

TRAVEL

# *In love with Lisbon*

Wondering where to go on your next city break? Travel writer **Aoibheann McNamara** checks out Portugal's historic capital.



Lisbon; gritty, grotty and endearing, is a meandering adventure of found places through which moves the slow yellow trams, that are a signature of this aged, post colonial micro-epic city on the Atlantic.

Being one of the poorest cities in the EU, you have a feeling of being in Europe and yet being somewhere else too. It is a place defiantly more exotic and more decaying in a positive sense. There is a hunger to the place and a sense of just hanging on. It is this feeling that I found most interesting, things not quiet right and not quiet there in an imperfect perfection and what we need more of when we travel.

Lisbon is a compact city cut through with a great travel network; with idealistic childlike yellow trams, most significantly tram 28 which acts as the main artery. Mixed weather and mixed feelings lend an unpredictability to the place. Docklands lead to and from the Baixa epicenter, Chiado the shopping area and Bairro Alto, the eating and drinking area. Belem lies to the West and provides peace and perfect pastries. All this is punctuated with beautiful parks and decorative coffee docks, which become the focal point of these green areas and provide peace in a semi bustling city.

We stayed at myhomeinlisbon. The owners also have Baixa House, which is more like a guesthouse. Our apartment was in a

turn of the century building of ten apartments beautifully decorated in contemporary up-cycled object trove style, which seems to be a staple for everything in Lisbon. Fresh bread was placed in a linen bag at your door every morning and the fridge had fresh fruit and yoghurt every day. Service was amazing. In an interior design context I have never seen anything better. Immaculate taste and attention to detail made being in the apartment an experience, not just a stay. This was an amazing rest point from which to emerge every day into the adventure that is Lisbon.

Days were spent meandering around the intensely steep and poorly cobbled streets in search of that vintage hat or glove shop we saw in our Wallpaper guide. Stopping for ice cream or lunch in one of the effortlessly retro spots along the way. The highlight of the day was definitely the morning pastries and coffee in one of the old pastry shops filled with energetic old ladies; serving the delightful Pasties de Belem, the filo pastry bases filled with set custard which are lightly cooked and then you add your own shake of icing sugar or cinnamon and enjoy with a super strong coffee. Cafeteria Doce Real Padaria on Rua D Pedro is one such place but the true gem is in Belem and is simply called Pasteis de Belem.

In terms of food you need to know where you are eating in



Lisbon. I went armed with business cards from friends but ended up not going to any of these and coming upon another series of spots pieced together from books, magazines and just plain searching out.

One such place was Cantinho do Avillez on Rua dos Duques de Braganca 7. I spotted it in a Portuguese magazine and spent much of the week trying to find it. After lunch I wanted to go into the kitchen and cry it was so good. I had “Barrosa DOP” hamburger with caramelized onions and foie gras. I don’t know what Barrosa DOP means but it was the best burger and best lunch I have ever had with the most perfect little chips. Followed by blood orange and vanilla crème brulee totally perfect and with stunning Portuguese wine, which I asked them to choose. It turns out that this restaurant is one of many run by Jose Avillez, who is known as the Jamie Oliver of Portugal. If that wasn’t all good enough, the interior was enhanced by the Portugese artist Joana Astolfi, who works with flea market finds and adds her own select twist to create fresh new work that become the essence of the space.

Another one of these fresh new restaurants is Pharmacia on Rua Marechal Saldanha 1, which is integrated into the pharmacy museum just near the Tagus river viewpoint



Miradouro. The décor is inspired by chemists of the past, with old pharmaceutical paraphernalia and even an LSD cocktail. The food is really up there. I had a salad of salt cod with chickpeas and squash and then a dessert selection of six different tastes - it was stunning. With outside seating looking out on the best view in Lisbon and warm staff this is a perfect place for a long lazy lunch or dinner.

Another find was Taberna on Rua Das Flores 103, which had been open only two weeks by a former head chef of the local journalists club. It was simple and small and yet everything was right. We had sopa de Feisao Frade a Algarvia, a simple slightly cooked egg soup with olive oil, onion and old bread, balanced by the dry cheeses and aged chorizo platter that accompanied it and with a side order of the Portugese specialty of carrot jam, this simple meal was complete. A lesson in rustic eating.

For shopping, if you only get to one shop go to A Vida Portuguesa on Rua Anchieta 11. This is an utterly unique place, run by a retired journalist. Shops like these should exist in all countries. They find old products that are still being produced, stocking everything from tooth paste to floor cleaner, chocolates to children’s toys, wood and needles and everything is unified by a unique aesthetic and an old world charm. The shop is about produce in a historical and social context and how the products play with our history and make up our references. It’s a unique idea conceived by a woman no doubt more interested in cultural preservation and continuation than in simple selling.

Lisbon is really a very different European city to visit. It won’t be for everyone yet has something for all. It is a little too unkempt for some but just the ticket for those that love that bit of searching for the heart of a place. The people are often disinterested, almost in a haze. This, you can look at as a welcome change from the Starbucks Western approach, or just see it as a disintegrated national customer service. It feels on the edge; about to tip somewhere else and yet rooted in the strength of its history and the weight of its monuments. It’s a slow city with slow trams, that almost don’t make it up the hill. But it’s a city that allows you to be; as you sit in the sun by a turn of the century coffee pavilion, having a sedimented coffee, an ode to its varied and multi cultural past and present.

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