

# Vidago: from traditional agricultural village to service oriented spa resort (1908-1968)

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## Abstract

The present article seeks to highlight parts of the history of Vidago (parish of Chaves in North Portugal) between 1908 and 1968. The research focuses on the socio-economic development that occurred in this spa resort and the changes that resulted from the investments of not only the main Vidaguense mineral water company and owner of the luxurious Vidago Palace that opened in 1910 (see Figure 1), but also of dozens of small local entrepreneurs.

Sérgio Pereira chose to study this reality for his Master Thesis in Tourism, a course he took at the Universidade do Alto Douro e Trás-os-Montes (UTAD). Supervised by Veronika Joukes, he elected the case study methodology, because he was confronted with a limited and bounded reality, and mainly used a literature review and semi-structured interviews as research techniques.

He concludes that the exploitation of the Vidaguense natural mineral waters by the concessionaire over several decades resulted mainly in bottling and marketing activities, but also in tourism development with the purpose of attracting spa goers from all over Portugal. This triggered changes in the Vidaguense society. The growing importance of secondary and tertiary economic activities in this developing spa town forced the population of Vidago and neighbouring regions to learn new professions linked mainly to the tourism sector. He also found that tourism growth promoted agricultural production and trade, as demand for all kinds of agricultural products, consumables and durable goods was stimulated by the local upcoming hotel “industry” and spa guests. Indeed, the investments made by the company *Vidago, Melgaço & Pedras Salgadas* (VMPS) in the first decades of the twentieth century stirred local trade and tourism

considerably and thus a growing percentage of the working population, including children, freed themselves from farm work to incorporate new professional skills on the job.

This socio-economic local stimulus provoked a micro-revolution at all levels in Vidago between 1908 and 1968. The valley of Ribeira de Oura moved from an agrarian economy to a mixed exploitation of resources (agriculture versus services, supplemented by some industrial activity in bottling companies), turning Vidago into a local economic and commercial centre. Despite this outbreak of socioeconomic development, growth was not enough to keep up with the demographic boom, due to the seasonality of spa tourism. This meant that an ever growing share of the population had to emigrate from the 60s onwards.

This article focuses mainly on aspects related to tourism, thus recreating the transformation that local life underwent between 1908 and 1968 in order to conclude that here, as in other spa resorts, thermal tourism became a real agent of social change.



Figure 1. Vidago Palace.  
Source: [1].

## 1 Introduction

In this article we analyse infrastructural, behavioural and paradigmatic changes in the society of Chaves that occurred between 1908 and 1968, to understand if the use of mineral local waters made this ruralized society change, or not, to a service society within this period.

In her PHD thesis, Veronika Joukes [2] makes it clear that thermal tourism in the region of Alto-Tâmega, - i.e. in the town centre of Chaves, Vidago (parish of Chaves), Pedras Salgadas (parish of Vila Pouca de Aguiar) and Carvalhelhos (parish of Boticas) - was the activity that best helped the population to grow economically and socially since the end of the 19th century. Surely, in Vidago, huge financial resources were invested for the use of the natural mineral water that exists there. The mentioned thesis contemplates an in-depth analysis of the exploitation by the Town Hall of Chaves of the municipality's natural mineral waters between 1882 and 1948, including in Vidago. We will only refer some details about the beginning of the history of thermalism in Vidago.

In 1863, Manuel de Sousa, a farmer born in Vidago was returning from one of his properties when he leaned over a small stream of water to drink. It flowed in a land called "*Palheiros*" that belonged to João das Fragas and Aurélia Rita. At that time, it was not even used for watering since its spring was insufficient. While drinking the water, Manuel de Sousa thought it was sparkling and it could ease the stomach discomfort that he had every day. He informed Miss Júlia de Vaz Araújo of his discovery and she informed the lawyer Domingos Vieira Ribeiro, who was living in Chaves and informed the Town Hall. It was still the year of 1863 when the Mayor of that time, Augusto César de Moraes Campilho sent twelve bottles of natural mineral water from the Vidago spring, specimens of rocks, soil and residues to Lisbon where they were analysed for the first time at the laboratory of the *Escola Politécnica* by Dr. Agostinho Lourenço, who concluded that these precious mineral waters were similar to the waters of the well-known spa of Vichy in France in terms of their chemical composition and that they deserved the upmost consideration for being the only waters of this kind in Portugal [3] [4].

