

Golegã

the heart of the Lusitano

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Once a year there is a village called Golegã, in the centre of Portugal, placed on the fertile banks of the river Tejo (Tagus), that becomes a magical place where, for one week, horses impose the pace of days and nights.

The “Feira da Golegã” (Feira – fair), also known as National Horse Fair and Lusitano Horse International Fair, is held every year in the week around the 11th November, a national holy day that honors the Christian saint Martinho. This event is like a climax of a natural cycle celebrating horses, horsemanship, friendship and a common love of the Lusitano.

Even if we’re talking about “just” one week in November, it all starts much earlier; we can even say that it acts like the blossom in a natural process, because as soon as it ends everyone starts planning for next year’s celebration. One of the most common sayings the day after this fair closes is - “it just ended and I already miss it!”

Golegã is a little village, placed in the region of Ribatejo, a flat and fertile territory developed along the river that will meet the sea near Lisbon, the capital of Portugal. The natural characteristics of this land, its central position within the country, and its close relationship to Lisbon, turned it into one of the richest farming regions and made it a natural place for horse breeding where we can now find some of the oldest Lusitano studs, located in beautiful and ancient family estates.

Historically, the village of Golegã, always played a major role in this region, attracting many services and providing a meeting point for farmers, merchants, buyers and peasants, that travelled here periodically to exchange their products for the necessary goods and tools that they would need on their working life in the countryside. The horse was a natural presence in this setting, not only as an exchangeable good and a form of transport, but more importantly, as a symbol of one’s wealth and social standing.

These are the origins of the fair, which evolved into a major equestrian event in the late XIXth century, attracting the wealthy farmers and important people of society looking for recreation, but still keeping its popular roots as a rural trade fair, bringing together the peasants and people of the surrounding villages and farms.

The name National Horse Fair was officially established in 1972 and since that year, the village of Golegã has also become known as the Portuguese horse capital. During the fair, this village, converts itself into a village sized stable, where the number of horses largely reflects the number of inhabitants, and for some days the population can experience real traffic jams... but with ridden horses and horse carriages, in a constant flow between all sorts of improvised barns through-

out the central square, where all the major events take place, and where everyone gets the chance to show mounted riding along a busy drive known as the “manga”.

This fine combination between horse, people, traditions and atmosphere, translates into an exquisite experience... like travelling back in time in a collective euphoria that swirls around the Lusitano. This event keeps impressing the spectators and attracting more and more foreign visitors every year,

who arrive hoping to get a taste of this equestrian frenzy.

In the last two decades the Lusitano horse breed has become more and more well-known around the world. First, it was only about its beauty, noble character, and its breathtaking performances in the controversial bullfighting shows. But with the growth of horse sport, leisure riding and the general improvement in animal care, the Lusitano has earned a new role and captured the attention of horse lovers world





wide, who are captivated by the breeds outstanding achievements in working equitation, dressage, driving, classical equitation, and most of all by its easy going temperament that makes it the perfect equine companion.

With the Lusitano in the spotlight, since 1999, the Golegã Fair also hosts the Lusitano Horse International Fair, becoming a showcase for the products of the most traditional and famous Lusitano horse breeders and studs, as well as for the small breeders and individual owners, that bring their horses for public judgment in the morphology contests and many types of equestrian sport competitions.

But the breeding and sport is just a part of this event. For many this is a once in a life-time chance to show their horse and spend "on horse" quality time among friends. Since hotels are rare and very recent in Golegã, the visitors rent houses, house parts, rooms, half rooms, beds... or just a hay bale for the night, to sleep in the village that becomes completely full every year.

All the backyards and free plots turn into temporary stables, and many good houses include equestrian facilities to keep the owners horses and also to rent stables during the fair.

For the first time visitor, it is a mystery how all this happens in such a smooth way. The village, the humans, and the horses, look as if they were meant to be, and even if sometimes we come across a relationship one could consider "too" close human-horse / horse-human contact, in only very few episodes does this contact actually become, in effect, too close.

To prevent any accidents, the town council designed a horse traffic plan, and during the fair most of the central area is only for equestrian and pedestrian circulation, sign posted with specific traffic signs and marks in the ground.

Most of the action takes place in the village central square, known as "Largo do Arneiro" but officially named "Largo do Marquês do Pombal", and in the streets that derive from it. From Sunday to Sunday, during the fair, this area becomes full of small restaurants, bars, equestrian goods and craftsmanship shops, and other typical fair commerce. Tasting coal baked chestnuts and having a sip of "abafado", a sweet mix of wine and homemade spirit, is mandatory to all visitors.

The central square, where the main events take place, comprises four different zones with four different uses, and this may well be the reason everything works out just fine.

The centre of the square becomes a show arena, prepared for all kinds of events. Around this central arena, there is a one-way drive for showing purposes where horse carriages and riders try to perform at their best, seeing others and letting the

A horse and rider dressed up in a traditional Portuguese costume according to etiquette.

others see them – this is the "manga".

Riding in the "manga" is like a legend for many of the Portuguese equestrians.

Facing the "manga" is where the main horse breeders and studs have their show stands. There they receive the guests, do business, show their selected horses, and have a privileged view of all the action. Behind the stands, there is the carriage drive, allowing a more fluid circulation of bigger horse carts and connecting the square with the houses and streets around it.

Etiquette says that the riders and amazons that ride in this central area should dress according to the Portuguese riding costume, and that the horses should be tacked with matching bridles and saddles. Everyone tries to follow this rule as best they can, but other styles are also allowed, except in the central arena where distinct attire is only permitted on special occasions like award ceremonies or competitions.

During this week this peaceful village turns into a "city" that never sleeps. It all starts early in the morning for some... for others, it's time to get some sleep after a night celebrating with friends... but for the more traditional and experienced riders that want to work calmly with their mounts, warming up for a show or rehearsing for a performance, this is the time to do it in the central arena, usually a quiet place at this time of the day.



Later in the morning is the time for the contests and competitions to commence, all around the village. People get together to see the horses, trying to guess which ones will be this year's champions. They meet friends and clients as the day quickly goes by...

As we walk around the village, from every backyard door we hear horses snorting, people talking, and the usual stable sounds. We see the horses being plaited and tacked according to the riders outfit. Everyone wants to look as best they can.

As the sunlight goes down, the smoke coming out of the chestnut ovens fills the air, like it was a planned special effect to add drama to the already dramatic scene of the horses and riders moving towards the central square.

Streets start to get crowded again as everyone heads for the "manga". People want to see the horses... riders want to show their horses... horses want to be shown... it is like a fair trade between the horse, the horse lovers and the horse people, following a set of traditions that has ruled since man and horse first met. 🐾

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Once per year, the village of Golega becomes the perfect village of horses.

