

# PALHEIROS DE MIRA



MUSEU | POSTO DE TURISMO ENGLISH

## LIFT

"the most enticing motion of fishing is always the hauling of the nets, which in Mira is carried out in the sand – ample portrait for painters to capture in pochade motion, colour and light - Raúl Brandão, in Os Pescadores

"it is a four hour journey from Cantanhede to Mira. Pine trees, evermore pine trees framed by an overwhelming sing of cicadas like I've never heard in my entire life. Then in an oxen cart, the crossing of the sand, under the reverberation of the sun, and finally Mira, land of fishermen, land of palheiros (wooden seaside huts) staked on the ripple of the dune, which rises like a wave to the skies" - RAÚL BRANDÃO, IN OS PESCADORES, 1923.

## COLONIZING THE SANDS

Although human presence is known to have existed on this coast since the Middle Ages, the permanent occupation of Praia de Mira, typical broad and windswept shore, is a historically recent phenomenon. One of the first documents the accounts for this occupation is the report of Vicar Tomé Nunes Pereira de Resende on the effects of the earthquake of 1 November 1755 and the subsequent seaquake that swept Praia de Mira.

"At more or less eleven o'clock in the morning the ocean water commenced to revolt, the mighty waves fought, incoming waves confusingly encountering outer waves, creating immense fury, rising higher than land and as it calmed a great howl could be heard.

The water passed 270 paces its ordinary boundary and suddenly retrieved and it became dry more than 350 paces beyond its usual desert and this ascent and descent lasted half an hour more or less, this was repeated several times in the course of an hour and a half give or take, and several people who were fishing witnessed all these movements."

It is at the beginning of the 19th century that the settlement of these extensive depopulated sands witnessed a new enlargement, with people coming from the North, Ílhavo and other nearby places. Here they remained from the end of Spring to the beginning of Autumn to carry out their trade, taking advantage of the calmer sea. In a few decades a township known as "Costa do Mar" or "de Mira", or yet "Praia do Mar" or "de Mira" emerged, which later will have the human mark of "Palheiros de Mira", or "da Costa". The first births were recorded in 1835, thus the new settlement continued to develop, and in the 1860s-70s, it was already land of "fishermen and peasants" who were dedicated to the trade of fishing and the cultivation of the fields.

## THE PALHEIROS (WOODEN SEASIDE HUTS)

The first fishermen, who seasonally settled in Praia de Mira, began to build shelters for themselves and their trade. These original wooden huts, unique examples of use of the autochthonous materials, initially had as roofs tufts of the dune plants, also called beachgrass (*Amophila arenaria*).

Thus resulted its name, and that of the ancient urban core: Palheiros de Mira (wooden huts). The long gone beachgrass roofs gave way to wooden roofs – a gable roof – material that, in turn, began to be replaced, in the 1930s, by Portuguese clay tiles.

Originally erected on stakes, a technique that guaranteed the passage of the sand driven by winds and waters, thus avoiding accumulation near the walls, the Palheiros de Mira reached two to three floors, dimensions that do not exist in other seaside villages. In these, the main access was made by ways of an exterior staircase to a balcony and the connection between floors was made by an interior, narrow and steep staircase.

Before glass square windows, these dwellings had wooden shutters to protect them from the elements. In addition, in ancient times, the chimney was also made of wood, garnished with zinc foil. However, frequent fires demanded the evolution to other building solutions in zinc and cement.

"I continue to climb and finally encounter the sea, only to see more wooden huts scattered amongst the splendid sandy stretch and some odd, archaic boats, which lift their unmeasured bows and sterns up to heaven" - RAÚL BRANDÃO, IN OS PESCADORES, 1923.

## 1ST FLOOR

"the traveller does not sight the palheiros, he feels absolutely deceived, but will still ask an old man who entertains himself by looking at the sea: 'Excuse me, where are the palheiros?'

The old man smiles, he must be comparing this traveller to so many others who have come to him to ask the same precise question, and replies with impeccable manners: "They exist no more. Now there are only houses, further ahead you will find only two or three remaining palheiros."

