



Love always Lisbon

By Andrea Tomaz

Lisbon is a city that knows how to play hard to get. If it were a new lover, you'd never be able to forget it or shake off its charms.

Faded, cobblestoned and utterly seductive, the Portuguese capital delivers highs and lows which will squish your stomach like you're on a first date. The rollercoaster buzz of this place lives within its steep streets, outstretched views and elevator-style structures. Oh and its clanking trams which run up and down the city.

Filled with contradictions, 'Lisboa' is packed with laneway secrets and chunks of grid-like streets. Here, Moorish architecture merges with painted 'azulejo' tiling. Designer-clad ladies and businessmen walk through passageways while messy laundry flaps above them, strung from lofty windows.

Trundle through the city's quarters and find posh districts, backstreet slums and 'miradouro' lookouts with stunning vistas which leap out towards the watery horizon.

Half old and half new, Lisbon is haphazard and fast-paced, especially when compared to the rest of laidback Portugal. Yet some parts of everyday life still dawdle along, clinging to simple pleasures. Look one way and you'll see chaotic traffic and heart-squeezing, monster roundabouts. But take a different turn and you'll spot locals loafing outside time-warped cafes. Here, they share gossip over warm custard tarts, cigarettes and thimble-sized coffee 'bicas'. This ritual is just part of being a native 'Lisboeta'.



Yes, Lisbon is charming. But be warned; the city won't just open up its heart to any old visitor looking for easy tourist attractions. It's got far too much soul (and history) for that. Lisbon is captivating because it's hard to pin down. To truly enjoy the city, you must make the effort and put on your comfiest walking shoes. Wander through the districts of Alfama, Bairro Alto, Chiado, Baixa and Belem and be prepared to get lost around any given stone corner. With wide eyes and lots of legwork, you'll discover castle ruins, amazing views, boutique shopping, rustic cuisine, football passion, thumping nightlife and a café society that revolves around titchy caffeine hits and pastries that are bound to make your thighs wobble.

Got a few days to burn in and around beautiful, crazy Lisbon? Here are a few things to do and see.

Explore Alfama.

This steep, old area is one of the few parts of traditional Lisbon which survived the catastrophic 1755 earthquake. It's filled with Arabic-influenced architecture and is the birthplace of 'fado', traditional Portuguese singing. Catch Tram 28 to Alfama, which starts in the Baixa. The ride is full of bumps and jolts. It's also wonderfully scenic and will save your legs for later.

Upon arrival, visit the open-air remains of Castelo de São Jorge. Climb its battlements, and take in the city views, then come back down and check out the buskers who sometimes play within the tree-dotted grounds. Follow up your visit with a side-trip to the nearby lookout, Miradouro da Graça, which features more sweeping vistas and an outdoor cafe.

Don't even think about leaving Alfama without stopping in at Chapitô, a colourful bar and restaurant that leads a double-life as a charitable creative arts school, teaching dancing and clowning to disadvantaged young people. Secure a spot outside, buy some colourful handmade Chapitô jewellery, absorb the panoramic city views and succumb to a lazy afternoon of boozing and snacking on flame-charred sausages.

Get High

Small change will buy you a trip straight up in the old-fashioned lift called Elevador da Santa Justa. Weird and wonderful, this unusual 45-metre structure which first opened in 1899 was created by Raoul Mesnier du Ponsard, an apprentice to Gustave Eiffel. Ride up and you'll encounter more city views and a sky-high bar that serves freshly squeezed orange juice. If Willy Wonka loved architecture and juice instead of chocolates and sweets, this would probably be his dream creation. Lisbon is home to a number of curious lifts, so rise to the challenge of checking them all out.



Sweeten Up

Belem is the spiritual home of the 'pastel de nata' (aka the Portuguese custard tart). If you're a pastry purist searching for the ultimate sugar fix, head to the Antiga Confeitaria de Belem. During the early 19th Century, the local Catholic monastery folk here created the original recipe and then passed it onto a family whose descendants now run this particular pastry shop. Antiga Confeitaria de Belem creates over 10,000 tarts everyday. Each one is served warm, deliberately burnt on top and dusted with cinnamon and icing sugar.

Experience Fado

Fado is an old-fashioned singing which is deeply tied to the national psyche and tugs at the heartstrings of the Portuguese. Its melancholic lyrics explore themes of destiny, death, yearning and lost love. Slip into a fado tavern for an eye-opening performance fuelled by passion, tradition and probably lots of wine. Try venues such as Bauica in Alfama or Adega do Ribatejo in Bairro Alto.

Explore Bairro Alto

By day, Bairro Alto is a boutique shopping district. But after dark it morphs into a heaving bar zone. Revellers cram into the neighbourhood's narrow streets and barhop the night away. The nightlife buzzes until daybreak (at the least) and can rival the offerings of any other city in Europe.

Visit Lux-Fragil

Part-owned by actor John Malkovich, Lux is Lisbon's ultimate uber club. Expect electro, house and a gigantic stiletto sculpture set on the top level.

Sneak Off To Storybook Sintra

Okay, okay. Beautiful Sintra isn't officially in Lisbon, but it's only 28 kilometres away and is easily accessible by train or car. More importantly, it's one of the most beautiful parts of Portugal.

Straight out of a fairytale book, Sintra's enchanting landscape looks more than a little bit mystical. This is the land that the Ancient Romans once used for moon-worshipping. Later, the Portuguese royal family created their summer palace here. Expect lush and hilly forests, wooded valleys, soaring castle backdrops and a quaint old town that's hard to leave.

Visit the quirky castle Palácio Nacional da Pena, which is decked out with a drawbridge, gargoyles and a crazy colour scheme of fairy floss pink and lemon hues. The surrounding parklands are equally intriguing. They're filled with exotic plants and strange trees with low, undulating boughs that snake along the ground. There are also ponds with mini castle islets, where swans can sleep with a sense of royal importance. After exploring Sintra's storybook beauty, take a side-step to nearby beaches or the fishing village, Cascais.