

Pena Palace Sintra

Wildly vibrant. Fearlessly flamboyant.

Twenty five km from the vibrant capital of Portugal lies the 145 sq km sprawl of an enchanting UNESCO World Heritage Site brimming with European Romantic architectural marvels, natural wonders and historic treasures.

words // Punita Malhotra



The iconic iron gate at Pena Palace provided great defence against attacks

The Sintra-Cascais Natural Park is a wonderland of hidden sandy bays, rugged coastline, towering cliffs, thick forests and shimmering lakes. Hiding in its misty, woody folds, is an intriguing town with a name inspired by the Roman goddess of nature, Sintra. Flaunting a quintessentially Portuguese historic centre with quaint cobbled streets, traditional white-n-yellow houses, tiny squares, artisanal nooks, outdoor cafes, and mouth-watering local delights. And home to one of the Seven Wonders of Portugal, the famed Pena Palace, where far-fetched fantasies of fairy palaces, exquisite castles and paradise gardens melt into reality.

DWARFED BY GREEN

Curiosity levels are peaking by the time one alights at the shaded,

sun-filtered entrance of the Sintra Park and Palace. The reverie rolls in gently with a wandering trail along the labyrinth paths of the 200-hectare forested grounds, nestling what was the royal summer retreat to Portuguese royalty during the 19th century. Skyscraper trees kiss the cloudless blue skies. Fuzzy sunbeams break through the thick green glades as leaves crunch underfoot. It's a deeply luxurious, velvety soft, moss-lathered rocky terrain with endless walking paths, tinkling streams and the shadow of the highest peaks of the Serre de Sintra. This is no ancient forest but an elaborately landscaped magical woodland designed by King Fernando II. Rare flora and fauna from across continents sprout everywhere, follies hide behind thick clumps, and there's even a lake with black swans

from Australia. Pena Park is a destination in itself where several hours can fly by.

TOUCHED BY A RAINBOW

The first splash of technicolor can be seen through the lush vegetation, leading to a quickening of pace. A few more peek-a-boos around the last couple of bends and the drama of the full panorama unfolds. Legoland, the mind recalls by default as a mystical, multi-coloured castle-palace looms up ahead, oozing a one-of-a-kind whimsical kitsch, against the backdrop of a deep blue sky. Hopelessly romantic, unabashedly extravagant and strangely unreal. Doused in a blend of shades unimaginable for an imperial residence—rosy red, mango yellow, soft lilac. This is as playfully vivid as it gets.

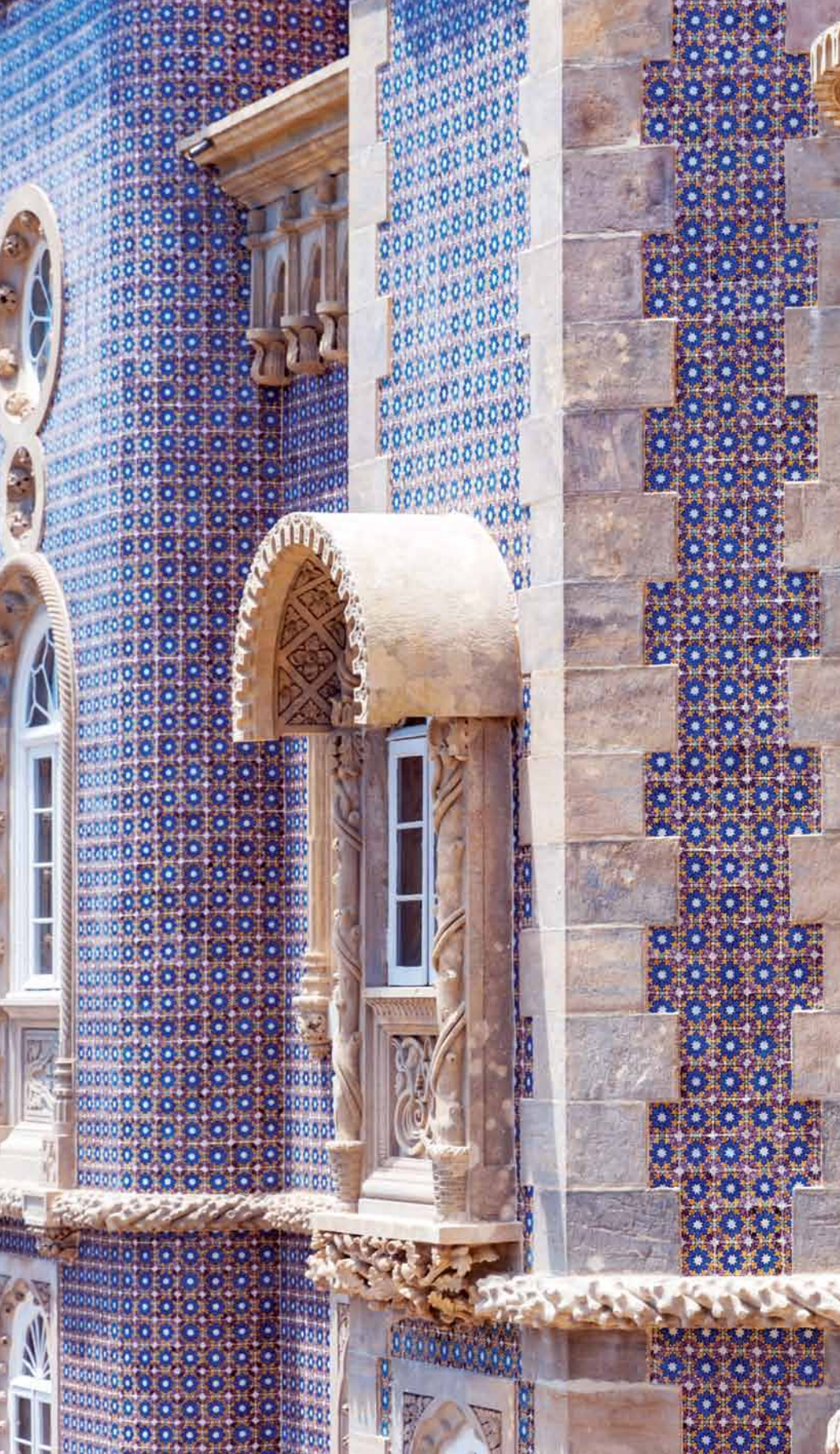
Is that really a 19th century palace converted from a defunct monastery? Imagination meets innovation in one fanciful building as varied elements including a chapel, cloister, dome and drawbridge present themselves with equal aplomb. Architects commissioned by Ferdinand II, king consort to Queen Maria II may have been inspired by Bavarian castles, but Pena Palace stands in a league of its own, every inch of

