# Is Torel Palace the fanciest hotel in Portugal? Could be!



Now that everyone’s banging on about Lisbon the way they used to bang on about Barcelona, you can’t help but think it might be nice to go somewhere, you know, else. Which is what brings us to Porto, Portugal’s second city right on the Douro River (and you know that means wine!) spanned by a beautiful bridge designed by Gustave Eiffel of… oh, what’s it called?… Eiffel Tower fame.

Smaller, less busy, prettier in parts but with all that fun and comedy that you expect of Portuguese people, not to stereotype anyone at all ever (but they do seem quite funny), Porto is the town that gave its name to Port, the drink. And any town that gives its name to a drink is already on a winning ticket with us. You can even do tours and tastings from here. Oh and you must try white port maybe with tonic. It’s our new favourite tipple.

And if you are going to explore Porto, you couldn’t do any better than choose Torel Palace as your base. Plonked right in the middle of the old town on a quiet little street near the National Theatre and the classic tiled Santa Francesinha church, a few minutes from tourist hot spot Café Majestic (join that queue if you can be arsed), it can’t really be beaten for location.

The building was once Palacete Camp Navarro, the palatial home of a squillionaire merchant family since back in the 1860s and one of the finest examples of romantic architecture in the city. But that doesn’t mean it’s not working a seriously funky vibe. As you walk in you might notice a flight of books sailing through the space, just one of the art installations that play with Torel Palace’s grand chandeliers and majestic staircase. It’s called having your pastel de nata and eating it.

But if you’re wowed by the entrance, the library and the reception (it’s very much a take-a-seat-and-have-a-glass-of-wine reception, which is the future of all receptions, we hope), you wait until we get you to our room, probably the best in the whole palace. Well, it is called the Royal Suite, so there’s a clue right there.

Step through the grand doors and you’re in a room big enough to be a ballroom with a little balcony and views out to the street. But in the middle of this huge room is a giant mirrored cube, the likes of which you’ve never seen outside of an art gallery. The purpose of the cube, closed on three sides with a fringed curtain on the fourth, is to contain the bathroom and to split the room up into manageable zones: the sitting room looking at the mirror with a TV embedded in it on one side, the bedroom again looking at the mirror again with a TV embedded in it on the other. And when we say ‘embedded’, the TV screen is part of the glass of the mirror, so if it’s not on, it’s not there.

Aside from the mirrored cube, the style is very grand and maximalist with huge padded headboards going way up towards those sky-high ceilings, bobble fringes on curtains, gem-coloured velvets and, in our case, a ceiling so intricately painted, we barely turned on the TV, we were so engrossed in it. This is paired with funky little modern lamps, a bathroom that is all marble with light shining through it (there’s a word for that, isn’t there? Can’t think of it right now) and black and white photographs of some of Portugal’s most famous writers. Smaller rooms are just as delicious and still have the mirrored cube, making genius use of the space, whether you’re in a suite or an entry-level room looking out over the gardens at the back.

Go down that staircase, past the over-stuffed library, which is quirky and classic all at the same time, and down another staircase, and you’ll find Blind, the bar and restaurant painted black and with a menu on the wall in Braille. There’s a huge oval bar in the middle of the room, perfect for sitting up at with a martini, while chef Vitor Matos is the person mixing classic Portuguese food (and you know how legendary Portuguese food is!) with mod touches.

Oh and just outside Blind, you’ll find the pink façade of the building, a storeys-high wall of plants and the sweetest tiled swimming pool under a canopy of green climbers. Sit here, have a cocktail, dip your toes in.

So a very visitable little town, a great spot in that town and a hotel that manages to be grand and contemporary, serious and cheeky, relaxed and impressive… all at the same time! Talk about multi-tasking!

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