

In the Lapa luxury

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Steve McKenna is left shaken and stirred by Lisbon's many charms.

LIKE just about every man on the planet, I've always harboured a desire to play James Bond for a day. Glamorous girls, super-fast cars, outrageous stunts and the ability to look suave while ordering a martini are things we can only fantasise about.

Today, though, it feels like I'm a touch nearer to living the dream. The hotel I'm checking into - the plush five-star Lapa Palace - is nestled in one of Lisbon's classiest districts and is exactly the kind of spot Bond would be sent for one of his undercover missions.

My fellow (immaculately dressed) guests seem a friendly bunch, but I'm in no doubt that, lurking among them, is at least one megalomaniac with a cunning plan for world domination and a fleet of henchmen in reserve.

(At this point, I tuck into my book and discover that George Bush, Sir Paul McCartney, Bono, Sting, Cher and Tina Turner are among those to have stayed at the prestigious Lapa.)



Somehow I feel a bit out of place in my casual shirt and knee-length shorts - until I recall that a young Sean Connery carried this look off with aplomb in *Thunderball*. Still, I can't help thinking how much cooler it would have been had I arrived in a tuxedo with a Walther PPK tucked neatly inside my jacket pocket.

Nevertheless, I'm welcomed by an affable young receptionist, who insists on calling me Meester McKenna and possesses the ideal qualities of a 007 character: smooth, foreign and full of polite conversation in fluent English.

My room is large and decked out with a huge amount of wardrobe space, while the bathroom is adorned with marble and intricately decorated tiles, the azulejos that characterise so much Portuguese architecture.

The balcony overlooks not just a Babylon-inspired garden with ornamental fountains, pools and streams, but, a little further back, Lisbon's Tagus River. You could be fooled for thinking you're in San Francisco when you see the giant red bridge that spans it, as the Ponte 25 de Abril was built by the same company that constructed the Golden Gate 31 years earlier.

George Lazenby's 007 drove across it in the 1969 Bond film *On Her Majesty's Secret Service*, with his new wife Tracy, played by Diana Rigg. She ended up dead in his arms soon after, thanks to a wayward shot by Irma Bunt, Blofeld's henchwoman.

I don't have a wife but I do have a date for tonight. She's a friend of a friend who's pledged to show me some of Lisbon's night-life.

It's either this or an evening in front of the TV watching some of the hotel's entertainment collection, which includes, would you believe, the entire James Bond collection.

I meet Mirela, my companion for the evening, at the Alcantara region, a revamped dockside enclave lined with bars and offering lovely views of the Ponte 25 de Abril.

"Do you like caipirinha?" she asks.

"I don't know. Is it like martini?"

"What?"

"Don't worry. I'll try one."

Caipirinha is the national drink of Brazil, a country with strong ties to Portugal, having been ruled by them from 1500 to 1822.

The links don't stop there. Mirela points out a giant white statue that looms in the distance over the other side of the Tagus. It's Christ the King, a Catholic monument that was inspired by Rio de Janeiro's Christ the Redeemer, and was inaugurated on the orders of then-Portuguese dictator Antonio de Oliveira Salazar in the 1950s.

It begins to get blurry as time passes, though - and not just because the light is fading. Caipirinha, a muddle of crushed ice, lime and sugar doused in Cachaca, is refreshing, but incredibly strong.

It must be - after my third glass I'm even attempting to bop to Latino music in one of the booming clubs along the Alcantara strip.

The latest tune by Daddy Yankee - the band behind the worldwide hit *Gasolina* - is being pumped out and the dance floor is jammed with gyrating hips, glistening foreheads and billowing smoke.

After 10 minutes of trying to hold back a laugh, Mirela ultimately cracks. She can see that I've got all the grace and co-ordination of a three-legged horse, so she suggests we move to a quieter spot.

We end up riding a taxi to the Graca district, where we walk past Lux, a super-trendy club bankrolled by Hollywood star John Malkovich, only to end up in a shabby backstreet bar.

Apart from a man with heaving muscles and an even bigger selection of tattoos, it's empty and I begin to wonder why we're here.

Perhaps sensing my discomfort, Mirela assures me there's nothing sinister in this solitude. It's only 3am and the place will soon start to liven up.

She's not lying. Over the next three hours, as we soothe ourselves with more caipirinhas, scores of people arrive, although rather than dancing on tables, they're quite happy sitting at them, talking to each other peacefully and waiting for the sun to rise. Mirela says they're all danced out. It's just before 7am when we leave the bar.

