



Praça do Comércio



A statue at the Praça do Comércio

## TRIPPING THE LIGHT FANTASTIC

*Urban renewal combined with cultural revival has put Lisbon back on the map*  
By Prachi Joshi



The MAAT Museum

THERE IS SOMETHING about the light in Lisbon—the cobalt sky right out of a Renaissance fresco; the glistening façades of azulejo (patterned tiles), crowned by terracotta roofs; and the golden hour over the Tagus River. It bathes the maze of Alfama’s medieval streets, accentuates the arched symmetry of the 18<sup>th</sup>-century galleries in Baixa, and bounces off the undulating lines of the futuristic MAAT Museum. Lisbon is meant to be savoured, but if you’re pressed for time, here’s a handy 72-hour guide.

**MONUMENTAL HISTORY** You understand why Lisbon is called the ‘City of Seven Hills’ as you wander its streets. Hop onto the bright yellow vintage tram 28 to the hilltop São Jorge Castle. The Alfama quarter, with its labyrinthine alleyways lined with small houses, tumbles down from the castle in a picturesque jumble of cobbled streets. The earthquake of 1755 levelled much of Lisbon but spared Alfama, so while the rest of the city was rebuilt along modern lines, this quarter stayed stuck in time. At



Padrão dos Descobrimentos

night, yellow streetlights cast long shadows on the neighbourhood, and the sounds of the famously melancholic and moving fado music reverberate from its many clubs. Drop in at Clube de Fado to listen to the best performers.

**THE SOUL OF PORTUGAL** Alfama may have usurped fado, but it was in the Moorish district, Mouraria, where the genre was born in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. The most famous fadista of that time, Maria Severa, lived on Rua da Guia. While her home has been restored and turned into a fado house, the entire street pays tribute to the music too, with photos and paintings of fadistas adorning the walls. Mouraria was earlier regarded as a notorious neighbourhood and it still looks a little rough around the edges, with tiled houses and graffiti-covered buildings standing cheek by jowl. In 2008, the residents of the area created a non-profit association to revitalise it and improve community integration and now it is Lisbon’s most multi-cultural neighbourhood.

**READ BETWEEN THE LINES** Lisbon is home to the oldest bookstore in the world still in operation. Livraria Bertrand opened in 1732 and quickly became the meeting place of the literary elite. Its azulejo-tiled entrance leads into a bright, well-stocked shop with hardwood floors; a high, vaulted ceiling; and polished wooden shelving. At the opposite end of the spectrum is Livraria do Simão, possibly the smallest bookshop in the world, a mere shoe cupboard-size shop choc-a-bloc with books. And in the Alcântara neighbourhood is the uber cool Livraria Ler Devagar, a former printing factory repurposed into a bookstore—an antique printing machine forms the centrepiece and a bicycle hangs from the ceiling. It is located in the LX Factory area, which is currently Lisbon’s trendiest quarter with galleries, cafés, and indie stores.

**DOWNTOWN DISCOVERIES** Stroll down Avenida da Liberdade, the majestic, tree-lined boulevard flanked by a mix of 19<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup>-century buildings that house designer shops and trendy restaurants and bars. It is also home to several hotels, the chicest of which is the boutique Hotel Valverde—a townhouse converted into an

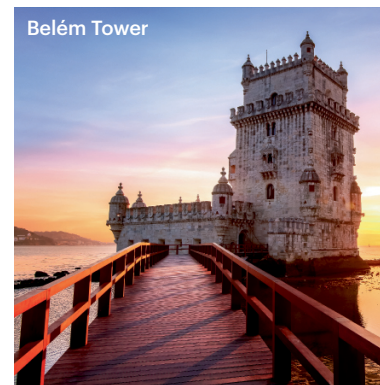
elegant luxury hotel. Avenida da Liberdade opens onto Rossio Square, the preferred meeting spot of Lisboaetas for centuries. The neo-Manueline façade of Rossio Train Station dominates the square on one side, and nearby is Café Beira Gare, which serves delicious street food. Stand at the bar and savour the deep-fried varieties of *salgados*—cod cakes, shrimp empanadas, meat samosas, and more. Wash this down with a potent shot of sour cherry liqueur at A Ginjinha in Largo São Domingos. Then walk down Rua Augusta towards the riverfront Praça do Comércio crowned by the striking Rua Augusta Arch. For a small fee, take the elevator up the arch for a sublime view of the river and city centre.

**HISTORY MEETS ART** Continuing down the riverfront, you arrive at Belém, which is home to two 16<sup>th</sup>-century UNESCO World Heritage Sites—the extravagantly carved Jerónimos Monastery and Belém Tower, which played a significant role in Portugal’s long history of maritime discoveries. Next to the monastery, Antiga Confeitaria de Belém has been serving custard tarts (*pastéis de nata*) since 1837. Across the immaculate Jardim da Praça do Império is the Centro Cultural de Belém, which houses the modern and contemporary art Museum Berardo. Do not skip the recently opened Museum of Art, Architecture, and Technology (MAAT) with its undulating façade covered with 3D ceramic tiles. If you’re planning to stay in Belém, book yourself a room at Altis Belém Hotel & Spa, a luxury design hotel, if only for its Michelin-starred Feitoria Restaurant, with its seasonal menu of contemporary Portuguese cuisine. Try the bluefin tuna ramen served with tiny radish, seaweed, and a clear consommé.

**FOOD FORTHOUGHT** Lisbon’s dining scene reflects the city’s resurgence with young chefs who play with traditional Portuguese cuisine, giving its authentic flavours a modern makeover. In the Chiado neighbourhood, superstar chef José Avillez is spearheading this trend with no less than seven restaurants and bars, including the Michelin-starred restaurant Belcanto and the Beco Cabaret Gourmet (which combines a stellar degustation menu and a burlesque performance). For a more relaxed meal, try Cantinho do Avillez for innovative dishes like tuna tartare with popcorn made of rice and shaved horseradish. While there, visit A Vida Portuguesa for souvenirs such as traditional soaps in retro packaging, kitchen props, and local food products. Much like Lisbon, it celebrates the past while embracing the future. ■



A tram line in the city



Belém Tower



The Lisbon skyline at dusk