



Text by **Emily McAuliffe**  
Photos by Lisbon Tourism  
Association, iStock, and Alamy

## THE MANY FACES OF LISBON

While Lisbon can be roamed for weeks, if not months, these key areas are the perfect starting point for first-time visitors.

Portugal's capital has things figured out. The city is cosmopolitan, but not so much that its Portuguese roots have been diluted. It's busy, but just enough to hum without being frenetic. It has classic beauty and a sense of order, but its unique architecture and graffitied side streets give it an edge. All this is presented through a collage of neighbourhoods that garner their own energy and style.



◀ The statue of King Joseph I on Praça do Comércio

▼ The busy Rua Augusta

## BAIXA: grand, sumptuous, and majestic

Lisbon's Baixa, or downtown, is an ideal place to start your exploration. The city's main square, Praça do Comércio, is framed by sunshine-yellow buildings and topped by the grand Arco da Rua Augusta, which serves as the gateway to the city and can be climbed for a panoramic view. The symbolic figures of Glory, Genius, and Valour sit atop the archway, with Glory's outstretched arms welcoming you to pass through to the labyrinth of streets and laneways that piece together one of Europe's most enchanting cities.

The square is a hot favourite for selfie-snapping tourists, but it also forms an important part of Lisbon's history. You'll note the metro station is (somewhat confusingly) not called Praça do Comércio, but Terreiro do Paço. This references the site's former name and is where the royal palace stood before one of the most powerful earthquakes in history obliterated the city in 1755. Although devastating, the disaster pushed Lisbon to become one of the world's most sophisticated master-planned cities upon its resurrection, with its forward-thinking design driven by the Marquês de Pombal. Downtown Lisbon, characterised by neat, wide streets and elegant façades that reflect a golden afternoon light, is hence often referred to as Baixa Pombalina after Pombal, and the statesman is honoured with a statue on one of the pillars of the arch.

In the middle of the square stands one of Lisbon's most photogenic statues, that of King Joseph I, who ruled Portugal at the



time of the earthquake. His line of sight once looked towards the entry point for the city's trade, which fed through Lisbon's central artery, Rua Augusta.

To this day, Rua Augusta serves a commercial function as a wide pedestrianised street lined with shops and cafés. While waiters will do their best to draw tourists into restaurants set along the traditional black-and-white patterned pavement, the wise will carry on to more traditional eateries in the surrounding streets or the hip area of Chiado, uphill from Baixa. Luring people off the street by thrusting menus under their noses isn't the Portuguese way.

Hence, carry on down Rua Augusta and duck up a back street for some of the city's best seafood at *Solar 31* (Calçada Garcia 31; solar31.com), or choose from traditional dishes scratched on a paper menu at the delightfully raucous *Super Mário* (Rua do Duque 9). Afterwards you can nip over to *Topo Chiado* (FB/topolisboa) for an alfresco drink with good beats and better views.

**Stay at:** Cristiano Ronaldo fans can step into the sporting legend's hotel, *Pestana CR7 Lisboa* (Rua do Comércio 54; pestanacr7.com; from EUR 148) for a dose of football fantasia.

Even non-sporty types can enjoy the sleek design and fun technicoloured furnishings. **Dine at:** The *RIB Beef & Wine* restaurant on the corner of Praça do Comércio not only has great food but also showcases some of Lisbon's ingenious earthquake-proof building design – look up at the domed ceilings (Praça do Comércio 31A; FB/RIBLisboa).

**Shop at:** Chiado's *Vista Alegre* sells a delicate selection of Portuguese ceramics and glassware (Largo do Chiado, 20-23; vistaalegre.com).



◀ The Museum of Art, Architecture, and Technology, designed by British architect Amanda Levete

▼ The construction of the Jerónimos Monastery, a former monastery of the Order of Saint Jerome, was funded with money obtained from the tax on commerce from Africa and the Orient.

## BELÉM: history and modernity together

If there's one part of Lisbon that packs the most history into the smallest space, Belém would be it. The neighbourhood at the mouth of the Tagus River was the lynchpin of Portugal's near-world domination during the Age of Discovery, starting from the 15<sup>th</sup> century, and makes a pleasant half-day trip (or more) from the centre.

