

Living a vida in Lisbon

Return with a suitcase stuffed with treasure from this most surprising of shopping destinations, complete with handmade antiques, sweet-smelling soaps, ravishing evening gowns and honeyed Portuguese delicacies, writes **Adriaane Pielou**

You can feel it in the air: Lisbon is getting hot. It's just on the cusp, hovering between being slightly-off-the-radar as a European weekend or holiday destination and the place that everyone's suddenly hungry, eager, positively desperate to see. As the capital of Portugal, a hard-working, once-conquering but now relatively poor city, Lisbon has never been an obvious choice like London, Paris, Venice or Rome. Now that those cities are so permanently rammed with tourists, however, the appeal of quieter, second-tier cities such as this is becoming more potent.

This beautiful, hilly little city on the edge of western Europe has a lot going for it. Renovation projects are taking place all across as foreign investors pile in to hollow out and renovate beautiful, old, tile-fronted buildings going for a relative song. As young entrepreneurs have taken the plunge, new shops, cafes and restaurants have opened, turning the once-staid Príncipe Real into the cool new hangout destination. Recently opened restaurants such as the elegant Eleven, the cosy Cantinho do Avillez and The Independent are heaving, taking bookings for two sittings a night, at 8pm or 10pm, to cope with demand. At the same time, Lisbon retains its old-world air. It's still a place where every purchase is wrapped (painfully slowly) in paper and tied with ribbon. And hug-yourself bargains still exist here. Even with VAT now at an austerity-policy-driven 23 per cent, many prices are at a level that disappeared decades ago from the more prosperous parts of Europe, from the €2 (Dh10) that you pay for a cappuccino and the €1.50 (Dh8) for one of the delectable, cinnamon-dusted pasteis de nata – egg custard tarts that Portugal is famous for – to the room rates at the wonderful Four Seasons Hotel Ritz – almost half what you'd pay at the Four Seasons in Paris or Milan.



WHAT TO BUY

Lisbon is a place to look for handmade Portuguese shoes and sandals, as well as fine porcelain, bed linen and the work of master craftsmen and jewellers, all the while picking up appealing bits and pieces in retro packaging.

Not to be missed are **Antiga Barbearia de Bairro** soaps for €6.40 (Dh33); **Alecrim Aos Molhos** tubes of cardamom, chocolate or kiwi jams; tins of sardines from **A Vida Portuguesa** on Rua Anchieta 11 in Chiado; and Portuguese delicacies such as dried orange dipped in chocolate at €8 (Dh41) per kilo, or sugared almonds, walnuts in honey and a large selection of coffees from the fragrant, fusty old **Manuel Tavares**, off the main square, Rossio.

Along the way, you might want to stop for a painstakingly thorough €10 (Dh50) manicure at Alfredo & Biquette 36 Rua Garrett, 213 427 611, alfredobiquette.com) or an even cheaper barbershop shave.

GETTY IMAGES

In the streets of Chiado, above the black-and-white, mosaic-paved flat Baixa, the centre of the city – which was entirely rebuilt after Lisbon was razed by its great fire of 1755 – dark little wood-panelled or tile-lined, old-fashioned shops flank international newcomers such as **Zara**, **H&M** and **Muji**. The tiny **Luvária Ulisses**, for instance, a handmade-glove shop on Rua do Carmo, was set up in 1925 and is big enough only for two thinnish customers or one large one at a time; or **Joalharía do Carmo** for lovely antique silverware; **Helio** for handmade shoes at around €90 (Dh458); and, around the corner, **Paris em Lisboa** on Rua Garrett for fringed and embroidered hand towels from €9 (Dh46) and finely worked bed linen made in the north of Portugal.

This isn't a city preserved in aspic. On the broad, tree-lined main shopping boulevard, Avenida da Liberdade, there are now more familiar luxury brands in evidence than ever: **Louis Vuitton**, **Gucci**,

Prada, **Cartier**, **Michael Kors**, **Loewe**, **MaxMara** and **Burberry** all have stores popular with wealthy Brazilians and label-crazed Chinese shoppers trying to get around the two-items-per-customer quotas. In the past few years, they've been joined by a handful of Portuguese designers, such as **Luis Onofre**, whose elegant handmade shoes are bought by Michelle Obama.

In Príncipe Real, beyond the raffish Bairro Alto, heart of the nightlife in Lisbon, new shops set up by young entrepreneurs include Casa Da Praia, selling white-on-white embroidered Indian kaftans by **Manvionline** at €57 (Dh290) and sassy swimwear from the new Colombian label **Maaji** (€110 [Dh560] for a double-sided 1950s style). The block-long, three-storey, neo-Moorish Embaixada LX has become the main focus of the neighbourhood, full of cool little shops such as **Moleskine**, **Paéz** and the Portuguese Vivienne Westwood, **Storytailors**.

Treasure trove

The Portuguese capital is a delightful destination for those seeking some old-fashioned and beautifully packaged retail therapy.

ANTIQUES AND JEWELLERY

The best buys are handmade luxury items. In **Jorge Welsh**, the leading antique store, items sourced from the treasure trove that is the north of Portugal can be half the price that they're sold at in London. At **Rosior** – one of the 20 or so independent jewellers left in Europe, which has made collections for Cartier, produce just 60 or 70 one-off pieces a year and have a shop in the Four Seasons – a handmade silver *Tree of Life* table piece, with the names of grandfathers inscribed on the roots, parents on the branches, photographs of family members inserted into discs hanging from the branches, costs from €14,000 (Dh71,317). And might you be interested in the exquisite 420-carat gemstone-studded, antelope-skin-lined minaudière that took two years to make and was launched on Portuguese TV? It could be yours for €320,000 (Dh1.6 million). But, please, no bargaining. "We do not discuss discounts," smiles José Rosas, the son of the owner.