

DRESSAGE PARAÍSO

World-class dressage
awaits at Portugal's Monte
Velho Equo-Resort
and Lusitano Stud Farm
BY L.A. SOKOLOWSKI

DREAM DRESSAGE: A guest at
Portugal's Monte Velho Equo-
Resort pirouettes on a Lusitano
schoolmaster under the tutelage of
head trainer and Saumur graduate
Coralie Baldrey





COURTESY OF THE MONTE VELHO EQUO-RESORT

Before planning your next (or first!) riding vacation, try an online search for the keywords *horse lover's paradise*. You will get more than 17 million results. Like asking 10 people for an opinion and getting 11 replies, paradise means something different to every rider.

But since the 2020 Tokyo Olympics, the Monte Velho Equo-Resort, a boutique hotel on a Lusitano breeding farm in Arraiolos, in the Alentejo region of southern Portugal, might be that one in 17 million.

Its dressage program, based on the principles of the famed Cadre Noir in Saumur, France, produced Tokyo's most talked-about rookie duo: João Miguel Torrão, who at 25 became the youngest dressage rider ever to represent Portugal in Olympic competition; and the farm's homebred then 10-year-old Lusitano stallion Equador MVL (Quo Vadis – Que Ha, Hostil), whom Torrão had met six years earlier while interning at the farm and trained through the levels. The pair finished 29th individually (70.186%) and were eighth with the Portuguese Olympic squad.

If your idea of paradise includes riding with classically trained, Olympic-caliber instructors; experiencing upper-level movements on Portuguese Lusitanos; and luxuriating in farm-to-table dining and historic accommodations dating back to the Roman *Equitatus* (cavalry), then welcome to the Monte Velho ("Old Home") Equo-Resort or, as they say in Portugal, "*Bem-vindo*."

FLUENT INSTRUCTION

A reputation for fine instruction is one reason that guests keep coming back to Monte Velho. Coralie Baldrey, a graduate of the French National Riding School at Saumur, has been head trainer since 2015, and Torrão has described her as one of the most influential people in his career.

"All our instructors are engaged in dressage competition with our stud-farm horses, and regularly train with the world's most renowned trainers," says Diogo Lima Mayer Jr., who had a managerial career with L'Oréal Paris prior to becoming the director of the farm still owned by his father, Diogo Mayer Sr. Dressage lessons here are taught in Portuguese, English, French, or Spanish, depending on the student's preference.

In 2019, one such world-class horseman was British Olympic dressage team gold medalist Carl Hester, who was brought in to work with Torrão and Equador before the British CDIs and the FEI European Dressage Cham-



ON THE MAP: Monte Velho's star Lusitano stallion, Equador MVF, took Portugal's João Miguel Torrão to the 2020 Tokyo Olympics and achieved record scores for an Iberian horse during his dressage career



COVERED CLASSROOM: Monte Velho's facilities include two 50 x 100-meter covered arenas, plus an Olympic-sized outdoor arena used for advanced-level lessons

pionships (where Team Portugal saw its first-ever win in the FEI Dressage Nations Cup Portugal).

Hester commended Baldrey for instilling a correct classical foundation and noted, "I find Lusitanos kind and willing to work with. Equador transformed from a cuddly

pony into a real showman. They have the potential to achieve a place in the top-ten world rankings."

AN ITINERARY FOR EVERY RIDER

Active Riding Trips, Equitours, and In the Saddle are among the trip organizers serving the US (plus Epona

in Spain) that work with Monte Velho to offer curated, year-round program packages—or, new in 2022, yoga-and-horses getaways. Dressage Lessons and Trail Riding includes daily morning dressage lessons and 90-minute afternoon trail rides. Those who choose the Intensive Dressage Lessons package receive two lessons daily, with one afternoon lesson swapped out for a trail ride. The Dressage Light option features a daily hour-long dressage lesson. If you and your travel companions just want to get out of the sandbox, the Trail Riding program includes twice-daily trail rides.

"One of the reasons I like this program," says Active Riding Trips president Stacey Adams, "is the chance to experience the Lusitano in the arena and on a trail. They are gentle, willing, expressive in their movement, and drop-dead gorgeous! It's easy to see how people fall in love with them and why we have an 85% repeat ratio from our guests. They go back every year."

Prior to arrival, Mayer says, each guest is given a questionnaire. "We ask: How many years have they been riding? What kind of horse do they want to ride? What kind of exercises do they want to improve? We get a complete overview of each client, and every week we have an instructors' meeting where we review the riding résumés before preparing the week ahead."

"The first lesson is always an assessment," says Mayer. "From that moment on, we structure the week for each guest, depending on the number of lessons in the program they've chosen. Our goal is to tailor the experience of each guest so when they leave, they take home techniques and lessons they can apply on their horse. We want an interactive

experience, where guests try exercises they've not done with their horse."

