

## **Gozo    Island of Myth & Miracles**

This Guide is intended to present a true and factual statement of the spirit, character, charm and colour of an island over the past 5000 years.

It is an invitation to dedicate some time and experience the magic of a people, culture and a way of life that you will forever treasure...

...and like Ulysses, you will not regret the time enjoyed in Gozo, but will regret to leave the island.

The cave was sheltered by a copse of alders and fragrant cypresses, which was the roosting place of wide-winged birds, horned owls and falcons and cormorants with long tongues, birds of the coast, whose business takes them down to the sea. Trailing around the mouth of the cavern was a thriving garden vine, with great bunches of grapes: from four separate neighbouring springs four crystal rivulets were channelled to run this way and that; and in soft meadows on either side iris and wild celery flourished. It was indeed a spot where even an immortal visitor must pause to gaze in wonder and delight.

**The Odyssey, V.63-74, Bk. 5, Homer**

Though the iris, the owls and the falcons are long gone, this ancient description is still fitting for Gozo, the island of Ogygia, on which Ulysses was shipwrecked a thousand or so years before Christ walked in Palestine. Here, it is said, Ulysses met the bewitching nymph Calypso, and idled away seven years of lotus-eating, before his conscience drew him back to the hearth of his loyal wife, Penelope.

Gozo still evokes the magic of the myth, which draws and enraptures thousands of visitors, capturing them with a spell far more powerful than any conjured by the nymphs of old. Some even stay on for longer than Ulysses did, returning to buy houses that are centuries old, converting them into comfortable homes.

The sleepy pace and rustic charm of this tiny, tranquil haven is wont to induce a luxurious stupor, the right kind of medicine for those who have been deprived of harmony and tranquillity for any length of time. It is not for those who favour bright lights and big cities, humming traffic and honking horns. But there are many who do not, and all year round they are to be found in Gozo, taking leisurely walks in quiet village streets, over green hills and through picturesque valleys, diving in the crystal-clear waters, swimming in blue coves and lagoons, drinking a glass of wine in a bar, dining quietly by candlelight, in the open air, or simply savouring the tranquil magic of Gozo.

### **Golden Silence**

Gozo meaning "joy" in Castilian is the name the Aragonese gave this island, when they possessed it in 1282. The idea of joy and pleasure is also conveyed by its Latin motto "Fertilis ab undis caput iffero – a fruitful land raising its head from the sea". We know that the Phoenicians, when it was theirs in 700BC, called it "Gwl" or Gaulos, meaning a round ship, possibly in reference to the island's shape from a

distance, a name the Romans kept when they, in turn took it over in 218AD. The Arabs, who came to rule this precious piece of land a thousand years ago, and who strongly influenced its Semitic language, left behind the name that has stuck in the vernacular: *Ghawdex* (pronounced Aw-desh).

Gozo is the second largest island of the Maltese Archipelago that consists of three islands known as Gozo, comino and mainland Malta. Millions of years ago the Maltese island were the elevated regions on a mass of land extending southwards from nearby Sicily. This continental shelf was submerged when the sea level rose during the interglacials leaving those land tips exposed in the centre of the Mediterranean Sea.

Roughly circular in shape, 14km by 7km in area, Gozo is hilly and from the south-west to the north-west, the coast is entirely surrounded by cliffs. The hills of Gozo are curiously rounded and flat-topped, the result of hard rock lying on top of softer rock. The highest point on the island rising 190 metres above sea level is *TacDbiegi* hill on the outskirts of the village of *San Lawrenz*. The southern part of the island facing Malta, is low lying, but it rises near the coast and forms the vertical cliffs of *Ta' cenc* that jut out like a bastion into the sea. Several narrow valleys cut through and dissect the plateau – the best known being *Marsalforn*, *Xlendi* and *Ramla l-Hamra*.

Gozo is rural and simple, its culture and way of life rooted in fishing, and in primitive pastoral and agricultural activity. Tomatoes, potatoes, onions, melons, grapes, figs, oranges, and tangerines are the island's prime agricultural produce.