A train, bus, or tram will have you in Belém in less than 30 minutes, where you can criss-cross neat paths and manicured greenspace to a series of attractions. Keen sightseers can join the queue for the Mosteiro dos Jerónimos, but you can make do by ogling at the stately monastery from the outside. The building's detailed Manueline architectural style is native to Portugal and is named after its primary influencer, King Manuel I, who headed the country during Portugal's Age of Discovery glory years. Key features of the style include the armillary sphere and Order of Christ cross. Once you've singled out these motifs symbolic of Portugal's maritime pursuits, you'll notice them scattered all around Belém. Look for the sphere underfoot as you cross the pavement, and notice it etched into the side of the fountain in the main square. The cross can be seen high on the Torre de Belém, another building intricately carved in the Manueline style. This tower once served a military function at the river entrance and is now a popular visitor attraction ([torrebelem.gov.pt](http://torrebelem.gov.pt)). Another iconic monument that pays



homage to Portugal's discoveries is the 56-metre-high Padrão dos Descobrimentos ([padraodosdescobrimentos.pt](http://padraodosdescobrimentos.pt)). On the pavement leading towards the monument is a limestone compass rose that illustrates the global itineraries of Portugal's explorers.

Belém also ties in 19<sup>th</sup>-century history as the site of the new royal palace after Terreiro do Paço crumbled in the earthquake. The Ajuda Palace is worth a short bus ride or 20-minute walk uphill from the foreshore to see the royal family's ornate abode ([palacioajuda.pt](http://palacioajuda.pt)). While the building that exists today is the second iteration of the residence after the original was destroyed by fire in 1794, it is the last place Portuguese nobility lived before the country was declared a republic in 1910.

Belém balances history with modernity as home to the Museu Coleção Berardo of modern and contemporary art ([museuberardo.pt](http://museuberardo.pt)) and the Museum of Art, Architecture, and Technology, or MAAT ([maat.pt](http://maat.pt)). The latter sits riverside like a giant white UFO and neighbours the Tejo Power Station, where tours highlight the history and future of electricity ([fundacaoedp.pt](http://fundacaoedp.pt)).

**Stay at:** The *Altis Belém Hotel & Spa* (Doca do Bom Sucesso; [althotels.com](http://althotels.com); from EUR 212) presents five-star luxury by the river. The design hotel also includes the *Michelin*-starred *Feitoria Restaurant & Wine Bar*.

**Dine at:** *Enoteca de Belém* is a cute hole-in-the-wall restaurant and wine bar hidden down an alleyway. The sense of discovery is half the appeal (Travessa do Marta Pinto 10; [travessadaermida.com](http://travessadaermida.com)).

**Drink at:** The modern, open-plan *SUD Lisboa* (Avenida Brasília – Pavilhão Poente; [sudlisboa.com](http://sudlisboa.com)) has absolute river frontage and is conveniently located near the MAAT.



◀ A view over the roofs of Alfama to the Church of Santa Engrácia

▼ A typical, narrow street in Lisbon lined with colourful buildings



## ALFAMA: old-world charm

In contrast to downtown's wide, orderly streets, Alfama is a confused jumble of laneways pieced together with rough cobblestones. This neighbourhood sits directly east of Baixa as an example of Lisbon pre- and post-earthquake, given Alfama survived the disaster. The quaint old-world feel unsurprisingly magnetises tourists, but beyond the clamour of souvenir shops is an area seeped in soul – racks of postcards and sardine-printed tea-towels can't stamp out centuries' worth of history that easily.

The best way to explore Alfama is without a map (until you need to find your way out). Choose your own adventure through the narrow alleyways and find old people gazing from doorways with cats weaving between their legs, and ladies pegging washing from wrought-iron Juliet balconies. Early in the morning, street vendors wheel crates of produce to the small grocery stores wedged between trinket shops and, come nightfall, the air fills with the sounds of fado, Portugal's melancholic music. Many restaurants along Alfama's streets advertise dinner and fado shows, so take your pick. You can then visit the Fado Museum by the river to dig deeper into the music's soulful history ([museudofado.pt](http://museudofado.pt)).

Alfama is also the access point to one of Lisbon's major attractions, the São Jorge Castle ([castelosaojorge.pt](http://castelosaojorge.pt)). The structure was constructed by the Moors in the mid-eleventh century and went

on to house Portuguese nobility. Lines to get into the fortress can be lengthy, but if anything, the views of the city justify the wait. The climb to the castle is a steep one (or you can opt to clack up the hill on the famous Tram 28, in which case watch your pockets), but refuge can be sought en route at the *Wine Bar do Castelo*, where you can try an impressive range of Portuguese wines ([FB/winebardocastelo](http://FB/winebardocastelo)).

