

As old as the hills

Tim Heap visits the Portuguese capital and finds great places to eat, a lively art scene, ancient architecture – and pink streets



One thing we've probably all learnt the hard way on our travels is that to really get a sense of a place you have to stay in the heart of the action, and stay on your feet. I'd visited the charming Portuguese capital of Lisbon once before, a few years ago, and although it was clearly a vibrant and historic city to explore, staying out of the centre meant I left not knowing how the different neighbourhoods connected – neither geographically nor culturally and socially.

Since then, it seems that Lisbon has exploded as a cool European destination, synonymous with words such as *hip*, *innovative* and *up-and-coming* (as well as *cheap*) with plenty of think-pieces written as to why this might be the case.

Hell, even Madonna relocated here last year, and if that's not enough to convince us gays to plan a trip then I'm not sure what is.

For my second visit, I was a guest of AlmaLusa Baixa/Chiado, a boutique hotel that sits right in the city centre, on the perimeter of the Praça do Município, a small square dominated by the city hall. You'd think that would make it a bustling spot but many of the buildings that line the square are uninhabited, and, given that the hotel, which opened in 2015, has only 28 rooms, it guarantees peace and quiet should you want it.

My trip companions are envious when I'm lucky enough to be given a stunning first-floor room with a Juliet balcony that overlooks the square,

"Lisbon has exploded as a cool European destination"

even offering a glimpse — through an archway — of the Tagus river.

The hotel's name, AlmaLusa, means Portuguese soul, while the Baixa/Chiado suffix is in reference to the two areas of the city that it straddles.

From the main entrance, guests step out into Baixa, Lisbon's historic heart and commercial centre, while a back door, reached from the top floor, exits into the Chiado district, a stylish shopping hotspot with many of Lisbon's buzziest bars and restaurants.

After a quick change into shorts (despite it being late November, the mercury's in the high teens) and a fresco bite to eat in the hotel's Delfina restaurant, we meet Joelle from tour company Cosmopolitan, to delve into some local history. As the oldest metropolis in Western Europe, predating even Rome, there's a lot to see: millennia of occupation by various

inhabitants, as well as disasters caused by fire, water and earth, have left their marks all over the city, in both the buildings and the people.

Over the next few hours, Joelle leads us through the city centre to visit tiny, unassuming chapels and large churches — one, the Igreja



PINK POUNDERS: Tim, far left with the rest of the group

de São Domingo, still has pitted and blackened walls following a blaze in 1959 that nearly destroyed it. Afterwards, we stop at the nearby Rossio Square to sample ginjinha, a brandy-type sour cherry liqueur. It feels a little early in the day to be doing shots, but I join in, sipping the sweetly sharp liquid before eating the cherry that sits in the bottom and spitting out the pip like a real Lisboaeta.

Joelle's tour is a good starting point for getting to grips with the geography of Lisbon, with its eight hills meaning you're rarely on flat ground for too long. AlmaLusa has a range of preferred partners that guests can book experiences with, from city tours and sailing trips to culinary experiences such as the private dinner

that's been reserved for us that night.

I'm glad to be in a taxi and not on foot as we pull up on a steep street in the Príncipe Real district and enter the traditional apartment owned by American wine guru and cook Maureen and her Portuguese husband João.

Enjoying charcuterie and cheese with bread and homemade olive oil from their farm in the Alentejo region, we listen to their story as well as that of the city — it's fascinating to hear a non-Portuguese resident's perspective of this rapidly evolving metropolis.

I remember Lisbon's impressive street art scene from my last visit, and the following day discover that it's still thriving. Although originally Spanish, City Guru tour guide Marisa enthuses about the city as if a proud local but, sadly, it turns out that few Lisboetas take time to appreciate what we've been brought to see.

The Chão de Loureiro multi-storey car park in the former slum, but now hip, area of Mouraria, is more than just a place to park while browsing in the adjacent shopping centre: it is, as Marisa puts it, a free art exhibition.

Commissioned by the Lisbon City Council in 2011, each level of the car park is a showcase of a particular Portuguese street artist's style. Wandering through each level, Marisa points out her favourite pieces and the motifs that each artist uses.

We seem to have come on a good day because a cityscape painted by Miguel Janeiro across a handful of parking bays is unobstructed by cars — a rarity, apparently.

After getting a few odd looks from drivers wondering why we're taking such interest in the car park, we head off towards the river front, past a few more street murals and along Rua da Rosa, where the tarmac is bubblegum pink.

Once a place where sailors came to pick up girls, it's now a popular night-life spot — even with a gay bar or two. Continuing on, we reach Monte Mar restaurant and say goodbye to Marisa

and hello to freshly cooked sea bass. The offshoot of a long-established Cascais eatery, it's an idyllic spot. Refined but not pretentious, it's by the shimmering river, with the 25 de Abril Bridge — bearing a remarkable resemblance to San Francisco's Golden Gate Bridge — in full view.

A little later, we're zipping along the river-front cycle path on bikes and e-bikes from tour company Cycling Lisbon, first approaching then going under and past the enormous bridge. Before arriving at our destination, a small marina where a sailing boat waits, we pass several landmarks: the sleek, low-rise MAAT (Museum of Art, Architecture and Technology), the huge Padrão dos Descobrimentos monument, celebrating the Portuguese age of discovery, and the UNESCO-protected Jerónimos monastery and

"We zip along the river front on bikes — a great way to see more of the city"

the Tower of Belém, a former prison. It's a great way to see more of the city than remaining on foot, with plenty of photo opps.