Gozo though separated from mainland Malta by a 5km stretch of Mediterranean sea is distinctly different from Malta. The soil is fertile as much blue clay is present. This means that rain water does not sink through the ground quickly and is the reason why Gozo always looks greener for most part of the year.

Gozo's population of approximately 29,000 is not so much in evidence, except in the in the bustling little square in what makes for the main town, Victoria, so named in 1897 in honour of Queen Victoria's jubilee and where a fifth of the population resides.

The local people have resolutely stuck to their own name of Rabat, instead of Victoria. Like other Rabats in the one-time or present Arab world, this Rabat, has its medina, the fortified citadel atop a summit, which shelters the old town and which once offered security from raiders. This haunting citadel, a favourite spot for true romantics, has only a few splendid old houses and a lovely small cathedral encircled by the spectacular bastion walls. At night, with moonlight filtering through the ruins and the aged stones of ancient *palazzi*, it is almost possible to feel the spirits of those who lived, laughed, cried, loved, played – and died- here, when the world was a very different place, but Gozo was much the same.

The island's hamlets and villages, which are perfectly, still, with their strong wooden doors closed and their windows shuttered, appear to be deserted at certain times of the day. A boy in shorts might free-wheel an old bicycle down the centre of the main street, or a girl in a shaded cotton dress might run to her grandmother's home with a reed basket containing a fresh loaf and some tomatoes. A dog might twitch its tail, lying stupefied by the heat and the silence, right in the middle of the road. But sounds are muted and movement at a minimum.

There is no fear in walking about at night. The sense of safety and security is tangible. The people of this island take pride in the absolute absence of muggings and the almost non-existence of theft. Until fairly recently, when they were not at home, the villagers of Gozo left their keys in their front doors, a custom which can occasionally still be seen.

Gozo is tranquil, and treasures its peace. For some, the silence can be overwhelming, but not to those for whom it spells a blessed a blessed respite from the trials and tribulations of everyday life. Gozo is not for those who like wild clubbing, bur for those who treasure their peace of body and soul and a slow

rhythm of life, although a couple of excellent night spots are a hive of activity among the locals during the summer months.

Village bars open early in order to cater for the early risers who attend the first mass of the day and close fairly late at night, catering to the socialising needs of locals and visitors alike. These watering-holes, with their wooden chairs, marble counters, and large metal trays containing this local delicacy, *pastizzi*, are a cultural icon. They have stayed unchanged for decades, the only sign of time passing by being the food and drink displayed for sale on the solid shelves and in the Edwardian glass cases.

The island is well served by restaurants, where the eating is good and varied. The visitor is spoilt for choice. Apart from restaurants and cafes offering local dishes as well as continental menus, one can also enjoy theme restaurants such as Chinese and Indian.

Restaurants abound in Rabat, *Mgarr* and in the fishing villages of *Marsalforn* and *Xlendi*, as well as in several other places. At the end of a day of pleasure on the beach, the most enjoyable epilogue is dinner *al fresco* in one of these places. A particular local dish is rabbit stewed in wine. Octopus stew with spaghetti is also very typical. Very tasty are a variety of soups and dishes with freshly caught local fish. A quick lunch with local cheeselets, olives, tomatoes, olive-oil and fresh bread washed down with a glass of wine is a real treat. Juicy prickly pears as a dessert may prove delicious and a small jar of the world renowned pure Gozo honey may be taken home to be shared with family and friends.

In this pastoral atmosphere, you will occasionally come across the incongruity of an International Herald Tribune, a Guardian, or a Frankfurter Allgemeine. Gozo is peaceful, but it is not isolated, and the newspapers get there on time, which may be bad news for visitors who want to escape the headlines from their own country. But as they say, no man is an island and where better to communicate than over a beer or two, accompanied by bowls full of roasted peanuts and some sun-dried tomatoes?

