

Castles Made of Sand

How one laid-back Portuguese beach town became an unexpected playground for architecture's international elite.

BY GISELA WILLIAMS

PHOTOS BY FRANCISCO NOGUEIRA

When the French interior designer Jacques Grange first arrived in Comporta, Portugal, 30 years ago, swarms of mosquitoes rose from the rice fields like black clouds at dusk. Undulating white-sand dunes stretched empty for miles. Waves welled from a surreal turquoise-hued ocean. Driving through the area—a collection of hamlets along the west coast of the Alentejo region an hour south of Lisbon—he wouldn't have spotted anything except a few whitewashed villages and the occasional glimpse of the water.

That he managed to find himself in such isolation was a testament to his protégé Vera Iachia and her husband, Manrico. The couple had invited Grange to visit their one-room reed cabana, built in the style of the thatched beach shacks owned by fishermen and rice farmers who made up most of Comporta's local population. Situated amongst the dunes, the property had no running water or electricity for the first few years; the best way to access it was on horseback or quad vehicle from the beach.

To Grange, the place was magic. He instantly fell in love with the landscape, its umbrella pines and miles of empty beaches. "It was like the Hamptons a hundred years ago," he recalls. He was so enamored of the Iachia's Arcadian lifestyle that he rented a little bungalow of his own, and eventually bought a house that belonged to Vera's mother. "For me, luxury is a space in the wilderness," he says. "You walk to the beach over the dunes and often it is empty. You wake

up and you see a stork fly above you. That is luxury."

At the time, the Herdade da Comporta's 48 square miles of private farmland was owned by one family, the Espírito Santo clan, Portugal's most powerful banking dynasty. They extended the agricultural production and built up some infrastructure (schools and basic housing) for the community; in return, the family got a Boston-size swath of pristine wilderness and a 7.5-mile-long stretch of white-sand beach practically to themselves.

Thanks to the family's near monopoly and the region's strict building codes, construction was kept down and tourism controlled. Vera, a member of the Espírito Santo family, continued to add cabanas to her property throughout the 1990s, drawing from the local architectural vernacular: modest compounds of small, freestanding buildings with woven-reed facades and palm-covered gable-sided roofs, each dedicated to a specific use. Inside, she kept the interiors relatively minimal, decorating them with woven Moroccan rugs and a mix of wood furniture and textiles from Bali and Peru. In the years to come, she'd design other properties in the area with the same bohemian blend of rural and cosmopolitan, local and international. The aesthetic was dubbed Comporta Style, with Vera, who passed away a year and a half ago, as its originator and champion.

For a while, things stayed slow and quiet. But like most secrets, word of Comporta's untouched beauty began to surface. International designers and Portuguese society caught on.

(OPPOSITE) A villa at Melides Art, designed by Esteva i Esteva.

Tastemakers—Andy Warhol, Princess Caroline and Albert of Monaco, and Christian Louboutin among them—began showing up, lured by the area's vast natural beauty and quiet isolation. With them came a flurry of new cachet and attention. The first modern restaurant in the area, Museu do Arroz, launched in the late '90s; the now legendary beach restaurants Comporta Café and Sal opened in the early aughts. The design-focused concept store Rice launched in 2012.

Then, in 2014, Espírito Santo Financial Group declared bankruptcy. Its executive chairman, the family patriarch Ricardo Espírito Santo Silva Salgado, was arrested for money laundering and tax evasion. The Herdade da Comporta was seized from the family's holdings. (Much of it is currently up for sale.) New public and private projects are already in the works, including a big hotel complex in Carvalhal and an Aman resort slated for the Herdade, with more beachside developments rumored. Longtime visitors, like Louboutin, grumble about Comporta being discovered by the "masses" (with wealthy Parisians making up the bulk of the newcomers).

But the tide is also carrying with it a healthy infusion of projects by renowned architects—Philippe Starck, Vincent van Duysen, and Manuel Aires Mateus among them—who are creating ambitious spaces for sophisticated clients, or for themselves, trying their hand at contemporary interpretations of Comporta Style.

What a difference a generation makes.>





PHOTOS (CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT): FRANCISCO NOGUEIRA; NELSON GARRIDO. COURTESY SUBLIME COMPORTA.

The first seeds of change were planted in the 2000s, when two forward-thinking pilots started buying land and erecting spaces for travelers to stay just outside the Herdade da Comporta.

