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Bridge to the Future

As it welcomes a surge of wealthy vacationers, Florianópolis aims to become the next Silicon Valley.

- Mark Chesnut reports

Perhaps it's ironic that the most iconic image of Florianópolis—the Hercílio Luz Bridge—has sat unused since 1991. Once the longest suspension bridge in Brazil (when it opened in 1926), it closed more than a decade ago, as newer highways began linking mainland Brazil to the 202-square-mile island of Santa Catarina, where Florianópolis lies. Attempts to get the historic structure back in working condition are ongoing, but delayed.

Then again, maybe this magnificent construction, which arcs over a peaceful stretch of water next to the city center, should be seen as a symbol of the city's untapped potential. After all, the city's growing technology industry, important academic centers and increasingly high-profile reputation with wealthy vacationers seem capable of making Florianópolis into one of Brazil's newest hot spots.

It's not difficult to see the changes already underway. As I boarded a flight from São Paulo on TAM Airlines, flight attendants handed each passenger a brochure for Essence, a large real estate development planned for Campeche Beach. It was the first time I'd ever received real estate investment material from cabin crew. But in Florianópolis—usually called Floripa by Brazilians—luxury vacation real estate is big business. And it's getting bigger.

Island Life

Stretching across a 202-square-mile island called Santa Catarina in Southern Brazil, what is now known as Florianópolis was originally inhabited by the Tupi-Guarani Indians, followed by Azorean settlers and the Portuguese, who officially founded the city in the year 1673. To this day, the influence of the Azoreans, who subsisted on farming and fishing, is visible in the city's architecture, cuisine, culture and speech patterns.

It wasn't until the late 20th century that Florianópolis really began to grow. The population nearly tripled between 1970 and 2004, and today, more than 800,000 people live in the metropolitan area. Even with fast growth, the city has managed to maintain a good reputation. The literacy rate is around 97 percent, as is the percentage of homes with electricity. Florianópolis also wields political influence as the capital of the state of Santa Catarina. The presence of academic institutions like the Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina (Federal University of Santa Catarina) has attracted investment in the technology sector, leading some optimistic observers to predict the city will become the Silicon Valley of South America. "The software industry is growing quickly," says Joceli Marina Cardozo, executive director of Santa Catarina Travel (SCT).

Heavy industry and manufacturing is shunned in favor of greener growth, notes Valdir Walendowsky, president of SCT. “In order to preserve the natural environment, no manufacturing industries are allowed on the island,” he explains. “Thus, the green economy of Florianópolis lives on high technology, tourism, universities and public administration. Today, approximately 45 percent of the island is a permanent ecological reserve.” The goal now, Walendowsky says, is to plan new, sustainable infrastructure to deal with increased tourism numbers as the city works to build its profile in the high-tech field.

The travel and tourism industries are already taking note of Florianópolis. In 2006, the city’s first foreign hotel brand, Sofitel, opened, and the first U.S.-based specialty tour operator, **Nexus Surf**, set up an office. The tour company has since expanded its offerings to include nightlife and city tours, in addition to surfing classes and excursions that take advantage of the excellent waves.

“Leisure tourism [has] increased, thanks to the natural attractiveness that the city offers to travelers,” says Robson Bini, general manager of the 88-room Mercure Apartments Florianópolis Lindacap. But when it comes to the corporate side of things, Bini says, “Business tourism is still the same,” with no growth in the past four years. That’s not to say he doesn’t see the potential, especially given the types of business travelers the Mercure regularly attracts—people who work in energy, finance, telecommunications, and the development of software and video games. “I think that business travel is going to grow if we have more fiscal incentives [for] the technology companies,” he asserts.

Mariangela Klein, Sofitel’s regional marketing and communication manager, also emphasizes the importance of corporate road warriors for Floripa’s bottom line. “Business travelers spend about \$120 a day, and the leisure [traveler] spends 50 percent less,” she says.

Business travelers are more likely to stay in the city center—a compact, clean area of moderately-sized high-rises and corporate-oriented hotels. Historic architecture is most visible in the area surrounding Praça XV de Novembro, a lush city square centered around a giant ficus tree. (A long-standing tradition dictates that visitors must circle the tree three times for good luck; no word on whether this works for business deals.) The daily crafts market—as well as a larger public market just a few blocks away—are popular places for souvenir shopping. However, locals are more likely to head to the shopping malls that have sprouted in recent years to satisfy their shopping needs. Beiramar, one of the first malls to open in Florianópolis, is centrally located next to the Majestic Palace Hotel, while Floripa Shopping is the largest mall, with more than 807,000 square feet, and Iguatemi Florianópolis is the newest and most upscale.

Chic Escape

Florianópolis may still be carving out its role as a high-tech business hub, but it’s already firmly on the map with a growing number of wealthy vacationers. As a result, the city offers myriad options for corporate types looking for a bit of upscale R&R. “The greatest reward for the business traveler is the possibility of combining work and leisure in a stunning natural setting,” Walendowsky says, “complemented by the colors of the Azorean culture and seafood delicacies—and all this in the context of social organization and safety.”

Some 42 beaches line the coast of the island, each with its own personality—from the quiet, trail-lined forests of Naufragados Beach to the surfing-oriented waves of Praia Mole. The stretch of sand getting the most attention is located at Jurerê Internacional, an upscale beach community lined with expensive vacation homes on tiny lots. The beach is thinner, but the waters are calmer and better for families. The ambience mixes elements of St. Tropez, Punta del Este, Ibiza and the Hamptons, with more reasonable prices.

Throughout the warm summer months, visitors from all through the Americas and Europe line the beach at Jurerê Internacional. They stay at private homes or hotels like Il Campanario Villaggio Resort, one of the area’s newest properties. They linger over dinner and drinks while lounging on Bali-style daybeds at Café de la Musique. And when the sun sets, they flock to Pacha Floripa, a massive multi-use event space that hosts live music, as well as international DJs.

A quieter, business-friendly resort option is Costão do Santinho—the largest resort hotel on the island—which has a marina, multiple bars and restaurants, and convention and meeting space. In May, a new events center called Tugua Hall opened, capable of handling up to 3,000 people.

As Florianópolis continues to garner attention in the media for its sun, sand and chic ambiance, the city is preparing to receive more visitors for both business and pleasure. There are plans for a new convention center to open by 2012 in the nearby city of Balneário Camboriú, and the city's international airport, named after Hercílio Luz, a former governor of the state, is slated for renovation and expansion. Someday, locals promise, even that iconic bridge—named after the same man—will once again welcome traffic into the city. But for now, it sure makes for a pretty postcard.

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