Gozo and its inhabitants have their own distinct character and identity, and noticeably different lifestyles, accents and dialect. Those who live in Gozo pointedly describe themselves as Gozitan, while those who live in Malta call themselves Maltese. Through the centuries, the Gozitan has developed a strong and independent character. A conservative person with staunch, clear thoughts, unaffected by what others think about him and who carefully deliberates every action to determine its compatibility with his interests and plans. Gozitans are hard-working and diligent, known as able farmers. The tourist who spends time on the island will surely experience the friendliness of the Gozitans. The young children and the old folk alike will go out of their way to indicate a direction or help a visitor find a hotel or apartment.

Gozo is renowned for its cottage industries, particularly spinning and weaving, and the creation of jumpers and jackets from the wool of sheep and goats.

Lace is the most widespread doorstep craft. It was introduced on a large scale after the 1840's. The craft soon proved its worth for the product was sold to the higher classes of society and even abroad. It was very common, especially in the afternoon, to see mothers with their daughters sitting on empty wooden lemonade crates with a lace pillow in their lap rested against the wall, their hands moving bobbins swiftly and deftly creating the most intricate and delicate of designs. Gozo lace is an object d'art and it continues to flourish despite competition from machine made lace.

The men make lace of a different variety: silver filigree, twisted into miraculous pieces of jewellery. And there is fabulous glass, with remarkable shapes in subtle shades of blue and green. Pottery is widely available, ranging from decorative pots and statuettes to imaginative house name plaques and door numbers.

crafts that are rarer still include palm work, palm leaves that are woven into sun-hats or baskets, cane work, especially practised by fisherman during winter to make cane curtains, carvers or sculptors, working the local stone or papier mache, producing statues and other objects to their own design, wood-workers that can construct anything from frames of grandfather clocks to limitation antiques chests of drawers and guilders, a craft that is gaining popularity.

change is slow in Gozo, which adamantly sticks to its tortoise-like pace. Gozo has still succeeded in retaining its dream-like qualities of peace and solitude. If Ulysses were to come here today, he would find it even harder to leave.

### **History of Gozo**

Gozo's history goes back to 5000 B.c. when a group from Sicily succeeded in crossing over on some form of sea-craft. These people who first colonised Gozo (Neolithic 5000 – 4100 Bc) probably lived in caves around *Il-Mixta* on *Ghajj Abdul* Plateau on the outskirts of *San Lawrenz* village, to the north-west of Gozo. This site consists of one huge cave separated into two by a natural column and a man-made wall. Pottery sherds unearthed on this site are of a purer pedigree than any other pottery found elsewhere in the Maltese Islands. This suggests that Gozo might have been settled earlier than Malta.

**The Temple Period (4100 -2500 Bc).** This phase represents an important turning point in the cultural evolution of prehistoric man. The greatest undertaking of the pre-Phoenician Gozitans are undoubtedly *Ggantija* Temples (3600 – 3000 Bc) situated in *Xaghra*, and documented as the oldest free-standing structure in the world. The temples take their name from the Maltese term "*Ggant*" meaning "giant", an apt name when one views the sheer size and height of these megaliths. Especially impressive are the cornerstones and the rear wall of the south temple.

The site consists of two temples, contained within a single outer wall. Although sharing a common façade, each temple unit has a separate entrance. The south temple has a five apse plan and is the older of the two, as well as being the larger and better preserved. The left apse in the second pair of apses, has three niches complete with capstones. Some suggest it might refer to a triple divinity, a triade. The remains of a fire-reddened circular stone hearth, possibly for an eternal flame, is in the opposite apse, where there are also remains of what was probably a small enclosure where oracles were delivered.

The north temple is considerably smaller, but with a more evolved four-apse plan having its rear apse replaced by a shallow niche. The entrance is very similar to that of the first temple; only the threshold is narrower and shorter.

