

# interview

Catarina Portas

Portuguese retail entrepreneur Catarina Portas started her career making hats with a local milliner before becoming a journalist focusing on fashion. She now runs the retro shops A Vida Portuguesa in Lisbon and Porto; **Richard Bence** talks to her about reviving Portugal's past while looking to the future

**It started in 2004 when I was working as a journalist** and discovered that many products from the 1920s-1960s were still sold in their original packaging. I loved their fun, naive designs, but I realised that these products were vanishing from the market. I decided to investigate, select and assemble them in boxes by theme, with a booklet revealing the stories behind them.

**It's common knowledge that in times of crisis consumers turn to products with a past,** for the sense of security they bring. But in my case, A Vida Portuguesa came about way before the recession. These products have been around for many decades due to their outstanding quality. In some cases this comes down to an old way of doing things, by hand or following ancient skills or techniques.

**The word 'local' is back on everybody's lips and is a trend we are going back to.** It can certainly make a difference in a mass-produced market and help us to overcome the recession.

**I have a special fondness for the swallow that has become the symbol of the shop.** In 1891, the genius artist Rafael Bordalo Pinheiro shaped a few swallows in ceramics



MUSEE CARLOS RANDE

Portas believes 'objects can tell extraordinary stories about people'

to hang from the ceiling of Tabacaria Mónaco (in the Rossio square of Lisbon), where they have remained to this day. He then got carried away and released them on tiles and other decorative pieces. It didn't take long before the swallows were usual in Portuguese homes, both inside and out, becoming something of a national icon – the most beautiful and perfect of them all.

**You can learn a lot about a society by looking at what it once used but no longer wants to keep** – and this is what you find in second-hand markets. I love to take a peek at local markets and second-hand fairs. I also like to visit cemeteries, because I find it interesting to understand the way in which each culture relates to the one that preceded it. The Jewish cemetery in Prague is one of my favourites.

**Lux on Lisbon's riverfront has been my bar of choice ever since it opened 10 years ago.** I've been to several amazing parties there, including the 'Malicious' party with Dita Von Teese, a Fellini-Almodóvar party – where everybody dressed up as a film character – and the New Year party where the guests received a mask with the face of an artist or fashion designer as they walked in.

**I believe eating out on the street is a way of making big cities more friendly and humane.** I love street food, whether it's grilled sardines in Alfama's streets, tapas in the bars of Madrid, or a slice of pizza eaten over the tall tables on top of wine barrels at Forno Roscioli in Rome. So it's no surprise that I've also started a kiosk business in Lisbon (by the way, the empodas – savoury pastry nibbles – are delicious!).

**I'm drawn to small hotels that offer local charm – and even a dose of eccentricity.** In Portugal, I have recently discovered two such places: Pensão Favorita in Porto, which resembles a cloud in the famous street where all the art galleries are located, and A Companhia das Culturas in Castro Marim (south of the country) on the rural Algarve coast, which is a prime example of



**Clockwise:** Pensão Favorita in Porto; The past is revived at A Vida Portuguesa; Portas likes to visit Brussels' Musée de Beaux-Arts when in town



MUSEE CARLOS RANDE

sustainable tourism. You're in the countryside yet minutes away from the beach, you can pick figs at the end of the afternoon, and the owners are distinguished figures of local history. I'm also curious to visit the Vidago Palace Hotel in the north of Portugal – an impressive centenary building that has been recently renovated, including a spa by architect Álvaro Siza Vieira. When I visit any of these places, I start wondering what my own hotel would look like...

**I never miss an opportunity to eat mussels in Brussels.** Ever since my brother, Miguel Portas, became a Member of the European Parliament and moved there, I also visit the antique shops and the marchés aux puces (flea markets). For culture, besides the Magritte Museum, I love the heart collection

gathered by a cardiologist in a delightful room in the Musée de Beaux-Arts.

**The producers I work with for A Vida Portuguesa are true heroes.** They manage old factories that have been around for several generations now, keeping their savoir faire and the quality of their products up to standard. These people refuse to give up, even in the most difficult situations, and continue to make things and make them well.

**We have just launched brand-new products to the Portuguese market:** Portugal's old redcurrant and copifé drinks cordials in bottled versions that are made entirely from natural ingredients. We serve them at our Quiosques de Refresco – refreshment kiosks – in three of Lisbon's historic squares, bringing the city's traditional drinks back.