

# Lisbon: Rich in History and Culture

BY JANET SIMON

Today's visitors to the Portuguese capital city of Lisbon see striking evidence of a glorious past. At the height of Portugal's power during the 15th-century Age of Discovery, her explorers sailed all over the world under Prince Henry the Navigator. Portugal's strategic position at the western end of the Mediterranean resulted in the sea having a major effect on the country's influence in the region, voyages of exploration, trade, and cuisine.

An even earlier factor in Portugal's development was the invasion of the Moors: Arab Muslims who crossed from North Africa in 711 CE and who ruled both Portugal and Spain for 300 years. The Moors contributed to Portugal's seafaring by introducing the lateen sail and the astrolabe for navigation, helping to launch Portugal into far-reaching overseas exploration.

Today, the Belém suburb of Lisbon, at the mouth of the River Tagus, is a major tourist destination. The Tower of Belém was built as a

fortress in the middle of the river and was passed by ships as they departed in search of new trade routes. The prominent Monument to the Discoveries commemorates all those who took part in the Age of Discovery and features Prince Henry at the prow of a caravel ship, followed by Vasco da Gama, Magellan, and others. The Jerónimos Monastery, a beautiful example of Manueline architecture, which is a Portuguese variant of late Gothic, is a monument to the wealth of this period. It was financed largely by the "pepper



The Monument to the Discoveries.

tax" levied on spices, precious stones, and gold. The Monastery's west wing houses the National Museum of Archaeology and is Portugal's main archaeological research center. Both the Tower and the Monastery have been designated UNESCO World Heritage Sites.

Throughout modern Lisbon and much of Portugal, an artistic tradition in ceramic or porcelain tiles is evident on both the exterior facades and the interiors of public buildings, churches, train stations, and homes. The beautiful tiles are called *azulejos*

in Portuguese, which comes not from *azul* (blue), as one might expect, but from the Arabic word *az-zulayj*, meaning polished stone.

The first tiles used in Portugal included geometric designs on Moorish tiles imported from Andalusia in Spain. From the 16th century on, Portugal produced its own decorative tiles, branching out into human and animal designs that had been rejected in Islamic religious art. The country never developed a strong painting-on-canvas tradition, and tile work became the national art of Portugal. Many azulejos chronicle significant episodes and cultural aspects of Portugal's history. Over the centuries, tile art has included numerous themes: Christian, Classical Roman, the Chinese Ming Dynasty, and Dutch- and Flemish-inspired designs and colors.

The National Tile Museum (Museu Nacional do Azulejo) is located in a 16th-century convent and church which provides a lovely setting for tiles spanning the history of the azulejo tradition. A 75-foot-long map of Lisbon, painted on tiles in the early 1700s, graphically portrays what the city looked like before the tragic All Saints Day earthquake of 1755, which leveled much of the central city and killed 15,000 people in Lisbon alone.

For a multisensory experience of Lisbon's culture and history, I suggest dining in a restaurant decorated with lovely azulejos while partaking of some of Portugal's delicious seafood. Among the possibilities are Restaurante Casa do Alentejo and Restaurante Cervejaria Trindade, both featured on the Lisbon Guide's "10 Most Beautiful Restaurants of Lisbon." Casa do Alentejo is an example of a recreated Moorish palace, richly decorated in pictorial and geometric tiles. Cervejaria Trindade was originally the dining hall of a monastery before becoming a brewery and restaurant. Beneath a colorful vaulted ceiling, large tile murals portray the seasons of the year.

Located on hills rising from the city center, the Moorish quarter of Alfama and the Bairro Alto are picturesque areas to explore on foot. The imposing Castle of Saint George (Castelo de São Jorge) dominates the hill above the Alfama and offers spectacular views of the city and the Tagus River. The stately, arcaded Praça do Comércio, also known as Palace Square, adjoins the Tagus River. The square was the site of the royal palace for 400 years and contains the triumphal arch of King



Painted tiles depict fanciful themes.



Restaurante Cervejaria Trindade.

José I. Portugal is known for its port wine and emotionally poignant fado singing, and both can be enjoyed in the fado houses of Lisbon.

Lisbon is rich in history, culture, visual experiences, unique neighborhoods to explore, and dining options—a worthy choice for a traveler's itinerary. •

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