The temples have exercised many a mathematical and engineering mind, seeking a solution to the mystery of how these huge stones were quarried, transported and then lifted upright in those primitive times. Local legend has it that the work was undertaken by a giantess called *Sansuna*, who lived on a diet of broad beans and water and carried the megaliths on her head. However it was stone balls, which one can see strewn around the site, which probably served as rollers to transport these huge blocks of stone to the site.

After the disappearance of the temple people the islands were repopulated by an entirely different race.

**Bronze Age (2500 – 700 Bc).** Unlike their predecessors, these people were warlike people who used copper and bronze tools and weapons and who cremated their dead instead of burying them. Among the interesting remains, there are three dolmens on *Tac-enc* plateau. These consist of a horizontal, roughly shaped slab of limestone supported on three sides by blocks of stone.

**Phoenicians and carthaginians (700 – 218 Bc).** The Phoenicians attracted by the local harbours, established a colony in Malta and Gozo. Around 500Bc, the Phoenicians of Carthage took over and the Carthaginians, as they are better known, remained masters of the islands until 218Bc. There are remains of a Punic rock-cut sanctuary at *Ras il-Wardija*, on the outskirts of *Santa Lucija* village, on the south-western tip of Gozo.

**Romans (218 – AD 535).** At the beginning of the second Punic War in 218Bc, the Carthaginians were ousted by the Romans. In Gozo they created a municipium, autonomous of that of Malta with a republican sort of Government that minted its own coins. Under the Romans, Christianity reached the shores of the island for the first time. In AD 60, Saint Paul the Apostle, while journeying to Rome, was shipwrecked in Malta.

**Byzantines (535 – 870).** Around AD 535, the islands passed under the dominion of the East Roman Empire that is under the rule of Byzantium. Very little is known of Byzantine times in Gozo.

**Arabs (870 – 1127).** In 870, the Aglabid Arabs became sole masters of the Maltese archipelago. The Punic dialect that had originated with the Phoenicians was then greatly affected in its structure. The Arab stay is evidenced by many place names and family names and especially by the name they gave to the island of Gozo – *Ghawdex*, that survives to this day.

**European Domination (1127 – 1530).** Count Roger the Norman freed the islands from the Arabs, who however remained masters paying a tribute. In 1127, the Normans took formal possession and hence, Gozo and Malta shared the same fate of Sicily passing successively under the rule of Swabia (1194), Angou (1266) and Aragon (1282). Under these rulers, the island was governed by a series of feudal lords whose sole interest was to exact the highest possible taxes from the inhabitants. Around 1397, the Gozitans created the *Universitas Gaudisii* – a corporation to defend local interests. From then onwards, the Gozitans fought hard to maintain their ancient privileges and freedom.

**Knights of St. John (1530 – 1798).** On 23 March 1530, the islands passed under the Knights of Saint John of Jerusalem, a chivalrous religious order initiated in 1099 and officially founded in Jerusalem in 1113. Initially they made no improvements in Gozo and in 1551, the island suffered its worst siege in history. In July, the citadel was besieged by the Turks of Sinan Pasha. The Medieval walls without flanks and terreplein to resist gunpowder bombardment were easy prey to the besiegers and the fortifications soon succumbed. A tombstone in the local cathedral conveys some of the horror in its commemoration of the nobleman Bernardo Dupuo, who died fighting the Turkish pirates, after killing his own wife and daughters to save them from slavery and concubinage, two fates worse than death. The entire population of about 5000 was taken into slavery.

After the terror of 1551, recovery was slow and painful. Some Gozitan slaves were traced and ransomed,

but life was shattered and families left permanently split asunder, their various members sold to different owners in far-off lands. Grand Master de la Sengle encouraged resettlement from Malta, by promising to waive the new settlers' debt of the previous four years, if they would take the risk of living in undefended territory. Others, it is said came over from nearby Sicily.

