

MADE BY HAND

The colourful ceramic tiles that embellish the city of Lisbon reflect a rich tradition of Portuguese craftsmanship. Here's where to see—and buy—the best examples of these artistic adornments.

LISBON'S Azulejos

By Jeff Book | Photography by Philip Lee Harvey



LISBON'S SÃO VICENTE DE FORA IS A LATE-RENAISSANCE GEM. The stately church holds a beautiful Baroque altarpiece and the tombs of kings from Portugal's Bragança dynasty, which ruled the country from 1640 till 1910. Its roof terrace affords heavenly views of the broad Tagus River and the Alfama quarter's scenic jumble of red roofs. And, in the great Portuguese tradition, it boasts splendid tilework. In the cloisters, wall panels of blue-and-white tiles illustrate the fables of La Fontaine. It's easy to envision long-gone monks smiling at these images of animals acting out human foibles.

For more than 500 years, the Portuguese have adorned interiors and exteriors with tile, from filigreed street numbers to expansive murals. In both Portugal and Spain, the tradition of decorative tilework has its roots in the centuries of Moorish occupation of the Iberian Peninsula. The Spanish and Portuguese languages share the word for ceramic tile: *azulejo* (az-oo-lay-ho), from an Arabic word meaning "polished stone" and not, as some assume, from *azul*, Portuguese for blue.

Though the Moorish influence was greater in Spain, it is Portugal that is unmatched for its lavish, imaginative use of tile. This may seem odd, since the national character is marked by restraint and stoicism. Yet the Portuguese also have a love of embellishment. Witness the country's distinctive Manueline style (named for King Manuel I, who reigned from 1495 to 1521), which enlivened late-Gothic architecture with exuberant flourishes: ornately carved windows and portals, columns and vaults, pinnacles and crenellations. It was Manuel who started the vogue for azulejos in the early 1500s, when he ordered custom tiles from Seville to decorate his palace at Sintra, near Lisbon.

Azulejos are a sunny counterpart to another national treasure, *fado*. This soulful music embodies the elusive Portuguese trait known as *saudade*, a melancholy yearning for something in the past or out of reach. Both evoke nostalgia, but azulejos were and are a window on a world of beauty and wonder, displaying views of nature, myth and folklore, history, biblical tales, and maritime and hunting scenes—the flatscreen TV of a low-tech age. A courtly couple flirts during a dance lesson. A saint, mortally wounded, gazes heavenward. Monkeys caper in human costume. The goddess Ceres speeds across the sky in a chariot drawn by a dragon. Noblemen on horseback lance a wild boar. Birds flit in the branches of a luxuriant bouquet—the tree of life.

These motifs also appeared in European frescos, tapestries and other tableaux, but in Portugal tiles were the main medium. It helped that they were economical, durable and practical,



preceding pages, left to right: Artist Manuel Loureço with his work at atelier Loja Dos Descobrimentos (www.loja-descobrimentos.com); tiles at Palácio de Fronteira. these pages, clockwise from right: Tiles in the Alfama quarter; view from Castelo de São Jorge; at Palácio de Fronteira; restoration work at Museu Nacional do Azulejo; in the Praça do Comércio.



