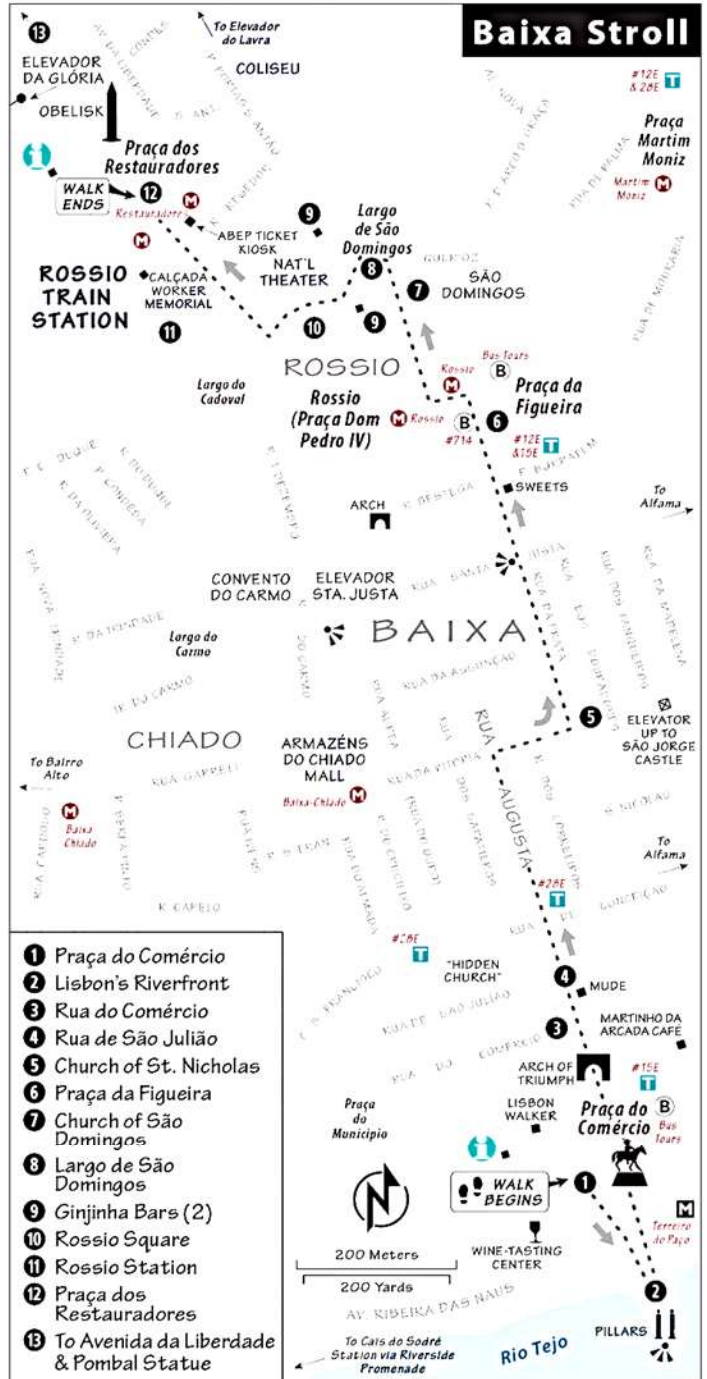


# Baixa Stroll



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## BAIXA STROLL

This ▲▲▲ walk covers the highlights of Lisbon's historic downtown, the Baixa, which fills a flat valley between two hills. The district slopes gently from the waterfront up to Rossio, Praça dos Restauradores, Avenida da Liberdade, and the newer town. The walk starts at Praça do Comércio and ends at Praça dos Restauradores.

• *Start your walk at the statue of King José I in the center of **Praça do Comércio**. Find a spot of shade in José's shadow (or take cover under the arcades) and read a bit about the Baixa's history.*

**Background:** After the disastrous 1755 earthquake, the Baixa district was rebuilt on a grid street plan. The uniform and utilitarian Pombaline architecture (named after the Marquês de Pombal, the chief minister who rebuilt the city—see sidebar, earlier) feels almost military. That's because it is. The Baixa was constructed by military engineers who had experience building garrison towns overseas. The new Lisbon featured the architecture of conquest—simple to assemble, economical, with all the pieces easy to ship. The 18th-century buildings you'd see in Mozambique and Brazil are interchangeable with those in Lisbon.

