

## ESSAY 12

Heart's desire  
*Hooked by 'saudade'*

'Saudade', the almost untranslatable Portuguese feeling of joyful sadness, can be keenly felt throughout the capital and keep you coming back for more – even if you're not entirely sure what it means.

*by Anja Mutic,  
writer*

The first time I laid eyes on Lisbon I felt a strange kind of wistfulness. It didn't make sense because I had never been to Portugal: there was nothing to be wistful about. En route from the airport to the centre we passed tumbledown façades, a tall palm tree here and there poking out between the abandoned buildings.

On that first visit I stayed in Castelo, an old neighbourhood with crooked streets and gabled houses; I slept at Palácio Belmonte (*see page 22*), a 10-suite hideaway

in a 1449 palace that sits atop ancient Roman and Moorish walls. Standouts among my many vivid memories include vistas of once-grand townhouses, laundry-laden balconies and wrinkle-faced ladies gazing pensively out of their windows. I also remember that moment I first stood on the Miradouro de Santa Luzia, a lookout with a view over neighbouring Alfama's rooftops, the river and the dome of the Panteão Nacional, all framed by grapevine-draped lattices.

I've since lost count of my touchdowns at Lisbon Airport, each of which involves a dramatic arrival: it always appears as if the plane is going to land on the terracotta rooftops. On one particular Sunday morning a few years ago I landed as the day was breaking: everything was half-dark, slow and still. Fado played on the radio in my taxi – a fitting welcome. And there it was again, that same wistfulness. I recognised it so distinctly as the car slid through the empty streets.

I now know the name of this wistfulness: it's called *saudade* in Portuguese. Like Denmark's *hygge* or the Swedish *lagom*, it's a word that eludes translation. Some describe it as melancholy, others a sweet sadness. It's akin to the love that lingers after someone is gone. But it's not just about loss: it can be a yearning or nostalgia. *Saudade* is like a thread that weaves in and out of all aspects of Portuguese

*“Saudade’ is like a thread that weaves in and out of all aspects of Portuguese society; it’s the foundation of the country’s mentality”*

Portugal had it all before it lost so much of what it was proud of. Its steady decline from a once rich and powerful monarchy, with its golden era during the Age of Discoveries, to a country struck hard by the debt crisis left its mark. No wonder *saudade* has since become omnipresent.

I have a soft spot for nostalgia, the bittersweet remembrance of the past – so, really, it’s also no wonder that I love this city. I love walking through the half-empty streets on a quiet afternoon, past yellow funiculars and rickety trams that clamber up and down the cobbled hills. I love listening to bluesy fado seeping out from half-closed bars in Alfama and stumbling across laundry lines zigzagging their way through narrow alleyways. I love strolling through unexpected squares filled with greenery and eating *pastéis de nata* on the waterfront district of Belém. During the 15th century, explorers set out from here to discover the world – this very

society; it’s the foundation of the country’s mentality, a tune that forever plays subtly in the background. And it’s not surprising. A former colonial powerhouse,

same world in which today so little remains to be discovered.

I was hooked by *saudade* so strongly that a couple of years after that initial visit I returned. The idea was to visit friends and spend a summer month by the Rio Tejo, writing up a storm. I found a small apartment on the top floor of a run-down building in Bairro Alto, a quarter known for its languid days and raucous nights. From one side of my living room I could see the Castelo de São Jorge.

I came back to Lisbon the following year, left again and then returned. Over the years I kept coming and going – and I still do. I revisit Lisbon every chance I get, to listen to a little fado, get lost on aimless hillside wanders and take in that enchanted light. Something tells me it’s *saudade* that keeps luring me back, triggering my senses in ways so seductive and poignant that I can’t resist. — (M)

#### ‘Saudade’ sweet spots

##### 01 Ride a tram

Take Tram 28 from Martim Moniz to Campo de Ourique.

##### 02 Listen to fado

Head to the cosy Tasca do Chico in Bairro Alto.

##### 03 Look out over the Tejo

Sit by Cais do Sodré and soak in the river views.



**ABOUT THE WRITER:** Anja Mutic is a writer who splits her time between Zagreb, Croatia and New York. Although she calls Lisbon her impossible love, she has had an affair with the city for 15 years and returns frequently.