

by Keron Psillas

THE

Romance OF GOLEGÃ

Keron Psillas began her professional photographic career in 2006. After two years tenure as Director of the Art Wolfe Digital Photography Center, she has maintained a robust career as a freelance photographer, writer, and teacher. She continues to offer photographic workshops and tours on several continents. She often teaches with her mentor, National Geographic veteran, Sam Abell, and Charlie Waite, renowned English landscape photographer, along with other notable professionals. Her published works include *Meditation for Two*, *Alchemy*, and *40 Years Later*, all with long-time collaborator Dominique Barbier. This September she debuts a landmark work: *Cavalo Lusitano*, *The Spirit Within*, dedicated to her husband. 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.

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 and the hills of Lisbon just behind. Finally, after dreaming of Portugal since seeing the glorious Lusitanos of Brazil 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 and increasingly, among the enthusiasts for Working Equitation. 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...

A legendary 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 its 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.



(CAPTION 1) Ana Batista....

From my first glimpse of the Ribatejo I felt a connection to the land that was surprisingly strong. I had traveled many times to Brasil with Dominique and Debra, beginning in 2007, and photographed the finest Lusitano breeding farms and their magnificent horses. But it was the land and heritage of Portugal that kept calling me through the noble Lusitano.

On this first trip 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 Valencia 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 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, Freire, and Braga were names I had heard often and had seen on the genealogy of fine Lusitanos from Brazil. 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 manège of Mestre Oliveira. Nothing had changed since the years that Dominique had lived and studied there. It



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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! Sempre!) and then the flow of horses and people opened onto a large square. I had arrived: Golegã! The lights and the chestnut smoke started to mix with the mist and light rain, and it lent an almost Dickensian feel to the scene. Horses with riders in traditional costume were parading around the central show-ground, 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). was quiet, only a few horses in the old stalls, but no one in the manège. 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.

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 an energetic 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 mid 1700's, breeders and owners brought their finest horses to Golegã, to the St. Martin's Fair, to be seen, to buy and sell horses, and to promote their stallions for the coming breeding season. It was the time for friendships to be renewed, news to be shared, and breeding to be judged. Since 1972, the festival has been known as the National Horse Fair. The Fair at Golegã, usually 8 days or so and always at the time of São Martinho (November 11), stretched across the history

I had my chance to return to the Feira de Golegã in November of that year when I was offered some magazine work during the Festival of the Lusitano. Upon arrival, 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 center of all the activity the streets grew narrower and even more crowded. Animals, horses and carts were happily coexisting within inches of each

and tradition of the Lusitano. The Feira unites 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 300 years.

I met again a familiar face and frequent photographic subject from my trips to Brazil, Senhor Carlos Oliveira... champion apresentador on several continents. Carlos worked for the finest breeders in Portugal, Spain, France, Belgium, Switzerland, Mexico, Columbia and Brazil for thirty years: Senhors 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 made 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.

I mentioned romance at the beginning, didn't I? Carlos and I fell in love and were married. It all began on a night with a full moon in Golegã that November. But let's get back to the horses, the land, the traditions.

Over the last seven years, I have brought clients, students, and friends to revel in the charm and passion of the feira. After people get over the shock of so many beautiful horses going 'round and 'round the square outside the arena, they begin to settle in to see the subtle differences in breeding. On one corner of the Largo (square where the

arena for competitions exists) you can see the casita of Manuel Coimbra. I enjoy this because there are always Campinos in attendance in traditional dress. On another corner you can marvel at the proud black horses of Senhor Ortigao Costa. And another holds the proud lineages of Senhor Manuel Veiga and just beside that, his cousins at the Veiga-Maltez casita.

You can also spend time in the picadeiro, watching riders present horses for sale to clients, watching performers warm up before going out to the arena, and looking to see who is talking to whom from where. Golegã is the place to be for all of Europe if you are looking to meet the best breeders and see the best horses in one place. The picadeiro and the casitas are where the negotiations are struck.

All the disciplines are there to enjoy; along with the morphology competition there is dressage, jumping, working equitation, driving in all configurations, even Horseball! There are special performances of the Portuguese School of Equestrian Art, Mestre Luis Valenca's Centro de Equestre do Leziria Grande, and the Masters of Working Equitation generally offer a carousel.

The other popular activities at Golegã? Shopping and drinking. There are tack shops and custom tailors for Portuguese riding outfits, boot makers, toys, custom porcelains, blacksmithing....if it has anything to do with the Lusitano, you can find it. The drinking? One of the

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The Romance of Golegã



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great traditions at Golegã is to have Ginja (or Ginjinha) in little chocolate cups. This liquor, made from a fruit similar to a wild cherry, is wildly popular all over the region, but even more so in Golegã. Some of the 'bars' are at ground level for walk-up patrons, and some are a bit higher, for the 'walk up patrons' on horseback! You have been warned.

If you come this year, it's likely you'll find me photographing in the arena or having a rest in my favorite spot: the casita of Senhor Manuel Braga and Senhor Luis Meneses. There are wonderful horses to be seen but I go there to see family and friends. I go there to see pictures of my husband on the walls and to listen again

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to the familiar, poignant stories. Here is the history of the Lusitano from the last 35 years. Tragically, we lost my husband Carlos after Golegã of 2016, when he fell from one of our horses. The feira takes on an extra layer of nuance and depth for me now, and for his friends and family. While it is true that it will never be the same for any of us, the spirit of the Lusitano that he loved so much will continue to draw people from around the world. That generous, expressive, noble character that Carlos shared with his beloved Lusitanos is alive and well, as it has been for centuries.

So now, come see for yourself. We are waiting to welcome you! <http://feiradagolega.com> ❖TIH

BARBIER FARMS

Ginja Fado **Golegã!** November 5 thru 15, 2018

Make your plans now to join us in Portugal for the Lusitano Fair in Golegã! We'll be visiting the fair for four action-packed days and nights along with other days out to stunning UNESCO World Heritage sites of Portuguese history and culture. With elegant and historic lodging, delicious local fare, and trips to the finest breeding farms, this is the way to experience the heritage of the Lusitano! Come us to experience the magic. This is an exclusive trip, space is strictly limited. Contact Debra soon for all the package details and to reserve your spot!

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Lusitanos

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Cavalo Lusitano: The Spirit Within

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