

Mexilhoeira Grande

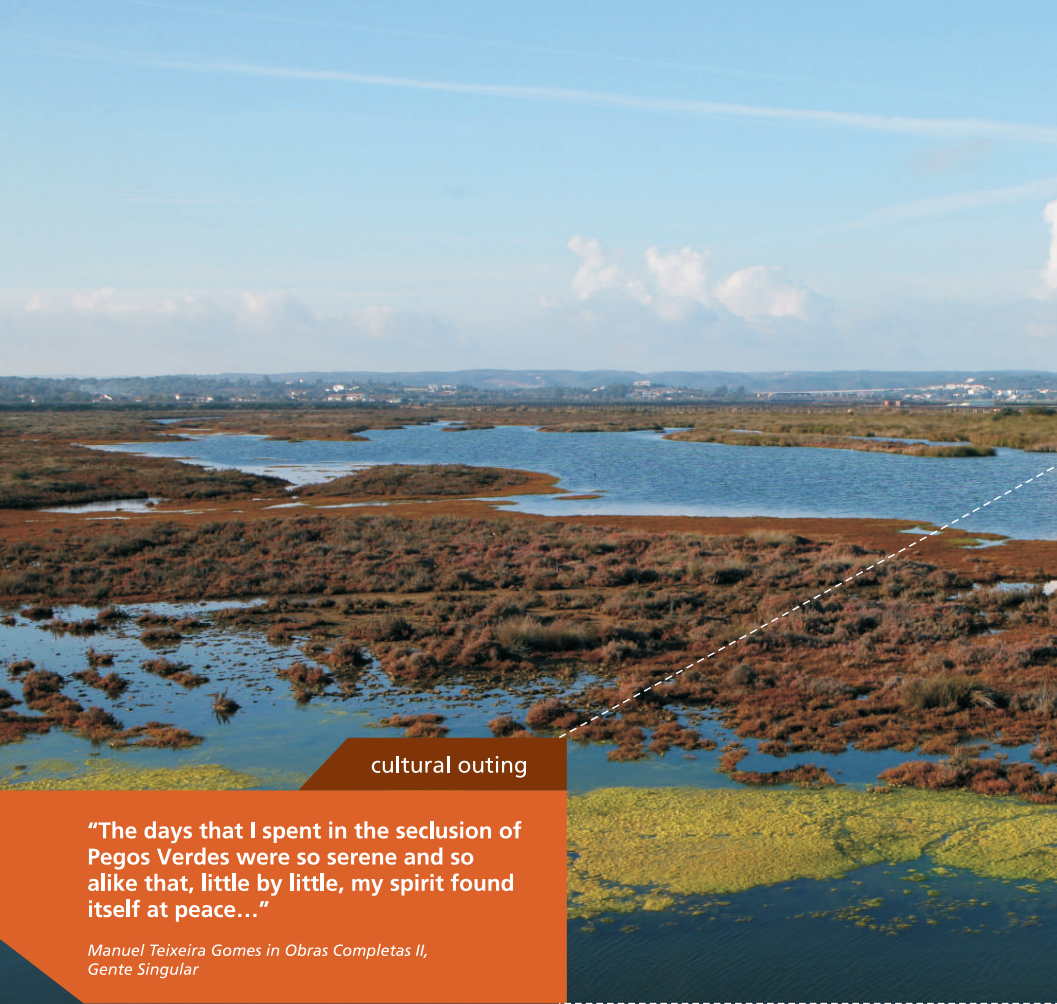
Lastly, and purely as a matter of interest, you may care to venture a little farther north and visit the site of the former civil parish of Senhora do Verde, which ceased to exist in 1836. Its territory now divided up between neighbouring parishes, Senhora do Verde once played a unique role in the matter of religious beliefs. As the story goes, during the reign of D. Manuel, a spring whose waters were supposed to have healing properties apparently miraculously bubbled up out of the entrails of the earth near the Senhora do Verde Stream. The phenomenon is thought to be the reason why a religious monument was built, and to have given rise to the parish itself. Today, as you pass by the stream, you can still catch a tiny glimpse of the ruins of the Senhora do Verde Church, which was once the main church in the parish. The building had a single nave, with a domed chancel narrower than the body of the church. The most noteworthy feature is the Manueline-style main portico. The image of the patron saint can be found in a chapel next to the main church (*Igreja Matriz*) in Alvor.