With 19 schoolmasters, "I like to say we have a horse for every type of guest, and try to apply our experience to give each guest the best match," Mayer says. "Some stay with the same horse all week. Some like to change and find different rides on a variety of horses." There are lower-level specialists, six small-tour-level horses, and five Grand Prix-level horses, he says.

Most guests are active dressage riders, says Adams, but their experience levels vary greatly. "Some are competing at Prix St. Georges and Grand Prix. Others are just getting into the study of the movements."

TREES OF LIFE

Monte Velho is also an active Lusitano breeding facility, and guests enjoy watching staffers handle the season's foal crop.

The stud farm is a boutique operation with just five broodmares, and "each year we carefully select Lusitano stallions that will best complement each mare and their potential to produce a competitive dressage prospect," Mayer says.

That strategy began in 1994, when the breeding program launched with five *Alter Real* (royal) broodmares of Berber and Andalusian descent, crossed with one of the most influential and expressive Lusitano stallions of his day, Xaquiro (1980-2007). The resulting offspring have earned Monte Velho four Champion of Champions titles at The International Festival of the Lusitano Horse.

But star stallion Equador MVL "is the biggest ambassador Monte Velho has ever had," says Mayer. "He has broken all records for a Lusitano and Iberian horse. He holds the



HAPPY TRAILS: Exploring the great outdoors around Monte Velho



THE NURSERY: An outsider checks on Monte Velho's Lusitano broodmare band and foals

dressage records for an Iberian horse in Grand Prix (77%), Grand Prix Special (79%) and Grand Prix Freestyle (84%). All the guests that come to Monte Velho want a photo

with him and to visit him in the stable!"

Mares and foals enjoy a lush expanse of rolling hills and open fields, a lake for cooling off, and evergreen



VIEWES GALORE: Both the rooftop pool and the guest rooms feature stunning countryside vistas

cork oak (*Quercus suber*) trees for shade. The farm is classified as a National Ecological Reserve, with a commitment to sustainability that includes its cork oak, a highly sustainable and biodiverse resource whose bark is harvested once a decade as raw material not only to stop wine bottles, but for everything from roofing to floors to baseballs.

Monte Velho's last cork harvest, in 2013, yielded more than 70 tons. Between harvests, as trees regrow their bark, they absorb five times more carbon while helping to fuel the photosynthesis necessary for regrowth.

This summer, the Mayer family will again harvest cork. Roughly a month beforehand, the trees turn a deep, almost blood, red. "The landscape is different when the trees are without their cork," Mayer says. "It gives everything a special tone and color." The harvest is also important to development at the farm, as the proceeds are used to underwrite new projects. "This year's funds will go to making a new lake. A new dam is important, due to a problem with a lack of water in the region."

LUXO PARAÍSO

The boutique hotel's grounds date to the Romans (400 AD), and like the cork trees in its horse fields, Monte Velho keeps finding renewal through

careful additions to its accommodations and facilities.

"Since I was a child, I remember coming almost every weekend to Monte Velho," Mayer recalls. "Our property was dedicated to the family and to Lusitano breeding until 2013, when we decided it was time to share our treasure."

Mayer's father designed the buildings, and his mother, Margarida, created their sleek, airy interiors. The property blends into the natural elements of its surroundings. Each guest room opens to a furnished balcony with views of the Alentejo countryside and is appointed with air conditioning, wireless internet, TV, a coffee machine, and a private outdoor shower overlooking the pastures and cork oaks. There's also a rooftop pool with "amazing views," Mayer says.

All that riding works up an appetite. "Monte Velho can organize themed meals, picnics, or canoeing on the lake," Mayer says. "Our meals are made and served on the premises."

Guests John and Annie Pearson, of Santa Fe, New Mexico, say their 2015 trip to Monte Velho was a great experience. "The cuisine was based on local ingredients and calibrated to suit busy days riding. The family's red and rosé wines were offered with meals. The staff, led by Diogo, are

helpful, and language was rarely, if ever, a problem. Coralie is very much about competitive dressage and the German method, and João is an amazing, thoughtful guide to classical (and competitive) dressage, so it all worked out really well for us."

The creature comforts may be exemplary, but that's not the main attraction for most guests.

"The one thing that does set these programs apart from others," Adams says, "is how riders of all levels meet here, become friends, encourage each other, and bond over their love of dressage."

Editor's note: Shortly before this issue went to press, we received the sad news that the Lusitano stallion Equador MVL died May 2 at the age of 13. According to published reports, the horse did not survive an emergency surgery following a cervical injury.



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