The buildings are all uniform, with the same number of floors and standard facades. They were designed to survive the next earthquake, with stone firewalls and wooden frameworks that had flexible crisscross beams. The priorities were to rebuild fast, cheap, and shake-proof.

If it had been left up to the people, who believed the earthquake was a punishment from God, they would have rebuilt their churches bigger and more impressive than ever. But Pombal was a practical military man with a budget, a timeline, and an awareness of his society's limits. Large churches didn't fit into the new, orderly grid. In those austere postearthquake days, Pombal got his way.



Looking uphill at the lower left corner of the square, find a statue remembering the generations of laborers who made the city's characteristic black-and-white *calçada* sidewalks. Lisboners love the patterns decorating their pavements throughout the town. Here, these bronze workers have made the symbol of the city: a ship, carrying the remains of St. Vincent, guarded by two ravens.

Overlooking the square is the 1930s Art Deco facade of the Eden Theater. About 100 yards farther up the boulevard (past a Metro station and TI, on the left) is the Elevador da Glória funicular that climbs to the Bairro Alto.

• *While this walk ends here, you can stroll up Avenida da Liberdade for a good look at another facet of this fine city. The next walk (Bairro Alto and Chiado Stroll) starts at the funicular just up the street on your left.*

## 13 Avenida da Liberdade

This tree-lined grand boulevard, running north from Rossio, connects the old town (where most of the sightseeing action is) with the newer upper town. Before the great earthquake, this was the city's royal promenade. After 1755, it was the grand boulevard of Pombal's new Lisbon—originally limited to the aristocracy. The present street, built in the 1880s and inspired by Paris' Champs-Élysées, is lined with hotels, high-fashion shopping, expensive office buildings...and eight lanes of traffic. The grand "rotunda"—as the roundabout formally known as Marquês de Pombal is called—tops off Avenida da Liberdade with a commanding **statue of Pombal**. Allegorical symbols of his impressive accomplishments decorate the statue. (An absent king and an iron-willed minister left in charge can do a lot in 27 years.) Beyond that lies the fine Edward VII Park. From the Rotunda (M: Marquês de Pombal), it's an enjoyable 20-minute downhill walk along the mile-long avenue back to the Baixa.

think that their Sebastian will save the day—he's the symbol of being ridiculously hopeful.



• Just uphill from Rossio station is *Praça dos Restauradores*, at the bottom of Lisbon's long and grand *Avenida da Liberdade*. Between Rossio station and the square is Lisbon's oldest hotel, the *Avenida Palace*. Built as a terminus hotel at the same time as Rossio station, it has a fun interior; with an elegant yet inviting oasis of a bar/lounge—popular with WWII spies in the 20th century, and tourists needing a little break in the 21st century (nice after this walk).

## 12 **Praça dos Restauradores**

This monumental square connects Rossio with Avenida da Liberdade. The obelisk at its centerpiece celebrates the restoration of Portuguese independence from Spain in 1640 (without any help from the still-missing Sebastian mentioned earlier).



The Baixa has three squares—two preearthquake (Comércio and Rossio) and one added later (Figueira)—and three main streets: Prata (silver), Aurea (gold), and Augusta (relating the Portuguese king to a Roman emperor). The former maze of the Jewish quarter was eliminated, but the area has many streets named for the crafts and shops once found there.

The Baixa's pedestrian streets, inviting cafés, bustling shops, and elegant old storefronts give the district a certain charm. City-government subsidies make sure the old businesses stay around, but modern ones find a way to creep in. I find myself doing laps up and down Rua Augusta in a people-watching stupor. Its delightful ambience is perfect for strolling.

• Now turn your attention to the square itself.

## ❶ Praça do Comércio (Commerce Square)

At this riverfront square bordering the Baixa—along the gateway to Lisbon—ships used to dock and sell their goods. This was the site of Portugal’s royal palace for 200 preearthquake years, but after the 1755 earthquake/tsunami/fire, the jittery king fled to more stable Belém, never to return. These days, government ministries ring Praça do Comércio. It’s also the departure point for city bus and tram tours, and boats that cruise along the Rio Tejo. The area opposite the harbor was conceived as a residential neighborhood for the upper class, but they chose the suburbs. Today, the square has two names (“Palace Square” and “Commerce Square”) and little real life. Locals consider it just a big place to pass through.