From 1865 onwards, it was the Town Hall of Chaves that made the first investments in the construction of a fountain and a simple spa in Vidago, and that same year it also started bottling the Vidago water to sell it. Nevertheless, some private investors, namely counsellor José Pedro António Nogueira, commander Miguel Augusto de Carvalho,

deputy Augusto César Falcão da Fonseca, António José Pereira Coelho and João Gualberto da Fonseca, i.e. one Lisbon, another from Vila Real and three from Chaves decided to work together to profit from these resources and created a company to obtain the concession of the exploitation of the Vidago natural mineral waters from the Town Hall of Chaves. They reached their goal in 1870. That was the beginning of *Águas de Vidago*, concessionaire of the springs in the parishes of Arcossó, Vidago, Vila Verde and Sabroso (Diário do Governo 1893 no. 200). It is this concessionaire, which became *Sociedade Vidago, Melgaço & Pedras Salgadas* (VM&PS) in 1934 that contributed substantially to the growth of Vidago because it was the company that invested in the construction of the *Vidago Palace Hotel* and in the industrialization of the bottling line.

## 2 Methodology

Two methodological tools were fundamental for the research that took place before the writing of this article: the socio-historic approach and the case study approach. The idea is to, among other things, understand the origin of some of the local phenomena, their historic development until they reached their maturation and relate them with their context. In this case, we focused on the realities experienced in a small region called valley of Ribeira de Oura between 1908 and 1968.

We privileged the reading of primary and secondary sources and particularly valued the contributions of eleven persons who actively experienced the period in analysis, being that the majority of the persons interviewed had some kind of professional activity in Vidago during the period studied. Sérgio Pereira requested them to write down their testimony to three open questions. His field work also implied informal conversations with many inhabitants and people who had worked for VM&PS to supplement the information available. He also visited some hotels that underwent few refurbishments since their opening to understand the conditions offered to the guests.

## 3 Spatial and time coordinates

The springs in the valley of Ribeira de Oura are located in a very ruralized territory in the district of Vila Real, former province of Trás-os-Montes, away from the urban centres and from the city life and hustle; a factor which, associated to the climatic and landscape conditions might have helped the investors to decide to invest on the exploitation of local hydro-mineral and tourist resources. We will focus on the

area around these springs and, specifically, all the tourist activity at the said thermal spa resort of Vidago. (See Figure 2).



Figure 2. Localization of Vidago.

Source: [5].

We initiated our analysis in 1908, the year in which the construction of the Palace Hotel started, a unique architectonic enterprise of exceptional conditions for that time. Since the beginning of its exploitation, Vidago underwent a massive development. We observed that it was in 1909 that the company *Águas de Vidago* definitively obtained the property of the concession by means of a licence of exploitation of the springs Vidago 1 and 2 and the purchase of the lands of spring Vidago 2 from Manuel de Sousa, after legal proceedings with the Town Hall of Chaves that reached the Higher Court due to several appeals [2].

The period analysed ends in 1968 with the opening of the guest house *Pensão Primavera*, the last traditional hotel of the thermal spa resort to be built after the destruction of the *Hotel Salus/Hotel do Golfe* on March 19, 1967, due to a huge fire [6].

Another reason for our study of the socio-economic development of Vidago between 1908-1968 is that this period meets the maturation period of thermal tourism in Portugal. This being the repetition of a movement that had developed during the 19th century throughout Europe.

#### 4 Proofs that Vidago grew thanks to its natural mineral waters

There is a series of elements that help us prove that Vidago slowly transformed since the discovery of the natural mineral water in its subsoil. In the following paragraphs we comment on some major areas of change: the opening of new hotels, the demographic evolution, the arrival of the railway, the increase of employability in different sectors and the introduction of new habits. Although all of this was

happening at the same time, we will debate each theme separately.

