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What's it like to live in the world's 'smartest cities' for 2024

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By Lindsey Galloway,

The BBC speaks to residents in five of the top-ranked cities in the Smart Cities Index 2024 to understand which features are making the most impact to their lives.

With global temperatures rising and environmental changes putting pressure on every country, cities are facing new challenges in their plans for a sustainable future. Some destinations, however, have moved aggressively to implement smart solutions that aim to build a higher long-term quality of life, providing guidance for the rest of the world to follow.

To help chart the progress of these initiatives, the International Institute for Management Development (IMD) puts together an annual ranking of the world's smartest cities, based on the economic and technological strength of each city and how these factors enhance quality of life and provide solutions to societal challenges. Now in its fifth year, the [Smart Cities Index](#) 2024 collected data from residents of 142 cities to understand their views on their city's health and safety, mobility, activities, opportunities and governance.

Interestingly, not a single city from North America or Africa cracked the top 20 this year, and all but three cities in the top 20 are located in Europe or Asia. To better understand what exactly made these cities feel "smart", we spoke to residents in five of the top-ranked places to understand which features are making the most impact to their lives.

Canberra, Australia

Ranking third in the index, and one of the few non-European or Asian cities in the top 20, Australia's capital scored particularly well for its low air pollution, its number of green spaces and a high sense of inclusion among minority citizens. This doesn't surprise Bryden and David Campbell, co-founders of Brand Rebellion, a brand and workforce consultancy based in Canberra.

"What truly stands out is the strong sense of community," said Bryden. "There's a genuine connectedness and a willingness to help and support others, making it a warm and welcoming place to call home."

The world's 10 smartest cities

According to the Smart Cities Index 2024, the world's ten smartest cities are:

- Zurich
- Oslo
- Canberra
- Geneva
- Singapore
- Copenhagen
- Lausanne
- London
- Helsinki
- Abu Dhabi

She also mentioned how the city's proximity to nature informs how the city puts sustainability front and centre. "Canberra is advanced in clean energy and renewable initiatives," she said. "The city has ambitious targets to achieve net zero emissions by 2045, and this is evident in the ongoing electrification and adoption of renewable energy sources throughout the area."

Canberra has also adopted technology to make the city more liveable and more attractive to startup founders and other businesses – something that helps create a virtuous cycle of innovation. "The city's smart city initiatives, including smart

lighting, waste management and traffic management systems, significantly improve the efficiency and sustainability of city services," said David. A robust high-speed internet supports overall connectivity and the growth of remote work, while innovation hubs and co-working spaces like [Canberra Innovation Network](#) help foster tech development and entrepreneurship.

Singapore

Ranked fifth in this year's index, Singapore jumped two places in the rankings thanks to high scores in safety (enabled by CCTV), high connectivity that makes schooling and traffic monitoring easier, and online reporting and document processing that enables seamless dealing with government bureaucracy.

"Singapore's public transportation system is greatly enhanced by the strategic use of open data and contactless payment technologies," said Firdaus Syazwani, long-time resident and founder of personal finance resource [Dollar Bureau](#).

"Together this streamlines travel and makes it exceptionally convenient for residents and visitors alike."

He mentions that both the government and private companies publish extensive datasets about traffic patterns, bus and train schedules and crowd sizes at stations, which app developers and urban planners can then leverage to build solutions for commuters – helping them optimise their travel routes, save time and ultimately reduce city congestion.

Resident Kirk Westaway, executive chef at two-Michelin-starred restaurant [JAAN](#), also points to the small touches that make a big difference in day-to-day life, especially in public transportation. "[Quick] contactless payments and real-time data mean you're not left waiting wondering if you'll get to your destination on time," he said.

In addition, Westaway highlights Singapore's focus on sustainability within its smart city framework. "Technology is leveraged to spearhead sustainability efforts, and urban farming is becoming a way of life here," he said. [The Aquaponics Farm at Swissôtel The Stamford](#), which optimises growing space without soil and minimises water usage for fresh produce, provides one example

of how smart cities can integrate innovative solutions for food production in urban environments.