Portimão cultural outing

Mexilhoeira Grande





cultural outing

“The days that I spent in the seclusion of Pegos Verdes were so serene and so alike that, little by little, my spirit found itself at peace...”

Manuel Teixeira Gomes in Obras Completas II, Gente Singular

Mexilhoeira Grande is the largest of the Municipality of Portimão's three civil parishes, albeit the most sparsely populated one. Its unique landscapes are the result of both the hilly terrain and local climate, combined with the farming activity that has been carried on in the area for many years. In this essentially rural community, traditions and customs continue to thrive and can still be clearly seen in the day-to-day life of the locals.

If you wish, you can start at the prehistoric Megalithic Monuments of Alcalar and continue in chronological order, visiting the Roman Villa at Abicada, followed by the now-extinct civil parish of Senhora do Verde, and finishing up in Mexilhoeira Grande town centre where you can see the end result of the whole evolutionary process. However, for practical reasons, we'll begin our tour of the parish's heritage by visiting Espargueira and Abicada. Begin by making your way between

the salt pans, marshes and streams to Espargueira, discovering the authentic world of nature and a huge wealth of archaeological and natural heritage as you go. Take in the wonderful scenery, teeming with animal and plant life, where boundless beauty nestles in the embrace of the river's outstretched arms. You'll have no trouble understanding why the Romans considered this to be the perfect spot in which to build the Villa of Abicada, which will be the second stop on our tour.

On your way to the Municipality's second National Monument, take the opportunity to stop off in the town of Mexilhoeira Grande.

A Little History

The settlement of Mexilhoeira Grande is thought to be very old; references can be found to it in documents dating from the first half of the 15th century. The parish's main church (Igreja Matriz) was concluded in 1534, lending credence to historians' belief that Mexilhoeira was an

important settlement, undoubtedly the parish seat, long before the 17th century. The parish was transferred from Monchique to the Municipality of Portimão in 1834 and in 1999 the then village of Mexilhoeira Grande was granted its town charter.

Villa de Abicada National Monument

The setting for the Villa, which dates from the 2nd century AD and is still famous to this day, offers all the features that were prized by the Roman nobility: a site overlooking sea, river and mountains, encircled by the Farello and Senhora do Verde streams flowing towards the estuary, and water-laden, fertile fields. We know which parts of the Villa were used respectively by the male and female members of the household, and which were used as the kitchen, storerooms and for services. The layout is unique, expanding outwards from a hexagonal atrium

and taking a rectangular shape divided into three distinct sections. The central section comprises five square compartments spread out around the sides of an outer hexagon, in which a smaller, concentric one – the impluvium – can be seen. Another section lies to the west, comprising compartments that are connected to each other by a corridor encircling the peristyle. This is where the gynaeceum, the area reserved for the women, was located. The part of the building that was used as granaries, kitchens and slaves' quarters can be seen to the east.



The real worth of the monument lies in its mosaics: geometrical motifs made up of polychromatic tesserae in a variety of colours, the most prevalent of which are grey, red, white and blue. Only the section used as the kitchen, storerooms and slaves' quarters is devoid of mosaics.

Pay particular attention here to the traditional local architecture, especially the whitewashed houses with coloured borders around the doors and windows, and the typical Algarvian chimneys. For many years, locals built the walls of their houses with pisé, then whitewashed them using lime produced at various sites around the parish. The townspeople are deeply religious, an important aspect of local life to which an array of religious architecture bears witness: the main church (Igreja Matriz), the Senhor dos Passos Chapel and the Misericórdia Church. As you leave Mexilhoeira and head towards Alcalar, be sure to cast an appreciative eye over the cultivated



lands along the route. The variety of crops grown here includes vines and orange trees, dotted here and there with carob, almond and fig trees, as well as an occasional olive grove, once a huge source of wealth for the Algarve. The Neolithic settlement of Alcalar sprawled over a prominent hill next to the place of the same name, situated at end of the formerly navigable stretch of the Torre Stream, some five

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kilometres from Mexilhoeira Grande, in the heart of the transitional area between sea and uplands known as the Algarvean Barrocal. When you arrive at the National Monument – the Megalithic Necropolis of Alcalar – call into the Visitors' Centre, where you can obtain information about the settlement and the necropolis and learn about the socio-cultural and historical background of this ancient community.