



# TEA AND ROYAL ROMANCE AT THE LAPA PALACE

*By Diana von Welanetz Wentworth*

ROMANTIC PLACES, LUXURIOUS ACCOMMODATIONS, intimate meals served attentively and with a certain reverence—these key comforts entice us to pack our bags and leave our cozy hillside home in Corona del Mar.

Often, the most fun Ted and I have is seeking out new settings for our shared indulgence, the most restorative meal of the day—afternoon tea. Lingering over a cup of tea at the end of a busy day is a ritual we truly cherish.

Where does the tradition of tea-drinking have its roots? England, you say? Surprisingly, it was Portuguese explorers, setting out from the wealthy empire that then ruled the seven seas, who discovered tea in Asia and introduced it

to Europe, and later to the royalty of England.

So, with two days to explore Lisbon during a Silversea Cruise, and with fresh memories of formal tea at the Ritz in London (rated #1 in the world), Ted and I are eager to experience both the city's most historic lodgings as well as its very finest tea service. Research reveals both to be at the same locale, the historic, luxurious, jewel-like Lapa Palace in the city's most fashionable quarter.

Entering this pink palace originally built in 1755, set high on one of Lisbon's seven hills overlooking the Tagus River, we find an oasis surrounded by landscaped gardens, an aviary, and even a waterfall.

Indoors, it retains much of the furniture and tile work





commissioned by the Count of Valenças after he purchased the luxurious villa in 1870 to create his own magnificent family home and garden. Portugal's trademark azulejo decorative tiles, created by Rafael Bordalo Pinheiro, one of the country's greatest ceramists, decorate the lobby.

When Orient-Express bought the palace in 1998, they added a garden wing of new rooms and one of the most beautiful spas in all Europe. Royal guests who have visited include most of the kings and queens of Europe plus Catherine Deneuve, U2, Sting, and Sir Paul McCartney.

Checking into the magnificent Biedermeier Suite (Room 506), we too feel royally welcomed. Among the hotel's unique toiletries is a beribboned bottle of Oranjrose, Agua de Portugal, a 140-year-old scent brought by Maria Pia de Savoia, daughter of Vittorio Emanuele II, King of Italy, when she married the Portuguese King Luís I.

Ready for tea at last, Ted and I settle into a table in the Rio Tejo Bar, a gracious and welcoming room of vast windows overlooking the veranda and gardens. Luis, our server, tells us "Portugal is the only European country that produces tea. And the Lapa Palace is the only city hotel that offers a traditional tea service, featuring 42 types of tea from India, China, Vietnam and Japan." He recommends we try a variety scented with star anise called African Star, and brings us a stack of three plates filled with sandwiches, sweets and scones.

Because of our deep interest, we are soon joined by Sandro Fabris, the hotel manager, and his wife Doris, public relations director. Having met at the prestigious Hotel School in Lausanne and devoted years of experience together at the Cipriani Hotel, Lapa Palace's Orient-Express sibling property in Venice, Italy, it is easy to sense this attractive couple's shared passion for beautification and innovation.

"We have a custom here of serving vintage Port with afternoon tea as well," Doris tells us. "Our service has a special tradition, the opening of the bottle without removing the cork," adds Sandro. "Corks in vintage bottles easily disintegrate." He demonstrates by heating an implement known as a tanaz over a flame (step #1). Sandro clamps the red-hot tanaz around the neck of the bottle (step #2), and then pours ice water over it to cool it suddenly (step #3). There is a snap and the neck of the bottle is removed cork and all (step #4), leaving a smooth lip. He presents it to me as a souvenir.



"Ideally, Port is served around 65 degrees, in a narrow wine glass, only half-filled to keep the alcohol content from overpowering the flavor. It is often served with goat cheese, crackers and some sort of marmalade, another Portuguese invention named for a popular quince preserve called marmelada that led to the invention of orange marmalade." Is there no end to the enduring legacies of the Portuguese?

"My doctor says I will never outgrow my need for chocolate!" exclaims Ted when he discovers our last few sips of Port pair perfectly with the Lapa's truffles made in house, flavored with Port, Armanac, or hazelnuts.

"You must attend a bull fight while you are here!" Dolores says as we part. "Oh no," we demur. "We feel too much empathy for the bulls."

"Then you will especially appreciate that in Portugal the fight ends not in death, but with the bull being crowned in roses!"

Now, what could be more romantic than that?

For information and reservations at the Lapa Palace visit [www.lapapalace.com](http://www.lapapalace.com).  

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