In contrast to the well-appreciated spectacle of the castle, the National Pantheon tends to be a shy contender on traveller hit lists but gives an interesting introduction to some of Portugal's key historical figures, such as fado singer Amália Rodrigues and writer Almeida Garrett. The building's decorative dome is so high it'll give you a crick in your neck if you look at it from the inside, and it provides a quiet outpost to admire the city from if you climb to the outdoor terrace that encircles it ([patrimoniocultural.gov.pt](http://patrimoniocultural.gov.pt)).

**Stay at:** The *Palácio Belmonte* (Pátio de Dom Fradique 14; [palaciobelmonte.com](http://palaciobelmonte.com), from EUR 500) is a private residence that doubles as a hotel. The Roman Tower is arguably Lisbon's most impressive room, with 360-degree views across the city and the Tagus River.

**Dine at:** Ridiculously cheap authentic food is the last thing you'd expect to find near a major train station and cruise ship terminal, but *RC Restaurante* is just that. The lucky tourists who chance upon this place wedge between locals who dine here weekly, if not daily ([Calçada do Forte 26](http://Calçada do Forte 26)).

**Shop at:** The lads can dress their feet in a pair of handmade Portuguese leather shoes from *The Lisbon Walker*. Better still, purchases come boxed with a bottle of wine ([thel Lisbonwalker.com](http://thel Lisbonwalker.com)).



◀ Old magnolia trees and the summer café in the Príncipe Real Garden

▼ Kiosk in the Jardim do Príncipe Real



A courtyard in Príncipe Real



## PRÍNCIPE REAL: hip and luxurious

Príncipe Real's main thoroughfare is a runway of designer stores and chic eateries. The neighbourhood sits atop one of Lisbon's famous calf-burning hills, meaning fabulous views are glimpsed between the rows of colourful buildings. Shop for boutique clothing, jewellery, and homewares at concept stores like *REAL Slow Retail* (FB/REAL.SlowRetailConceptStore). Next door is *Bettina & Niccolo Corallo*, renowned for

its wicked hot chocolate. This place isn't a secret, so get in early before they run out.

Then take your shopping outdoors on Saturdays, when the Jardim do Príncipe Real park hosts a bustling produce and craft market. Spend the morning amongst the stalls picking up organic fruit, locally made jewellery and the odd antique. The park is an attraction in itself, with a giant cedar tree casting shade over the gardens like a giant umbrella. Creatives and hipsters love this boho-flavoured pocket of Lisbon. Here you'll also find one of Lisbon's famous *quiosques*, or outdoor kiosks, where you can order alfresco drinks and snacks with a side of people-watching. Locals come here in the morning, afternoon, and after work for rest and relaxation.

Other watering holes are in no short supply in Príncipe Real, so factor in time for a tippie or two. Enjoy the convivial atmosphere of *The Bar* with a classic cocktail (FB/thebarpt), sample Portuguese wines under the expert guidance of sommelier Mike Taylor at *Bottega Montucci* (FB/bottegamontucci), and drink amid a wacky collection of trinkets at *Pavilhão Chinês* (FB/pavilhaochineslisboa). **BO**

**Stay at:** *The Memmo Príncipe Real* (Rua Dom Pedro V, 56 J; memmohotels.com; from EUR 306) is one of Lisbon's few truly modern hotels, given it was built from the ground up rather than retrofitted into a heritage building. The poolside terrace capitalises on the suburb's smashing urban views.  
**Dine at:** Don't let the fact *The Decadente* joins a hostel put you off. The restaurant and its neighbouring bar, *The Insólito*, are some of the coolest spots to eat and drink in the city and overlook the São Pedro de Alcântara viewpoint (Rua São Pedro de Alcântara 81; thedecadente.pt).  
**Shop at:** *Embaixada* is a neo-Arabic palace transformed into an opulent gallery of designer stores. A stately central staircase and high ceilings give serious wow (Praça do Príncipe Real 26; embaixadalx.pt).

airBaltic flies to  
**Lisbon**  
 twice per week  
 from **89 EUR**  
 one way

Look for prices with cherries on [airbaltic.com](http://airbaltic.com)