

## THE EUROPE ISSUE

## Navigating the maze of my memory lane

## LISBON FROM FI

now showcases sidewalk cafes, restaurants and museums and, on sunny days, crowds of camera-toting visitors and a few Lisboetas passing through.

Then it's off to the hills of Lisbon, with their aging beauty concealed in the steep maze of alleyways, and back to the mosaic-paved streets and neoclassical architecture of Pombaline Baixa, the city's elegant downtown district, built in the 18th century after the devastating 1755 earthquake.

I stopped counting my visits to Lisbon years ago; there were too many to keep track of. It's become one of "my" cities. For my husband, who spent 14 years in Portugal, it's a second home. So what are we doing on a tourist tram?

I've come on a curious mission: to find a key to a sentiment that's been haunting me since I discovered the country in 2005. That first time I laid eyes on Lisbon, I felt a peculiar kind of wistfulness. I'd never before set foot in Portugal, so there was nothing to be wistful about. But the feeling was present, it was potent, and I found it quite odd. En route from the airport, I remember seeing shabby porticos, a palm tree here and there poking out of spaces between abandoned buildings.

On that first trip, I came with a boyfriend. As we explored Lisbon, we fought. A lot. Instead of setting out to unlock the secrets of this striking city, I spent almost the entire trip feeling sad. Yet the sadness was tinged with strangely sweet undertones.

A couple of months after our return to New York, that relationship ended. Our parting had nothing to do with Portugal itself. But the end of that romance meant a beginning of another. Only now I was in love with a city, my blossoming affair with Lisbon infused with bittersweet emotions.

## Portugal's loss

A couple of years later, I landed in Lisbon at 5:30 a.m. on a Sunday morning. Everything was still half-dark, slow, still. Fado was playing on the taxi radio. And there it was again, that same wistfulness. I could recognize it so clearly as the car glided through the empty streets.

Only by then, I knew its name. I was feeling saudade, the famed Portuguese word that has no apt translation. You could describe it as a profound state of longing for someone or something you love, while knowing deep inside that he, she or it may never return. It's the love that lingers after someone is gone. It's a mix of emotions — happiness because you once had this person by your side, and sadness because you don't anymore — and it triggers the senses in poignant ways.

Although the word first appeared even earlier, it's often said that this yearning stems from the 15th-century age of discoveries. This was the golden era when Portuguese explorers set sail for far-flung seas, many disappearing in storms, others dying in battle or starting new lives elsewhere. Those left behind suffered from saudade, the nagging sense of absence, the wishful longing for what is gone. Saudade became a thread that runs through all aspects of Portuguese society, the foundation of its mentality, a tune that always plays subtly in the background. It has become a Portuguese way of life.

The former colonial powerhouse ruled a number of countries and imposed its culture on lands as far away as India (Goa was a Portuguese enclave), China (Macau belonged to Portugal until 1999), Brazil, Angola (and a string of ex-colonies across Africa) and Uruguay (Colonia del Sacramento in the country's southwest is a replica of a small Portuguese town). After this period of power and wealth, Portugal was hit by the dictatorship of Antonio de Oliveira Salazar, which lasted from 1926 to 1974. Hundreds of thousands of Portuguese citizens left the country during this time. There was that longing again, for the motherland, as emigrants set up new lives elsewhere.

Then the dictatorship fell and the former colonies got their independence, after nearly six centuries of Portuguese rule. Decades later, Portugal is one of the poorest members of the European Union. The country once had it all, then lost most of what it was proud of. No surprise, then, that saudade is omnipresent, shadowing every step.

## An air of nostalgia

I've always loved wistfulness. I have a soft spot for nostalgia, the bittersweet remembrance of things past. Perhaps it was the saudade that seduced me to Lisbon in the first place. I love walking through the city's half-empty streets on a quiet Sunday afternoon, past yellow funiculars and wobbly trams, the peeling walls filled with street art that makes you stop and think, the light reflecting off pastel-colored rooftops.

I love hearing fado from the bars of Alfama, the city's oldest hilltop quarter. I love the laundry lines zigzagging across slim alleyways and staircases that seemingly lead to nowhere. I love the unexpected squares filled with palm trees and colorfully dressed African vendors. I love nibbling on pastéis de Belém custard tarts in the namesake district overlooking the Atlantic.