The statue is **José I**, the king who gave control of the government to his chief minister, the Marquês de Pombal. Built 20 years after the quake, it shows the king on his horse, with Pombal (on the medallion), looking at their port. The king on horseback strikes a heroic pose, bravely riding through the ground covered in snakes (a contrast to his actual behavior after the earthquake,



• *Crossing the square in front of the National Theater, you see...*

## ❶ Rossio Station

The circa-1900 facade of Rossio station is Neo-Manueline. You can read the words “*Estação Central*” (central station) carved on its striking horseshoe arches. Find the empty niche where a statue of King Sebastian once stood in the center of two arches. Unfortunately, the statue fell and broke into many pieces in 2016 when a tourist climbed the facade to take a selfie (I’m not kidding). It has since been repaired but has yet to return...much like his legend. This romantic, dashing, and young soldier-king was lost in 1580 in an ill-fated crusade to Africa. As Sebastian left no direct heir, the crown ended up with Philip II of Spain, who became Philip I of Portugal. The Spanish king promised to give back the throne if Sebastian ever turned up—and ever since, the Portuguese have dreamed that Sebastian will return, restoring their national greatness. Even today, in a crisis, the Portuguese like to

liqueur, considered the most authentic; it's just across the square, at the start of the restaurant row—Rua das Portas de Santo Antão—at #7.)

• *A big square is around the corner (fronting the National Theater). This is...*

## 10 Rossio Square

Lisbon's historic center, Rossio, is still the city's bustling cultural heart. Given its elongated shape, historians know it was a Roman racetrack 2,000 years ago; these days, cars circle the loop instead of chariots. It's home to the colonnaded National Theater, American fast-food chains, and street vendors who can shine your shoes, laminate your documents, and sell you cheap watches, autumn chestnuts, and lottery tickets. The column in the square's center honors Pedro IV—king of Portugal and emperor of Brazil. (Many maps refer to the square as Praça Dom Pedro IV, but residents always just call it Rossio, for the train station at one corner.)

The square once held a palace that functioned as the headquarters of the Inquisition. Damaged by the 1755 earthquake, it was demolished, and in an attempt to erase its memory, the National Theater was built in its place.

From here you can see the Elevador de Santa Justa and the ruined convent breaking the city skyline. Notice the fine stone patterns in the pavement—evoking waves encountered by the great explorers. (If you're prone to seasickness, don't look down as you cross the square.)

refusing to sleep in a stone building ever again). The snakes actually hide support mechanisms for the heavy statue. Triumph and Fame toot the king's arrival, while a horse represents Portugal's European power and an elephant asserts the country's dominance in Asia. In its glory days, this city was where east met west. The statue proved such a success that it jump-started sculptor Joaquim Machado de Castro's career (see more at his museum in Coimbra).

The big arch marking the inland side of the square is Lisbon's **Arch of Triumph** (with Vasco da Gama on the left and Pombal on the right). Disregarding his usual austerity, Pombal restored some of the city's Parisian-style grandeur at this central approach into downtown.

Facing the Arch of Triumph, get oriented to a few landmarks on the square (moving from left to right):

At 9 o'clock is the cozy **Wines of Portugal Tasting Room**, a nonprofit wine-appreciation venue. About two dozen local wines are offered; English descriptions are above each tap, and a helpful attendant is happy to explain things. To taste, you buy a chip card (€3 minimum and €1 deposit for the card), take a glass, and serve yourself samples of Portuguese wines of every variety: white, red, green (*vinho verde*), and a few ports (each €1 and up; focused flights of five wines can be reserved for €8-15; daily 11:00-19:00).

At 10 o'clock is the **TI**.

At 2 o'clock, under the arcade just right of the arch, is **Martinho da Arcada**, a fine option for a coffee, pastry, or snack (Praça do Comércio 8, at the corner of Rua da Prata). It was founded in 1782—when the wealthy would come here to savor early ice cream made with mountain snow, lemon, and spices. While it has a fancy restaurant, I'd enjoy just a coffee and pastry in its café bar. This place was one of poet Fernando Pessoa's old haunts (they display a few Pessoa artifacts, lots of old photos, and a shrine-like table that was his favorite). In the early 20th century,

painters, writers, and dreamers shared revolutionary ideas here over coffee.

At 3 o'clock is the much-promoted "**Lisbon Story Center**," a childish exhibit with no artifacts—you pay €8 to stand for an hour looking at animated history on computer screens. Nearby is another branch of the **TI** (in case the first one is too crowded).

