


The Humblest Digital City

YOU WON'T FIND Pirai in a Fodor's guide. Nor is this poky town of 23,600 inhabitants, whose renown peaked during the 19th-century Brazilian coffee boom, exactly the nerve center of Latin American high technology. But if it were up to Mayor Luiz Fernando de Souza, known to all as Pezão, or Bigfoot in Portuguese, all this will change. Late last year, on the eve of his eighth and final year in office, Souza launched his most ambitious plan ever. He vowed to outfit all municipal facilities, from the town hall to the public schools, with broadband, wireless Internet access.

It sounded quixotic at best. Only a fraction of Brazilians had Internet access of any kind. Even now, just 6 percent of the country's 11 million Web users enjoy broadband connections—and barely one in 20 of them has gone wireless. What's more, 90 percent of this vanguard lives in big cities, like Rio de Janeiro. But Bigfoot was never one to think small, and by early this year he'd gone off tilting at transmission towers.

Now humble Pirai, tucked

discreetly behind a tall sierra 80 kilometers from Rio de Janeiro, may be the most advanced outpost of wirelessness in Brazil. Radio waves beamed from base stations perched on hills high above the town bring digital data into Pirai at a respectable 14 megabits per second. The signal

PIRAI, BRAZIL	
	Population: 23,600
	Why: For connecting the once remote
Fact: In one month this rural town in a low-tech country built itself a wireless network	

is picked up by antennas, each the size of a cigarette pack, in health clinics, city hall and open-air kiosks where passers-by can log on for free. While most Brazilian public schoolers are lucky to have a library, students in Pirai elementary schools regularly consult Google and exchange e-mail.

Souza admits he is no computer whiz, but he proudly calls Pirai a digital city. "People thought the whole thing was a bit megalomaniacal," he says. "But I'm confident that technology can make a big

difference for young people."

It's worth the gamble. In a continent where poverty has always prospered, fancy technology has long been the privilege of a wafer-thin class of sophisticates. Until the 1990s even a fixed telephone line was beyond the reach of most Latin American consumers. A decade of economic overhauling, including privatization of telephone services, changed things dramatically. Now mobile telephones are expected to outnumber land lines within a few years, and computer sales and Internet access are burgeoning.


Wireless technology has barely begun, but thanks to a healthy mix of pioneers like Souza, enterprising tech companies and a restless society hungry for the latest gadgets, that might soon change as well. Souza has made sure Pirai leads this trend. Several companies, including a software firm, have already migrated to Pirai, drawn by the reliable Web access. Students who were left behind in the classroom are using the Internet to catch up. "I'm even learning to use the Internet myself," Souza says. It's not a bad retirement plan.

—MAC MARGOLIS



BLANKETED: Auckland has become one big Wi-Fi hotspot

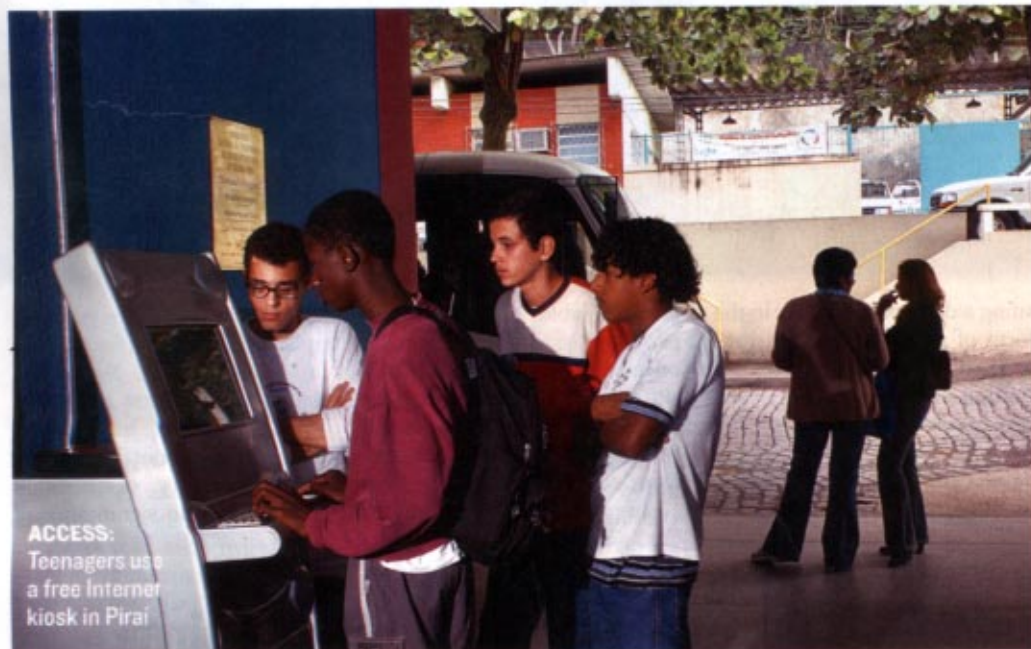
All Over The Place

AUCKLAND, N.Z.	
	Population: 367,734
	Why: City offers seamless connectivity
Fact: PCs and Web-enabled phones work anywhere within a 35km-wide wireless grid	

AUCKLAND IS FAMOUS for sailing, aquariums, Maori culture and dinosaur skeletons. Wireless Internet access is perhaps not far behind. In most cities, connecting wirelessly to the Internet means scoping out a Wi-Fi hotspot and sitting with your laptop in one place, or surfing the Net over a pocket-size phone with a tiny screen. Six months ago Auckland became one of the few cities to see the deployment of a single wireless broadband network that blankets its entire area. Users can surf the Net from the beach, their office, their home or a moving bus.

Upstart telecom firm Woosh Wireless is responsible for developing the new network. The four-year-old firm installed three wireless base stations at each of 80 cellular sites around town, covering a 52-square-kilometer area. The technology lets subscribers surf the Net on their PCs but adds the freedom of mobile phones.

—BRAD STONE



ACCESS: Teenagers use a free Internet kiosk in Pirai