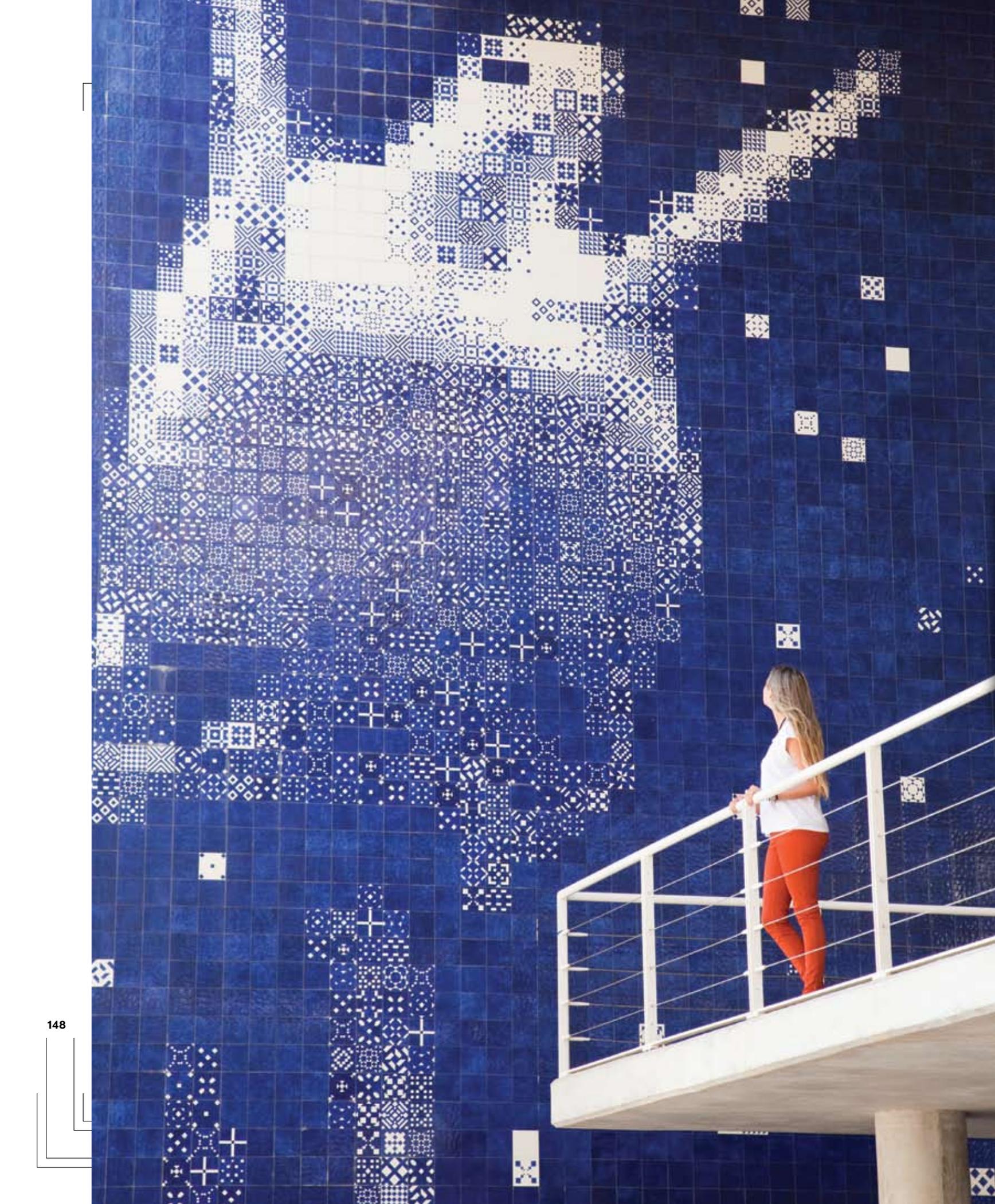


impervious to moisture and decay and reflecting the rays of the sun. They have the advantage of animating surfaces with consistent colour and pattern that please the eye regardless of content. And they lend grand buildings an aspect of human scale. V.S. Pritchett touched on this humanising effect when he wrote, “Capital cities tend to public display and monumental magnificence, but the public things in Lisbon have a familiarity and grace, as though public splendour were tempered by private fantasy.” Azulejos grace buildings across Portugal, as well as in former colonies such as Brazil, Macau and Goa. But there’s no better place to appreciate their brilliant variety than in Lisbon.

The Museu Nacional do Azulejo would be worth a visit just for its lovely setting, a 16th-century convent where the Manueline cloister and gilded Baroque chapel still contain original tile panels. Exhibits trace the evolution of tiles in Portugal, where commercial fabrication began in the 16th century and adapted to changing styles and influences, including those derived from tiles imported from Spain, Italy and the Netherlands. The early introduction of Italy’s majolica technique allowed Portuguese artists to paint elaborate designs directly onto tin-glazed tiles. They drew inspiration from Renaissance paintings and engravings. Portugal’s everlasting love of blue-and-white tiles began in the 17th century with the influence of Dutch delft tiles, which imitated Chinese export porcelain. Florid fabrics from India were translated into tiled altar fronts. A highlight of the collection, an 11-by-23-metre mural from around 1700, shows Lisbon as it looked before a 1755 earthquake levelled 85% of the city. Antique tiles depicting fish and other food sources line the attractive museum restaurant.

Most visitors to Lisbon go to the Belém district to see two Manueline-style UNESCO World Heritage sites—the Tower of Belém and the Mosteiro dos Jeronimos, with fine azulejo panels in the refectory—and esteemed museums devoted to maritime

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left to right: Designer Ivan Chermayeff's five-storey-high mural of sea life at the Oceanário de Lisboa; modern life amid the traditional embellishments of the Alfama quarter.

history, archaeology, antique coaches, contemporary art and design. They also savour the wildly popular custard tarts of Pastéis de Belém, a pretty shop (founded in 1837) with an azulejo façade and wainscoting.

