

Several hole-in-the-wall shops in Lisbon and Sintra offer *ginja*, or *ginjinha*—a traditional Portuguese sour cherry liqueur delicately flavoured with spices such as cinnamon and clove. This sweet, aromatic infusion is often served in tiny, edible chocolate cups—a must-try.

A BRUSH WITH PORTUGAL

Travel writer and watercolour artist **Shikha Shah** embarks on a four-day solo sketching adventure in Lisbon and Sintra, drawn by the city's *azulejo* tiles, pastel façades, rich culinary traditions, and the soulful charm of its *fado* music and folklore. Illustrations by Shikha Shah

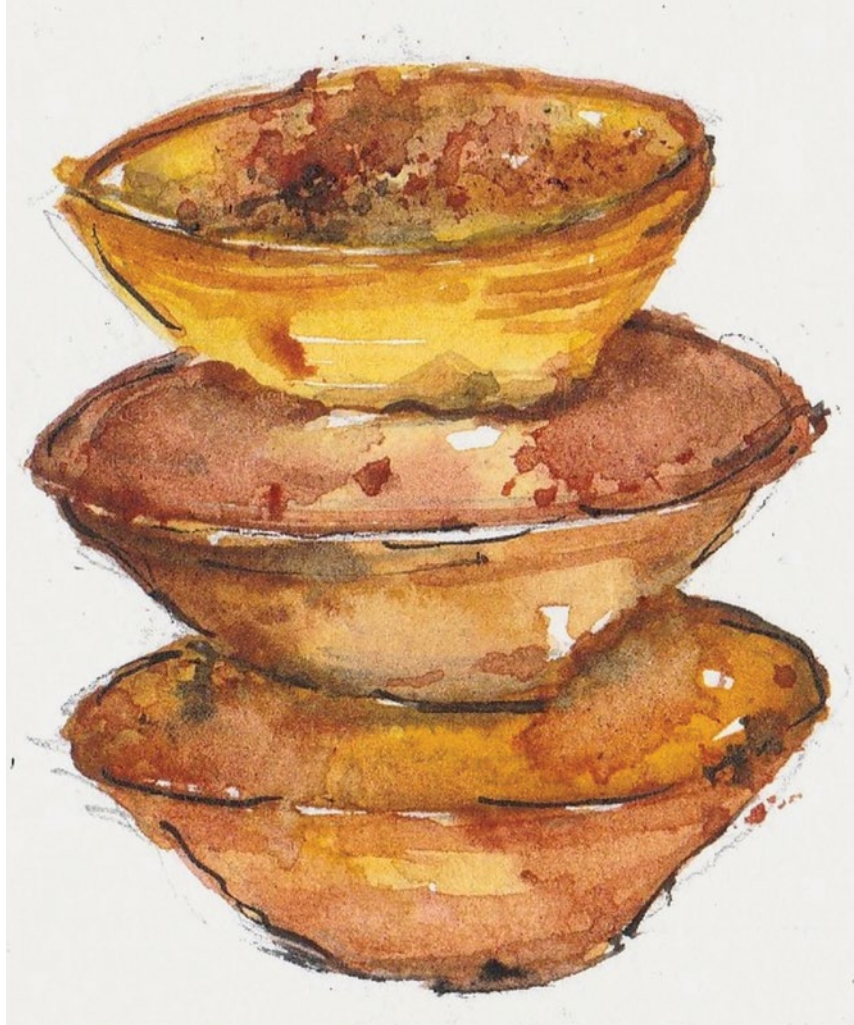


Occupying a place of pride in Sintra town centre, the National Palace of Sintra is the oldest palace in Portugal and boasts over 1,000 years of history.



Clockwise from top:
Combining palatial elegance with the warmth of a Portuguese home, Palácio Príncipe Real is British couple Gail and Miles Curley's stylish refuge in Lisbon; a wine tasting at The Lisbon Winery often includes a selection of boutique local wines, accompanied by an artisanal cheese and charcuterie board—a delicious insight into Portuguese flavours and *vinho* culture; board the iconic electric Tram 28 to experience the essence of old Lisbon. This small, vintage tram winds its way up narrow streets, past century-old churches, tile-covered buildings adorned with vibrant flowerpots and laundry drying in the sun, and terraces offering spectacular views.





