

Palacio Belmonte by [Rupert Eden](#) Featured Hotel in Lisbon



[Palacio Belmonte](#)

"A sprawling, enchanting 15th-century palace underneath the walls of Sao Jorge Castle, with huge suites and a black marble pool."

Price from: EUR 350.00

Imagine a hotel and exclusive business club which takes hours to find, taxi drivers have never heard of, where you are greeted by a startled maid in complete darkness in the foyer and where you and the rather louche receptionist seem to be the only guests. Arriving at the Palacio Belmonte, a converted palace housed inside Lisbon's Moorish castle, reminded me of a horror movie where the guests are spirited away never to be seen again. Winding granite steps took me to my peaceful and grandiose third-floor room decorated in yellow and creamy beige salvage silks. The suite was named after a contemporary philosopher Agostinho da Silva and featured genuine 18th century furnishings including a huge gilt mirror, blue tile panels, a large oil canvas by Claude Guichard, two drawings dated 1870 and a wooden cupboard housing a mysterious religious oil painting. A tremendous impromptu thunderstorm added to the atmosphere and rattling, religious icons spooked me out even more. As I intrepidly ventured out of my room to explore I noticed the most curious thing - bookshelves everywhere talked of nothing but

alternative lifestyles. Titles such as, “Radical Agriculture” or “Cornucopia - A Source book of Edible Plants” lined shelves everywhere. As I scanned the bookshelves there was an eerie silence - no music or lights - nobody, no restaurant or bar - just a vast high-ceilinged coffin of a hotel.

Thankfully when I awoke the next morning daylight put a new perspective on things and I was relieved to find other guests munching on breakfast. I was ushered outside to a warm terrace overlooking Alfama’s spectacular churches and the southeastern stretch of the Tagus river. A huge breakfast table was laid out for me and the waiter asked what I wanted for breakfast - what anything? - I ordered a smoked salmon egg scramble and got it within ten minutes. So this is why Conde Nast Traveller ranks the hotel in its top 20 hippest - as I ate the sunshine poured down and lit up the lush tropical garden and a stylish black granite swimming pool surrounded by a wooden deck. I recognised the garden from scenes from Wim Wender’s “Lisbon “Story” and Roberto Faenza’s “Afirma Pereira” which starred Marcello Mastroianni as a lonely Portuguese journalist - both films had otherwise left little impression.

After breakfast further exploration of the hotel revealed a totally new picture from the previous night’s nightmare. Nine huge suites and three luxuriant apartments all had their own character. Modern bathrooms built into ancient Roman and Arabesque structures changed from black granite to black, white and green coloured marble. The original palace was built in 1449, on the top of the even older fortified Roman and Moorish walls, and joined up three towers; a rectangular keep at the western extremity, a corner tower to the north built on Roman foundations, and a pentagonal 7th century Moorish tower. By 1730 the noble family that owned the palace had commissioned two Portuguese master tile-makers to make 59 hand-painted panels using over 30,000 tiles - most of these panels survived the

1755 earthquake and today are the hotel's hallmark.

When Maria and Frédéric Coustols bought Palacio Belmonte they found a crumbling building in need of decades of loving restoration. No expense was spared as something between €20 and €40 million was spent on the project but thanks to Mr Coustols artistic eye and architectural genius the palace's incredible multi-layered history dating as far back as 130 BC is now clearly visible. In one hallway a perfectly preserved 19th century bathtub is restored to its original dark blue and fuchsia painted designs and all around original blue and white "azulezo" tiles depict Lisbon's lost era. It is no wonder this restoration project got the thumbs up from Prince Charles who awarded the couple the prestigious Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyor's award for outstanding restoration.

Rupert Eden