The vulnerability to pirates and slavery is the reason why villages in Gozo did not develop until the late 18<sup>th</sup> – early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Before that, the tiny population stayed close to the citadel, taking shelter within its walls between dusk and dawn, in line with a curfew order that was only lifted in 1637 and whenever there was notice of a raid by pirates. The villages remain, today, completely different in structure to those of Malta. They are open-ended and do not form the Maltese pattern of tightly-winding, narrow and easily defended streets.

It was to be another 150 years before the Knights contemplated the reality of an undefended Gozo, left open to the Turks. They hurriedly built some defences, but by then the piratical raids were easing off, until they ceased altogether in 1708.

As a result of these raids, a reluctance to communicate information crept irremediably into the Gozitan character. As one writer recently put it in his guide to Gozo, Gozitans "*have now accepted that not all tourists are direct descendants of 16<sup>th</sup> century Turkish slave-traders*", and their natural wariness has eased into friendliness, though they still prefer to keep their distance.

**French (1798 – 1800).** On 10 June 1798, the French under General Napoleon Bonaparte ousted the Knights from Malta. Their rule in Gozo was short-lived. In September the people rose against the French, who, on 28 October surrendered to the Gozitans. Gozo enjoyed a short period of autonomy until 5 September 1800, when the British took the Maltese islands under their protection.

**British (1800 – 1964).** Malta and Gozo became formally a British crown colony in 1813 and the island was slowly transformed into a fortress colony. Its resistance to the Axis bombardments during the second World War is legendary.

Malta and Gozo became a sovereign independent state within the commonwealth on 21 September 1964 and were declared a Republic on 13 December 1974. Though ruled from Malta from time immemorial Gozo has had semi-autonomous governments several times in its history, the last being the Gozo civic council between 1961 and 1973. The island is now governed like any other part of the Maltese islands. The executive functions of the central Government are carried out through the Ministry for Gozo, established on 14 May 1987.

### **Saints and Festas**

The curse of fear and terror under which the Gozitans lived for so long, coupled with the insecurity of a livelihood fully dependent on the elements and limitations of a small island, has made them sticklers for devotion to their favourite saints. Saints were the last hope in the darkness, and religious images served as protective devices against the cruel vagaries of a harsh existence.

Religious culture in Gozo remains strong, with God taking second place to His saints. Devotional fervour erupts in great feasts, which take place in the summer months. These village festas are unparalleled on the continent so the English words feast, festival or holy day, do not convey a true meaning of these

celebrations.

Every weekend from the last Sunday in May up to mid-September, each town and village organises a festa in honour of the patron saint to whom the parish is dedicated. In these festas, the spiritual and the secular intermingle, religion and folklore abound.

These celebrations have long been an important event and the rivalry between the villages reaches sky-high proportions

A festa worthy of the name is made up of illuminations, brass bands, fireworks and a procession. The façade of the village church as well as the principal streets are decorated with thousands of twinkling lights. From the Wednesday preceding the festa to its eve, several brass bands march through different streets preceded and followed by the young and not so young who revel in dancing and merrymaking. The beginning and end of these marches are marked by a profusion of multi-coloured ground and aerial fireworks. On Sunday afternoon, in the town and larger villages, there is also a traditional horse and donkey race along the main street. The climax of the festa is reached on Sunday evening when a procession with the statue of the saint carried shoulder-high wends its way slowly through the village streets. The villagers, men and women and children don their best outfit and the houses are appropriately decorated and lit for the occasion.

Festas are colourful celebrations with participants vying for the most splendid show, the best fireworks, and the most spectacular sense of *briju* (festivity). During the summer holiday months, August in particular, thousands of people from Malta invade Gozo, spilling through the streets, filling the restaurants and bars, and spending the afternoon sleeping off their excesses on the beaches. This is the only time of year when Gozo shakes off its sleepy persona.

