

TT No.78: Stephen Harris - Lisbon Weekend Travels (Saturday 15th & Sunday 16th September 2007).

Although not bang up to date (I've been out of the country ever since) I thought that readers of this website may be interested to hear of my football experiences in Lisbon over a weekend in mid-September. Lisbon is a beautiful and affordable city with a vibrant football culture. For many years it was an excessively expensive place to reach from the UK, but all that has changed, with cheap flights now available from Luton, Gatwick and Bristol. Perhaps the one drawback from a football tourist's perspective is that precise kick-off dates and times for the top division games are not settled until the Monday before the weekend they are played, thus requiring pre-booked visitors to be flexible in their match choice.

Saturday 15 September 2007; Bwin Liga; **Benfica** 3-0 Naval 1 Maio. Att: 34,713. Admission Euro 37; No Programme issued; FGIF Match rating: 3*.

I was pleased to be able to visit the rebuilt Estadio de Luz, having missed out on a game there in the 2004 European Championships. It really is an impressive place, the inside reminding me of the new Arsenal stadium here in London. With a capacity of almost 66,000, a full house was not expected for this league game against lowly opposition from Figueira da Foz. Nevertheless, I was unsure of the exact ticket arrangements and got there early, just in case. In the event, the ground was almost exactly half full and buying a ticket from the kiosks outside could not have been easier. Unusually for me I opted for the best, and most expensive, ticket available. To my surprise once inside I found this to be the busiest section of the ground, close to the pitch in the lowest tier along one side, and populated by a very well-to-do looking crowd. All around, the ground consists of two continuous tiers of red seats, separated by two rings of VIP seats and boxes. The upper tier to my right was not in use and the small contingent of away fans were squeezed into a narrow corner section at this end. The lower tier behind the goal to my left contained the main, vociferous fan block, with another faction - the 'Diablos' away to my right.

Benfica probably had their eyes on their forthcoming Champions League game and appeared to start at half pace. Nevertheless, it was great to see such stars as Rui Costa and Nuno Gomes in action and as a team they were light years ahead of their opposition. Benfica really turned it on in the second half, with both of the aforementioned scoring in a comfortable 3-0 win. It was a very pleasant evening all round and I lingered into the night drinking beer and talking football in one of the little bars around the stadium concourse. Perhaps the one sour note was a brief battle followed by a long stand-off during the game between the police and the Diablos who had breached a ban on flags and banners being brought into the stadium.

Sunday 16 September 2007; Liga Vitalis; **G D Estoril** 3-2 SC Freamunde. Att: c.1,250. Admission Euro 10; No Programme issued; FGIF Match rating: 4*.

A very hot Sunday afternoon saw me thoroughly lost in the posh, hilly avenues of Estoril searching for the Estadio Antonio Coimbra da Mota, home of Grupo Desportivo Estoril Praia. Not a hard ground to find really, unless you print off the street 'map' from Google Maps which seems to bear little resemblance to the reality on the ground. The only living soul I saw during this lost period was a lone motorist who stopped briefly to ask if I knew where the football ground was and sped off on my negative answer before I could cadge a lift.

Having eventually wandered down the right street I found a real hotchpotch of a ground, essentially consisting of just two, seated sides giving a 5,000 capacity. One side has a small covered stand, flanked by uncovered seats. The other is all uncovered seating, exposed to the full ferocity of the sun. Around 300 away supporters occupied half of this side; the other half reserved for home supporters attracted just 13 spectators. Almost everybody else crammed into the shady areas on the west side. Behind the north end is a shallow, tarmacked slope which evidently once housed standing spectators but is no longer used. The south end is occupied fully by the dressing room block.

Freamunde started well and dominated almost the entire game - much to the loud dismay of the home fans and their handful of '12th Man' ultras. Freamunde scored twice in the second half and lead 2-0 with less than five minutes to go and with many disgruntled supporters heading for home. Then in a dramatic last 5, Estoril scored three as Freamunde conceded a penalty, had a player sent off and lost both their discipline and their dignity. Marvellous stuff.

Sunday 16 September 2007; Bwin Liga; **Belenenses** 2-1 Uniao Leira. Att: c.3,000. Admission Euro 10; No Programme issued; FGIF Match rating: 3*.

A quick dash on the coastal train saw me at the Estadio Restelo, the attractive home of Belenenses for their evening game against fellow UEFA Cup qualifiers Leira. First problem was getting in. Long queues at the ticket windows were made up of socios collecting their passes and paying the 5 Euro supplement needed to watch this game. Nobody seemed to know where tickets for casual punters such as myself were to be obtained. Eventually finding the correct, unmarked and deserted window I finally obtained a ticket which seemed to allow me to use any part of the stadium I chose. I got the distinct feeling that I was the only non-member present in the small crowd.

The ground consists of a large double-tier horseshoe of 32,500 light blue plastic seats commanding a magnificent view to the south over the Tagus river. This south end has a much lower curve of uncovered bench seats which are no longer in use. The club had just received approval from UEFA to play their home UEFA Cup game here against Bayern Munchen - a fixture attracting much anticipation and making this game rather low-key in comparison. Around the stadium itself is a large, mixed sports complex and a second, much smaller football stadium. Along with the majority of spectators I entered the west side and I stood in the lower tier amongst

the hardcore 'Furia Azul' boys. Otherwise, the crowd seemed to consist mostly of crusty old sea dogs from the maritime end of town and there were none of the fur coats and fat cigars that I had seen at Benfica.

The game was a disappointingly poor one and Belenenses hardly seemed bothered at all at the start, conceding after 10 minutes. They woke up in the second half, urged on by their supporters, eventually and just about deservedly clinching the game 2-1. As with the previous two games, there was no match programme issued. But Belenenses do produce a very nice monthly Journal, which provides a good souvenir of the day.

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