

# Evolution is a Choice for Lisbon, the New 2020 Green European Capital

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In Europe, the start of a new decade of environmental progress was marked by the passing of an environmental torch — the title of European Green Capital — from one European city to another. The stark contrast between Oslo, the 2019 recipient, and Lisbon, this year's winner,

is significant since it highlights the ways cities of all different types are finding innovative ways to move the needle forward when it comes to reversing the effects of climate change. While Norway represents a country that has already established a formidable commitment to sustainable practices and operates within a more financially stable and resource-rich reality, Portugal represents an entirely different set of circumstances from which to drive change.

During the opening ceremony that kicked off Lisbon's title year, the jury revealed that it felt Lisbon, which started its journey toward sustainability during a period of economic crisis, could serve as a role model for other cities across the EU and the world by demonstrating how sustainability and economic growth can go hand in hand. With the second-lowest birth rate in Europe and the majority of its most viable workforce unable to sustain itself on the Portuguese minimum wage of 600 euros (650 USD) per month, Portugal is seeing its young adults move out of the country in search of work in more competitive markets. The fact is that sustainable cities create improved quality of life conditions for their residents while simultaneously attracting a quality workforce to help develop those cities in the future. It's thus no wonder that Lisbon's incentive to go green goes beyond the singular desire to cut back on carbon emissions.

## How Did Lisbon Set Out to Become a Sustainable City?

The theme of Lisbon's green capital year is "choose to evolve." By viewing evolution as a choice, Lisbon has proved that even with scarce resources and limited funding, when the collective choice is made to combat climate change, the city can accomplish a lot. The following are a few examples of initiatives that have placed Lisbon on the map and helped transform it into an edgy, innovative, and environmentally progressive city:



- Only two days after Lisbon officially started its title year as European Green Capital, 4,500 people from all over the city and surrounding areas **planted 20,000 trees** in the Portuguese capital. "Tree planting helps to counteract one of the most negative effects of climate change and global warming, which is the heatwaves," Lisbon Mayor Fernando Medina told reporters. "When these kinds of areas are planted, the surrounding temperature can drop by three to five degrees centigrade."<sup>1</sup> The city plans to be 100 percent carbon-neutral by 2050 and aims to plant 100,000 trees throughout the year.



- Lisbon has **vast green roof coverage** that allows for the creation of biodiversity niches, CO<sub>2</sub> capture, and oxygen production, as well as energy conservation through rainwater retention and thermal insulation.



- Lisbon takes the green in European Green Capital very seriously, with 85 percent of people in Lisbon living within 300 meters of green spaces and with more than 750 acres of new green areas located throughout the city. Monsanto Park, Lisbon's biggest urban forest, is one of Europe's largest forests and the first to receive the **Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) certification**, which means it meets the highest environmental and social standards in the world. Lisbon is also connecting its green areas with the Vale de Alcântara green corridor. It connects the city's natural amenities, including Monsanto Park and the Tagus River, with cycle paths and walkways, giving its citizens greater access to green spaces.



- With more than **290 days of sunshine each year**, Lisbon is capitalizing on its significant sun exposure by investing heavily in energy efficiency, namely solar power. In addition, 100 percent of Lisbon's city lights are LED, which translates to the emission of 1,521 tons less CO<sub>2</sub> per year.



- In 2017, Lisbon launched a bike-sharing initiative, with electric bikes comprising two-thirds of the fleet. It is also promoting alternatively fueled vehicles, with 91 percent of the municipal car fleet electric. It has one of the world's largest electric vehicle charging point networks with 516 points citywide. Lisbon has more than **600 shared electrical bikes** and more than 56 miles of bike lanes throughout the city. Residents and visitors alike are encouraged to take advantage of sustainable mobility, and the city has plans to restrict car use and prioritize walking, cycling, and public transportation.

## Growing Interest in Going Green

This year the **European Green Capital Commission** received 36 applications from cities across Europe, all vying for the prestigious title of Greenest European City. In the 13 years of the initiative's existence, this is the highest number of cities so far to enter the competition, and for good reason. During the opening ceremony in Lisbon on January 10, 2020, Karmenu Vella, the European Commissioner for Environment, Maritime Affairs, and Fisheries, said:

“European cities increasingly understand that by going green they can offer a good quality of life to their citizens and protect their businesses from environmental risks.<sup>2</sup>”

What cities such as Lisbon are demonstrating is that going green and the concept of sustainability within the urban context is not limited to purely environmental

concerns. By becoming a sustainable city, Lisbon is proving how sustainable urban design greatly impacts the economic performance of a city by attracting a younger, environmentally savvy, smart workforce as well as the innovative companies that employ them.

With close to 70 percent of Europeans living in towns or cities<sup>3</sup> and roughly 80 percent of Americans populating cities,<sup>4</sup> there is an increasingly larger role for cities to play in supplying solutions for the environmental challenges the world now faces. In establishing the award and continuing to pass on the torch from one city to the next, the European Green Capital Commission not only recognizes the role cities play in driving sustainable development forward but also has a hand in ensuring more cities will be educated on the value of becoming sustainable and be inspired to follow in their predecessors' footsteps.

<sup>1</sup> M. Armstrong. Lisbon kicks-off year as European Green Capital 2020. *EuroNews*. <https://www.euronews.com/2020/01/12/lisbon-kicks-off-year-as-european-green-capital-2020>.

<sup>2</sup> Growing interest in 'going green': Record number of cities apply for European green city awards. (Nov. 18, 2019). *European Commission*. [https://ec.europa.eu/info/news/growing-interest-going-green-record-number-cities-apply-european-green-city-awards-2019-nov-18\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/news/growing-interest-going-green-record-number-cities-apply-european-green-city-awards-2019-nov-18_en).

<sup>3</sup> Urban Europe – Statistics on cities, towns and suburbs – Executive summary. *Eurostat Statistics Explained*. [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Urban\\_Europe\\_-\\_statistics\\_on\\_cities\\_towns\\_and\\_suburbs\\_-\\_executive\\_summary](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Urban_Europe_-_statistics_on_cities_towns_and_suburbs_-_executive_summary).

<sup>4</sup> U.S. cities factsheet. *Center for Sustainable Systems, University of Michigan*. <http://css.umich.edu/factsheets/us-cities-factsheet>.