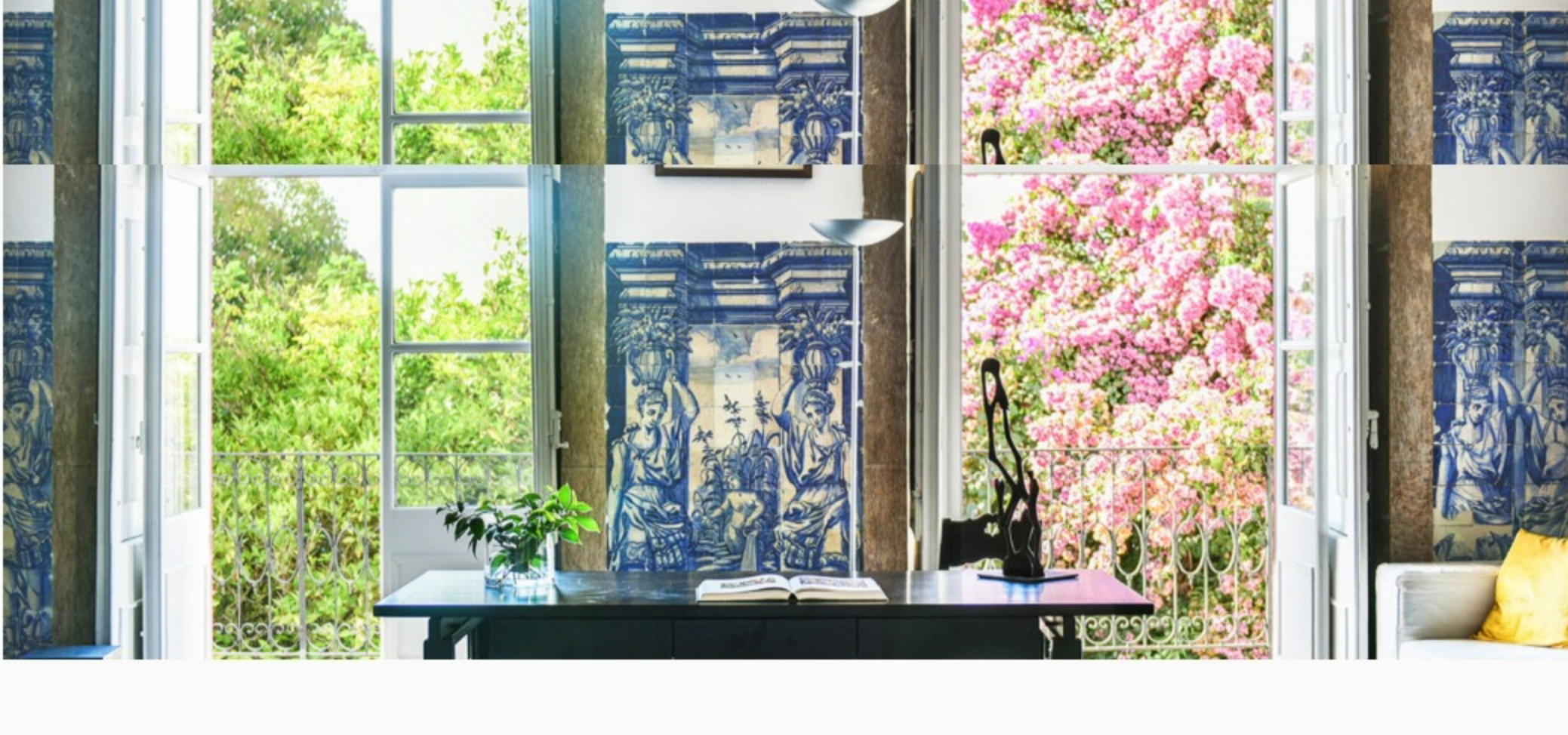


A palace with a view

IT USED TO BE JUST A PLACE TO REST YOUR HEAD. BUT IN OUR FAST-CHANGING TIMES, THE HOTEL HAS EVOLVED IN ENDLESS INCARNATIONS: ART, DESIGN, HI-TECH, WELLNESS, UNDERWATER OR TREE HOTELS CATER TO THE MODERN TRAVELER'S EVERY WHIM. AN ENCLAVE OF ORIGINAL AUBERGES, THOUGH, DEFIES ANY LABEL. FAMILY OWNED, WITH A FASCINATING STORY AND A DISTINCTIVE SOUL, THESE ESTABLISHMENTS BOAST A CLIENTELE RESEMBLING THAT OF AN EXCLUSIVE PRIVATE CLUB AND A CHARM THAT IS SUBTLE AND INIMITABLE. THIS IS TRUE OF PALÁCIO BELMONTE IN THE PORTUGUESE CAPITAL, LISBON.



