

# Lisbon Lite

From red rooftops to blue azulejo tiles, Portugal's capital city revels in its splendid colours



## :: Charukesi Ramadurai

**T**ravelling through Portugal by road, my mind keeps wandering to the article I read on the BBC, calling it the place where people love to be sad, a “culture of melancholy”. There have been similar such descriptors for this society – mournful, moody. In other words, the non-Thailand of countries.

Yet, in Portugal, I found a country not just sunny in weather, but also in disposition. It has some of the friendliest and most helpful people in Europe.

The first stop was Lisbon, a charming city with vintage trams on cobblestone streets, striking street art, al fresco cafes, magnificent cathedrals, a lively music scene and a wide range of dining options. And oh, the pastries!

In this lazy, leisurely stroll late in the evening, what accompanies us is not just the constant strains of melancholy music emanating from the bars, but also a golden light. I am not hallucinating: Lisbon is said to have a special kind of light, located as it is in the lap of seven hills. It makes the pale pastel colours of even the most decrepit buildings in Alfama glow, burnished as if by an unseen hand.

Even the faded azulejo – traditional tiles that are typically blue-and-white – embedded on the walls of homes seem to have acquired a magical sheen.

The next day, Tram 28 takes us for a quick jaunt around the old city; these rickety yellow trams are surprisingly hardy, transporting both locals and visi-

tors through the crowded and narrow slopes. I get off at one of the most prominent *miradouros* (viewpoints) of Lisbon, the Portas do Sol, from where the city stretches out like a plaid carpet, the red rooftops of buildings leading all the way to the harbour in the distance.

From there, it is a long walk to the Baixa (pronounced Bai-sha) suburb where I am staying. The stroll is punctuated by frequent stops for gelato and pastel de nata, which is Portugal's sweet gift to the world, a soft and creamy egg custard baked in a crisp pastry shell.

I eventually fetch up near the magnificent Praça do Comércio, with its marble statues and archway leading into the wide and glitzy shopping street of Rua Augusta. On this entirely cobble-stoned street, closed to traffic, I stop for music performances from buskers and a quick lunch, followed by more pastries.

The afternoon is given over to a couple of museum visits: the Museu Nacional do Azulejo, or the National Azulejo Museum that documents the history of these colourful tiles all the way from the mid 15th century, the times when Moorish invaders brought them to this part of the world, and the Museu do Fado or the Fado Museum that showcases the evolution of Portugal's favourite music form.

To me, one of the most compelling charms of Lisbon is the fact that every



Azulejo tiles in Alfama

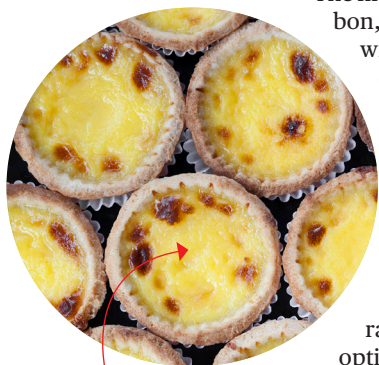


Street musician sings fado in Alfama

single thing we see and do is a pleasant discovery. Despite being a capital city, Lisbon feels like a small town, one that is constantly evolving and surprising itself in the process. And unlike other Western European capital cities like Rome, Paris or Brussels, Lisbon doesn't bring to mind a particular food or monuments. So, it is all the more delightful when Lisbon puts on a dazzling array of sights and sounds.

Which brings me back to the unfair suggestion that Portugal is a sad place – perhaps that impression was based on the soulfulness of the traditional fado music, literally translated as “fate”, or the innate emotion of saudade, which locals claim is untranslatable, but loosely means nostalgia or a longing for something lost. I sense no particular melancholy among locals, just a joy at being able to live in one of the most vivacious European cities. ■

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Pastel de Nata

Lisbon began at Alfama, one of the oldest neighbourhoods and also one of its most vibrant. The narrow, winding lanes of Alfama are best negotiated on foot. It is anyway a walker's delight. There are bustling bars and kitschy souvenir stalls. The road slopes up and down, but that is only to be expected in a city built on seven hills.

It is late spring, and flowers are blooming everywhere, in plastic pots on windowsills and careless patches on the pavements.



Praco do Comercio square overlooking the river Tagus

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