

Dressage Paradise

By: Danielle Aymond

In December 2022, I was lucky enough to get to attend the Carl Hester *Through the Levels Masterclass* at the World Equestrian Center. It was fantastic and I learned so much. However, I also came home with a sponsor pamphlet to a vacation I only took home to daydream over. The pamphlet was for an equestrian resort in Portugal named Monte-Velho. It is a Lusitano breeding facility but also has a small 9 bedroom resort and offers a lesson program to guests on Lusitano Grand Prix schoolmasters.

Although I was fascinated by the idea of the resort, I often find I'm disappointed by "horse vacations." I was sure the resort was probably lovely but that that the training would be minimal and disappointing and probably completely overpriced.

This year my husband surprised me for our anniversary with a trip to Monte-Velho. I was shocked! As I sat on the plane ride home, I thought I have got to share this experience we everyone- they are not going to believe it.

It is scary to invest in a trip somewhere in a foreign country with no context or personal references. So here is my completely honest review and experience. Bottom line: Book it NOW! It is absolutely worth it.

First, the travel was incredibly easy – considering Europe. We flew from New Orleans to Philadelphia, and after a short layover, Philadelphia to Lisbon - which was only six hours. The flight was over a Saturday night, so we landed in Lisbon Sunday morning.

Monte-Velho had arranged a driver for us who was waiting as we landed. We rode the hour and half snoozing and catching some beautiful countryside. Sundays are a "day-off" at Monte-Velho so after we got settled in our room, the staff encouraged us to explore the entire farm while it was at its most peaceful. We loved on all the dozens of gorgeous Lusitanos and even the Stallions were sweet. We snoozed and relaxed and absolutely soaked in the beauty of this place. Words just absolutely can not do it justice.



The resort cooks every meal, and they are fantastic. All is cooked with fresh local ingredients with enough options to please everyone from the picky eater to the food snob (I know – my husband and I are on the polar extremes of that scale). They prepare a magnificent spread including local wine, beer and incredible desserts. They even take special dietary requests and make sure every guest is happy and full at every meal.

The dining is family style at a long table for all the guests that overlooks the massive outdoor dressage arena. Breakfasts were my favorite because I could sip my coffee and watch Monte-Velho's very own dressage Olympian train one stunning Lusitano after another. The meals are also special since you sit family style with guests from all over the world who are all united by the passion of dressage! There were riders that were still working Training-level basics to those that had shown to Grand Prix.



I didn't know quite what to expect on Day 1 of training, but I had gotten some insight from the other guests who were regulars (I found that many guests become regulars). As I was handed the reins of my



first mount the trainer asked me my goals of the week. I told her I both teaching my older horse flying lead changes at home but had never actually ridden changes – a very hard task. She smiled and off we went. In that

very first lesson I think I did 30 flying lead changes – more than I had ever even attempted in my entire dressage career!

I took two lessons a day for five days. I thought I would be exhausted, but I found out that when you get to walk up like a princess and just mount your horse and then dismount and frolic away – you're not nearly as exhausted! It also super helpful that the horses you are riding are INCREDIBLE. They are fabulous schoolmasters that absolutely know what they are doing and really want to please.

As the week progressed, I was able to feel every Grand Prix movement I had only dreamed about. It was a life changing experience. I was also lucky enough to ride some of the younger greener horses that were still working on learning changes in order for the trainers to help me with exercises in training flying changes. Exactly what I needed to bring home with me!

Throughout the week we also did lots of activities on and off the resort. The absolute highlight, however, was the owner-led breeding tour. We learned all about the history of the farm and these magnificent horses. He brought us straight into the mare field which had about 8 mares, with five already having recently dropped their foals. All of the mares and babies were as friendly as Labradors, greeting us and taking scratches from the guests. I have never experienced such a kind nature in broodmares with week old babies. It was an absolute testament to the nature of this breed and the farm's horses.



Overall, I could go on and on about how beautiful the facility was and all of the five star

amenities that were provided to us. But the absolute most shocking part to me was the quality of the training. There were three trainers and every one of them invested the time and energy into every ride as if I was their top rider. They were kind, knowledgeable and brought out the absolute best riding in me.

I cannot recommend this experience enough and plan on going back every year that I can. The opportunity to sit on these animals and actually feel the finish line of dressage is priceless. I finally have a clear feeling for where I am going in my dressage journey. I was even able to come home and finish the flying changes on my Zeus and get both my bronze qualifying scores within less than two months! I absolutely could not have done that without the confidence and experience this trip gave me.

I know you want to know the bottom line on costs. Flights if booked in advance can be as little as \$600 a person but if you wait too long they average about \$1200 a person. The trip is all inclusive and based per rider. All in all, we spent about \$3,000 per person at the resort for my room (6 nights), all my food, wine and the training (the costs per night can vary slightly between low and high season). Since it is all inclusive you can budget for the trip well ahead of time and there's no secret charges. It's well laid out on their website: https://www.montevelho.pt/reservas_en

If you are a dressage enthusiast, I cannot recommend this trip enough. It was also my non-dressage husband's favorite vacation of his life- so there truly is fun for all.

Let's get a SEDA trip and take over Monte-Velho for a week – who's with me?

