

6. Basket cars or sledges



Before the arrival of tourists sledges were commonly used as a means for local people to travel down toward the capital, Funchal. Other goods such as grape juice, sugar cane and firewood would also be transported in a similar way. The picture shows such a sledge loaded with firewood outside the Belomonte restaurant by the church in Monte.

It was around 1850 that the sledges started to be used as a means of downhill public transport for local residents who wanted to travel quickly from the mountain village of Monte to the coastal town of Funchal. The design of

basket carts as we know them today is usually attributed to Russel Manness. He was a wealthy wine merchant who needed to make frequent visits to the city center from his residence in Monte, Quinta Gordon (currently Quinta Jardins do Imperador). With the completion of the railway in 1894 and the subsequent increase in tourist numbers the Association of Carreiros do Monte was created, with the aim of defending the rights of its members.

The carts are manned by two carreiros, (this literally translates as ... something that guides or maintains direction like rails), but they are usually called drivers. All drivers wear the same uniform style of dress, white trousers and shirt with a straw hat with a black "Madeira" band. More importantly the shoes have extra this shoes with soles made from strips of rubber taken from car tyres. The drivers will sometimes stand, one foot on the runner, and scoot with the other to maintain a suitably scary speed or use their feet to control speed while negotiating bends. At strategic placed en-route assistants are placed to control cars and avoid accidents, drivers are responsible for the safety of their passengers.



The downhill journey starts at the bottom of the stairs leading to the Nossa Senhora do Monte Church, and finishes at Livramento a little below Monte and takes about 10 minutes on a course of 2 km reaching at times a speed of 48 km/hour. Livramento is about half way to the city so a twenty minute walk, or one of the waiting taxis, will be needed to complete the trip.

There are about 150 carreiros working in Monte and each is assigned a unique number that is used to ensure trips are taken in order. Carreiros have the responsibility of passing-on driving skill to an apprentice so that that tradition continues when they retire. The apprentice inherits the number of his teacher. The sledges are made of wicker, and incorporate a padded bench seat for up to three people and wooden sledge runners. Most sledges have ropes attached to the front of the runners to aid steering. Made locally in Monte the wicker is from Cural das Freiras and the wood is eucalyptus wood, coming from Santo da Serra. Wicker work is an industry still active on the island with traditionally made baskets and other items sold all over the world.

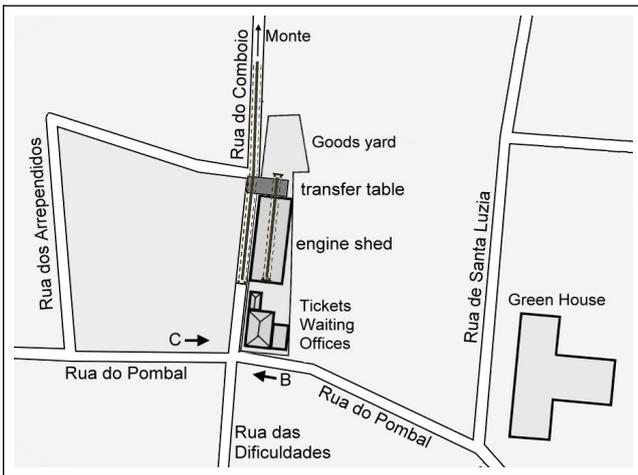
Today the Carts are returned to Monte on the back of a lorry and the carreiros use the local bus to ride to Largo da Fonte. Before motorised transport was available only one option existed. The carts had to be carried, not by the carreiros but by paid labourers who would carry them on their backs all the way to the top. The Carreiros could use the train or walk to the start.



The route taken today is the same as it was in the 1800's but stops short at Livramento. Previously they would have continued down Caminho do Monte, then Rue de Santa Luzia, and eventually turning right into Rua do Pombal at "The Green House" as it is known to local residents. This would have brought them to the main railway station where horse drawn carriages on rails "Carros Americanos" would transport visitors effortlessly back to the city centre at Largo da restauração.

At first I thought this building may have had some connection with the railway or the basket carts but disappointingly this turns out to be not the case. Built around 1909 it was a Seminar building, belonging to the Funchal diocese. From time to time it was used as a school but was subsequently handed back to the diocese, which seems unable to find a proper utilization for it. The building is now derelict and used for target practice for passing schoolchildren openly using cobblestones to smash windows.





After passing the Green House the baskets would turn sharp right down the steep hill of Rua do Pombal to arrive at the station.

Carros Americanos, American style carriages would be available to complete the journey to the city centre.

Today the station building is still there and looking exactly as it did over one hundred years ago, but other buildings have been demolished or altered.