I wake later that morning, feeling slightly fuzzy. But I struggle out of bed as I have a whole city to explore.

The Lapa district is a good half-hour walk from the downtown area, but trams regularly shudder up and down its hilly streets.

Riding one of them, I can't help but think of San Francisco. Lisbon has much in common with the Californian city - and not just because of its look-alike bridges and topography. Both have been battered by monstrous earthquakes. San Francisco was destroyed by one in 1906, while Lisbon suffered a quake in 1755, levelling much of what was once one of Europe's most beautiful cities and sparking a series of deadly fires and tsunamis.

An estimated 100,000 people were killed and up to 85 per cent of Lisbon's buildings, including a slew of Roman, Visigoth and Moorish-era structures, were destroyed.

Ambling through the feast of impeccably arranged plazas and admiring the seemingly never-ending batch of pastel-coloured palatial gems today, one has to conclude that the reconstruction party did a sterling job.

It took me a couple of hours to reach St George Castle, the grand fortress that has sat atop one of Lisbon's seven hills and overlooked the city in one form or another since the sixth century.

The wonderful views from the ramparts make the long haul worth the effort, as does an excellent multimedia exhibit, which depicts much of Lisbon's history, including a simulation of the great earthquake.

Over the coming days, I discover Lisbon is crammed with fascinating spots like these. Indeed, one of its big strengths is its feast of cultural gems, from the National Museum of Ancient Art to the outstanding Gulbenkian, which hosts an incredible collection of Asian, Egyptian, Greek and Islamic artefacts.

This historical pattern flows over into the western suburb of Belem, a 10-minute train ride from downtown and a celebration of Portugal's great seafaring past.

The gargantuan Jeronimo's Monastery dwarfs everything else in its path and is a symbol of Portugal's power and wealth during the 15th and 16th centuries, built as it was under the reign of King Manuel I.

Constructed of limestone, the monastery survived the 1755 disaster and is the final resting place of several famous Portuguese figures, including Vasco da Gama, who led groundbreaking expeditions to Africa, Asia and South America from 1497 to 1524.

I'm particularly enchanted by the monastery's magnificent cloisters, which are carved with coils of rope, sea monsters, coral and other motifs that evoke the Age of Discovery.

The same theme can be found close to the riverside, with the grand, elaborate Discoveries Monument, which was unveiled in 1960 to commemorate the 500th anniversary of the death of another of Portugal's great explorers, Henry the Navigator.

The beautiful sculpture represents a ship ready to depart, with important historical figures onboard, including King Manuel I, Vasco de Gama and Henry himself, as well as monks, cartographers and cosmographers.

The adjacent pavement is decorated with a mosaic displaying a compass with the map of the world charting the routes taken by the Portuguese explorers, while a brisk five-minute walk away is another testament to the country's vital history - the iconic Belem Tower.

I don't know how Vasco de Gama and company got the energy to sail rough seas for years on end. After three days merely exploring Lisbon, I'm absolutely shattered, although if I'm being honest, I don't think I ever recovered from the first night, with my pitiful attempts to be James Bond.

What I need right now is a few days lazing on a beach. There are no 007-inspired exotic tropical island paradises nearby, but the Algarve is just a three-hour train ride away.

My good friend Mirela has even offered to join me. I accept, but on one condition: we stick to martini.

The writer was a guest of the Lapa Palace.

TRIP NOTES

* KLM Royal Dutch Airlines (www.klm.com) flies from Sydney to Lisbon from \$1700, including taxes. For other deals, try <http://www.flightcentre.com.au>.

* Doubles at the luxurious Lapa Palace (www.lapapalace.com) are available from EUR300 (\$478) a night. For other accommodation options, plus details on dining and things to do in Lisbon, see <http://www.visitlisboa.com>.

* It may be worth investing in a Lisboa Card, which offers complimentary or discounted entry to most Lisbon attractions and free city-wide travel. It's EUR14.85 for a one-day pass, EUR31 for three days. See <http://www.askmelisboa.com> for further details.

* If you plan to visit other parts of Portugal, a great way of seeing this compact country is by rail. Check out <http://www.cp.pt> for timetables and fares. Eurail (www.eurail.com), which offers continent-wide rail passes, also sells one-country deals from EUR94.

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