

1. Introduction

During my very first visit to Madeira in 2010 I was intrigued by an unusual building situated at Largo da Fonte, a part of the municipality of Monte and above the Capital Funchal. It was clearly very old and built in the classical style. Abandoned many years ago was in a very poor condition. A notice nearby mentioned something about a railway station but I dismissed this as I thought at the time thinking it must be wrong. My main reason for being there was to visit the gardens and the Igreja de Nossa Senhora do Monte (Church of Our Lady of the Mountain) so I passed the building by without further thought.



In the following days I began to wonder about the “station”, and after some research discovered “The caminho de ferro do Monte” the Monte Railway. From that grew my mission to discover everything there was to know about the railway.

The internet provides many old photographs showing an engine and carriage at various points on the track. Of these photographs many are poor copies, most have no description, and some that do are incorrect. Many websites refer to the railway only to mention the date it was first opened, the date it was extended and the date an engine boiler exploded. It’s true that some sites did go into more detail but still left many questions unanswered. For example, how many stations were there, where were they and why do some photographs show tracks of a different type in the city of Funchal?

My challenge was to obtain as many photographs as possible from all sources, study them to accurately identify the locations. This was done by visiting sites, photographing and comparing details on the old photographs. Talking to local people who were able to confirm my findings and occasionally add further unexpected information.

Madeira

Madeira is the top 6000 feet of a dormant volcano that rises 20,000ft from the floor of the Atlantic Ocean. The first eruption was 5 million years ago but subsequent eruptions, about 6,500 years ago, created further cones and lava flows. With further erosion due to wind and rain all signs of later eruptions have now disappeared leaving the centre of the island, around Pico Ruivo and Pico do Areeiro, central mountainous area we see today. Water flowing from this region has over many years carved out radial ravines as the rivers run down to the sea particularly on the south of the island.



Behind Funchal the hills curve to form a large natural amphitheatre with banana plantations and lush vegetation. Flowers bloom all year round and with a favourable mild and moderate climate it is often called the "Island of Flowers". A popular cruise ship destination and stop-off for ships traveling across the Atlantic from Europe brings a daily flood of visitors to the city. The hotel district in the Moumental Lido area to the west of Funchal provides accommodation for the many package holiday visitors. The population of Madeira is in the region of 270,000 but taking foreign visitors into account this rises to about 1.4 million outnumbering the local population by more than 4:1.

There's no better illustration of this than the views from road when travelling from the airport to Funchal along the VR1. A series of alternating bridges and tunnels provide the only practical means of travel round the island.

When Madeira was first discovered it was covered in dense forests and was named accordingly, the Portuguese word for wood is ... madeira. Funchal, the capital of Madeira, is situated on the south coast of the island at a point where two rivers, Ribeira de Santa Luzia and Ribeira de Joao Gomes, meet to enter the sea. The name comes from "funcho", a wild herb once common on the island at the time of its discovery.



Monte

There's a story that on the hillside near Terreiro da Luta a young girl witnessed a miraculous appearance of the Virgin Mary, and so in 1470 a small chapel dedicated to "Nossa Senhora da Encarnação" (Our Lady of Incarnation) was built. From this, in 1565, the parish of "Nossa Senhora do Monte" (Our Lady of the Mountain) was created. In 1741 the church "Ingreja de Nossa Senhora do Monte" was constructed and rebuilt in 1818 after having been destroyed in an earthquake in 1748.



As the parish regional administration office is located just 25 metres above the station at Largo da Fonte this would probably be seen as the centre of the parish. The tendency of human nature toward simplification resulted in the short name for the parish – Monte. As this small area has become a focus for tourist attention it seems that everyone has just come to accept "Monte" as the name. Monte is one of ten parishes in Madeira and I believe that Atalhinho is a district of Monte, just below of Largo da Fonte, comprising the ornamental gardens and two hotels.