#### 4.1 The opening of new lodging units

At the end of the 19th century and up to 1910, the village of Vidago was a poorly developed thermal spa resort and it had hardly any services to offer to its (spa) guests. In fact the hotel capacity was no more than the *Grande Hotel* and the *Pequeno Hotel*, which belonged to the company *Águas de Vidago*, built in 1874, which could respectively receive about 100 guests distributed in 54 rooms and 30 distributed in 16 rooms. It was at the *Grande Hotel* that king D. Luís I and Queen D. Amélia stayed in 1875, 1876 and 1877.

There were the *Hotel Aurélias*, and the *Hotel Simão*. Both operated in large homes that were transformed into guest houses by their owners. There were also a few eating houses (*casas de pasto*) [4: 123].

Most hotels appeared in the beginning of the 20th century. Some examples are the *Palace Hotel* built in 1910, the *Hotel Avenida* in 1911 and the *Hotel Salus* in 1918 [5]. There were also some guest houses with simpler rooms. Table 1 illustrates the rising number of hotel rooms in Vidago at the beginning of the 20th century.

Table 1. Vidago hotel capacity 1910-1930 (no. of rooms)

Hotel	1910/11	1920	1930
<i>Grande Hotel</i>	54	54	54
<i>Pequeno Hotel</i>	16	16	Deactivated
<i>Palace Hotel</i>	160	160	160
<i>Hotel Avenida</i>	68	68	68
<i>Pensão Avenida</i>	16	16	16
<i>Hotel Salus</i>	Inexistent	85	85
<i>Pensão Francisco Dias</i>	Inexistent	Inexistent	22
<i>Pensão Moderno</i>	Inexistent	Inexistent	15
<b>Total of bedrooms</b>	<b>314</b>	<b>399</b>	<b>420</b>

Source: [6]. Data processed by Sérgio Pereira.

While the previously mentioned hotels were kept open, from 1935 onwards, a new set of family guest houses opened, which had low risk financial

investment. The *Pensão Termas*, the old and the new *Pensão Santos*, the new *Pensão da Avenida*, the *Hotel do Parque* and the *Pensão Primavera* offered more modest conditions and no important architectonic styles. In the beginning they were the residence of the owners, who slowly adapted them by adding rooms and undertaking successive refurbishments in accordance to their financial possibilities to answer to the growing demand for cheaper rooms of the growing number of less wealthy spa tourists.

The loss of quality of the lodging facilities since the beginning of the 20th century up to 1968 shows that initially the wealthier people went to Vidago and only later the less wealthy ones.

There is no doubt that the *Palace Hotel Vidago* is the most impressive building. The opening of this luxury hotel in 1910 and the creation of the park around the springs with avenues surrounded by trees, well-designed gardens, artificial lakes and monumental architectonic structures that protected the springs were used to implement in Vidago some of the luxurious life of the Portuguese Royal Court. The idea was to follow the model of the international spa resorts, changing the image of thermal tourism in the region forever. The revolutionary events and the implementation of the republican regime made this romantic and princely ideal that the investors wanted to give to this new hotel fall down [7] [8]. Although the Portuguese monarchy did not have the privilege to enjoy the majestic and elegant hotel, throughout the 20th century, it was attended by the nations' most important personalities from different fields such as politics, culture and show business: Amélia Rey Colaço (1898-1990), theatre entrepreneur, Sequeira Costa (°1930), musician and composer, Presidents of the Republic Marechal Carmona (1869-1951) and Américo Thomaz (1894-1987), Marcello Caetano (1906-1980), the last President of the Council of the Estado Novo dictatorial regime, Duarte Pacheco (1900-1943), minister of public works and Sá Carneiro (1934-1980), founder of the Social Democratic Party (PSD) [9: 130, 131 and 133].

During the period under analysis, the village grew in urbanistic terms due to the needs of the spa resort. All these lodging units promoted the creation of employment and fed the vision that thermal tourism could bring richness to the region that would persist in the future.

