

I had my first glimpse of the Ribatejo, the region of Portugal that is home to the Lusitano and all its heritage, in the Spring of 2011. Following the Tagus river south, the plane flew over a vast delta, heavily cultivated and glowing green with rice paddies and hay fields. The margins of the delta rose gently to a shelf to the East, and the land turned into pastures and open woodlands. As the plane neared the city we circled out over the Atlantic and then flew right back up the Tagus. This time I could look down and see the Tower of Belem, the Jeronimos Monastery, and the hills of Lisbon just behind. The landing was abrupt and too near those populous hills for my taste! But finally, after dreaming of Portugal since seeing the glorious Lusitanos of Brasil and the beautiful performance of the Portuguese School of Equestrian Art in Paris, I had arrived.

Perhaps you can tell that this is not a training article or a biographical piece on a famous rider. This is a story of romance, charm, beauty and history, all created by a noble, dignified horse whose characteristics and functionality have made him a rising star in the dressage competition world. The Iberic horse has always been the Horse of Kings and a treasured mount for students of classical dressage, but now the rest of the equine world is learning to appreciate his unique abilities. Now, back to the romance!

The performance in Paris in late November of 2007 was the first time the Four Classical Schools were seen together. It was a moving experience when they filed into Bercy, four abreast, the Directors of the Schools at the head of columns of their horses and riders. The crowd was on it's feet cheering and it was only the beginning. We saw dazzling performances of the Schools from Saumur, Jerez, Vienna, and Portugal. But the riders from Portugal captured my heart with their beautiful bays from Alter and their gorgeous baroque costumes. I decided then I would journey to Portugal as soon as I could.

It took nearly four more years but arriving in June of 2011 with the Barbiers to discover the heritage of the Lusitano...and to take a trip down a poignant memory lane for Dominique...was unexpectedly life-changing. From my first glimpse of the Ribatejo I felt a connection to the land that was both surprising and forceful. I had traveled many times to Brasil with Dominique and Debra, beginning in 2007, and photographed the finest Lusitano breeding farms including Interagro and Rocas do Vouga. But land and heritage of Portugal kept calling me through the noble Lusitano.

We saw a lovely performance by the School of Equestrian Art in the outdoor ring at the National Palace at Queluz, visited Sintra, and toured the Coach Museum in Belem.

A visit to Mestre Luis Valença would take us north, following the Tagus up into the Ribatejo. I was at eye level with the watery landscape I had viewed from above. And I was now seeing horses dotting the open woodlands, rolling hillsides, and intermittent grasslands. I saw fields with black bulls lazily munching in the heat of mid-day. Nesting storks made condominiums of the electricity pylons while wading birds of all kinds were busily bobbing beaks and heads up and down in the rice paddies.

Listening to Dominique reminisce with Mestre Luis was like turning the pages in a history book of the Great Masters. Of course there was much discussion of Mestre Nuno Oliveira. Each of these men shared favorite personal reminiscences. But they also spoke of the great breeding families of Portugal. Veiga, Coimbra, and Braga were names I had heard often and seen on the genealogy of fine Lusitanos from Brasil. I knew of Andrade and Meneses from learning about Mestre Oliveira and his horses, but now I was hearing about the personal side of the man and his relationship with his horses and the breeders that created them.

After we left Mestre Valenca, we traveled to Avesada, a tiny village west of Vila Franca, and stepped back more than 30 years in history. We visited the Manege of Mestre Oliveira. Nothing had changed since the years that Dominique had lived and studied there. It was quiet, only a few horses in the old stalls, but no one in the manege. The chair in the corner where the Mestre would sit each day to offer the occasional comment to his students was dust covered, but there. The names on the outside wall of the Picadeiro of the horses that the Mestre shared his life with were all still there...and the hand-painted azulejos of the haute école movements were still at the end of the arena, waiting for the next rider to passage beneath them. Time stood still in melancholy anticipation.

There was a visit to Santarem for a bullfight, unexpectedly exhilarating and enchanting with its pageantry and we visited Senhor Manuel Coimbra and saw horses at his manege in nearby Golegã.

We traveled then to Spain and other wonderful sights and events. But my heart remained in Portugal with my brain trying to figure out how to get back!

I had my chance in November of that year when I was offered some work at Golegã during the Festival of the Lusitano. Pouring rain and a late night connection found me driving north in the pitch black to a tiny village off an unfamiliar roadway. Some two hours later I arrived in Vargos and was shown my room in the charming Villa Vargos. I was off the next day to Golegã to immerse myself in the famous Festival of the Lusitano.

At first I had no idea which way to go, so I decided to follow the horses. They were everywhere! All manner of riders in traditional costumes of forcados, campinos, and apresentadores....carriages, carts, horses being led, horses being ridden, all moving toward an unknown point. I was happy to just float along on the current.

As we neared the epicenter of all the activity the streets grew more narrow and even more crowded. Animals horses and carts were happily coexisting within inches of each other. I'm certain I was wide-eyed! The sounds of hooves on ancient cobblestones began to mix with announcements over a loudspeaker (all in Portuguese), and the calls of the vendors roasting chestnuts...QUENTE! (Hot!). Children were calling to parents to

“look at that one!”, friends called to one another as they were recognized, (En forma? Sim! Todos!) and then the flow of horses and people opened onto a large square. I had arrived: Golegã!