And at 5 o'clock is the **Terreiro do Paço Metro stop** (see the red *M* on a post). Finally, look up to see the tree-covered home to São Jorge Castle from the previous walk.

• *Before moving on, use the crosswalk at the bottom of the big square for a quick look at...*

## ② Lisbon's Riverfront

An inviting balustrade and a pair of Pombaline pillars—Lisbon's gateway to the sea, an arrival and departure point for everyone from Philip II of Spain to dictator António de Oliveira Salazar—mark a little pier (called the Cais das Colunas) that offers a fine, water-level view of the Tejo riverscape. To your left is the busy Terreiro do Paço ferry terminal—one of many that connect commuters to the far side of the river. To your right are the 25th of April Bridge and Cristo Rei statue. Down here at water level, you can really see that the Tejo is a tidal river—the Atlantic is just around the bend (past the bridge). At low tide, the humble little rocky beach reveals worlds of sea life in rocky pools. Any tide poolers out today?

• *Now, head back up through the square, cross the busy street, pass under the big arch, and walk down Rua Augusta into the Baixa district. (Skip the chance to pay to go to the top of the arch—it affords only a mediocre view from its empty rooftop.)*

*The first cross-street you meet is...*

• *Look toward the big adjoining square to find the colorful little tavern serving a traditional berry brandy.*

## ⑨ Liquid Sightseeing (Ginjinha Bars)

*Ginjinha* (zheen-ZHEEN-yah) is a favorite Lisbon drink. While nuns baked sweets, the monks took care of quenching thirsts with this sweet liquor, made from the *ginja* berry (like a sour cherry), sugar, and brandy. It's now sold for €1.40 a shot in funky old shops throughout downtown. Buy it with or without berries (*com elas* or *sem elas*—that's "with them" or "without them") and *gelada* (if you want it poured from a chilled bottle). In Portugal, when people are impressed by the taste of something, they say, "*Sabe que nem ginjas*"—literally "It tastes like *ginja*," but meaning "finger-lickin' good."



The oldest *ginjinha* joint in town is a hole-in-the-wall at Largo de São Domingos 8. If you hang around the bar long enough, you'll see them refill the bottle from an enormous vat. (Another *ginjinha* bar, Ginjinha Sem Rival, serves the prized *Eduardinho*



A stone monument on the square remembers the Jewish massacre of 1506. Many Jews expelled from Spain in 1492 took refuge in Portugal. But when a drought ravaged the country, Lisbonites killed several thousand of them on this square.

The city's 16th-century slave market also took place here, but the square is now a meeting point for the city's African community—immigrants from former Portuguese colonies such as Angola, Mozambique, and Portuguese Guinea. They hang out, trade news from home, and watch the tourists go by.

With that unfortunate heritage, the city today calls itself the “City of Tolerance.” You’ll see that phrase—in the language of all the communities that now live peacefully together here—on a wall behind the benches. Just beyond this square is a square called Praça Martim Moniz, the springboard for the tangled and characteristic Mouraria district, the immigrant neighborhood between here and the castle (described later, under “Sights in Lisbon”).

### 3 Rua do Comércio

Look right to see the old **cathedral** with its Romanesque fortress-like crenellations (described later, under “Sights in Lisbon”). Notice that many of the surrounding buildings are in the austere architectural style adopted immediately after the earthquake. Exterior decoration was adopted here in Lisbon only in the 19th century, after the Portuguese in colonial Brazil found that the tiles protected against humidity.



The characteristic black-and-white cobbled **sidewalk** (*calçada*) is uniquely Portuguese. These mosaic limestone and basalt cobbles were first cut and laid by 19th-century prison laborers, but maintaining them has since developed into a skilled craft. To this day patterns are chosen from acceptable designs made from large, wooden stencils. One benefit of these sidewalks is that they move

and flow with the earth; even as tree roots spread or the ground shifts, the asphalt does not crack. But as the stones can be slippery and require skilled labor, the city government is talking about replacing them with modern pavement. Locals are crying out to keep the tradition.

Across the street, on the right, you'll pass the **MUDE**, Lisbon's museum of 20th-century design and fashion, occupying a former bank building (likely closed for renovation).

• *The next cross-street is...*

#### ④ Rua de São Julião

**Churches** blend into the postearthquake Baixa. There's one about 30 yards to the left down Rua de São Julião (hiding on right side of street; look for the triangular pediment over door). Churches were rebuilt to be better incorporated into the no-nonsense grid plan of the Baixa. Look up for evidence of how downtown Lisbon's population is shrinking as more people move to the suburbs: The upper floors of many buildings are now mostly empty.