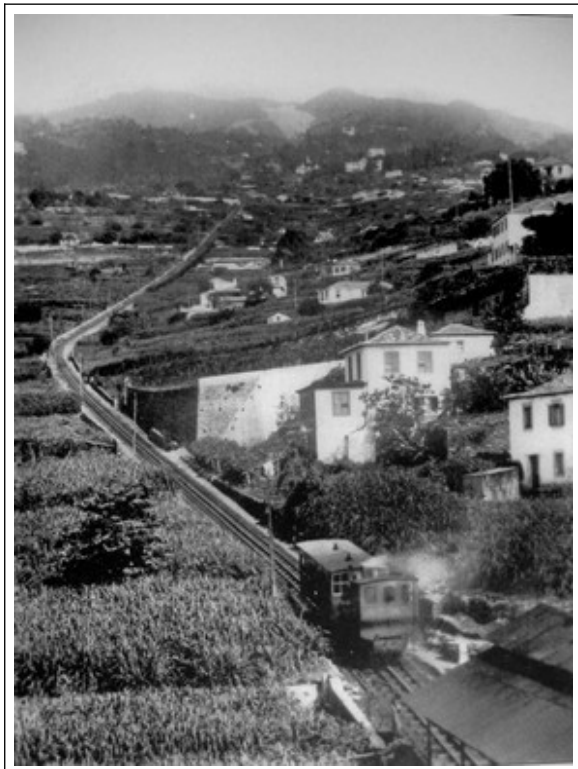
Monte is a major attraction for cruise ship visitors. Organised trips will take them first on the cablecar "Teleferico" travelling over rooftops to Monte. Here they will have the option of visiting the "Quinta Jardins do Imperador", the "Monte Palace Tropical Garden" shown on the right, the Church, and the view over the bay is something not to be missed.



Finally, the ultimate tourist activity, and source of amusement for local people, are the basket cars. These will take passengers part of the way down to the city at speeds up to an estimated 48 km/hour. A taxi or a steep walk will take them back to the ship.

Overview of the railway

The Monte Railway (Caminho do ferro do Monte) linked Rua do Pombal in the city of Funchal to Monte and later to Terreiro da Luta at a height of 850m above sea level. The engine employed a rack and pinion system for traction due to the steep gradient of the track. In addition to this the engine was inclined to the track to help keep the water in the boiler level with the pipes. It seems the designer didn't have an interest in passenger comfort, at least for those facing downhill



The track length was 3.9km (2.4m) reaching an elevation of 850m (2790ft) serving these stops:

Pombal (City station)
Levada de Santa Luzia
Livramento
Quinta Sant'Ana (Sant'Ana)
Flamengo
Confeiteira
Hotel Belmonte (Atalhinho)
Largo da Fonte (Monte station)
Terreiro da Luta.(End of line)

In the picture the train is at the Pombal base station and Terreiro da Luta is right at the top just above the cloudbase.

Railway timeline:

October 17, 1890 – The Train Company was created by public subscription.
January 22, 1891 - Approval of the project by the Funchal City Council.
February 17, 1891 – Manuel Alexandre de Sousa concession sold to the Monte Railroad Company.
July 16, 1893 - Inauguration of the 1st section of the Railroad.
August 3, 1894 - Inauguration of the 2nd section of the Railroad.
August 4, 1910 - Request for expansion to the railway line to Terreiro da Luta.
June 24, 1912 - Inauguration of the last section to Terreiro da Luta.
October 10, 1919 - Explosion between the Levada de Santa Luzia and deliverance.
February 1, 1920 – The Railroad reopens after the explosion.
March 29, 1943 – Funchal City Council orders the closure of the railway line.
June 25, 1953 - Petition for paving roads at the request of the residents of Monte.

The railway greatly benefited those living or working near the line and provided a general improvement in quality of life. Economic growth resulted from the easy transport of goods both agricultural and catering. It was expected that the railway would be used mostly for upward travel, as people could also use other other means of transport, such as the basket cars for going downhill. Although the rail company did own a goods wagon it seems possible that some items such as grape juice, sugar cane and wood for cooking would continue to be moved by more traditional means.

At this time tourism was on the increase and so was the demand for hotels with the “New Hotel” later to be Reid’s Palace Hotel at sea level, Monte Palace Hotel in the botanical garden and the Grande Hotel Belmonte (now a school).

The company owned at least three engines but two were known to be in a poor state of repair and possibly dangerous. As a result some people were becoming reluctant to use the service. Several incidents including the boiler explosion and several derailments were making the cost of running the railway uneconomical. The 1914/18 war affected the flow of foreign tourists and the growing number of cars on the island were taking business away from the railway.

In April 1943, the last train trip took place and soon after the line was dismantled. Despite the precarious conditions in which it operated in recent years, the railway still attracted passengers, even some of the locals, who after the closure were left without means of transport. The material was sold at an almost negligible price, according to the opinion of the time, while the old installations were abandoned. Part of the material resulting from the dismantling, namely the rails, went to scrap and part was used to repair the Bom Jesus Elevator, in Braga.

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