



O THER CITIES have compass points and maps that tell you where things are, but Lisbon has only two dimensions: up and down. Wherever you set out to walk, your journey will end in stairs. One advantage of this hilliness is that it's probably the quietest capital in Europe. It's difficult to imagine any city more devoid of the sound of cars. In the heart of Lisbon, no more than two flights of stairs below a main road, I sat on the terrace of an *enoteca*, and the loudest sound was birdsong: the shrill descending harmonies of swifts and unidentified chirrings from a pine tree growing through the pavement on the left.

Lisbon is an exhausted city, preserved by ill fortune in a quiet, ravaged beauty. The last major redevelopment of the city centre

came after the great earthquake and tsunami of 1755, when thousands died in a morning. Although there have been some wonderful buildings added since then – among them the most absurdly beautiful railway station I have ever seen – the character of the place is largely defined by the twisted old quarters that survived the earthquake, since they were built on hills made of harder rock.

The earthquake shocked all of Europe: it struck Lisbon, one of the most prosperous cities on the continent, as if to show that progress meant nothing in the face of nature. Christian preachers used it as an illustration of the wrath of God; Voltaire made it the centrepiece of *Candide* to mock the very idea of God. The man who then ruled Portugal, the Marquess of Pombal, used it as an opportunity

Above, clockwise from left: barman at Bistro 100 Maneiras in Chiado; a view of the Alfama with the Tagus River beyond; an atelier at LX Factory arts centre. Opposite, a taberna, also at LX Factory

for decisive and confident action. He had the whole ruined central valley of the city – the Baixa district – rebuilt on a rational and geometric grid, with the long axis opening into the Praça do Comércio, a bright square that ends at the Tagus River, here so wide that it looks like an arm of the sea.

The Baixa is a good area to stroll around by daylight, when there is a sense of neighbourhood. At night, although it is still perfectly safe, it becomes infested with accordion players and strolling guitarists.

The oldest part of the city is the Alfama, a hill leading up to St George's Castle; in the ancient Moorish quarter especially, poverty has weathered into a kind of determined picturesqueness. Here, pigeons peck at the weeds that grow between cobbles, and lean cats study them from the ➤