• *Step into the square just beyond the church.*

#### ⑧ Largo de São Domingos

This area was just outside of the old town walls—long a place where people gathered to keep watering holes busy and enjoy bohemian entertainment. Today the square is home to classic old bars (like the *ginjinha* bar described next) and a busy “eating lane,” Rua das Portas de Santo Antão (kitty-corner from where you entered the square, to the right of the National Theater on the far side of the square).



horse. Continue straight out of the square on **Rua Dom Antão de Almada**. This lane has several characteristic shops. Pop into the classic cod shop (on the left at #1C—you'll smell it). Cod (*bacalhau*) is part of Portugal's heritage as a nation of seafaring explorers: Salted cod could keep for a year on a ship. Just soak in water to rinse out the salt and enjoy. The adjacent ham counter serves *pata negra* (*presunto ibérico*) from acorn-fed pigs—the very best. Many say the *alheira* sausage, made with bread, game, and garlic instead of pork, was a favorite among Lisbon's Jews back when they needed to fake being Christians (during the forced conversions of the Inquisition era). In reality, the sausage was a way to preserve other types of meat for long winter months.

• *At the end of the lane stands a big church facing another square.*

### 7 Church of São Domingos

A center of the Inquisition in the 1600s, this is now one of Lisbon's most active churches (daily 7:30-19:00). The evocative interior—rebuilt from the ruins left by the 1755 earthquake—would continue to play an important role in local history due to its location so near Rossio. Two famous royal weddings were held here in the 1800s. But the current state of the church—with black soot on the walls and charred stonework at the altar—is due to a raging fire in 1959. Closed for decades, São Domingos finally reopened to the public in the 1990s, with all its scars still visible. Tabloid photos of fire damage can be seen at the exit. Our Lady of Fátima is Portugal's most popular saint, and her chapel (in the left rear of the church) always has the most candles. Her statue is accompanied by two of the three children to whom she miraculously appeared (the third was still alive when this chapel was made and so is not shown in heaven with the saint).



At the next block, **Rua da Conceição**, there's a stop for the handy trolley #28E. Ahead on the right (in the windows of the Millennium Bank) are Roman artifacts—a reminder that Lisbon's history goes way back.

• *Go two more blocks to the intersection with Rua da Vitoria. Turn right and walk two blocks to Rua da Prata, where you'll see the camouflaged...*

### 5 Church of St. Nicholas (Igreja de São Nicolau)

Notice how a typical church facade faces the square, but on the streetfront side, the entire exterior is covered with green tiles, as just another stretch of post-earthquake Baixa architecture. The church made extra income by leasing what is technically their property to the businesses on busy Rua da Prata. Several of the fine, tiled buildings near this square have been refurbished. In fact,

the one at the very top of the square hides a free elevator that takes you partway up to the castle atop the Alfama.



• Head north down *Rua da Prata* toward the statue marking *Praça da Figueira*. At *Rua de Santa Justa*, look left for a good view of *Elevador de Santa Justa* before continuing straight to the square.

### 6 Praça da Figueira (Fig Tree Square)

This was the site of a huge hospital destroyed in the earthquake. With no money to replace the hospital, the space was left open until the late 1880s, when it was filled with a big iron-framed market (similar to Barcelona's La Boqueria). That structure was torn down decades ago, leaving the square you see today.



The big building on the left, with its upper floors long neglected, has been purchased in part by Spanish tennis star Rafael Nadal for a total of €62 million. It's an example of the neighborhood being reinvigorated—though likely at the expense of long-time tenants.

The nearby **Confeitaria Nacional** shop (on the corner of the square, 20 yards to your left) is a venerable palace of sweets little changed since the 19th century. In the window is a display of “*conventuel* sweets”—special nun-made treats often consisting of sugar and egg yolks. (Historically, the nuns, who used the egg whites to starch their laundry, had an abundance of yolks.) Consider a light lunch in the recommended upstairs dining room.

The square is a transportation hub, with stops for minibus #737 to the castle; old trolley #12E to the Alfama viewpoint; modern trolley #15E and bus #714 heading out to Belém; and hop-on, hop-off tour buses.

Walk to the far-left corner of the square, past skateboarders oblivious to its historical statue—Portugal's King João I on a