

A Costa by Olivier



# Secret spots and historic sites — see another side of Lisbon

On a break to the Portuguese capital, **Min Sett Hein** follows the maritime story that connects the city with his home in Myanmar

**B**uilt across seven hills, Lisbon spills towards the Tagus River in long descents, the whole place angled at the water. The city doesn't follow a route but a gradient. Good walking shoes are non-negotiable.

I came here chasing a connection that began in a classroom in Myanmar. Mr Bhone was my first English teacher. He had a Burmese name and hazel eyes. He was Bayingyi, a word derived from the Persian *farangi*, meaning foreigner. The term was applied to a Catholic community descended from Portuguese settlers who first made contact with Burma in about 1519, during the Age of Discovery, and never entirely left.

At school I learnt about Filipe de Brito e Nicote, a Lisbon-born adventurer who saved an Arakanese king's life, parlayed his gratitude into a port governorship of Syriam (present-day Thanlyin, on the Yangon river), declared himself king of Pegu and was eventually impaled on an iron stake. That's the kind of ending that lodges in a ten-year-old's imagination. His followers were marched in chains into what was

“Fernando Pessoa, the modernist poet, has a bronze double statue at his usual table outside the café A Brasileira

then Upper Burma, where they stayed, and prayed, and slowly became Burmese in every way except their faith. Four centuries later one of their descendants was teaching me to conjugate English verbs.

Bairro Alto sits at the crown of one of Lisbon's seven hills. The old aristocratic quarter, its cobbled streets and noble townhouses make for a neighbourhood that feels residential but has bars that continue to fill after midnight.

Those who want the nightlife within easy reach but not within earshot should try the Lumiares Hotel and Spa, which was once the palace of the counts of Lumiares and now has triple glazing to silence the street noise below. The 18th-century bones have been sensitively restored: there are Portuguese-made textiles throughout and a rooftop bar-restaurant from which you can see the whole city (mains from £14; [thelumiares.com](http://thelumiares.com)).

A short walk downhill through Chiado sits the café A Brasileira, open since 1905 and showing no signs of slowing down. Fernando Pessoa (1888-1935), Portugal's pre-eminent modernist poet, has a bronze double statue at what was his usual table outside. The place that kept him caffeinated was also one of Lisbon's first modern art salons, popular among poets and painters in the early 20th century. Now it serves tourists who, like me, are there for the atmosphere and the photograph and are not going to pretend otherwise ([abrasileira.pt](http://abrasileira.pt)).

Belem is 20 minutes west by tram from the centre. Jeronimos Monastery, which took a century to complete, was built on

The Alfama district



the spot where Portuguese sailors came to pray before setting out for the unknown (£15.60; [museusemonumentos.pt](http://museusemonumentos.pt)). I spent 30 minutes in the queue, passing the time with a pastel de nata from nearby Pasteis de Belem, whose original recipe has been a closely guarded secret since 1837 (£1.40; [pasteisdebelem.pt](http://pasteisdebelem.pt)).

The Portuguese monastic sweet tradition exists because convents used egg whites to starch religious vestments and sent the surplus yolks to the kitchen. The whites also went into the lime mortar of churches and were used as gold leaf binder on altars. Queijadas de Sintra (ricotta-style cheese tarts), pao de lo (a soft, eggy sponge), the pastel de nata... an entire confectionery culture built from leftovers.

Inside the Church of Santa Maria, within the monastery, is the tomb of Vasco da Gama, the man who pioneered the sea route to India in 1498, setting in motion the chain of trade that eventually brought de Brito to Burma. The remains of Pessoa were also moved here in 1985.

Next door is the Museu de Marinha, which I visited expecting ship models and 17th-century globes and left having found

something else altogether. In one of the display cases is a piece of glazed stoneware originating from Martaban, present-day Mottama, in the Gulf of Pegu, Myanmar—the same port de Brito knew. These jars once carried spices, oil and pickled fruit along the maritime routes. I stood in front of it for a long time looking at an object from the place I was born. Visitors drifted past to admire the galleons, leaving the two of us alone with our shared history (£7; [cultura.marinha.pt/en/museu](http://cultura.marinha.pt/en/museu)).

After that we made our way back uphill, via tram and on foot, to Alfama. If the rest of Lisbon faces the river, Alfama faces inwards on its narrow streets. On Rua dos Cegos, a triangular roofline from the 1500s still stands, spared by the 1755 earthquake. From here the neighbourhood spills towards the Baixa, where Casa dos Bicos, a 16th-century mansion studded with diamond-shaped stones, stops you mid-stride. Roman walls have been excavated beneath it and it is one of the few structures that would have stood when de Brito sailed from this city (ground-floor archaeological area is free, [josesaramago.org](http://josesaramago.org)).

A sailor back then would surely have

