Cities represent civilization and human achievement: they are bubbling microcosms of virtues and vices, vanguards of technology and creative pursuits, incubators of traditions and melting-pots of diversity. More than half the world's population now lives in cities, and for travellers they hold an endless fascination.

Initially, I bought this book as a gift for my brother, but once I looked through it, I found it so hard to part with that I ended up buying one for myself too. Although it doesn't quite measure up to the sheer bliss that is Lonely Planet's The Travel Book, this sleek coffee table book is chock full of stunning photography and interesting trivia about 200 cities around the globe. Admittedly, the rankings are subjective (the order is based upon the results of an online survey), but the cities included in the book are very diverse, and one doesn't need to put much stock in the rankings to enjoy vicariously wandering through each city.

One thing I couldn't help but notice: since the book is geared toward tourism, it tends to whitewash the horrible conditions existing in some of the cities it describes, leading to rather silly-sounding descriptions such as Strengths: lovely foliage; friendly people; excellent coffee...Weaknesses: rainy weather; expensive golfing; land mines; summary executions; boring food. Also, you can tell things are bad in a given city when it receives a Gold Star for optimism.

With the holidays approaching, The Cities Book makes an excellent gift...and you may consider buying one for yourself.