## 4.2 Population growth

In the censuses between 1864 and 1920 the people of Vidago still belong to the parish of Arcossó. The total population of the parish was of 857 people in

1864 and about 1,572 in 1920, i.e., there is a population increase higher than 80%  $[(1,572-857)/857 = 0.834]$ . (See Table 2)

Table 2. Population residing in the parishes of the valley of Ribeira de Oura before the creation of the Vidago parish (1864-1920)

Parish	1864	1878	1890	1900	1911	1920
Anelhe	617	617	706	695	649	585
Arcossó/Vidago	857	1010	1533	1223	1547	1572
Loivos	759	797	917	950	967	927
Oura	627	589	715	712	946	953
Selhariz	368	448	497	415	430	388
Vilarinho das Paranhairas	388	388	434	404	392	419
Vilas Boas	503	520	596	556	526	491

Source: [10]. Data processed by Sérgio Pereira.

After the creation of the parish of Vidago (next to the one of Arcossó) in 1925, and later in the census of 1930, the number of inhabitants of the parish of Arcossó decreases to 688, i.e., almost half of the number from ten years before. On the contrary, the total number of Vidagos' inhabitants in the census of 1930 was of 1,256 people. We can also analyse the available demographic data, using the population density as a parameter. It's clear that except for the urban nucleus of Chaves, the Vidago parish is the most populated area up to 1926. When the parish of Vidago is created, it immediately ranks second with between 200-300 inhabitants per km<sup>2</sup> in the municipality of Chaves, which is the result of a strong demographic attraction due to the development of its springs [11: Annex no. 31 and 32] [12: 145, 148]. The parishes nearest to Vidago, such as Oura and Loivos, also increased their population since the beginning of the century. They also have been influenced by the appearance of the springs and by the small economic revolution boosted by the presence of the spa tourists that stayed at different hotels of the resort (see Table 3).

Table 3. Population residing in the parishes of the valley of Ribeira de Oura after the creation of the Vidago parish (1930-1970)

Parish	1930	1940	1950	1960	1970
Anelhe	774	816	954	898	615
Arcossó	688	674	789	771	520
Vidago	125	137	160	171	121
Loivos	6	2	9	2	0
Oura	100	110	116	125	104
Selhariz	8	0	9	4	5
Vilarinho das Paranhairas	108	118	143	113	875
Vilas Boas	0	6	9	2	0
Selhariz	452	515	593	585	450
Vilarinho das Paranhairas	464	575	540	426	345
Vilas Boas	513	526	616	520	380

Source: [10]. Data processed by Sérgio Pereira.

### 4.3 The railway

The managers of the company *Águas de Vidago* were well aware that the train would be a strategic element for the water business. The arrival of the railway in 1910, the year of the opening of Vidago Palace, allowed tourists to travel to the spa resort faster and in a more comfortable way. Since the majority arrived by train, this was clearly a fundamental factor for the growth of Vidago.

Using his political power, the manager António Teixeira de Sousa was able to relocate the Vidago station from the centre of the settlement as it was initially planned to a point that made it possible to draw a straight line between the station and the monumental entrance of the Palace. The newly created Avenue received his name: *Alameda de Teixeira de Sousa* [2: 356] [6].

But it was not only the transport of people that created opportunities, so did the transport of goods. With the trains of the Corgo line, the bottle trays started being transported to the warehouses of Oporto and Lisbon to enter the commercial circuit. The wagons also brought numerous products to Vidago. An example is the fresh fish that arrived twice a week from the Vigo fishing port, which was served to the guests of the different hotels of the resort [13].

It is important to note that one of the factors that hindered the development and the full exploitation of the competitor springs in the centre of Chaves and Vilarelho da Raia is related to the late arrival of the railroad to the city of Chaves: a decade later, in 1921.

### 4.4 Increase of employability in different sectors

During the first half of the 20th century, the *Águas de Vidago* company promoted many changes in the village of Vidago, and it was responsible for the increase of the region's tourism. By exploiting the natural mineral waters' springs and building the first hotels, it promoted the arrival of tourists willing to spend their money in the village and the region. This situation created a wave of trade dynamism which led to the arrival of people from neighbouring lands and from farther away who saw the growth of the Vidago thermal spa resort as an opportunity for a better life. Employability increased highly in the hotel sector of the valley of Ribeira de Oura in jobs that needed a low level of training such as washerwomen, maids, doormen, kitchen helpers, butlers, messengers and in more complex positions

with some requirements. In both cases, the managers chose experienced professionals who arrived from the capital's hotels or even from Spain. It was the case of cooks and waiters [14].