A lesser-known destination, the 17th-century Palácio de Fronteira, is a superb gallery of tiles, from heroic scenes in the Hall of Battles to panels in the majestic gardens that mingle with statues or echo in water features—notably a company of life-size cavaliers drawn from Velasquez. That the Duke of Wellington stayed here while defending Lisbon from Napoleon only enhances the palace's romance. Tile aficionados swap other favourite examples, from historic panels at the Lisbon cathedral, São Roque church and Santo Amaro chapel to colourful façades in the Alfama.

As more recent works in the Museu Nacional do Azulejo indicate, the art of tile has experienced a revival since the 1950s. Artists began using azulejos as a blank canvas for everything from painterly abstraction to playful sketches and graffiti-inspired cartoons. This creative ferment blossomed in public art, especially works commissioned from the mid-1980s on for new subway stations and the 1998 Lisbon World Exposition. Today, murals by acclaimed Portuguese artists as well as internationally known talents such as Sean Scully and Friedensreich Hundertwasser add zest to station and pavilion walls. Take the red line to the former Expo fairground—now the Parque das Nações (Park of Nations)—to see an array of works, especially at the Estação do Oriente terminus, designed by Santiago Calatrava. At the nearby Oceanário de Lisboa, a five-storey-high mural uses traditional blue-and-white tiles as pixels in a computer-generated vision of sea life. In fact, we might think of tiles as the original pixels. After five centuries, Portugal's azulejo tradition is alive and well in the digital age. **4MORE** go to FourSeasonsMagazine.com/IssueFour2011 to see video of Lisbon's exquisite azulejos.

Jeff Book covers design, travel and food for *Travel + Leisure*, *Elle Décor*, *Smithsonian* and other publications.

ON THE TILE TRAIL

Visit these sources for time-honoured tile designs as well as modern ones. Also, we suggest prime spots beyond Lisbon to admire azulejos.

Buying Azulejos in Lisbon | Sant'anna, maker of exquisite hand-painted tiles since 1741, offers a diverse selection at its showroom in the Chiado district. If you'd like to see how the tiles (and platters, pottery, etc.) are made, the old-fashioned Belém factory may be toured by appointment. 95 Rua do Alecrim; www.fabrica-santanna.com



clockwise from right:
Artist Querubim Lapa with his imaginative work; Chelas metro station featuring tilework by artist Jorge Martins; modern tile art by Lapa; creating a tile's intricate pattern at atelier and shop Loja Dos Descobrimentos; a play of colour, light and shadow on a wall of tiles at the Parque das Nações.





♦ A vivid tiled façade announces the showroom of **Viúva Lamego**, a major source of handmade azulejos since 1849. 25 Largo do Intendente; www.viuvalamego.com

♦ Located in the stylish Príncipe Real neighbourhood, **Solar** is a top source for antique tiles (many salvaged from churches and palaces), from 15th-century Moorish patterns to 20th-century Art Deco designs. 68-70 Rua Dom Pedro V

♦ A hotbed of contemporary tilework, **Galeria Ratton** invites leading artists and designers to create works in tile, from limited editions to large public murals. The results honour tradition while departing from it. 2C Rua Academia das Ciências; www.galeriaratton.blogspot.com

Sintra | In 1809 Lord Byron visited this royal playground some 24 kilometres from Lisbon and found “beauties of every description, natural and artificial, palaces and gardens rising in the midst of rocks, cataracts, and precipices. . . .” Sintra still enchants with its exotic landscape and eclectic architecture, including vibrant tilework. Conical twin chimneys crown the **Palácio Nacional de Sintra**, an alluring mix of Moorish, Gothic and Manueline styles that dates from the late 13th century. Tiles lend panache to many of the regally decorated rooms, complementing ceilings painted with galleons, swans and coats of arms. Tiles also figure in the **Palácio de Pena**, a hilltop retreat with a fanciful Romantic style and storybook charm.

Queluz | On the way to Sintra, stop at the **Palácio Nacional de Queluz**, a Versailles-style 18th-century chateau with a room of azulejos depicting scenes of colonial Macau and Brazil. An azulejo-clad canal and bridges add a Portuguese flair to the French-style gardens.

Oporto | Like the Douro River, azulejos flow through Portugal’s second-largest city. Gleaming tiles enrich the ancient cathedral’s cloister and the façade of the **Church of the Carmelites**. Blue-and-white azulejos from the early 20th century plaster the **São Bento** train station with evocative, floor-to-ceiling scenes of historical subjects, fiestas, modes of transport and everyday life. At the very contemporary **Casa da Música** concert hall, architect Rem Koolhaas tempered the sleek structure with bold expanses of tiles.

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left to right: ▲ tile awaiting the expert attention of the artist at the workshop of Querubim Lapa; detail of the Chermayeff Oceanário mural's pixel-esque blue-and-white tiles.

