

Graphic detail | 15-minute cities

# What can the world's most walkable cities teach other places?

Researchers show how more urban areas could become 15-minute cities

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**I**MAGINE THE perfect urban neighbourhood. Residential streets are peppered with shops and cafés. Schools, museums and theatres can all be reached on foot. Green spaces offer a quiet escape. Some cities, such as Copenhagen, Paris and Tokyo, already function this way. These “walkable” cities—sometimes called “15-minute cities”—offer everything that locals need within a small radius. A study published recently in *Nature Cities*, a journal, shows which places do this best.

## Top 50 most walkable cities

Above 500k population, 2024

City	Average time Minutes to walk to key amenities	Accessibility % of residents within a 15-minute walk of key amenities	Country
1 Milan	6.4	97.5	Italy
2 Copenhagen	6.6	97.3	Denmark
3 Turin	7.1	95.9	Italy
4 Dublin	7.4	96.4	Ireland
5 Lyon	7.4	93.0	France
6 Munich	7.5	94.8	Germany
7 Paris	8.0	92.9	France
8 Marseille	8.1	93.6	France
9 Genoa	8.1	93.8	Italy
10 Edinburgh	8.2	94.3	Britain
11 Berlin	8.2	91.9	Germany
12 Vienna	8.3	90.7	Austria
13 St. Petersburg	8.3	91.1	Russia
14 Bilbao	8.4	88.2	Spain
15 Bordeaux	8.5	89.8	France
16 Minsk	8.6	89.4	Belarus
17 Stuttgart	9.1	90.7	Germany
18 Lille	9.1	90.5	France
19 Barcelona	9.2	85.3	Spain
20 Oslo	9.5	91.3	Norway

21	Moscow	9.6	85.8	Russia
22	Warsaw	10.0	81.8	Poland
23	Hanover	10.1	85.8	Germany
24	Toulouse	10.1	84.2	France
25	Dusseldorf	10.2	84.9	Germany
26	Leipzig	10.2	84.3	Germany
27	Lviv	10.2	82.9	Ukraine
28	Kyoto	10.3	89.3	Japan
29	London	10.3	84.6	Britain
30	Lisbon	10.5	83.9	Portugal
31	Nuremberg	11.0	78.9	Germany
32	Athens	11.1	85.5	Greece
33	Bucharest	11.1	82.7	Romania
34	Budapest	11.1	80.5	Hungary
35	Taipei	11.1	77.3	Taiwan
36	Prague	11.2	78.2	Czech Republic
37	Madrid	11.3	80.6	Spain
38	Ruhr	11.3	81.0	Germany
39	The Hague	11.4	80.7	Netherlands
40	Hamburg	11.4	81.7	Germany
41	Frankfurt	11.5	82.7	Germany
42	Cologne	11.5	79.2	Germany
43	Malaga	12.0	74.6	Spain
44	Newcastle	12.0	79.1	Britain
45	Kathmandu	12.0	78.9	Nepal
46	Ludwigshafen	12.1	77.1	Germany
47	Valencia	12.2	78.0	Spain
48	Wroclaw	12.2	73.5	Poland
49	Taichung	12.2	71.9	Taiwan
50	Tokyo	12.3	78.1	Japan

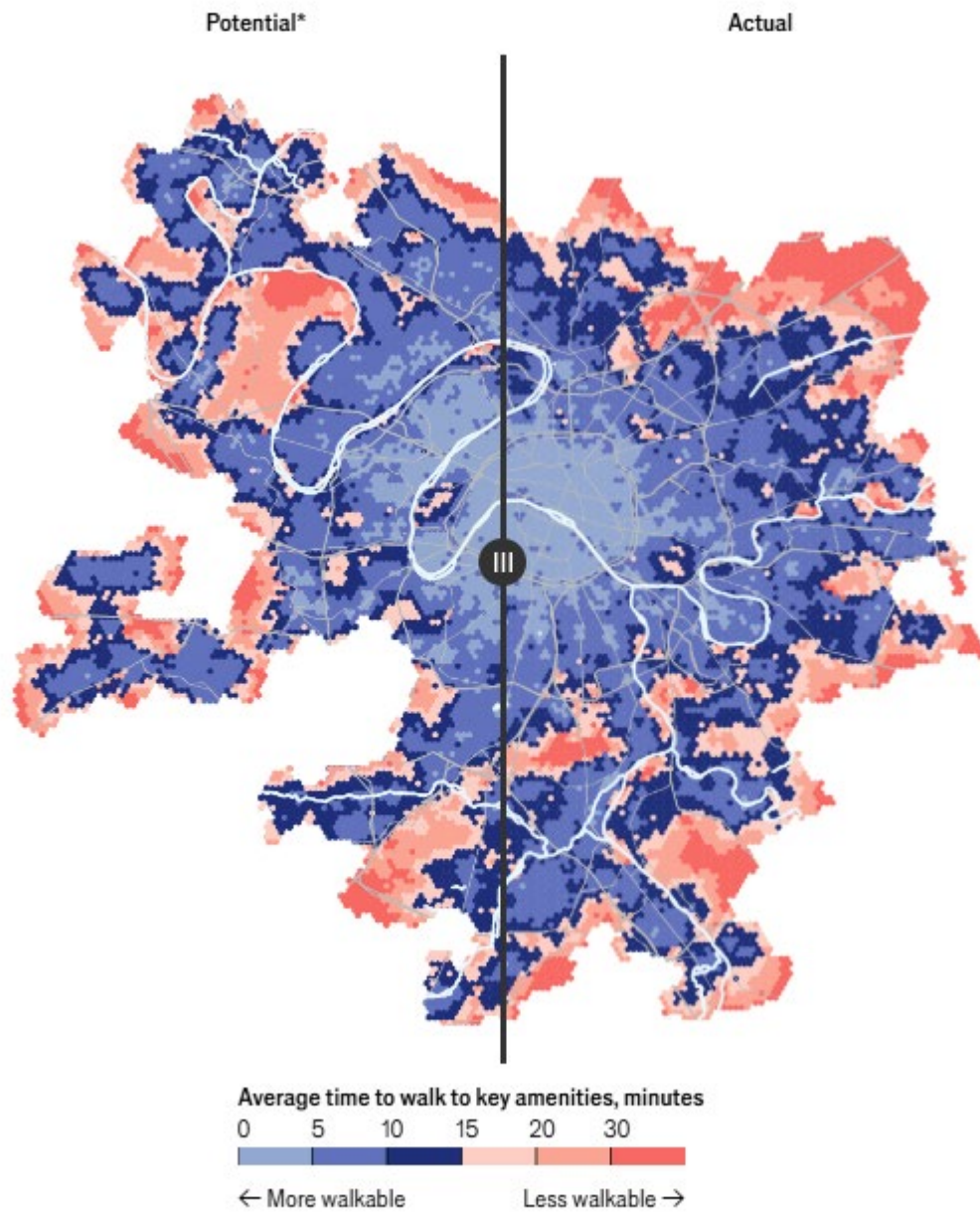
Matteo Bruno and his colleagues at the Sony Computer Science Laboratories in Rome calculated the walkability of more than 10,000 cities around the world. They first mapped how long it would take residents in various urban neighbourhoods to reach "key amenities", such as schools, hospitals, restaurants and shops, on foot. They then calculated an average for the whole city.

