

The heat is on

Bask in the sun and boost your dressage at Monte Velho in Portugal — all washed down with a glass of wine. Briony Reed reports



AMONG the many things I learned in my week at Monte Velho were German for half-pass (Traversale), French for a siesta (un petit dodo) and Arabic for cheers (fe sahetek). Which gives you a good idea of the glorious mixture of dressage instruction, relaxation, delicious dinners and good company to be found at this centre, nestled in the striking landscape of central Alentejo, Portugal.

Monte Velho was originally founded as a stud by Diogo Lima Mayer Snr, an architect advised by his doctor to adopt a stress-reducing interest. He opted to found the stud in the early 1990s — suffix MVL.

He is now a top Lusitano breeder, with MVL horses enjoying dressage careers throughout Europe



Learning from Lusitano mare A-Hema and João Torrão — skilled tuition and the abilities of this breed are a delightful dressage mix

and Brazil. And soon enough, visitors to the stud wanted to stay longer, and so a few years ago, the hotel and resort, designed by Diogo Snr and run by his son, Diogo Jnr, were opened.

From the moment you arrive and discover the sun terrace, the comfy living room with self-service bar, and saltwater pool with views over the valley and lake, you realise this is no ordinary riding holiday.

Roofs crackle contentedly in the heat, crickets chirp lazily and kittens play tag around the boulders and cork trees that dot the scenery — it is an idyllic location. The spacious and air-conditioned rooms are replete with luxurious touches such as an outside shower alongside the indoor variety.

Tuition begins the morning after your arrival. All lessons are private or semi-private, and take place in a 20x60m outdoor arena, sprinkled daily at 1pm to keep the surface pristine under the Portuguese sun. There is also a smaller, indoor school housed in a beautiful old building, which provides a cooler venue if needed.

The chief instructor, grand prix rider Coralie Baldrey, trained in Saumur and competed for Portugal. She joined Monte Velho in late 2014, and now trains with Daniel Pinto and Kyra Kyrklund. She and João Torrão (who competes the stud's top stallion, the seven-year-old Equador; the pair posted 77.6% in a young horse class at Biarritz CDI in October last year) form a formidable and complementary team. Coralie's focus is chiefly on the rider's position and approach; João's on how the horse is going.

Discussing the day: Monte Velho's full-size main arena is home to lessons and talking through technique while watching the stud's competition horses

Pictures by Henri Rocca, Briony Reed and courtesy of Monte Velho. Horse & Hound advises that an up-to-standard hard hat is worn at all times when mounted

And what of the horses? As you would expect given Monte Velho's origins, most were bred, born and raised at the resort; all are pure-bred Lusitanos. Three of them — Dom Quixote MVL, Banqueiro MVL and Conquistador MVL, all handsome greys of around 16.2hh — share their sire, Monte Velho's Quixote MVL, with Gonçalo Carvalho's ride Batuta, with whom he competed at both the Aachen Europeans and Olympia last year.

They are schooled to a high level and can perform all the lateral movements. Some, such as Afonso Henriques MVL, can provide visitors with a taste of grand prix movements.

Lusitanos were originally used for bullfighting, working at canter in a relatively constricted space — and with the small matter of a bull with which to contend. And so these horses are compact, sensitive and responsive. Past masters at collection and lateral movements, they are also even-tempered and metronomically rhythmical. What's not to love? Plus they look gorgeous, which never hurts.

'True schoolmasters'

MONTE VELHO'S focus is firmly on classical riding based on the scales of training. Coralie is more than happy to take riders through the grand prix movements at the end of a stay if desired — it's fun to try them out, but it's easier to experience piaffe and passage on Afonso than it is to keep him straight. Thought your sitting trot was fine? Think again. The horses are very capable, but you have to match them to get what you want — as true schoolmasters, they soon highlight any weaknesses, and the precision required to get the best out of them will fine-tune your riding.

Your first lesson is very relaxed, enabling you to get to know your mount, chosen for you by the staff.

João, whose talent was spotted when he arrived at MVL as an intern around five years ago, is a sympathetic and perceptive instructor. He quickly zones in on the horse's response to your riding, noticing the tiniest twists and imbalances in your position, and how the way of going is affected. A few tweaks here and there and you begin to feel the wonderful willingness and agility of the Lusitano.

An exacting and encouraging teacher, chief instructor Coralie hones in on the use of your seat and sharpness in transitions. Before you know it, you are enjoying balance, lightness and effortless lateral work.

With a shaded seating area by the arena you can also watch and learn from your fellow guests, and the feedback from photos is helpful, as you can use what you see to guide the focus of other lessons.

This is a place from which you leave with a very clear idea of what you need to work on, and notice the difference in your riding immediately.

It is also inspiring to watch the staff ride, both when schooling and in their own lessons. Whenever João headed for the arena with Equador, Giraldo MVL (a four-year-old stallion by Rubi AR, who was 13th in the grand prix special at London 2012 under Gonçalo Carvalho) or Guapa MVL, a powerful four-year-old mare due to begin her competition career shortly, he would be followed by a gaggle of dressage acolytes trying to acquire some further ability by osmosis.

Rest and relaxation

BUT it's not all about lessons and schooling. Monte Velho also offers hacks on a number of delightfully unflappable Lusitanos. The rides are designed to be



Above: the indoor school is housed in an elegant old building, providing a cool haven for schooling



Left: designed by the architect owner, the spacious premium bedrooms overlook unspoilt Portuguese countryside

Below left: the refreshing saltwater pool offers a welcome dip following an intense lesson



suitable for non-riders if required, so don't expect full-pelt across the countryside, but they are tailored to the needs of each particular group. It's a perfect opportunity to soak up the scenery and enjoy some exhilarating canters, all from the comfort of a Portuguese saddle (originally designed for bullfighting), which offers the security of a Western saddle but in a more classical position.

This is also a peaceful place to relax when not riding — with no other buildings in sight you can head off on a wander to see the stud mares and youngstock, cool off in the pool or simply curl up with a good book.

All meals are provided — and are healthy and delicious, washed down with a glass or two of wine from the Lima Mayer family vineyard if desired — and are eaten in the communal dining room, with a shady sun terrace overlooking the arena.

With the welcoming atmosphere and serious dressage focus, by the end of a visit you will easily understand why a large number of Monte Velho's guests return year after year. And you never know, you may well end up joining them. **H&H**

DETAILS

Price: from £364 per person sharing (3 nights with 3 dressage lessons); flights and transfers not included.

Closest airport: Lisbon (just over 1hr's drive)

Contact: In The Saddle www.inthesaddle.com 01299 272997