The arrival of the train in a village with hotels and guest houses spread over several streets triggered the creation of a new job: the *bellboy*. Every respectful hotel of Vidago had one; the bellboy would await the tourists arriving at the station of Vidago and take them to their place of lodging.

But the added-value in terms of employment was in the bottling of the springs' water, since this activity guaranteed a job to dozens of employees during the entire year. The majority of the employees that worked at the springs were women [7].

We highlight the contribution of another group associated to the Vidago natural mineral waters: every year a few minors started their active life working for VM&PS. A good example is the testimony of the Aguiar family. All the members of this family who were interviewed mentioned that their first job as a child at the Salus spring, was giving water to the spa tourists with reduced mobility because the spring emerged below the ground so it was necessary to go down and up 45 steps to collect the water in the measuring glasses. This was their duty when they started at the company, and they passed their know-how along to their siblings. It was a recurrent phenomenon: several members of the same family were working at VM&PS [13].

The knowledge accumulated while working for the tourists remained within the community of Ribeira de Oura and its surroundings. In fact, working at the local hotels was like completing a tourism vocational course. Many earned their skills on the job and the knowledge of the "*métier*" was transferred to the younger ones because there were no hotel training schools [13].

As previously mentioned, in 1920 the resort had four operating hotels that offered about 400 rooms for a rich and elitist class. Besides the hotels there were a few smaller guest houses that offered modest lodging conditions. All these hotels needed labour for different services and tasks. Although there was the need to recruit people from other locations, the local inhabitants seized the opportunity to get a job at the different hotels of the resort. This outbreak of tourism development also boosted the presence of many commercial houses in the village that needed employees to be at the counter. All these changes contributed to the displacement of employees that



were previously working in farms to services that were provided mainly during the thermal season. The thermal resort of Vidago operated uninterruptedly during the period that we researched. This does not mean that tourism in Vidago employed more people than agriculture. Here is already one reason to explain this: tourism itself boosted the local agricultural production. In a time where commercial exchanges took place with some limitations - it was much more difficult for products to reach their destination than nowadays - many of the agricultural products served at the hotels were produced in the region, in lands owned by the hotel entrepreneurs as it is the case of João Crisóstomo de Oliveira, owner of the *Hotel Avenida* [15]. Moreover, the active population could only work in tourism during the thermal season, from June to October. The remaining months, those people would be unemployed or would go back to their farm jobs. The seasonality of Vidago's spa tourism due to climate conditions did not enable the formation of an active professional class working full time in the service area. Based on our research, we concluded that although many families in Vidago received their main revenue from the agricultural activity, several of their members acquired some know-how about the hotel business which they shared with their kin, a habit that lasted throughout the 20th century. The population of the Valley of Ribeira da Oura saw in each thermal season a great opportunity that year after year would offer a temporary "job" to many unemployed people, mainly women and young people. Young people saw in the hotel work an opening to escape the much harder and less paid farm work. One of the aspects highlighted by the people with whom Sérgio Pereira talked was the fact that the work at the hotel during the three or four months of the thermal season allowed the families from Vidago to gather some savings that might help them to survive the remaining months of the year, being this an extra revenue used as a supplement (many times indispensable) to the family budget. However we noted that the growth of thermal tourism and the bottling industry throughout the 20th century couldn't meet the increase of labour demand. Indeed, even in "flourishing" Vidago the population underwent the same difficulties and vicissitudes as the population from the rest of Trás-os-Montes. The migrating process that the population from the north of Portugal underwent throughout the 20th century caused the same effects on the population of the valley of Ribeira de Oura. At the end of the 19th

century and beginning of the 20th century, many citizens from Vidago moved to Brazil and the USA. Some of these adventurers went back to Vidago to start their own business.

#### 4.5 Change of habits

We reiterate that, since the beginning of its activity, the company *Águas de Vidago* chose to exploit the Vidago springs in two ways. On the one hand, it invested important financial resources in the tourism and leisure, supplementing it with therapeutic services, taking advantage of the medicinal benefits of the waters. On the other hand, it chose to bottle and sell the water from the springs. This second decision brought quicker revenues and was less expensive in terms of exploitation. Nevertheless, at the beginning of the 20th century, it was done manually due to the lack of technological means that would only show up from the 1950's onwards. Moreover, the consumption of bottled water was not yet generalized in the Portuguese society. To increase the sales volume, the company *Águas de Vidago* told the public that the Vidago waters contained a medicinal and therapeutic purpose even when consumed in a family environment. Thus, it sold bottles of 0.25 centilitres with the waters of spring Vidago 1 in pharmacies spread over the country [16].