Not surprisingly, European cities were the most pedestrian-friendly. In a ranking of big cities (those with more than half a million people), 45 of the top 50 spots were in Europe. Milan came first. The average Milanese needs to walk for only around seven minutes to reach amenities, and 98% of the city's population live in 15-minute neighbourhoods. In Asia Kyoto, in Japan, and Taipei, the capital of Taiwan, were among the most walkable cities.

North American cities were notably absent from the top 50. Many of them are designed around cars, with residential neighbourhoods sprawling out far from central amenities. Vancouverites had the shortest strolls in the region, but their city ranked only 53rd in the world. Manhattan was ranked as highly walkable, but other districts of New York City dragged the average down.

The researchers also wanted to identify how places could be made more walkable. Paris, for example, already ranks well: it takes most Parisians just eight minutes, on average, to reach key amenities on foot, and 93% of them live in 15-minute neighbourhoods. But the authors developed an algorithm to determine how the city's current amenities could be moved in order to further improve its walkability (see map). They found that, with a bit of urban reshuffling, two minutes could be shaved off the average walking time, and 97% of people could live in 15-minute neighbourhoods. This shows how urban planning could improve walkability, not whether it would make economic sense: coaxing shops and restaurants to quieter neighbourhoods might require government incentives.

## Paris, approximate primary urban cluster



\* If services were optimally distributed

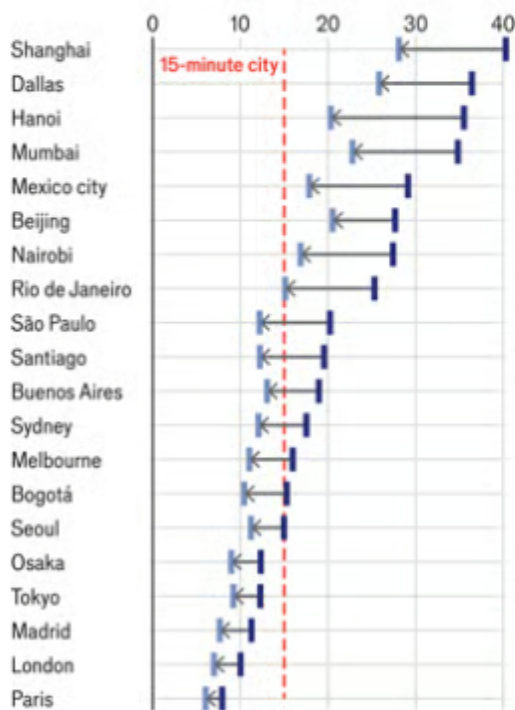
Source: "A universal framework for inclusive 15-minute cities", by M. Bruno et al., Nature Cities, 2024

The researchers did the same for 53 more cities (see chart). Of these, 34 were already 15-minute cities for most residents, but another ten had the potential to be. In Rio de Janeiro, for example, services are clustered around coastal neighbourhoods. Moving some of these services inland could cut the average walking time for residents from 25 minutes to 15. Similarly, roughly half of Melbourne’s population live in 15-minute neighbourhoods, but the researchers calculated that this could increase to around 90% if its amenities were better spread.

### Walk it back

Average walking time to city amenities, minutes  
Selected cities

■ Actual ■ Potential\*



\*If services were optimally distributed

Source: "A universal framework for inclusive 15-minute cities", by M. Bruno et al., *Nature Cities*, 2024

CHART: THE ECONOMIST

Alas, some cities are unlikely to ever become a pedestrian paradise. In places with a large suburban sprawl, achieving the 15-minute status would require a lot of new amenities. For Atlanta to become as walkable as a densely populated city like Berlin, for example, would require roughly twelve times as many key amenities as it has now. But small changes might still pay off: plenty of research has shown that more walkable cities have healthier residents and cleaner air. And increased foot traffic also helps local shops and cafés, too. ■