



Visual Glosa #4: Guided Visit to the Former Matosinhos Refinery ³

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³ This text was prepared and used by Inês Moreira as the basis for the guided tour of the Refinery, held on July 5, 2025, as part of the Open House. More information at: <https://2025.openhouseporto.com/places/16-antiga-refinaria-2025/>.



Partial view of the former Matosinhos Refinery, with the chimneys and industrial structures that shaped the territory for decades.

Welcome aboard. We're on our way to the site of the Former Matosinhos Refinery.

I'll be guiding you through a piece of territory that has been undergoing continuous material and symbolic transformation for centuries and that we've been following for the past three years through the civic platform Refineryboard.pt. This visit is cultural, historical, and invites the imagination.

Close your eyes.

Take a deep breath.

Counting to ten, we enter the ZONE, as Tarkovsky might say:

Ten... We roll across the ground that once trembled under the pumping of giant machines.

Nine... You smell the rust and the oil left behind.

Eight... You hear the wind moaning through empty pipes.

Seven... You feel the sun burning. You see the triangular ATEX sign: explosive atmosphere.

Six... The echo of lost footsteps follows us. Like the smoke from this bus.

Five... The shadows of the men who once worked here still linger.

Four... Listen to the silent voices of metal. And the cries of seagulls.

Three... We approach the still heart of this refinery.

Two... The past whispers in your ear: what do you seek, why did you come here?

One... You're in. Welcome to the past.

>>> And thank you, Lars Von Trier and Andrei Tarkovsky, for guiding us in.

The industrial park we're entering spans approximately 240 hectares, with several engineering facilities dedicated to oil refining and raw materials supply. It operated from 1970 to 2020 and is now undergoing dismantling. The site is roughly equivalent in scale to the urban area of Matosinhos, or Leça da Palmeira. 33% + 33% + 33%, with one third currently awaiting a new future. Let's look back:

1) Centuries and millennia

Before human presence, this area was dominated by shifting sand dunes and wild Atlantic forest, where wind and sea constantly redrew the landscape. It was an untouched ecosystem, or rather, touched only by plants and animals adapted to the fierce forces of the Atlantic, sea and air, a natural era, far from human time. [Coincidentally, perhaps contemporary to the species that gave rise to fossil fuels.].

2) Up until the 1910s

Matosinhos was a quiet coastal zone, where artisanal fishing and small-scale farming shaped daily life. It was a natural landscape where the rhythm of nature dictated the lives of its inhabitants, and time seemed to stand still. In the early 20th century, leisure and summer holidays began to take hold, turning Leça into a seaside refuge for those seeking rest by the sea.

3) From the 1940s to the 1960s

Leisure evolved, and nautical activities emerge, attracting more and more visitors to the coast. Pools were built at Quinta da Conceição and at the tidal zone, offering new spaces for recreation and social life by the sea, along with the nautical clubs and the Boa Nova Tea House. Matosinhos began to establish itself as a coastal leisure hub, maintaining a delicate balance between nature and growing human presence.

4) 1950s and 60s

If the construction of the Port of Leixões had already created the Aterro Beach land reclamation in the 19th century, by the 1960s the open fields gave way to the new coastal avenue. Plans and projects were launched to transform the landscape, in a transition toward progress, but also toward the erasure of former ways of life, beginning a process of artificialization that, now in the 21st century, efforts are being made to reverse.

5) Late 1960s

Tensions rise: what should be done? Ambitious proposals emerged, including a golf course for tourism and leisure modeled after the Penina Hotel in Lagos, an idea put forth by Mayor Pinto de Oliveira. But Salazar and the Estado Novo regime chose a different path, focused on industry and national economic growth and, against the will of the local mayor, decide to create the refinery by SACOR.

6) 1970s

The Matosinhos Refinery is born — a powerful symbol of Portuguese development, a factory that fuels the economy and generates employment. Chimneys and flares rise into the sky, and industrial progress takes shape in this place by the sea, stretching along its edge: pipelines run from Leixões to the airport.

7) 1980s and 1990s

The refinery adapted. It modernized its facilities to comply with emerging environmental regulations, seeking to reduce its impact in the. Yet the industry remained strong. It was a time of growth, but also of growing awareness about the environmental costs of progress. Early warnings became louder, and signs of wear began to show. The shadow of the future cast doubt on the present.

8) 2020

Production in Matosinhos came to a definitive end and was concentrated in Sines. The push for decarbonization and decontamination began, an intense effort to cleanse the soil and air, preparing the ground for a possible, though still uncertain, future.

9) 2023

The dismantling process began, erasing the scars of decades of production. Twenty-six crude oil tanks have already been removed. In 2026, decon-

tamination will begin, opening a path toward regeneration and a new beginning.

10) Now

Plans are being studied to transform this place into an Innovation District, including a university campus, headquarters for blue biotechnology initiatives, and other activities linked to green energy and knowledge.

Architects MVRDV have been commissioned to design the project, though we have not yet had access to it.



Finally:

If the dunes were still here,

**— if the Atlantic forest had been
preserved,**

— if the golf course had been built,

**— or if the refinery were still operating,
we wouldn't be here, in this small van,
curious about the future.**

**So I leave you with a question, and pass
the microphone:**

**What would you like to see happen in this
place? Do you have plans?**