

Welcome to Belém, the scam artist capital of Lisbon

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It has been quite a while since I was in Lisbon for a conference, but I still have a bunch of tiny travel stories. They may not be timely, but they're just stories. Lisbon is a wonderful city, and unlike Madrid, it doesn't have the feeling that it's overrun with tourists. It may very well be overrun with tourists, but at least it doesn't scream it at you. Well, until you get to the Belém neighborhood, which is where all the big monuments and famous historical buildings are. The sense begins to grow at the Padrão dos Descobrimentos (Monument to the Discoveries), and by the time you reach the Torre de Belém (Belém Tower), the touristiness is in full swing. I didn't notice any aggressive scam artists anywhere else in the city, but around the Tower of Belém you couldn't throw a rock without hitting one. First, there were the usual vendors selling overpriced trinkets or "artists" whose paintings of quaint Alfama alleyways are, in fact, color-by-number. These are not actually scam artists, but they are still out to separate tourists from their money in exchange for something of dubious value. As I approached Torre de Belém, arguably the signature landmark of the Belém district if not all of Lisbon, a gentleman approached me selling discounted tickets to enter the tower. "Half price, compared to buying them at the Tower." I politely declined, and when I reached the tower, I realized that the scam went beyond merely just selling fake tickets. You see, the tower was closed indefinitely due to a labor dispute. Even if the tickets were real, they were still no good. You could wander the grounds around the Tower but you couldn't go in, no matter how many tickets you bought or how cheap they were. A short time thereafter, I encountered my second Belém scam artist. There is one public rest room in the area. It doesn't get a lot of traffic, but that makes the job easier for the elderly gentleman who sat on a chair outside the entrance to the women's toilet. When a woman approached, he would get up and assist her with the door, guide her to a stall, and afterwards run the water in the sink, pump the soap for her, hand her a paper towel to dry her hands, and when his "services" were complete, he would block the exit until the woman paid him a small gratuity. (Just so you know, the sink area of the washroom is plainly visible from outdoors; I didn't go snooping into the women's bathroom for the purpose of investigative reporting. But I was intrigued when I saw the gentleman get up from his chair and go into the women's bathroom.) Related scam (not true, but an amusing story nonetheless).

Random tourist tips:

- If you choose to walk up to Castelo de São Jorge, you may see conflicting signs for directions, some of them official city signs and some of them merely graffiti. We decided to follow the graffiti and it worked okay, though the government path may have been more scenic (passing by more shops rather than wandering through a residential alley).
- At least the day I was there (March 11, 2008), the Sintra train during off-peak runs every 20 minutes, not 15 as more than one guide book claims.
- If you get a Lisbon Card, *make sure to bring the booklet with you* as well as the card, because many of the discounts are in the form of coupons from the book.

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