
Irina: generosity and cultural integration go hand in hand

ABOUT

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World Tourism Day 2021 | #TimeToEmbrace #TimeToBe

We are celebrating the World Tourism Day. Over the last years, the tourism industry has seen an enormous expansion and growth, so it's important to underline how openness and inclusion play a crucial role in improving social, cultural and economic relations. Now we would like to let others talk about their life in Portugal.

Meet Irina, from Moscow, now living in Lisbon.



Moving to a new country can be as daunting as it is exciting. Irina Konova, native of Moscow, knows this first-hand. During her master's studies in London, she met someone who changed her destiny – and her next destination.

“Back in London, I had the fortune to meet my supervisor, a very talented scientist who happened to be Portuguese. She suggested me to continue with my research in Lisbon. She praised the quality of education here, and since I'd already been to Lisbon in past (and had loved it), for me it was a no-brainer to decide to take my PhD here at ISCTE. It was a fortunate choice: I met all my best friends there.”

As life never happens in a straight line, Irina's path also took a different turn than she expected: she put her PhD on hold for now and she's focusing on other professional endeavours, such as organising networking events for expats and locals and facilitating workshops in art therapy.

“When I was a child, I wanted to be a ballet dancer. I used to go with my grandmother every weekend to the ballet in Moscow. That's when I fell in love with art and culture. Lisbon is a very cultural and artistic city and I absolute love this. I truly believe that art can save the world.”



As if this weren't poetic enough, Irina suggested that our interview took place at Maat Museum, one of the most iconic venues in the cultural landscape of Lisbon. This love for all cultural things was one of the fundamental keys to feeling totally acclimated to Lisbon's urban scene. However, Irina told us what strategy she used to find her groove in Portugal.

"Volunteering. This was absolutely my best decision that helped me to integrate myself. I really recommend everyone to volunteer. It helps to understand what goes on in people's minds. I checked Bolsa do Voluntariado's website and I found so many options. The volunteering sector in Portugal is very well managed and well developed, it's unbelievable!"

The first one I collaborated with was called Serve the City, in which we would organize tea parties with grannies in Campo de Ourique, in the library and the old cinema of that neighbourhood. These meetings happened once a week and aimed to entertain the grannies with music, dance, singing, art therapy. It was a beautiful initiative. I also volunteered at Refood, the famous non-profit that helps to build a human bridge between excess (by avoiding food waste) and necessity (by helping those in need).

What I really liked is that 70% of people that volunteer are Portuguese. So this is paramount: if you want to embrace Portuguese culture, if you want to understand where you live, please take a shot at volunteering. These people have the best values: kindness, empathy, taking care of each other and there's always a really warm and embracing atmosphere. Also, it's a pretty good way of give back to the society."



Irina has been living in Estrela neighbourhood since the beginning of her life in Lisbon.

"I fell in love with Jardim da Estrela. It's an authentic tropical garden. Did you know there are tons of parrots there?"

Her love for the city is palpable. She loves starting the day running in the park or near the river. After work, she still takes the time to appreciate the Lisbon sky. "It seems straight out of an impressionist painting, filled with beautiful colours.", she chuckles.

"Almost every day is a perfect day, I must admit it. I do believe that we build our own reality and I choose to be happy every day. Here in Lisbon it's easy to do that: good food, good people, good weather and a very safe space. After I moved to Lisbon, I changed a lot. I started to be more cheerful, more open towards other people, I started to smile more. My creativity somehow was unblocked. I believe the city and the people I've met helped to boost my creativity levels. I can't control my creativity now - it has its own life."

Irina recently received Portuguese citizenship. In her own words, it has been the happiest moment she's lived in Portugal so far.

"It was a tremendous honour for me. I cried that day, it was very emotional. I'm so glad that Portugal allows us immigrants to experience that. And probably the next happiest moment will be this Sunday, when I get to vote for the first time. It will be a very important day in my life. I'm kind of Portuguese now."



Photos by @nashdoeswork