Lausanne, Switzerland

While three Swiss cities made the top 10 (including Zurich at number one and Geneva at number four), the smaller Lausanne still punches above its weight, ranking seventh in the index even though its population sits at just around 150,000. But the intimacy of the city actually proves to be a strength among its residents.

"I love living in Lausanne because it's such a small city with all the amenities of a big town," said Olivia Bosshart, PR manager at Lausanne Tourism. "Everything is so close on foot. From the station, it's just 15 minutes to the lake [Lake Geneva] and 15 minutes to the city centre."

I love living in Lausanne because it's such a small city with all the amenities of a big town - Olivia Bosshart

It's also a city that takes its proximity to nature seriously and invests heavily in parks, gardens and other green spaces – with 360 hectares of urban green space and an initiative to plant more than 1,400 new trees each year.

In addition, the city remains committed to pushing digital initiatives forward in a sustainable way. The City of Lausanne is committed to reducing its digital impact and supports a digital transition of its administration," explained Alexane Bornoz, communications director at the City of Lausanne, also pointing out the city's efforts in providing digital services to residents and visitors: "A mobile app is available to find practical information for visiting and living in Lausanne," said Bornoz. "E-administration services are available to people living in Lausanne, including online registrations and reservations, transportation information and travels, sales of the city wine and more."

London, United Kingdom

Ranked eighth in the index (down two spots from last year), London continues to rank well for its ease of online services, including booking transportation and easy-to-access Wi-Fi.

"With great transportation both with the Tube, buses, boats and active travel schemes such as bikes and scooters, London is a fun place to be with lots going on every day of the week, including restaurants, pubs, night life, concerts and more," said Emma Orr of Winning Business UK Ltd. who worked with London's 32 boroughs on EV charging infrastructure.

Orr has watched the city enact deep commitments to ongoing sustainability over the past few years. "There is also a rise in smart grids, renewable energy across the city both within building design and energy harvesting," she said. "London is committed to becoming a 'clean city' in terms of both EV infrastructure but also the commitment to green space and active travel [walking and cycling] plans. Transport for London have targets that 80% of journeys should be completed by Active Travel [walking, cycling and public transport] by 2041."

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The city's commitment to sustainability is also evident in its push for electric vehicle infrastructure. "EV infrastructure is a huge technological change, which we see more so in London than any other UK city," Orr said, adding adds that this initiative is closely tied to the city's Ultra Low Emission Zone (ULEZ) policy, which makes it less expensive to drive EVs than gas-emitting cars (which must pay a fee to drive through).

Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates

Rounding out the top 10, Abu Dhabi moved up three places in the ratings this year to reach 10th in the index. The city scored extremely well for its ease of transportation and online booking, high sanitation even in the poorest areas of the

city, digital skills taught well in schools and as a place where people of different ethnicities feel welcome.

For residents, the smart and convenient features of the city's transportation system are unmatched. "The city's integration of vehicle charging infrastructures and autonomous driving solutions has made commuting smooth and efficient," said Dhanvin Sriram, a resident of Abu Dhabi and founder of AI tool Prompt Vibes. "The intelligent mobility centre ensures that land, sea, air and rail transportation are seamlessly managed. This advanced system not only reduces traffic congestion but also minimises environmental impact."

He also points to the newly planned neighbourhood Masdar City, located within Abu Dhabi as a model for sustainable urban development. "[Its] design blends traditional Arab architecture with modern technology, providing a naturally cool environment even during the scorching summer months," he said. "The extensive use of solar panels on rooftops harnesses the Sun's energy, making it one of the largest photovoltaic installations in the Middle East."

Abu Dhabi is a place where technology and sustainability come together, making life easier and more enjoyable for residents like me - Dhanvin Sriram

Most of the buildings in Masdar City are ranked LEED Gold or Platinum, and the buildings have all been designed to reduce energy and water consumption by at least 40%. Though building progress has been slower than anticipated, the area aims to eventually be big enough for 40,000 residents.

"Abu Dhabi is a place where technology and sustainability come together, making life easier and more enjoyable for residents like me," said Sriram.

Living In is a series from BBC Travel that discovers what it's like to reside in some of the world's top destinations.