

FINANCIAL TIMES

How to spend it

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SHAKE A LEG

SO MANY THINGS TO DO
AND PLACES TO SEE



lisbon

From its fado to its food, Portugal's capital city is fiercely protective of its heritage and traditions. But, says Paul Richardson, it now also embraces glamorous modern, high-concept developments.

In an age when cities come more and more to resemble one other, Lisbon remains a delightful eccentric, determined to preserve its unique character. No other capital city in western Europe maintains such a fine balance between a deep love of its own traditions and the need to move, somewhat reluctantly, with the times.

For proof, look no further than Lisbon's mass transport systems. The city has a super-modern Metro network which, if not in scale, puts the underground railways of most other European capitals to shame: €1.10 (about £1) takes you anywhere on this clean, efficient and pleasantly uncrowded service. And then there are the trams. Original 1930s tramcars with oak-panelled interiors and cushioned seats rattle and creak along the cobbled streets, making light work of Lisbon's notoriously awkward topography. How is it that such an ancient form of public transport has survived, not just as a tourist sideshow but as a vital part of the urban infrastructure? The answer: because the *lisboetas* wanted it that way. No other city I know is clearer about that which needs protecting from the ravages of "progress", however ramshackle or superannuated

it might seem to the streamlined, and increasingly homogenised, outside world.

Connoisseurs of the old European city, what little remains of it, will be in their element in Lisbon. Keep your eyes peeled, and you will still see public bath houses and washing places, Parisian-style pissoirs and hole-in-the-wall bars where locals get their fix of wild cherry ginginha, Lisbon's signature apéritif. In the inner-city neighbourhoods of Bairro Alto and Alfama, the balconies are still festooned with washing, old folk sit in chairs in the street, and from time to time, the air is filled with the aroma of grilling sardines.

Latterly, however, a process of sprucing up has begun. There is a Diesel store on the Praça Luis de Camões, and on the other side of the square, a fashionable five-star hotel, the Bairro Alto, designed in the height of minimalist good taste. Fishing boats and barges still ply their way along the wide River Tagus towards the open sea. But, down at the docks, old harbour buildings are steadily transmogrifying into fancy restaurants, galleries, design stores (though the best place to buy home accessories is Fabricio

Infinito, between Bairro Alto and Principe Real, which has a garden café), and night-clubs, a prime example being

Lux Frágil, a three-storey discotheque quite as glamorous as anything in Ibiza or Miami.

As recently as five years ago Lisbon offered little to choose between simple eating houses dishing up stalwart traditional Portuguese fare and historic dining rooms such as Tavares – still going strong after 225 years. Nowadays the list of fine restaurants includes chic modern eateries like Terreiro do Paço, Eleven and Bica do Sapato (part-owned by John Malkovich), where young chefs offer ironic versions of local dishes

and/or ingenious inventions of their own. The influence of the new Spanish cuisine has finally reached the shores of the Atlantic, though when hip food and high prices begin to tire, it's good to know the eating houses are still there with their comfortably old-fashioned menu of spit-roast chicken, salt cod a dozen ways, or Atlantic fish and shellfish done to a turn on the char-grill – with comfortably old-fashioned prices to match.

For much of the late 20th century Lisbon seemed like the city that never changed, happily mired in its own obsession with the past. Visitors who went in search of avant-garde "designer" hotels, for example, would come back disappointed. You stayed at the Britannia, the Avenida Palace or the Tivoli, and liked it or lumped it. So it's good to report that Lisbon's hotel scene has taken a considerable turn for the better. Perhaps the most welcome development is the new generation of charming smaller hotels such as Solar do Castelo and Solar dos Mouros, up by the Castelo de São Jorge; or York House and As Janelas Verdes, down by the river in Lapa. There is also a raft of high-concept establishments that wouldn't look out of place in Barcelona or Madrid, notably the Bairro Alto or the brand-new Fontana Park, designed by Francisco Aires Mateus and Nini Andrade Silva. The Fontana Park has black glass corridors, Philippe Starck baths and a Japanese restaurant.

As it happens, the king of Lisbon's hotels is also the most obstinately old-fashioned. Perfectly sited in an aristocratic 1870 mansion among manicured gardens and with views down to the river, Orient-Express's Lapa Palace is the city's grandest hotel and still one of Europe's finest. Say what you like about pelmets, valances and marble bathrooms, the Lapa provides an experience of cossetting luxury second to none. More to the point, it boasts the kind of fine-tuned, hyper-attentive service that you don't tend to find in places with Starck baths. During a recent stay it was my birthday, but I hadn't told a soul at the hotel. When I returned to my room that



Above: modern marvels at the Park of Nations. Right: Solar do Castelo, a boutique hotel.

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