the city itself, rightly or wrongly.

But these things matter a lot for regular people choosing where to live.

Montreal might be a leader in North America in bike infrastructure and pedestrian streets, but finding a doctor can be a really big challenge, more so than in other Canadian cities.

It's not the fault of the city itself.

Healthcare is run by the provinces in Canada, and it's not something you see while walking around.

But it is a real problem and might explain why Montreal scored lower than other Canadian cities like Calgary or Toronto.

A city's job market is another one of the fundamentals that regular people care about that urbanists might not focus on as much, because it's not part of the built environment.

Although that's not included on this livability index either, because the target audience is companies relocating employees, not regular people deciding where to live who would need to find a job there.

If you try to download the summary report, they clearly assume it's for business purposes.

It's hard to say that much more about this livability index, because they don't make very much of it public.

We can't see most of the city scores or even details on how they calculate most of the categories.

From crime to healthcare, most of the subcategories actually just seem to be subjective ratings from their own analysts, rather than more objective on-the-ground statistics.

That's actually understandable.

Trying to corral data from dozens of countries around the world has to be a nightmare, but it does leave their system kind of a black box.

Overall, this livability index probably works perfectly fine for its intended goal of helping companies calculate hardship pay for expats.

But people probably shouldn't put too much stock in small differences into which particular developed cities came out in the top ten.

If you're deciding where to live, you should look at specific things you care about, whether the job market or public transit, or at least find a list tailored to your priorities, like our top ten most urbanist cities in North America, or City Nerd's list of affordable US cities.