



# Lisbon's Barrio Alto – where the world comes to you

**A**T the top of the hill on Rua Teixeira, I spied Mary Poppins standing beneath the open canopy of a large black umbrella. At her side, a seven-foot convict dressed in striped prison garb cradled a ball and chain in his arms.

Next, on the corner of Travessa da Cara, I passed a white rabbit; he was scurrying into the darkening evening, a giant pocket watch clasped tightly between his paws. Not far away and loitering with intent by the doorway of a restaurant, whose kitchen was stirring into life with the faint rattle of cutlery, Kermit the Frog flashed a wide green smile at anyone who cared to notice.

You may be forgiven for thinking so, but this is no scene from a ghoulish nightmare of a Halloween past, but more innocently a stroll through the graffiti-filled back streets and alleyways which criss-cross Lisbon's eclectic Barrio Alto region. Here, every square inch of the area's crumbling and buckled walls are colourfully adorned with life-sized works of art; fantastic beasts, comical caricatures and wild inventions.

To the artist, each one is a masterpiece of urban design, of street art, of cosmopolitan creativity – call it what you will. But to others, especially the remaining souls who call the Barrio their home, the ones who live and die here, graffiti will always be just that – graffiti. In these archaic thoroughfares, high above the leisurely wide streets of the city centre which lie below, where families innocently sip their drinks at outdoor cafés, or choose delicate pastries from the windows of shops rooted in a bygone era, Lisbon lives



BY BRENDAN HARDING

another life.

It is a life of bars and clubs, of art and music, of antiquity and modernism, of the local and the exotic, of the banal and the eccentric. Where the mellow sounds of jazz mix with the cacophony of punk and where grooves of '70s funk complement the sorrowful lyrics of fado, the Barrio is a living world of cultural inter-connections. It is also a world dedicated to every hedonistic possibility there is; in fact, these are more than a possibility; it's just a matter of knowing behind which door they lie in this labyrinth of pleasure.

When it comes to nightlife, there are not many European cities which can give Lisbon, and more importantly the Barrio Alto, a run for its money. Sometimes in the Barrio, among the heaving crowds of happy revellers, it can feel like you alone are the guest of honour at the world's greatest party – that this great throbbing pulse of music and people was prepared just for you.

As you wander the thronged streets into the early hours, shaking new hands and making new

acquaintances, you will want to thank the organising committee for the efforts they've put in, for the surprises they've prepared for you. Behind every imposing doorway another secret lies waiting for your discovery. An alcove bar with the look and feel of a middle-eastern tea-room? A café where lines of plastic palms are hung with pseudo-kitsch baubles that tremble to the rhythms of pre-1950s pop? A room bedecked with lines of tabletop football games where you can take a well-deserved rest before once more returning to the madness.

Over the centuries, as a nation of explorers, Portugal has set forth its sailing fleet to circumnavigate the globe on voyages of discovery, plunder and trade. In the holds of caravels, they have returned with riches which can still be found behind the closed doors of the Barrio Alto. Music from Cape Verde, Brazil, Mozambique, Sao Tome, Indonesia and China. Restaurants whose menus draw inspiration from the whole world – their ingredients and spices evoking tastes from every continent. Art, whose influences are derived from association with cultures as diverse as Aztec and Mayan, Japanese and Goan.

Despite what the magazines may insist, you can forget Manhattan; Lisbon is the real cultural melting-pot of the western world. Once, while exploring the Barrio, I stepped into an early-evening jazz bar and back in time. The music that crackled from the antique speaker system was New York early 1920s. The decor told me I was in a Harlem speakeasy but the babbling language of the barman told me differently.

In the quietness before the storm of arriving revellers, a lone couple sat beneath a dim, yellow bulb. They were holding hands but not talking. The weak light gave them the appearance of starlets in a black and white movie of long ago. I wanted to call the barman 'Pops' and flick a cigarette into my mouth as I ordered a Mickey Finn. At any moment I expected the door to open and see Al Capone and his muscle being shown to their own private space, cordoned off behind ropes. Not wearing a pin-stripe suit and spats, I felt out of place, so I finished my drink and left.

Outside on the street, the first party-goers were starting to arrive from the lower town. Not knowing the area, I had a decision to make. Left or right? I tossed a coin and turned left but didn't get far before the haunting sound of familiar faint music drew me through a heavy-curtained doorway. Behind the curtain, the small room was dark and flickered with candlelight. Once my eyes adjusted, I could see I was almost alone. Behind the bar a lone dark-skinned woman swayed hypnotically to the sound of a Tango.

Tango is infectious and soon I too was swaying as the music of Astro Piazzolla tripped like a dancer through the flickering light. "I adore Tango," the girl hissed across the bar. "I just can't stand still when I hear it play." Her long black dress swirled about her feet as she poured my drink. As the accordion soared and I watched her move to the music, I realised that I could be in the back streets of Buenos Aires or Caracas. But that's the beauty of Lisbon's Barrio Alto: you don't have to travel to see the world, it's all right here waiting to be discovered.



Lisbon's eclectic Barrio Alto region. Here, every square inch of the area's crumbling and buckled walls are colourfully adorned with life-sized works of art