



BELO HORIZONTE: BARCELONA OF BRAZIL

FAST FACTS	Belo Horizonte	Similar To
Metropolitan (Labor Market) Population	4,800,000	Toronto, Dallas-Fort Worth, Madrid
Urbanized Area* Population	3,900,000	Washington, Boston, Detroit
Urbanized Land Area: Square Miles	320	McAllen (TX), Edmonton, Porto Alegre, Adelaide
Urbanized Land Area: Square Kilometers	829	
Population per Square Mile	12,200	Fukuoka, Naples
Population per Square Kilometer	4,700	
Capital of the state of Minas Gerais 3 rd largest metropolitan area in Brazil		
Urbanized Area Atlas: <i>Guia Super Rapido</i> , purchase at bookstores (58 maps)		
*Continuously built up area		

Nestled in the rolling hills of the state of Minas Gerais (“general mines”) is Brazil’s third largest urban area. It is probably fair to say that most high-income world residents have never heard of it. But Belo Horizonte is large --- with a metropolitan area nearing five million people, it is similar in size to Toronto, Dallas-Fort Worth or Madrid.

Belo Horizonte represents both the best and worst in urban planning. The core has, at least from map inspection, a pleasing street layout. In a flair that outdid L’Enfant’s Washington diagonals, Belo Horizonte Centro has a grid of streets on which is superimposed a grid of diagonals. Of course, the resulting eight street intersections make traffic more of a difficulty than with the four that are usual or the grade separations of Brasilia. Centro has a number of wide boulevards, many with green, treed medians and, in the Brazilian style, some with four roadways --- center express lanes and outside local lanes. These “three median” streets, give a pleasing feeling. The overall result is an impression similar to that of Barcelona, and a particularly attractive core that would do most European cities proud.

But, not far from Centro the randomness begins. To the north is the river, and clearly no attempt was made to continue the pattern beyond that. To the south are hills that would have precluded expansion of the plan. Nor does the pattern extend far to the less challenging east or west.

The high-rise apartment and condominium buildings are clustered in Centro and up the hills to the south. The main arterial (non-motorway) route from Centro to the south winds up the hill to Nova Lima providing some of the best urban views to be found in the nation, though stopping to take photographs requires violating the law.

The single-family neighborhoods appear to be of a fairly constant density. But, traveling to the north or south out of the city, one finds much larger lots in fledgling exurban single family dwelling communities.

And while the diagonal-grid plan is limited to Centro, nearly as much so is the affluence. Outside of Centro and the southern hills are the much less attractive middle and lower middle-income residential areas, most single-family neighborhoods. These neighborhoods look considerably less well kept than in Porto Alegre or Curitiba.

Like other Brazilian cities, Belo Horizonte has an effective busway system. It also has a metro, which carries a small share of travel and consumes virtually all of the subsidies available for public transport.

As in Rio de Janeiro, even the dense network of buses is unable to meet the increasingly dispersed travel demand. There has been a large increase in informal transport, principally using vans.

At the summit of the southern hills is Nova Lima, as genuine an edge city as the Arlanda corridor in Stockholm or Tysons Corner in Washington. There is a large enclosed shopping center, a number of international hotels and high rise office buildings.

Belo Horizonte is a city of contrasts. I saw few lower and middle income neighborhoods less attractive than in Belo Horizonte. But perhaps the most attractive urban sector experience in Brazil was that slice of Barcelona that is Belo Horizonte Centro.



View from Nova Lima toward Centro



Busway



Centro



Centro



Centro



Nova Lima



Nova Lima Shopping



Single Family Neighborhood



Northern Approach



Exurbs to the North

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