

17. Santo André Lagoon – Lagoa de Santo André, Portugal



Lagoa de Santo André is situated on the southwest coast of Iberia, south of Lisbon and the Sado River. Very important from a hydrological point of view, the lagoon hosts characteristic dense marshland vegetation, considerably reducing coastal erosion. Furthermore, it helps in the preservation of the underground water table in the immediate region. The site's vegetation coverage is relatively highly rated, rendering this remarkable habitat as one of Portugal's most significant wetlands, supporting a large number of breeding birds, reed-bed passerines, as well as wintering birds *en route* to and from the African continent.

The region is considered to have been inhabited since prehistory. Settlements dating from the late Neolithic age have been located in the vicinity. Excavations at Castelo Velho (Old Castle) confirmed human presence in the area and revealed a Neolithic settlement, later fortified by the Celts (3rd-2nd centuries BC). In the 5th century AD, the German invasion caused a severe decline of the settlement. The Moors, who later occupied the area, built a new castle on a hill opposite and called it Cacém, which was later taken by the Knights Templar. Christians soon took over the area, successively the Byzantines, the Order of Santiago, the Dukes of Aveiro, until it finally passed to the Spanish Crown. The nearby old fortified town of Sines, with its medieval castle, is the birthplace of Vasco de Gama, who in the 16th century sailed eastwards to India, circumnavigating Africa and the Cape of Good Hope. The city's archaeological museum displays some remarkable jewellery, probably of Phoenician origin.

Santo André Lagoon has always been an important source of fish, which resulted in a permanent fishermen's settlement and a very lively fishing tradition. Locals still construct their boats and assemble nets in the customary way, as fishing techniques and traditions are passed down from the old to the younger generations. Although not to the same extent, agriculture and cattle breeding are still practised in the region. Among the population, traditional knowledge of viniculture and rice production is widely spread. Water mills are still functioning and rice milling technology

is practised. Locals have always found ways to transform their environment, constructing and maintaining sluices, ditches and dams. They also erect straw huts around the wetland.

Religious traditions are also well preserved and pious ceremonies often take place, such as the ceremony 'linking the sea to the lagoon', the worship of St. Andrew and St. Peter and the Santo André fair. Local culinary traditions are one of the region's attractions, offering a combination of fish and eel stews, game dishes, pork, fried bread and coriander soups