The traveller thanked the old man and set for the pointed direction. There were the survivors, huge palheiros darkened by wind and sea breeze, some already dismantled, displaying the construction technique, the inner bones, the support clays. Some as it seems are still inhabited, while others have had their tiles swept away by gust and storm. It won't take many years for only photographic memory to remain." - JOSÉ SARAMAGO, IN VIAGENS EM PORTUGAL, 1981.

## THE ROAD

It darkens. I make my way up the road bordered by wooden fishermen huts, rotten boards, riding stables and salting sheds. Women, children, pigs. I continue climbing between old huts, some with their feet under water, others, further above, shabby and tired, defend themselves from the sand by ways of pine palisades. Shadows, confusion of stinky and dark alleyways, chattering in taverns. Remains of fish everywhere and old wicker baskets that rot, amongst teeming life and the sea breeze that comes from the wide and that everything sweeps and purifies. As night approaches the confusion redoubles: land seems larger and darker. I continue to climb and finally encounter the sea, and more wooden huts scattered amongst the splendid sandy stretch and some strange, archaic boats, which lift their unmeasured bows and sterns up to heaven" - RAÚL BRANDÃO, IN OS PESCADORES, 1923.

## A LIFE IN THE SAND

The house is scrubbed, the floor boards are then covered with sand, for better conservation. - RAQUEL SOEIRO DE BRITO, PALHEIROS DE MIRA, 1960.

## THE BATHS

In the early 20th century, doctors began to prescribe seawater baths as therapy for many ailments such as melancholy, leprosy, rheumatism, tuberculosis, gout and so many others.

The beach became popular and the Palheiros de Mira gained a new life with the appearance of the first inns and houses that rented out rooms to tourists who came from Coimbra, Viseu and other inland areas.

The crowds changed according to the Summer months. Elites and the wealthiest families who lived in the city would come in July and August. Farmers' families flocked in September and October, and it was normal for men to come only after the harvests. At a time when health and the sea breeze were of the essence, cold baths became evermore fashionable, as it was believed that they gave rigidity and symbolized austerity and discipline.

An example of this bathing custom was the traditional Holy Bath on the morning of St. John's day which led folks to the beach to feel the healing power of the ocean water. So as to alleviate rheumatism, doctors prescribed hot immersion baths and in Mira, in the Palheiros of Tio Zé Barrinha and Luís Milheirão, several women and boys fetched sea water, which was warmed in large pots allowing for the famous hot baths.

Times have changed and so have bathing suits. In the 60s, 70s and 80s of the 20th century, Praia de Mira became a reference for many families who come to the beach year after year. Many of them still come religiously every year!

## MEALS

"The standard meals are: at 8 am, coffee and corn bread; by noon, cabbage broth, seasoned with a piece of bacon and thickened with beans and rice, and, on the plate, with bread crumbs; around 5-6 o'clock, leftovers from lunch are eaten with very hot coffee and fried fish;

In the evening, around 8-9 o'clock, supper: potatoes either boiled or baked in the sand previously heated with embers, some fish, coffee and corn bread. [...] In Summer the fish varies and in Winter the only fish available is salted sardines. - RAQUEL SOEIRO DE BRITO, IN PALHEIROS DE MIRA, 1960.

## THE "ARTS" OF FISHING

Fishing by ways of trawling the nets to land is a traditional fishing technique, using a seine net dragged to shore, this technique was used in the Portuguese coast since ancient times. The family of "seine nets" includes: the xávega algarvia, the chincha, the chinchorro, the varina, the mugiganga, the tarrafa, among others. The net – or the whole of the nets and the cables that maneuver it – is called the "arts". The expressions "arte", "obra", "arte real", "rede real", or xávega have Mediterranean origin, from the southern regions of France, Catalonia or Andalusia.