I'd been hooked by saudade so strongly



RAFAEL MARCHANTE/REUTERS



ANJA MUTIC



HOJI FORTUNA



JOSE MANUEL RIBEIRO/REUTERS

**Fall in love with Lisbon for yourself: At top, a tram winds through Alfama, the Portuguese city's oldest hilltop quarter. Exhibitions at the Fado Museum, center, explore Portugal's melancholy signature music (fado means fate). Tourists can buy canned fish, above right, for local flavor. The sun sets on Bairro Alto, above left, welcoming the neighborhood's nightlife.**

that a couple of years after that first visit in 2005, I returned to Lisbon to spend a summer month by the Tagus. I didn't know that fate had something else in store. I met that something else outside a corner bar in the form of the man who's now my husband.

While our relationship was still a transatlantic venture with an uncertain future, I decided to spend a few months in Lisbon. I left New York and found a pied-à-terre on the top floor of a ramshackle building in Bairro Alto, a quarter known for its languid days and raucous nights. From one side of my living room I could see São Jorge castle atop Alfama and, if I leaned out the window, the Tagus on the other side.

A lot happened during those four months. Most memorable was my fall down a flight of stairs, on my behind the entire way, which led to a fractured bone and painful bed rest for weeks afterward. It wasn't the tumble per se, but at some point during those four months it dawned on me that, although I'll always love Lisbon, it wasn't going to make the cut as my primary home.

But the relationship continued. Hoji, my new boyfriend, eventually moved across the Atlantic, then became my husband. My love of Lisbon remained. And my obsession with saudade never faded. So, nine years after my first visit, I returned for a couple of days and set out to seek saudade. It felt like a mystery that I simply had to solve.

## Seeking saudade

So there we were, on tram 28. The idea was that if only I looked at Lisbon with fresh eyes, I'd finally "get" saudade, put my finger on where it comes from and what it means.

In Santos, the waterside quarter with 19th-century warehouses and wrought-iron balconies, Hoji showed me the spot where he'd performed stand-up comedy for a while. I spotted A Barraca, a 1930s cinema refashioned into a cultural space, where I'd once gone to dance the tango.

We passed Estrela Hall, built in 1906 adjoining the British church and cemetery and converted in 1947 into a theater housing the Lisbon Players, an English-language amateur drama group. Hoji had performed here once, and I'd gone to the premiere with my broken sacrum, sporting a donut-shaped orthopedic pillow to sit on.

The tram zipped past Bairro Alto Hotel, where we were now staying, a boutique hideaway nestled between the chic neighborhood of Chiado and the boho Bairro Alto. Our second-floor room with plush touches overlooked Praça Camões, a square dedicated to the Portuguese prince of poetry.

Just down the hill was Cais do Sodré, the train station serving westbound suburban routes. For years, the riverside district around the train station had been a seedy spot with lackluster back streets haunted by sailors and ladies of the night. A couple of years ago, it turned into boho-chic central, playing rival to Bairro Alto up the hill.

The tourists on the tram looked bored and sleepy as the two of us rode up and down memory lane. The sun was bright.

*I've come on a curious mission: to find a key to a sentiment that's been haunting me since I discovered the country in 2005. The first time I laid eyes on Lisbon, I felt a peculiar kind of wistfulness.*

In Alfama, with its crooked streets and gabled houses, I recalled that first visit with my ex, when we'd seen the tail end of our relationship at Palácio Belmonte, an exclusive 10-suite hideaway in a 1449 palace atop ancient Roman and Moorish walls. Then we zipped past the walk-up apartment that Hoji and I rented for 10 days after our Cape Verde adventure last winter, when my mother came to visit, fulfilling a long-held dream of hers. "The city looks ghostly and sad, yet so pretty," she kept saying, in different ways. To our right, we passed the Santa Luzia Belvedere, a lookout with a view toward the Alfama rooftops, the river, the dome of the National Pantheon, all framed by grapevine-draped lattices and tall palm trees.

As the tram moved, our stories — my own, my husband's and those we shared — intersected. It felt as though the history of Lisbon was being woven

through the experiences we'd once lived in the city.

In the formerly working-class Graça quarter, the tram rode past a pink building where we'd once spent Christmas with Hoji's friends. Azulejos, the painted tin-glazed tiles that are the emblem of Portugal, reflected the sunlight beautifully. We hopped off at Largo Martim Moniz, a once-sketchy square where up-to-no-goods gathered and the two of us used to meet by Hotel Mundial, on the southern end. Now with Lisbon at its most multi-culti, the recently revamped square has gotten a new lease on life: It hosts pretty fountains, a fusion market with kiosks hawking global fare and Chinese groceries, Turkish kebab houses, Indian restaurants and African stores around the edges.