With the afternoon creeping towards evening, we swap wheels for water in the form of a Tagus Cruises sunset sailing tour.

As the boat glides up the river, I sit out on the front, cold beer in hand and warm blanket wrapped around my shoulders, as the sunlight fades over Lisbon. Lovely though it is, I resolve to make my next visit in the summer months, when the famed beaches that line the nearby coasts are ripe for exploration and sunbathing.

When I hear that our final group dinner is at Bairro do Avillez, I know I'm in for a treat. Dashing chef José Avillez is one of Portugal's leading

culinary stars, with acclaimed restaurants in Lisbon and Porto.

There are several eateries in one here: the more casual Taberna leads through to the leafy Páteo, where we have a reservation.

Bathing in the buzzy atmosphere, I feast on seafood, strips of coal-grilled steaks and, for dessert, a concoction celebrating the humble hazelnut. All are delicious.

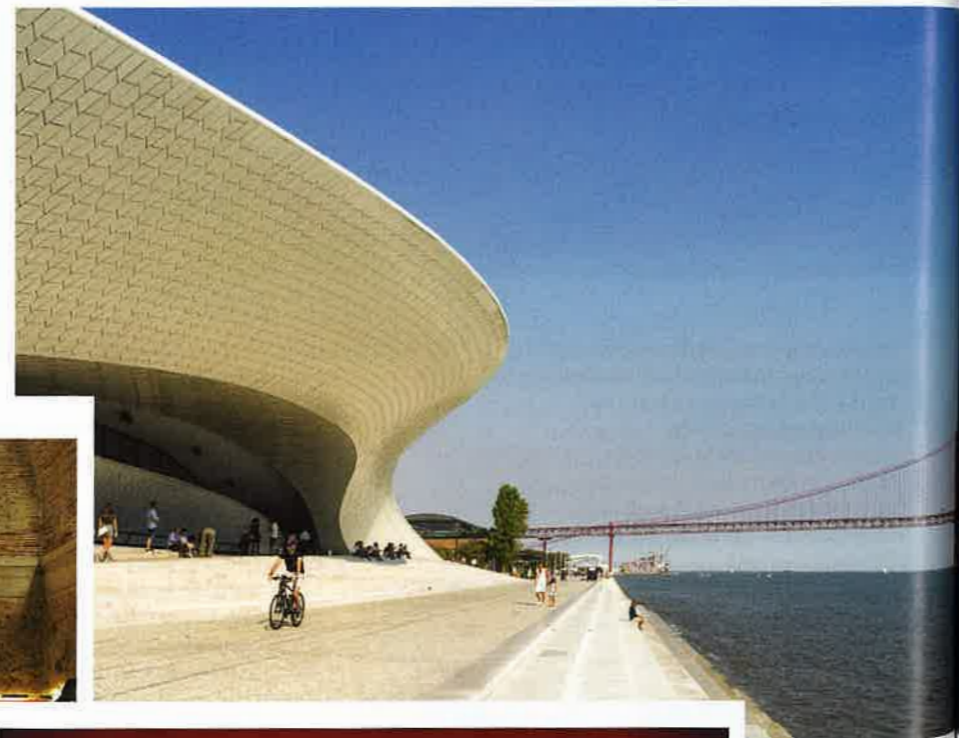
In between courses, we're ushered through a door for a sneak peak of hidden cabaret dining room Beco.



DOWN TO A FINE ART: Not happy with just murals, Lisbon also gives trams a paint job



A STATE OF SUSPENSE: View of 25 de Abril Bridge by the art museum, with its neon sign



SELF-DESCRIBED AND SELF-DEFINED



REVEALING: Cabaret room Beco with its mural of Dita von Teese

It's complete with a stage and a mural of burlesque star Dita von Teese — and there's a two-week waiting list.

The following morning after breakfast in Delfina, there's time to explore a couple more of the city's landmarks. First up, the Rua Augusta Arch, which dominates the Praça do Comércio and was built to commemorate Lisbon's reconstruction following the 8.5 earthquake in 1755 that destroyed much of it.

For just a few euros, you can access the viewpoint and take in the mosaic pavements, pastel-coloured buildings with terracotta rooftops, and the Moorish São Jorge Castle to the east.

After returning to ground level, I head to one of Lisbon's more unexpected institutions to satisfy my sweet tooth. In a nation famed for pastéis de nata (try Pastelaria Alcôa), candy-striped gelato shop Santini has become part of the tapestry here, with

more than 60 years in the business.

After picking up a cup of pistachio ice cream, I get my phone out to find the way back to AlmaLusa to pick up my luggage, but it's dead. Panic stations: how can I possibly find my way back without help?

But, having covered about 30km on foot over the past few days, I resolve to manage without technology.

It may have taken me a little longer without the help of Google, but as I round the corner and spy AlmaLusa's hidden back entrance, I feel a sense of accomplishment, and a new affinity to this charming corner of Europe. ☺

Rooms at AlmaLusa Baixa/Chiado start at £140/night. almalusahotels.com TAP Air Portugal flies daily to Lisbon from London City, Heathrow, Gatwick and Manchester, from £49 one way including taxes and surcharges. flytap.com

