

# Most liveable cities?

## Out of the Box

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**THE BRITISH DOMINATE** ranking exercises: university ones via QS and *Times* Higher Education, and city liveability via The *Economist* Intelligence Unit.

The reasons for their dominance of the latter are probably due to the large number of English-speaking expatriates who would be interested in where they'd live, and the need by the multinational companies to know how to compensate their employees according to the liveability of the cities they send them to.

These reasons are probably lost on most, as they view rankings as "score cards" for their favorite cities.

The 2018 EIU rankings came out recently. The top 10 are (from high to low): Vienna, Melbourne, Osaka, Calgary, Sydney, Vancouver, Toronto/Tokyo, Copenhagen, and Adelaide.

Hong Kong was at No 35, higher than Singapore at No 37. Frankly, I was surprised by how low both Hong Kong and Singapore ranked, so I decided to dig deeper.

I found interesting facts. Before 2018, no Asian cities ranked in the top 10 – Osaka and Tokyo were the first. Other than them, Hong Kong and Singapore, there are no other Asian cities in the top 50. Poor Asia!

There were no US cities in the top 20 and only four in the top 40 (same as Asia). Honolulu was the highest ranked US city at No 23, with Pittsburg at No 32, Washington, DC, at No 37 and Minneapolis at No 39.

The tourist hotspots were lower: Boston (No 42), Chicago/Miami (No 44), Seattle (No 46), San Francisco (No 49) and my hometown Los Angeles was No 50.

So Hong Kong ranked higher than most US cities. Only two UK cities ranked in the top 50: Manchester at 35th and London at 48th. So the British are not partisan.

Top cities tend to be Western and wealthy, medium sized, and English speaking or European.

So how does EIU come up with its ranking?

It uses five categories: stability (crime, terrorism, and military conflict), health care (quality and availability in both public and private sectors), culture/environment (climate, corruption, censorship, sporting venues), education, and infrastructure (roads, public transport, housing, telecommunication, housing, energy). High crime rates hurt – one main reason why US cities didn't rank well. Being at war hurts – Damascus ranked last. Being wealthy, high cultured, and having good schools help.

These factors are all reasonable by themselves but important ones are ignored: economics (wealth, jobs),

language challenges (living in Osaka but not speaking some Japanese), cultural differences (an uninitiated American living in rural China), acceptance of foreigners (*les Parisiens!*), and availability of domestic help (ask Hong Kong expatriates).

There could also be subconscious biases.

Apparently, Hong Kong and Singapore were penalized for having hot and humid summers, but cold and severe winters didn't hurt Calgary or Toronto.

Culture is also, well, culture-dependent. A Westerner may not appreciate Eastern cultural offerings as much as Western ones.

The score differences are actually quite small between cities, so a particularly low or high score in



**Tony Chan in top-ranked Vienna in January.**

the five categories matters a lot. How else could Hong Kong have ranked so low? We should rank very high in stability (a very low crime rate and very little corruption, little terrorism and no military conflict), infrastructure (our public transport, airport

and telecommunications are world best), health care (especially when cost-adjusted), and education (more top 100 universities than any other city in the world and our students consistently rank well in international math/science tests).

But Vienna scores much higher on all four. Really?

I consider Hong Kong quite good in culture – perhaps even better with West Kowloon.

Our natural environment is often underrated but our country parks, hiking trails and islands are big attractions for many visitors. So the only reason for Hong Kong's low ranking must be housing costs, bad air quality (which has improved) and censorship (as perceived by Western media).

Such rankings are ultimately personal. Different factors get different weights for different people and at different stages of their lives. Education weighs less for people with children all grown up, and younger people may worry more about jobs than health care.

Globally, more people are opting to live in more than one city, in effect combining the best features of each and at different times of the year.

I have visited nine of EIU's top 10 cities, and 47 of the top 50, most of them multiple times.

For my top 10 liveable cities, I'd include only Sydney and maybe Vancouver from EIU's top 10.

Hong Kong and San Francisco would be in. Beyond that, maybe London and Seattle. But your choices may be different from mine.