Perched atop the Alfama district with breathtaking views of the city, a stone's throw from São Jorge Castle, the palace is the former residence of the Earl of Belmonte dating back to 1449. When you first spot it, you could mistake it for a private home. Step inside, and the appearance continues. You feel like you are in one of your stylish friends' plush house, or on the ideal set for a costume drama: no wonder movies like Wim Wenders' »Lisbon Story« were filmed here, and taste-makers such as designer Christian Louboutin or actor Jeremy Irons, call this home when in town.



For the elegant floors, 300 years old wood from Latvia was used.



With a passion for historic preservation, Frédéric Coustols renovated the historic house into a palace of the highest order.

»It took me six years to restore the building in accordance with the rules of sustainability and the Venice Charter«, says Frédéric Coustols, who bought it in 1994 to make it his home. »At that time it was in total disrepair. Rain poured in through the roofs: we had to collect the water in buckets.« Coustols, a wealthy Frenchman with the passion for conservation (he owns a fortified township in Gascony and is restoring villages in India and China), soon realized that he wanted the stunning palace to be more than a private residence. »For most people, a house is a place to sleep. For me it is where something happens.« He envisioned »a luxury guesthouse for people who see luxury as synonymous with simplicity.« But bringing the Palácio back to life was no easy feat.



The café invites you to linger and marvel at the extraordinary and yet so simple interior world.

»Replacing the original materials was a challenge, as the building was constructed and remodeled in periods ranging from Roman times to 1725. We paved the floors with the same 300-year-old Latvian fern wood the Earl originally traded for wine. The 18th century hand-painted Azulejos (blue and white tiles) now on the walls were all mixed up: we had 3,800 of them and 59 panels to recreate.«



Small unexpected niches with architectural and historical highlights.



The hand-painted blue and white tiles date back to the 18th century and have been lavishly reconstructed into small works of art.

Along the way, there were a few surprises: »We found an escape tunnel running to the river Tagus; and in a secret room, a chest full of letters from the King and Queen of Portugal.«

The final result is an intriguing structure where unexpected niches, stairways, nooks and openings await at every turn. »Most people want interiors to be perfect. But perfect is not interesting.« There is a chapel and a music room. Television sets, lifts and air conditioning are out: the original, naturally ventilated heating and cooling system were retained. The ten enchanting suites, named after Portuguese personalities, are unique: the »Bartolomeu de Gusmão«, ensconced in a 7th century Moorish tower, has its own terrace; the »Fernão Mendes Pinto« features a Roman wall. Ours, the »Padre Himalaya«, occupies a Roman tower. From the bedroom windows the city is at our feet: the rooftops glint, the river shimmers. The bathroom, covered in marble, is straight out of a James Bond film.



The marble tiled room could serve as a smooth film set.

In the high-ceilinged common areas of the »piano nobile«, the décor juxtaposes antiques such as a rare Indo-Portuguese chest of drawers (»I spent three months negotiating the price«) and modern art pieces with flair and nonchalance; sculptures, paintings and installations such as the acrylic light sculpture »Outside Over There« in the »Maria Ursula Ballroom«. »I had no fixed vision for the décor: it happened organically«, says Coustols. »Nothing is static. This place is alive and fluid, not a museum.«



Between sculptures, paintings and installations, the high ceilings of the »piano nobile« look alive and flowing.

Guests love to linger in the library stocked with more than 4,000 books, where the walls are lined with words listing a word from each language of the world, an oeuvre the owner's artist sister made for French president François Mitterrand; or in the organic Mediterranean garden, planted with a fragrant cocktail of Portuguese plants and trees, where a black marble salt water pool is shaded by purple bougainvillea. »I wanted this house to be a place for history, passion, soul, warmth and individuality«, says Coustols. Mission accomplished.



The breathtaking view.

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