In 2004, Gonçalo Pessoa, a pilot for the Portuguese airline TAP, purchased 42 acres of wooded inland property about a 15-minute drive south of Comporta Village with the idea of building a beach house for his family. By the time he was ready to build, several years later, Pessoa saw the potential for high-end tourism in the region and decided to construct a small boutique hotel instead, adding a second structure with nine guest suites and a spa to the plan. He dubbed the property Sublime, and it was so quickly a success that Pessoa and his family briefly moved into a one-room office to make room for guests.

Just two years later, he brought on the Portuguese architects Miguel Cândia Martins (of the legendary Buddha Bar in Paris) and José Alberto Charrua to design ten two-bedroom villas scattered among the pine and cork trees, as well as a massive new, open-plan building (housing the lobby, restaurant, bar, and other facilities) shaped like the area's traditional rice-storage buildings.

"Initially, I was super inspired by Vera's work and the organic way she designed her houses," Pessoa says. "But when we decided to add the freestanding villas, we wanted to create a more contemporary take on Comporta style." They streamlined the geometry of the cabanas and used a mix of different materials—wood and poured concrete—for the facade and interior surfaces, creating dramatic contemporary structures that fit the landscape.

Around the same time Pessoa bought his land, his friend and fellow TAP pilot João Rodrigues had the idea for a holiday estate called Casas Na Areia ("Houses in

the Sand"). Designed by the Portuguese architect Manuel Aires Mateus and built in 2008, the property is a series of four small buildings with thatched roofs and concrete floors. But the real highlight is the open living room and kitchen cabana, where the addition of white sand floors atop heated concrete means that even indoor guests can plant their bare feet in the sand. "The concept was very much about slowing down," explains Mateus. "When you walk on the beach, one just moves more slowly." It created such a stir that, in 2010, Casas Na Areia was selected to represent Portugal at Venice's Architecture Biennale.

Since then, Rodrigues and Aires Mateus have collaborated on several other properties, including another one in Comporta called Cabanas no Rio, two tiny wooden fisherman huts with minimalist, modern interiors, located in a natural reserve on the Sado River. "The projects I work on with João are all about the possibility of experiences, about different ways of living and perceiving, that at the same time, have a strong sense of place," said Aires Mateus, who is currently working on multiple private houses in the area.

Meanwhile, Pessoa continues to innovate Sublime; this summer he will complete several spare three-, four-, and five-bedroom villas and introduce a new dining concept: the Food Circle, a rustic yet modern chef's kitchen in the middle of the property's lush organic garden. Pessoa also revealed that he is working with an acclaimed international designer on a secret hospitality concept across the road.

These updates have an urgency about them: Soon, Casas Na Areia and Sublime won't be the only luxury stays in the area. A small 30-room hotel and artist residency conceived by the French designer Pierre Yovanovitch will open at the end

of 2019. He has refined the local vernacular to its most basic form: A series of low-slung white-washed brick buildings surround swimming ponds, and wood walkways lead to smooth, rammed-earth ateliers. It will join the flashier Quinta da Comporta, a sprawling 73-room property being designed by Cândia Martins along the ricefields in the village of Carvalho, scheduled to open this fall.

As word of mouth continues to spread, and real estate becomes increasingly difficult to acquire, the neighboring town of Melides, 18 miles south of Comporta, has emerged as the latest place to stake a claim in the design community. Because the land is less expensive and less tied to Comporta Style, Melides is now fertile ground for more experimental architecture projects.

Louboutin recently moved there to avoid the mosquitos and uptick of social events during high season; both he and his friend and neighbor the Italian heiress and winemaker Countess Noemi Marone Cinzano, have opened tiny boutiques in Melides village. (He and his partners sell flowers and tableware; she sells accessories like Iacobella bags, Santa Maria Novella skin-care products, and L.G.R. sunglasses). The designer is also expected to open two inns by the summer of 2020. "There will be about twenty rooms," he revealed. "All different. Some in the village of Melides and others by the sea." Louboutin is working with the architect Madalena Caiado on the plans, which are inspired by Portugal's rural architecture, adding that it's the region's slow pace of life that is the greatest appeal for him.

Belgian architect Vincent van Duysen purchased land in Melides two years ago, and is currently building a one-level, horseshoe-shaped house made of poured concrete to be completed in early 2019. "The nature is breathtaking," he says of

(OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT) A typical fisherman shack, built upon pier stilts. A cabana with white sand floors at Casas Na Areia. A villa at Sublime Comporta.

(OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT) A house in progress by architect Manuel Aires Mateus. Storks perched in a nest in Comporta Village. Farmland in Comporta, with artist Jason Martin's white-washed studio in the background.

the area. "There are kilometers of beautiful beaches. I love the rice fields, and the storks, and the dunes."

The British artist Jason Martin, who is still based part-time in London, rents a studio in a nature reserve in Comporta and has another studio and a house in Melides. A second studio, a subterranean space with several skylights, designed by Pritzker-winning Portuguese architect Eduardo Souto de Moura, is in the works there, too; above ground, only a 20-square-foot glass picture window is somewhat visible. "You won't even know it's there," said Martin. (Owning agricultural land requires Martin to continue farming it, so he also planted a vineyard and is working with the award-winning winemaker José da Mota Cápita to produce a few hundred magnums in hand-cast green glass bottles of Martin's design). "It's the most exotic corner of Europe," he says. "Like Montauk in the fifties."

Other architects are taking the tradition of Comporta Style to an even more conceptual level. Studio KO, the design firm behind the new and acclaimed Yves Saint Laurent museum in Marrakesh, is currently working on two private homes and a hotel project in Comporta and Melides. "We have a crush on that region—especially Melides," says Olivier Marty, who founded Studio KO with his partner, in work and life, Karl Fournier. "The strong vernacular and light in that part of Portugal is very interesting to us." He and Fournier have spent time exploring the area, heading inland to the lesser developed parts of the region. "When we start a project we take samples almost like geologists," he says. "In Comporta, we are inspired by the minerals and the shapes."

Off the side of the road between the two towns lies an unmarked driveway that leads through more than 350 acres of

pinos and sand dunes. Hidden in the wilderness are large-scale sculptures: a circus bear wearing a hat and a tutu by the artist Marnie Weber and strange white creatures carved from marble by Olaf Breuning. This may be the most interesting and innovative project in the area: Melides Art, a development of contemporary villas set in an evolving art park, spearheaded by the indefatigable entrepreneur and art collector Miguel Carvalho.

Passionate about the idea of building a creative community in this wild corner of Portugal, Carvalho has Marc-Olivier Wahler, the former director of the Palais de Tokyo, curating the art park and upcoming art residencies. One of the most unusual demands on buyers at Melides Art is that they are required to host and initiate creative events at the complex, whether it's a film festival or concert series. "Part of the process of buying one of the houses is that you have to make a proposal for a creative project that will take place here and will be open to the community," Carvalho says. "I want to use this project as a physical platform to support and share creativity and a place for innovators and creators to meet."

The forthcoming villas—eight low-slung houses painted the color of the sand, with a sunken living room and massive sliding glass doors—and hotel and art exhibition spaces are designed by the father and son architecture team Antoni and Tomeu Esteva of Esteva i Esteva. "The initial concept we had for one of the buildings was to bury it underground so we could keep the sand dunes and just use some skylights open through the sand," Tomeu says of its design. "When you work in this environment, the beauty of the landscape seems so delicate that either you don't want to touch it at all, or you want to raise your construction above the ground." Carvalho says of the

Mallorca-based practice's appeal: "They make architecture where you don't know where the house ends and nature starts."

Philippe Starck, who has lived in Comporta (and Cascais) with his family for several years now, has taken the idea of camouflaged architecture to the extreme. He built a family home of glass obscured by trees near Pego beach in the small village of Carvalhal. Currently he is building himself a farm in Melides. "In Comporta, you have two choices," he says. "One is to be respectful, trying to be invisible by using the roots of this elegant, humble, and noble Portuguese architecture, or, second, to be invisible by using the updated technology of glasswork. Both work. It depends on your level of personal *saudade*," he says, using the Portuguese word to convey a deep state of nostalgia, or a longing for something absent. Starck explains that the absolute "nothing" of Comporta and its surroundings "gives you the space to live, to think, to dream, to grow." Comporta is a magic 'elsewhere.'"

Though it is difficult to predict what this "elsewhere" will look like over the next decade, it's clear that Comporta and its neighboring areas will not resemble the overbuilt beach communities of the Hamptons or Marbella. If anything, the very thing that made the area desirable—its laid-back, homegrown aesthetic identity—may also be what sustains it. But in exchange for the isolation of yesteryear, it seems that Comporta will continue to evolve as a stage for architectural experimentation on a global scale, all the while preserving the arcadian beauty that continues to inspire the artists leading the transformation. No matter how developed the coast may get, this is one place where dominance over the surroundings is not only a faux pas, but an impossibility. ●