its flamboyant facade screaming for undivided attention. There is a lot to digest—a jumble of turrets and towers, arches and spires, gargoyles and mythological creatures. An unexpected medley of shapes: round, square, pointy, conical. A wild mix of medieval, Renaissance, Gothic, Moorish and Manueline (Portuguese neo-Gothic) architecture, reflecting in geometric tiles, elaborate stone carvings and opulent gold domes.

The Royal
Kitchen at
Pena Palace



A wild mix of medieval, Renaissance, Gothic, Moorish and Manueline architecture is reflected in the geometric tiles, elaborate stone carvings and opulent gold domes here.



The facade studded with blue azulejos

Contrasting, even conflicting styles tossed together, in a strange harmony, shunning all conceivable logic, yet creating a pleasantly attractive whole.

Eyes stay riveted to the riot of colours all along the steep cobbled path, leading to an Arabic-style keyhole archway, the Door of Alhambra. Unmistakably reminiscent of Morocco. Then the half-man, half-fish statue of Triton holding up a huge bay window, intricately carved with waves, corals, grapes and flowers, conjures up an image of ancient Greece. Until rope-like twisting columns of a neo-Manueline entrance bring Portugal back into focus. It's a heady cocktail.

STUNNED INTO SILENCE

The palace interiors are a maze of sumptuously decorated rooms, as if frozen in time with the 1910 Republican revolution. Beneath the ornate sculptures, glittering chandeliers, rich furniture and gilded mirrors, one can detect a prolific cross-border influence of the times—Islamic-style stucco, Roman artwork and Turkish carpets meet Chinese porcelain, Bohemian crystal and Arabesque arched windows. Noteworthy stops include the royal quarters, an imposing dining room and the massive kitchens loaded with oversized copper utensils. The piece de resistance is the Sala dos Arabes (Arab room) where delicately frescoed, all-white vaulted ceilings and arched doorway designs show off King Manuel I's most important artistic contribution—tile-work borrowed from Seville and Granada in Spain. It's all geometric, lace-like, floral and classically Islamic in design.

There's more colour inspiration ahead. Pena Palace is literally an art gallery of abundant azulejo (Arabic



You can fly to
Lisbon with
Vistara's interline
partners Qatar
Airways and
Turkish Airlines.

for 'small polished stone') mosaic, a 13th century Moorish import and an integral part of Portuguese culture. Walls and floors overflow with an unimaginable array of hand-painted graceful motifs celebrating life, nature, religion and history, in 2-D and 3-D. The archetypal ones are recognisable in blue-white tones, the fashionable colour palette of the Gothic times. Could the resemblance to the Chinese porcelain from the Ming Dynasty be a pure coincidence? Other dominant colours like

yellows, greens and oranges add to the hypnotic aesthetic. The dark corridors of the Manueline cloister are complemented perfectly by the Riad-like inner courtyard lined with multi-hued Mudéjar azulejo. Another unmissable spectacle is the over-the-top gold dome ceiling with the imperial coats of arms in the 'Room of the Coats of Arms'. Competing for eyeball space are Portuguese stories of poignant history and lifestyle laid out in blue-and-

white ceramic tapestry on the walls below.

DAZZLED BY THE KALEIDOSCOPE

Finally, it's time for the big picture, dedicated time out to ogle at the palace facade from the far end of the cafe terrace. The red wing draws attention to the restored monastery that used to be home to 18 monks of the Order of Saint Jerome. The clock tower is only a faint reminder of its original avatar. An iconic stained-glass window waits inside the chapel for those seeking more eye candy. From this vantage point, the outlandish colours make for a lively, cheerful canvas. The massive grey-blue dome throws a hint of Austro-Hungarian. Tooth-shaped battlements remind of deserted English castles. Yellow twin-domes have a striking resemblance to Munich's celebrated Frauenkirche. There's even an Indian *chhatra*-style turret, complete with a yellow onion dome, finding its corner of comfort in the entire bohemian rhapsody. Pena Palace breaks all the rules, yet hogs all the limelight with its distinctly bizarre character.

Crowds melt away into oblivion as one immerses in the soul-stirring views of the impressive fortress walls winding down the hill. The surrounding forest stretches on for miles...it is possible to spot Lisbon and even the fathomless Atlantic in the distance, on a clear, cloudless day. Thirteen centuries ago, when the Arabs launched their 700-year long conquest of Iberia, Sintra was a strategic military stronghold. Thanks to the eccentric vision of a supremely cultured Portuguese regent, today it is the penultimate icon of Romanticist architecture. From dull caterpillar to vivacious butterfly...this certainly has been a metamorphosis par excellence! 🌸

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Vintage porcelain candle sticks and clock inside the palace