In the book "Palheiros de Mira", Raquel Soeiro de Brito described the "artes" (fishing utensils) of Mira as being formed by a bag or "cuada", of tight mesh net and thick thread, whose mouth extended, to one side and the other, by two long wings (mangas or alares) also in a network, decreasing its height to the ends, all in a total of 700 meters in length. It was coated (paint) with willow bark, in large iron cauldrons. The vessels were about 15 meters long and half-moon shape so as to be capable to overcome the force of the waves, and equipped with four powerful oars, moved by the force of forty men. The "artes" were thrown into the sea in a semicircular movement whilst oxen on the beach pulled the two cables from the net, until the siege was closed.

## FISHING COMPANIES (COMPANHAS)

In a broad sense, "Companha" is understood as the set of individuals gathered around an institution, a person or a trade. The "fishing companies" (Fishing Companies) are traditional fishing enterprises, with their lords, arrais (master) and fishermen (companions), encompassing both those who went to sea and the land personnel in charge of the most diverse functions – such as hauling the nets –, all organized according to a labour hierarchy, where, often, strong family ties prevailed.

Units of organization of the fishing activity - with their boats, gear and other paraphernalia - their legal standards have evolved over

time. These organisations were rooted in an ancient oral tradition, among them stood out the strong discipline and respect, especially towards the arrais. The pre-established agreements included the specific allocation of tasks and the distribution of income (contributions and division of earnings). There were also "sea-sharing" agreements between companies, i.e. division of space, taking into account the available resources.

## ARRIBA! ARRIBA! VIVA! VIVA!

"the women and the mule-drivers excitedly get their hands on the net and the bag comes out of the water, dragged through the sand, amongst hues of green that pour..." - RAUL BRANDÃO, IN OS PESCADORES, 1923.

"before 1926, as there was no road connecting the shore with the inner regions, the fish was transported to Cantanhede in 'convoys' of oxen carts through tracks in the sand, from where it followed, in general by railway, to the inland regions. It was also common to see carts pulled by donkeys transporting fish to Coimbra. At that time there were people who only dedicated themselves to this work. With the construction of the road, which ended in 1929, lorries began to transport the fish, thus ending the need for animals." - RAQUEL SOEIRO DE BRITO, IN PALHEIROS DE MIRA, 1960.

## FAINA MAIOR (COD FISHING)

For centuries the Portuguese fishermen had adventured on the European routes of Newfoundland, in cod fishing: the "Faina Maior". Dry and salty, the cod was economical, kept longer and was an excellent alternative for the many days of the religious calendar when one could not eat meat. In the 1570s, Faina Maior occupied dozens of ships and caravels from Aveiro, where there were many drying facilities and cod was marketed to other places. This dynamism suffered a strong setback from the 17th century on. Political and economic reasons led to the near stagnation of Portuguese long distance fishing, which remained so until its relaunch in the 1830s. One hundred years later, the Estado Novo reorganized and relaunched the stockfish industry: it was the "Campanha do Bacalhau".

The Portuguese fleet of stockfish fishing reached more than 70 ships. Fishermen from all over the Portuguese coast worked in these vessels, many of those from Mira, spending months away from the family, in the distant and risky cod fishing waters, in the art of hand-line fishing, in the solitude of the dory boats.

"lowering the dory boats, the captain bids farewells to the men every dawn with the same cry, and every day, he spends long hours leaning over the side of the boat, apprehensive, with a nostalgic feeling clouding his hard eyes... this is line fishing, in the banks of Newfoundland and Greenland. Who fishes like this? Only the Portuguese...in the whole world!!

There they go: a man and a fragile vessel... facing the sea so rough and so fickle, facing the fog that can become thick, the wind that can rise stiff... a man alone, in front of infinity!!

around two, three o'clock in the afternoon, the dory boat returns to the ship. However, there are times they do not return: either due to the excessive overload of fish, or due to the sudden fury of the "breeze", the boat sinks... other times, the very thick mist makes them lose the mother ship: resulting in long days adrift, with no water, no food, until...Zé Robalo never came back!" - BERNARDO SANTARENO, IN NOS MARES DO FIM DO MUNDO, 1959.