With the arrival of so many tourists, the inhabitants of Ribeira de Oura themselves were privileged with some "modernities". Since the inauguration of the *Grande Hotel* in 1874, the Vidago residents had the possibility of taking advantage of services such as the post or the telegraph that operated only during the bathing season. The first post employee is said to have been João Crisóstomo de Oliveira. He became one of the most influent hotel entrepreneurs of the resort, in the first half of the 20th century. The telegraph, the most modern means of communication of that time was inaugurated in Vidago by the minister Rodrigo da Fonseca Magalhães, when he went for his bathing season in the year 1875 [6:22].

While specific public services started making their way into the spa tourist daily routine at the beginning of the 20th century, such as the provision of drinking water, health services, electricity, etc..., the inhabitants, inspired by these examples, started demanding and doing their best to achieve a higher standard of life. The (tourism) development of the thermal village led to the arrival of these modern elements in Vidago much sooner than in other places in the region.

The guests spent quite some of their time relaxing in a green environment. They also enjoyed themselves at the sports facilities of VM&PS, such as its tennis fields, firing range, automobile race track, artificial lake (for rides on rowing boats), golf course, among others. The guests of the remaining hotels rested in their own friendly and familiar environment and enjoyed the famous dancing nights that were organized there. To ensure live music during the summer season, several bands were created. There were also the promenades near the river banks or to the local river beach, called "burricadas" in which the local donkeys were used as a means of transport, as you can see in Figure 3.



Figure 3. "Burricada" promenade.  
Source: Postal card of Sérgio Pereira.

All these changes made Vidago leave behind a fully agricultural economy and evolve to a more diversified one as shown in this small excerpt [7: 78]:

"Nowadays, life in Vidago is very different than it was some years ago. Then, life was focused on half a dozen noble families to whom the people of Vidago obeyed. Everything was different from now; the Vidago village now has a diversified and evolved life. The development of tourism led the people of Vidago to change their activity. The presence of the waters and the hotel life made some become rich and others were able to save some money. Business has also grown and it favoured a few fortunate ones. With regard to the people's daily routine, most of them are employees of the company *Águas de Vidago, Melgaço & Pedras Salgadas* that absorbs an important part of the population."

## 5 Conclusions

The study carried out showed a few realities of the Vidago spa resort between 1908 and 1968 that bear witness to a real social and economic growth as a result of the discovery of natural mineral water in

that location. At the beginning of the 20th century, the Vidago settlement was in fact a small commonplace village in the province of Trás-os-Montes. What the Town Hall was not able to achieve in Vidago, namely the exploitation of the springs and the construction of a European-like resort was promoted by a company of private capital, the company *Águas de Vidago*. In 1908 the company met the financial conditions to project and execute a set of infra-structures such as hotels, spa centres (therapeutic use), leisure equipment and buildings with artistic architecture which nowadays belong to the thermal heritage of the Vidago spa resort.

In short, we can consider that between 1908 and 1920 there was a significant investment in the construction of the magnificent Vidago Palace which led to its inauguration and intensive use. The 1920s can be related to the administrative promotion of Vidago to parish due to its status of thermal resort (important tourism classification at national level). The 1930s gave way to many different relationships between VM&PS (concessionaire of the resort) and the town living forces and resulted in the construction of a 9-hole golf course, a river beach and a new church. The decade of 1940 brought the highest frequency rate of spa tourists to Vidago with more than two thousand enrolments for treatments and the opening of many guest houses. Finally, in the 1950s and 1960s many personal relationships were established between the inhabitants and the guests. Moreover, there was a considerable cultural development mainly during the thermal season. All these events allowed a rural community to transform into a community, based on a mixture of economic activities mostly of the primary (agriculture) and tertiary (thermal tourism) sectors supplemented by the secondary sector (bottling).

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