The Alfama is Lisbon’s oldest and most atmospheric quarter, a labyrinthine maze of narrow streets, steps and alleys wrapped round the steep lower slopes of the Moorish castle. Walking around the area is a must for any Lisbon visit. It’s the street life that’s the interest here, much of it continuing in the same way as it has for centuries, with children playing in the squares and alleys, and families cooking fish on tiny grills outside their houses. Appropriately in an area which is home to many fado clubs, there is also a museum dedicated to this classic Portuguese music genre, while around the Alfama are further distractions in the form of the city’s cathedral, two historic churches containing national pantheons, a fantastic market, and museums dedicated to a Roman theatre, decorative arts and – further east – Portuguese tiles. Continue reading to find out more about... What to see in the Alfama Alfama walks and viewpoints **What to see in the Alfama The Sé** Lisbon’s squat, military-looking cathedral – the Sé – is Romanesque in style, with a surprisingly plain and sombre interior. This is because many of its original embellishments were destroyed by the 1755 earthquake, though restoration work in the 1930s saw the reconstruction of the huge and impressive rose window. The cathedral was founded in 1150 on the site of Moorish Lishbuna’s main mosque, shortly after the city was taken from the Moors under the direction of the Englishman Gilbert of Hastings, who became Lisbon’s first bishop.Most things of value were placed in the Treasury, including the remains of St Vincent, which, according to legend, arrived in Lisbon in a boat guided by ravens – the birds are still a symbol for the city today. Of more interest, however, is the thirteenth-century cloister, which is currently being excavated, to reveal the remains of a Roman house and Moorish public buildings. **useu do Fado** Set in the renovated Recinto da Praia, a former water cistern and bathhouse, the Museo do Fado is an engaging museum outlining the history of fado and Portuguese guitar by way of wax models, paintings, sounds and descriptions of the leading characters and styles of this very Portuguese music. It’s an excellent introduction to fado and worth seeing before you visit a fado house. There’s also a small café and a good shop selling fado CDs. **Museu de Artes Decorativas Portuguesas** Inside a seventeenth-century mansion, the lovely Museu de Artes Decorativas Portuguesas displays what was once the private collection of banker Ricardo do Espírito Santo Silva, who offered it to the nation in 1953. Here, you can see some of the best examples of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century applied arts in the country. Highlights include a stunning sixteenth-century tapestry depicting a parade of giraffes, beautiful carpets from Arraiolos in the Alentejo, and oriental quilts that were all the rage in the seventeenth century. The museum also has a courtyard café. **São Vicente de For a** The church of São Vicente de Fora takes its name from its original position fora (outside) the city walls. Built on the site where Crusaders perished while fighting the Moors, it remains one of Lisbon’s most interesting churches. Begun in 1582 under the Italian architect Felipe Terzi, it was finally inaugurated in 1629 only to be partially destroyed by the earthquake of 1755. It was then restored and in 1855, the former monastic refectory became the official burial site for the kings and queens of the House of Bragança. You can see the tombs of pretty much all the Portuguese monarchs from João IV to Manuel II, the last Portuguese king, who died in exile in England in 1932. Look out too for the tomb of Catherine of Bragança, the widow of England’s Charles II. Upstairs rooms trace the history of La Fontaine’s fables illustrated on 38 tile panels, but save some energy to climb to the roof for spectacular views out over the city. There’s also a lovely café by the entrance. **Feira da Ladra** Lisbon’s twice-weekly Feira da Ladra (“thieves’ market”) sprawls colourfully around the elongated square of Campo de Santa Clara below the impressive dome of the Santa Engrácia church. As well as bric-a-brac and old junk, you’ll also find cheap clothes, CDs, crafts, books, prints, antiques of varying quality and the odd novelty (such as night-vision goggles or souvenirs from Portugal’s former colonies). Best of all, though, are the people who run the stalls, a motley collection of Lisbon’s most interesting characters. **Santa Engrácia** The white dome of Santa Engrácia makes it one of the most recognizable buildings on the city skyline. Begun in 1682, it was not completed until 1966, leading to the expression “a job like Santa Engrácia”, one that is never finished. Since 1916, the church has been the Panteão Nacional, housing the tombs of eminent Portuguese figures, including former presidents, the writer Almeida Garrett and Amália Rodrigues, Portugal’s most famous fado singer. You can go up to the terrace for dazzling views across the river and city below. **Museu Nacional do Azulejo** One of the most appealing of Lisbon’s small museums, the Museu Nacional do Azulejo traces the development of tile-making from Moorish days to the present via its hugely impressive collection of azulejos, covering the main styles of tile from the fifteenth century to the present day. The museum is housed within the church and cloisters of Madre de Deus, a former convent dating from 1509. The church has a Baroque interior, installed after the earthquake of 1755, and retains some striking eighteenth-century tiles depicting scenes from the life of Santo António. Most of the museum is set around the church cloisters, which house many more delights, including Portugal’s longest azulejo – a 36m tiled panorama of pre-earthquake Lisbon, completed in around 1738 – and some fascinating examples of the large azulejo panels known as tapetes (carpets). There’s also a lovely garden café. **Alfama walks and viewpoints** Simply walking around is the best thing to do when you visit the Alfama. The easiest place to start a wander is along the road below the Sé, which becomes Rua de São João de Praça, and later Rua de São Pedro. Follow this as it twists its way down to the Alfama’s lower square, Largo do Chafariz de Dentro, home to many of the city’s best fado bars and clubs. From here, head uphill and you’ll probably get lost in the maze of alleys that wend up past the church of São Miguel to emerge by the Largo das Portas do Sol, a viewpoint with a tremendous outlook – a solitary palm rising from the stepped streets against the dome of Santa Engraçia and the Tejo beyond. Just round the corner, in front of the Igreja da Santa Luzia, the Mirádouro da Santa Luzia has perhaps the city’s best views across the Alfama and the river.