



SILENT GUARDIAN

PONTA DA PIEDADE LIGHTHOUSE
SHINES BRIGHTLY

TEXT & PHOTOS CATRIN GEORGE



The rocky peninsula of Ponta da Piedade is the standout landmark of Lagos and at its southernmost tip stands the lighthouse of Lagos, on the exact spot where, according to legend, the Blessed Virgin Mary Our Lady of Mercy is said to have appeared to returning fishermen.

Sunrise and sunset have fascinated people since the beginning of time. Both can be experienced on this rocky peninsula in front of Lagos, giving the site its very own magic. In his epic work *The Lusíads*, Portugal's national poet Luís Vaz de Camões wrote about the country's southern coast. This is the place where the land ends, the sea begins and Phoebe, the luminous, rests in the ocean.

According to tradition, the cliff-top plateau, known as Leixão da Cruz, where today the lighthouse stretches its red roof towards the sky, once housed a mightily cantilevered stone archway, which had trapped the sunrise between its columns and where Greek sailors worshipped their sun god Helios.

Subsequently, the Roman conquerors chose this spot for the construction of a religious temple in honour of their sun god Sol Invictus, their chosen guarantor for world domination. After the Christian re-conquest, the peninsula of Lagos gained a brand new sacred importance and at the beginning of the 16th century, according to legend, the Blessed Virgin Mary Our Lady of Mercy appeared on the cliff-top plateau shining brightly to the fishermen at sea. Her light safely guided the fishermen around the peninsula, whenever they had lost their way in the fog. The lore of this Marian apparition quickly did the rounds, and it was not long until the Leixão da Cruz outcrop was renamed. It has been known as Ponta da Piedade, Mercy Point, ever since. In order to prove worthy of the mercy received from the Blessed Virgin, the Lagos parish of Santa Maria commissioned the construction of the octagonal chapel Ermida da Nossa Senhora da Piedade in 1580. Right next to it, turned toward the east, a watchtower with ramparts was built by the naval unit in Lagos, using cannons to defend the



entrance to the port as well as the tuna traps off the coast of Lagos. The fort and tower fell victim to the devastating earthquake of 1755 and were never rebuilt however, amidst the remnants of the foundation walls of the tower, a navy lookout was built in 1821. A mast was erected here, sending out bright beacon pulses day and night. On one hand these pulses served as a warning light and orientation for ships, whilst on the other, it operated as a Morse code for communication purposes. With the help of these light pulses the guards on duty in the observation posts in Sagres,

Ferragudo and Lagos could communicate with each other and thus pass on messages to the next post. The visual communication between ships, fishing boats and observation posts however worked by flag waving, using the flag alphabet and a telescope.

The Ministry for Naval Affairs decided, in a decree in 1911, that a lighthouse should be built in place of the observation post and the pilgrimage chapel on the cliff-top plateau at the southern end of the Ponta da Piedade. According to the Lagos land registry directory, a navy admiral acquired the plot for 250 escudos (€26,61 in real terms today) on December 15, 1912 and then commissioned the construction of the lighthouse on behalf of the navy. The Lagos parish vehemently protested against the demolition of their chapel, but their protest was in vain. The church, more than 300 years old, was razed to the ground and the Ponta da Piedade Lighthouse was built in its place, including a residential building for the lighthouse keepers on duty, as well as an office and a workshop. The stone icon of Mary was saved and is on display in the Dr. José Formosinho Municipal Museum in Lagos.

The lighthouse was inaugurated on July 1, 1913. Fuelled by paraffin, the beacon flashed henceforth in a specified tact of five pulses within a period of ten seconds, and in clear



conditions was visible up to 16 nautical miles away. Equipped with Fresnel lenses and mounted on a rotation mechanism designed to resemble clockwork, the fourth-order crystal glass prism rotated on its own axis at a constant speed. In 1923 the prism installed in 1913 was replaced by a stronger one of the sixth Fresnel order. Since then the beacon has been sending a single light pulse lasting four seconds at intervals of two and a half seconds and is visible for about twenty nautical miles. The lighthouse and beacon were connected to mains electricity in 1952, becoming fully automated since 1983 and recently upgraded digitally. Only one lighthouse keeper is needed nowadays, for supervision purposes. He is also responsible for

controlling and maintaining the light buoys and the warning lights at the entrance to Lagos port. The keeper and his family live in one wing of the lighthouse building, while the other wing is reserved for high-ranking navy officers and their families for their summer holiday.

The Lagos lighthouse stands in a higher exposed position than its colleagues along the Algarve coast. On a clear day you can enjoy a wonderful panorama from inside the glass dome: to Sagres in the west, to the Rio Arade estuary between Portimão and Ferragudo in the east. The Serra de Monchique mountain range is visible in the northeast and the ocean kisses the horizon in the south. Below, boats full with tourists steer through the rugged and looming sandstone rocks, passing from bay to bay and in and out caves with a staircase boasting 200 steps leads up to the rock plateau right by Lagos' landmark. Standing inside the glass dome of the Ponta da Piedade Lighthouse it's not too hard to imagine a Marian apparition, confronted with such sublime scenery: elegant yachts gliding by, colourful umbrellas dotting the sand like splashes of colour on the beaches nearby. After all, as an old Portuguese proverb says, "Anything that is imaginable is possible". ■



The lighthouse is open for visitors on Wednesdays between 2pm and 4pm.
GPS: 37.080925, -8.669519
www.amn.pt/DF/Paginas/FaroldaPontadaPiedade.aspx



REPLACEMENT CHAPEL REMAINS A PROMISE

The demolition of the chapel has caused ongoing protest from the local parish, above all because a replacement had been promised but has never been built. An altar niche with the image of the Icon of Our Lady of Mercy at the lighthouse's entrance portal is a reminder of this promise and serves the parish for sacred rituals on Good Friday and in September. Brigadier Costa Franco, Mayor of Lagos from 1964 to 1972, had 15 altar niches built during his tenure, symbolic of Jesus Christ's 15 Stations of the Cross. Each altar niche is decorated with elaborately painted tile pictures that depict the agonising, biblically documented moments, from condemnation to burial. The holy path begins just outside the historic town gate in the Praça das Armas in Lagos and ends at the entrance portal of the lighthouse. An outdoor memorial service in honour of Our Lady of Sorrows takes place every year on the Sunday after September 15, in the square in front of the lighthouse, this year on September 18, at 6pm. On Good Friday, the annually-celebrated pilgrim torch-lit procession, followed by Good Friday Mass on the square in front of the lighthouse reminds us of Jesus Christ's suffering and salvation. Starts at 9pm at the Praça das Armas in Lagos.