Clockwise from left: Located in the charming Graça neighbourhood, in the little square of Largo da Graça, the Igreja e Convento da Graça is a relatively little-known Baroque gem steeped in religious significance. Its terrace offers a splendid view over the Tagus River; you haven't truly been to Portugal until you've tried its iconic *pastel de nata* (egg custard tart); believed to have been created by monks at Lisbon's Jerónimos Monastery in the 18th century, this piece of gastronomic tradition can be enjoyed at several speciality bakeries, such as Fábrica de Nata, which has branches in Lisbon, Sintra and Porto; *azulejo* is inseparable from Portuguese identity, art and culture. While here, look out for tilework signs and entire buildings adorned with glazed tiles—often in blue tones, depicting local legends and religious tales.





From top: Standing on a craggy outcrop, the romantic Pena Palace, with its peculiar domes and intricate carvings, showcases an eclectic blend of architectural styles and evokes a sense of mystery; a picturesque patchwork of red rooftops unfolds from Alfama's Miradouro das Portas do Sol—one of Lisbon's most iconic viewpoints.



ARRIVING IN SUNNY LISBOA, I check into Palácio Príncipe Real, a historic 1877 family home transformed into a stylish 25-room sanctuary with soothing peachy interiors, a serene spa, a cosy bar, and a plant-based restaurant offering garden-fresh breakfast until midday. My pool-facing room comes with all the comforts—plush bedding, a bathrobe and slippers that fit perfectly, a spacious writing desk with a SMEG kettle, and a balcony where I picture myself enjoying a glass of Port wine in the evenings. Settled in and refreshed from a long soak, I head out to explore the city.

I meet my guide, Pedro Melo, at Praça dos Restauradores for a private walking tour of Lisbon's vibrant neighbourhoods. We stop inside Igreja de São Domingos, which still bears scars from the 1755 earthquake and the 1959 fire, then arrive at the lively Rossio Square—Baixa's historic meeting point. A quick stop for espresso and *pastel de nata* (Portuguese custard tart) follows, before we visit Livraria Bertrand, the world's oldest operating bookshop, founded in 1732 in the Chiado neighbourhood. We take in the views from the Santa Justa elevator—a 19th-century Neo-Gothic lift connecting Baixa to Bairro Alto. The day ends with an immersive wine tasting at The Lisbon Winery.

On day two, I hop on the iconic tram 28E from Praça Luis de Camões to the oldest and most characterful Alfama district. After getting off at Portas do Sol, I take in the iconic view of the red-roofed houses, a quintessential Lisbon moment. I find a café with a view of Igreja e Convento da Graça, where I sit down with a latte to sketch the 13th-century church. Getting lost in Alfama's winding streets, full of tile shops and hidden taverns, is a must-do.

Back at my peaceful haven in the Príncipe Real neighbourhood, *estou em paz* (I am at peace). Spoiled by the warm, all-women team at the hotel, I never want to leave, but every adventure must end for a new one to begin. So, I take a 45-minute cab ride to Sintra, where I stay at the Valverde Sintra Palácio de Seteais, close to Quinta da Regaleira, a 19th-century estate known for its eccentric Neo-Gothic architecture. Sintra is full of UNESCO World Heritage sites, so there are often long queues at palaces, gardens, and castles. I skip the typical tourist route and explore Sintra's compact historic centre, with its wine bars, quaint shops, and bakeries offering *travesseiros de Sintra*, a puff pastry treat made with egg yolks, almonds, and sugar.

The next morning, after a lavish breakfast, I take bus 434 to the National Palace of Pena, a fairytale-like palace with vibrant yellow, blue, and red tones, and ornate tilework. The nearby Castelo dos Mouros (Moorish Castle), built by Muslim occupiers in the 10th century, offers spectacular views and a glimpse into Portugal's past. Back in town, I stop at Casa Piriquita, a pastry shop dating back to 1862, to try the *queijada de Sintra*—a cheesy tart once used as medieval payment.

In my four days of wandering and sketching in Lisbon and Sintra, I learnt to enjoy the flow of the journey. The act of sketching *en plein air* deepened my connection to these places and their people and left me with a meaningful souvenir—a sketchbook filled with hand-painted impressions of Portugal.

As someone wise once said, when you discover something that nourishes your soul, make room for it in your life. ☯