One of the toughest things for a photographer to face is a feast of photographic possibility. I had just walked into the greatest banquet of photos I had ever seen. The light was constantly changing...from bright and sunny to stormy and cloudy, then misty and moody...in less than an hour and continuously! And then when the lights and the chestnut smoke started to mix with the mist and light rain, it lent an almost Dickensian feel to the scene. Horses with riders in traditional costume were parading around the central showground, emerging from the mist and fog, from midday until well into the middle of the night. I was on sensory overload. (and loving every second).

From time to time I would recognize a friend from Brasil, or an acquaintance from the trip in June. People were warm and welcoming and it made it easy to be more relaxed in such a vibrating atmosphere. But the most surprising thing was the horses. With all the activity, sounds, smells, smoke, barking dogs, screaming children, banging, clanging and uproar...nearly every single one was calm and controlled. We are talking hundreds and hundreds of horses, mostly stallions, happily going about their business with a minimum of fuss. Riders of all ages (from 3 to 83) were riding the parade circuit and sharing the track with carts, carriages, ponies, donkeys, and the charging and snorting horses that seemed (by their costumes) to belong to the bullfighters. Here and there, around the grounds, riders stopped by the casitas of friends to have a drink (from horseback) and share a tale or two. As the night grew longer these casitas grew more popular.

I was witnessing an event that had taken place for centuries. Since the late 1700's, breeders and owners brought their finest horses to Golegã to be seen and to buy and sell horses. It was the time for friendships to be renewed, news to be shared, and breeding to be judged. The Festival at Golegã, always at the time of São Martinho in November, stretched across the history and tradition of the Lusitano, uniting the people of the Ribatejo around the endeavor to preserve the finest characteristics in the Iberian horse. The intelligent, brilliant, but kind animal that was bred to courageously face the bulls in the field is the same horse needed to pull the carriage for the family and carry the campinos and landowners across their estates. He was bred to be functional, hardy, willing in his work, and happy to partner with his caretaker. Those are the characteristics that are still revered today and are evident in the proud lineages of the last 200 years.

I met again a familiar face and frequent photographic subject from my trips to Brasil, Senhor Carlos Oliveira....champion apresentador on several continents. Carlos has worked for the finest breeders in Portugal, Europe and Brasil for thirty years: Senhores Veiga, Braga, and Coimbra, Senhor Carlos Torres and Senhor Vasco Freire with many others. He trained and presented many of the great champions of the last twenty-five

years including, among many others, Adeel, Neptune, Opus, Oceano, Violino, Riopete, Raja, and Dragao. That heritage makes him an integral and highly respected part of the Lusitano culture in Portugal with a lofty reputation surpassed only by his love and passion for the horse.

In 2012, I attended the Expo in Lisbon in June, renewed acquaintances and deepened friendships. I photographed the Valença team in the Apassionata shows in Europe and the short lived venture in the US. I returned to Brasil several times to photograph several of the breeding farms and helped lead private tours to share the Lusitano with visitors from the US. And this past year I have led photography workshops for equine enthusiasts and with Carlos Oliveira, I have led riding intensives for Lusitano lovers. Because of this, and my love of the land and its people, I am now living in Portugal, in the heart of the Ribatejo!

I am continually delighted by the costumes and romance with which the country adorns itself. Seeing the landscape turn into a sea of wildflowers this spring is something I will never forget. It was as if they had blossomed just to greet the new crop of foals, to welcome them to a paradise of color, sunshine, and beauty. I thought I knew, intimately, the groves of cork oaks, olives, and hillside vineyards. I've felt the summer heat and the shade of the oaks. I knew the gold and wine colored tones of autumn and harvest time, and the mists and fog of the winter season that greens the hillsides and meadows. Now I know the exuberant technicolor of spring. And in each of these landscapes you will find the serenely beautiful Lusitano weaving in and out of the forests, stallions watching over their mares, just as they have done for hundreds upon hundreds of years.

This November, I'll return to Golega with a small group of horse crazy folks and ride with Carlos Oliveira on his exquisitely trained horses. We will go to Cascais and ride with Pedro Torres, world champion working equitation rider, ride with Ana Batista, top female bullfighter, and visit many other luminaries in the Lusitano world. But best of all, we'll make new friendships over our shared love of this magnificent animal.

Bio:

Keron Psillas began her professional photographic career in 2006. After two years tenure as Director of the Art Wolfe Digital Photography Center, she has been a freelance photographer, writer, teacher, book and web designer, and editing consultant. She continues to offer photographic workshops and riding intensives. She often assists her mentor, National Geographic veteran, Sam Abell, along with several other notable professionals. She accepts commissions for farm shoots at various times during the year. She lives in the Ribatejo in Portugal, in the heart of the culture of the Lusitano. For more information: [www.keronpsillas.com](http://www.keronpsillas.com)

