

PORTUGAL

TUNING IN TO THE COUNTRY'S
SOUL MUSIC WHILE CRISS-
CROSSING LANDSCAPES

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Dusk falls softly on Lisbon, the narrow and cobblestoned streets of Alfama gleaming almost golden in the mellow light of the late evening. This old neighbourhood winds up and down one of Lisbon's seven hills, a jumble of intersecting lanes and a tumble of brightly painted houses perched along the edges. Like most visitors to the city, my husband and I have made Alfama our first destination to explore within this fascinating Portuguese capital city.

As we walk past bustling taverns and al fresco cafés spilling over with tourists, there seems to be a strain of melancholy wafting in the air. Is it merely my imagination – springing out of the knowledge that Alfama and nearby Mouraria were the birthplace of fado, Portugal's soul music?

I don't have to wonder for long. Just as we cross what seems like a popular restaurant, the door opens to let a few early diners out. And along with them, the lilting voice of a fadista (singer) reaches our ears. Although our hosts have warned us that fado concerts at most Alfama eateries are only modern-day tourist traps, there is something alluring, inviting and entreaty about that female voice. And we are tempted to go in and listen more closely.

That, alas, is not to be, since there is no place to even stand inside the cosy den; why don't you make a reservation for tomorrow, smiles the pretty hostess. The music follows us late into the night as we explore this area on foot, one of Lisbon's few to survive almost intact from the Great Earthquake of 1755. The original multicultural ethos



MUSEU DO FADO



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of Alfama is still visible today, especially in the numerous cafés and restaurants serving cuisine from all over the world.

At the Miradouro das Portas Do Sol viewpoint on top of the hill, we stop to take in the breath-taking panorama of the city. Alfama's pretty red tiled roofs stretch out in front of us like a ruby carpet. At the feted vegetarian café where we stop for dinner, the friendly Belgian chef-owner presses upon me a complimentary glass of the popular local cherry ginjinha (Ginja de Óbidos) when he hears that I have not yet tried it.

By the end of that evening, although we have not yet delved into fado, it is easy to see how these lanes served as the petri dish for the germination of the art form. Alfama and Mouraria were typical working class suburbs where singers gave free rein to their emotions, beginning the early 19th century. Fado – literally meaning fate – still remains the perfect expression of the uniquely Portuguese mood known as *saudade*.

This sentiment can be best described as a melancholy tinged by longing for things long gone: a lost love, a joyous way of life that has vanished, a musical expression of the struggle that everyday life is about. In fact, Amália Rodrigues, the famous fadista hailed as the Rainha do Fado (queen of fado) for recently shining the world's spotlight on this music form, is supposed to have admitted candidly, "The Portuguese invented fado because we have a lot to complain about."

The next morning, we are back at Alfama, this time to learn more about the history and evolution of fado at the Museu do Fado. This



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STRIKING THE RIGHT CHORD:
1. The Fado Museum in Lisbon which charts the history and evolution of the music; 2. The talented Ana Margarida, a fado singer who moonlights as a waitress; 3. A busy al fresco cafe in the Alfama neighbourhood of Lisbon; 4. Porto, Portugal's second largest city, is picture-postcard pretty



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fabulous museum is filled with fado trivia in the form of classic posters, concert archives and singer biographies, among other temporary exhibitions. My husband and I spend more time than intended at the small alcove on the upper floor, listening to classical recordings, sharing our favourites with each other.

All too soon, it is time for us to leave Lisbon. The other famous fado location in Portugal is the university town of Coimbra. However, I am not headed that way but to Portugal's second largest city, Porto, where JK Rowling spent years as a struggling writer before she found fame and success. I am headed there more in pursuit of its art and architecture (also hoping to finally catch a complete recital, even though the city has no fado tradition of its own).

As luck would have it, my AirBnB hostess, the 72-year-old Daisy Margarida, is a fadista who has been singing since her teens. When she finally acquiesces to our repeated pleas to sing, she has me in tears within minutes; both my husband and I are moved by the music even if not able to follow the lyrics. Margarida also sends us out in the evening with a (short) list of the best places to listen to fado in her city.

And that is how we fetch up at the Casa da Mariquin, frequented by locals as much as it is

sought after by tourists. There is an hour for the evening's recital to begin and just like in Lisbon, the small intimate place is packed to the rafters, with no space for walk-in guests. It is that night of the week when the resident fadista, mother of the owner, Fatima Couto, sings here. Surely, we won't be forced to return disappointed from here too?

Ana Margarida, the affable hostess, sees our distress and comes to our rescue: would we like to stand and watch the concert? Of course we would! She goes on to suggest that there is time for us to grab a bite somewhere nearby.

A quick pizza dinner later, my husband and I are shown a discreet place from where to look and listen. The first performer is the emerging star Miguel Xavier whose dulcet voice transports me to a state of near rapture. This is also the first time I am hearing the sounds of the guitarra Portuguesa (Portuguese guitar) clearly. This unique instrument – that looks more like a mandolin to my untrained eyes – is the flawless accompaniment to fado, superbly mellifluous while hitting the right notes of melancholy.

During the quick break after his concert, the buzz within the restaurant rises to a startling level of loudness, before an expectant hush falls over the happy diners. The clinking of

glasses stops just as suddenly as the raised voices of genial chatter. Fatima Couto takes the stage, closes her eyes and begins on a high note. For the next half hour, her powerful voice washes over us like sea waves, rising suddenly to a crescendo before falling into a soporific melody.

We walk out into the dark night, two happy souls, humming snatches of the half-remembered melodies. Ana Margarida waves us a cheery 'boa noite' (good night) with a hope to see us again soon. It is a wish that comes true sooner than we expect; the next evening, when we impulsively walk into the Casa Du Guitarra music shop in search of more local music, we discover that the talented fadista for the evening is none other than Ana Margarida. She smiles shyly at us from the stage before launching into song, her voice not yet perfect but soulful nevertheless.

Jazz genius Louis Armstrong once said, "If you have to ask what jazz is, you'll never know." In another context, another continent, a few time zones removed from his home town of New Orleans, I realise that the same is true of fado. In the words of Amália Rodrigues, "You feel it, you don't understand it and you don't explain it." W

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