## A mood of melancholy

The next day, we rose to rain clouds that hung heavy over the hilltops. The weather suited my saudade-seeking mission. We strolled to the Fado Museum, housed in a pink building near the waterfront. Fado, which in Portuguese means fate, was born from the songs of saudade. The Portuguese sailors who crossed the globe in the past brought back tales of unknown cultures. Out of these tales rose songs that spoke of danger-filled voyages, homesickness, loneliness and the volatility of nature and fate. So where else if not in this museum would I find the key to saudade?

We found listening stations, an old gramophone, dusty records, video clips of fado performances, a 19th-century square piano and a vintage Portuguese guitar. A wall inscription read: "Fado is a poem that can be heard and seen."

But nowhere could I find a mention of saudade. There was only one painting that spoke of the sentiment, a 1913 triptych called "O Marinheiro," an oil canvas by Constantino Fernandes, depicting the life of a sailor. The central panel shows an arrival, or perhaps a goodbye, and it's steeped in saudade.

Leaving the museum in an irritating drizzle, we walked back toward Bairro Alto in a mood of melancholy. A crowd of tourists was crammed inside Conserveira de Lisboa, an old-school canned foods store from the 1930s known for its colorful hand-wrapped cans of seafood based on the shop's own recipes. We popped in to see the cobblestone interior



LARIS KARKLIS/THE WASHINGTON POST

## DETAILS

## GETTING THERE

Lufthansa, Air France, United and others offer one-stop flights from all three Washington area airports to Lisbon.

## WHERE TO STAY

## Bairro Alto Hotel Lisboa

Praça Luís de Camões 2  
011-351-213-408-288  
[www.bairroaltohotel.com](http://www.bairroaltohotel.com)

Chic boutique hotel with a central Bairro Alto location, recently renovated rooms and a rooftop bar. Rooms from \$265.

## As Janelas Verdes

Rua das Janelas Verdes 47  
011-351-213-968-143  
[www.asjanelasverdes.com](http://www.asjanelasverdes.com)

A 29-room hideaway in an 18th-century townhouse in the Santos district, with a sweet patio. Rooms from \$205.

## WHERE TO EAT

## Belcanto

Largo de São Carlos 10  
011-351-213-420-607  
[www.joseavillez.pt/en/belcanto](http://www.joseavillez.pt/en/belcanto)

Star chef José Avillez cooks up an haute cuisine storm at this upscale restaurant with a Michelin star. Entrees start at \$58.

## Café Lisboa

Largo de São Carlos 23  
011-351-211-914-498  
[www.joseavillez.pt/en/cafe-lisboa](http://www.joseavillez.pt/en/cafe-lisboa)

New bistro inside São Carlos National Theatre, with an old-school decor and light fare by chef Avillez. Entrees start at \$14.

## Bistro 100 Maneiras

9 Largo da Trindade  
011-351-910-307-575  
[www.restaurante100maneiras.com](http://www.restaurante100maneiras.com)

A bustling Chiado restaurant in white wood paneling, where the menu features modern Portuguese classics with a twist. Entrees start at \$25.

## WHAT TO DO

## Hills Tramcar Tour

[www.yellowbustours.com](http://www.yellowbustours.com)

Tourist tram that does the No. 28 circuit of the hills, departing every 30 minutes from 9:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. October-June, every 20 minutes from 10 a.m. to 7 p.m. July-September. \$25.

## Rua Augusta Arch

Rua Augusta 2/10  
011-351-210-312-800

This monument on Terreiro do Paço has been open to visitors since August 2013, offering 360-degree city views. Daily 9 a.m. to 7 p.m. \$3.50.

## Lisbon Story Centre

Terreiro do Paço 78-81  
011-351-211-941-099  
[www.lisboastorycentre.pt](http://www.lisboastorycentre.pt)

An interactive high-tech exhibit that portrays the history of Lisbon through the centuries, including the 1755 earthquake. Daily 10 a.m. to 8 p.m. \$10.

## INFORMATION

[www.visitlisboa.com](http://www.visitlisboa.com)

— A.M.

[travel@washpost.com](http://travel@washpost.com)

Mutic ([www.everthenomad.com](http://www.everthenomad.com)) is a Brooklyn-based writer. She contributed to the new "Lonely Planet Portugal 9."