

Old world, new style

Explore the culture and cuisine of Lisbon from this historic base

JOHN BORTHWICK

Centuries ago, you had looked out from what is now AlmaLusa Alfama hotel towards the Lisbon waterfront, you might have seen the ships of explorer Vasco da Gama as he set out to find a sea route to India. The mustard-yellow building that houses the 25-room boutique hotel was already old back in 1497 when da Gama set sail. History runs deep in its stones and bones, from the Roman ruins below to its 12th-century role as the city arsenal, and later its survival of the cataclysmic 1755 Lisbon earthquake.

The beautifully refurbished four-storey edifice overlooks a cobblestone plaza. Like much of Lisbon, it is simultaneously ancient and contemporary. Premium wi-fi and complimentary smartphones for guests contrast with its metre-thick medieval walls. Massive beams that withstood the great quake still uphold the roof.

Located on sunny Rua dos Bacalhoeiros (street of the codfish sellers), the property faces Campo das Cebolas (field of onions) in Alfama, a millennia-old neighbourhood with a name derived from the Moorish term for “hot baths”. Its brand, AlmaLusa, translates fittingly as “soul of Portugal”.

“Space is a commodity in Lisbon,” understates the front office manager, Mauro Modesto, as he shows me round the hotel where everything, including a lift, fits precisely into place. It’s compact but not cramped. The seven room categories range from interior singles



and deluxe twins to suites with interconnecting options.

My deluxe room has calm, neutral colours and views to the Tagus River. Blackout curtains, king-size bed, smart TV, soundproofing, a great rain shower and local Benamor toiletries all receive ticks. At an economical 20sqm, bonuses include a Juliette balcony and oversized bathroom-dressing room. Storage space is limited but how many laptops, chargers and other such indispensable clobber did travellers drag around in 1740 when the building was reconfigured?

I head out to explore Alfama. The Romanesque belltower of Se de Lisboa (Lisbon Cathedral) looms behind the hotel. Neatly located just offstage from the main squares and tourist zones, the hotel is also only minutes from the grand Praca de Comercio, a vast ceremonial plaza facing the river. Inland from here, avenues bring me to more plazas, many of them inlaid with black-and-white patterned pavers reminiscent of 1960s pop art, which they pre-date by a century. The most famous is Rossio Square, nicknamed “rolling motion square”, thanks to its tide of parallel black sine waves that evoke a heaving Art Nouveau ocean. Crossing it is like wading through an optical illusion. Side streets – all cobblestones and clattering trams – narrow and become labyrinthine as they climb towards promenade viewpoints and cathedral spires.

With the burgeoning popularity of Lisbon, one of Europe’s oldest cities, new money has poured into Alfama to repurpose many apartment blocks and shops. On Rua da Madalena I can’t resist a converted shopfront announcing itself as Shoes and Booze Bar. Surely not a place where hip Lisboaetas quaff “shoey” of Madeira from their Manolo Blahniks? Not so – or, at least not this early in the night. This casual, friendly establishment actually does sell handmade pumps, along with quality plonk. I enjoy a local Mina Velha white, plus tuna tacos but, happy as I am with my Vans, I skip the bespoken brogues.

Breakfast is peak hour at the AlmaLusa’s ground-floor Delfina Cafe, where space is indeed a commodity. Tip: arrive by 8am or after nine to beat the buffet rush, or request the in-room breakfast service. The menu includes baked pastries, hot dishes, fresh fruit, juices and cereals, plus lactose and gluten-free options. There’s more room outdoors at the street-front tables with la carte meals, including local tapas, wine and cocktails until 11pm.

An alternative dining venue is at the hotel’s sister property, AlmaLusa Baixa/Chiado on Praca do Municipio, a 10-minute stroll across the Praca de Comercio. (How mundane these grandiose plazas, with their legends of navigators, kings and coups, sound when translated in English to plain commercial and municipal

IN THE KNOW

AlmaLusa Alfama is 30 minutes from Lisbon airport, a short stroll from the city’s cruise ship terminal, and an even shorter one from Terreiro Do Paco metro station. Rooms from \$306 a night. almalusahotels.com

square.) I settle in at Delfina Cantina Portuguesa, which specialises in regional fare. There’s plenty of room, a broad list of local wines and a menu strong on seafood, notably codfish. I go for a sauteed tenderloin fillet, which comes curiously topped with a fried egg plus a smooth Manoella Douro rose. The dessert menu doesn’t mention the ubiquitous pastel de nata (custard tart).

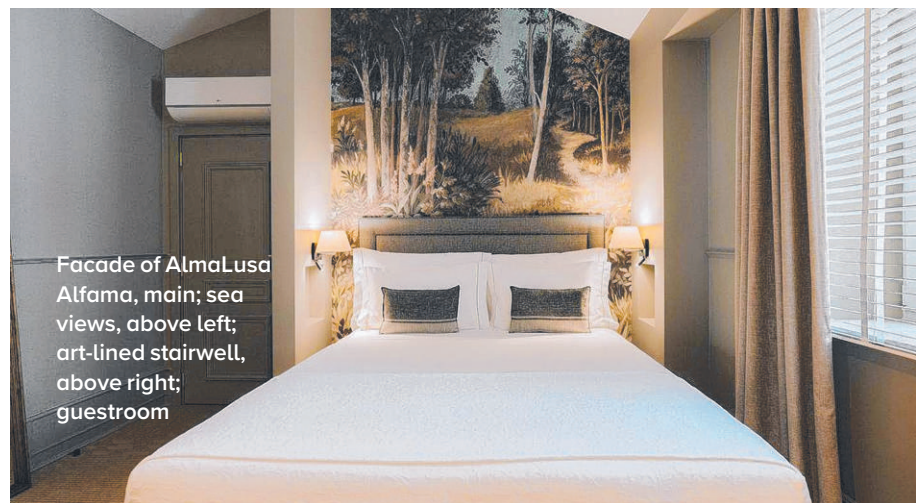
Price-wise, Lisbon is no longer the cheap capital of earlier renown, but is anywhere? I note, however, one reviewer describes Delfina Cantina as “one of not too many restaurants in Lisbon where you actually get value for money”. Fair comment. I roll home across those tiled Lisboa Art Nouveau oceans, well fed and content.

At times Lisbon resembles a destination that uncannily prescient builders from the distant past – medieval, Renaissance, Victorian – constructed to be irresistible to visitors in the centuries to come. They succeeded wildly.

The must-dos in Lisbon are too many to mention. Everyone loves to ride (if only once) the rattletrap 28E electrico tram up through Alfama, but the queues can be monumental and the on-board crush sardine-like.

My two Lisbon standouts are the eclectic art treasures of the Calouste Gulbenkian Museum and the enormous, 15th century Jeronimos Monastery where, incidentally, Vasco da Gama sleeps in his tomb. AlmaLusa Alfama seems the perfect tranquil base from which to set sail for both, and return.

John Borthwick was a guest of AlmaLusa Hotels.



Facade of AlmaLusa Alfama, main; sea views, above left; art-lined stairwell, above right; guestroom