The pilgrims Mecca of *Tac Pinu* draws thousands of devotees who seek special favour from the divine elements. People go there to ask for, or rather demand, fortune in their endeavours, which may be anything from a business enterprise, to a marriage, a pregnancy and examinations or as a last resort in seeking a cure from serious illness. If things turn out to their satisfaction, they return with a thank-you gift for the Madonna of *Tac Pinu*, in the shape of a votive offering. The gift is never given before the favour is received, but only promised. Glass cases in the church display these offerings; silver hearts, christening robes, artificial limbs, splints, and more. Weddings in Gozo end with the bridal bouquet being placed on the altar of *Tac Pinu*, for a happy marriage. Devotion to *Tac Pinu* is still alive among the thousands of Gozitan emigrants as can be witnessed from the letters sent by Gozitans living in far off countries.

And what of the tall statue of Jesus christ, standing on a peak between the capital town and the seaside resort of *Marsalforn*, like a mini version of Rio de Janeiro's most famous landmark? The islanders feared that the peak was a dormant volcano, because of its strange shape and planted the holy statue on it, so that it would not dare erupt. It hasn't poured out a drop of lava since, but that is because it is no more than an ordinary hill.

The people of Gozo set much store by their many chapels and churches, in which, during the hearing of the mass, they sit segregated according to gender: the men on one side, the women on the other. In sheer quantity, these houses of worship could serve a population many times greater. All churches have elaborate gilded interiors, marble works and sacred paintings by prominent artists. Gold and other precious ornaments donated by the parishioners adorn the statue of the patron saint.

Given the historical absence of strong secular leadership in this isolated and insular community, the islanders turned instead to the only figures of authority they recognised: the parish priests. These men, as did their counterparts, until fairly recently, in traditional Maltese villages, were the arbiters of right and wrong, sorters-out of disputes between friends and neighbours.

Faith in God and the saints helped the people of Gozo through many a crisis, like the plague of 1814, where only 104 died. A church was built as thanksgiving for salvation from this malaise, while a century later a chapel went up in gratitude for the passing of a major cholera epidemic, which affected 2.5% of the Gozitan population.

Religion creeps into myth and legend, too, as with the tale of the Lady in White, who floated the stones for a new chapel through the air, depositing them on the very spot where she wanted her shrine to be built. This, it was concluded, was the Madonna, making it quite clear where she wanted her shrine to be built. Then there is also *Kerrew*, the mystical hermit who, persecuted by the wanton people of a Maltese village, who sent a loose woman to tempt him, sailed over to Gozo on his cloak. There he lived, until he died, in Pomegranate cove, and people now pray to him for miracle cures.

## **Folklore**

Local folklore reaches its climax during the festas, but there are several other folkloristic celebrations throughout the year.

**carnival** is celebrated on the five days preceding Ash Wednesday. It usually falls in February. Initiated during the Aragonese rule (before 1530), the celebration has continued to grow and expand. Colourful artistic floats, grotesque masks and dance companies of all ages and sexes parade the streets of the town and the main villages throughout the five days. A spontaneous carnival is organised after sunset in the villages of *Nadur* and *Xewkija*. Hundreds of people walk up and down the main street dressed in comically distorted figures and the most imaginative and creative costumes and masks to conceal their identity.

The week from Palm Sunday to Easter Sunday, known in the Christian calendar as Holy Week, is full of religious and folkloristic shows. The central event is the Good Friday procession during which several life-size statues representing various moments from the passion and death of Christ are paraded through the village streets. Several men make vows to walk in the procession carrying a heavy cross or dragging heavy iron chains tied to their ankles. They wear hoods to conceal their identity. Scores of boys and young men are dressed in period costumes to add to the pageantry of the manifestation. Most impressive is the Roman legion, a gleam of breastplates, spears and shields and who announce themselves with trumpets and drum rolls. The procession is accompanied by the village band.

On Easter morning there is a procession with the statue of the Risen Christ in several villages. When the statue reaches the village square, the bearers stop for a moment and then return the Risen Christ inside the church with a run.

***Mnarja*** (the illuminated) is the feast dedicated to Saint Peter and Saint Paul, celebrated on the 29<sup>th</sup> of June.

On the eve of *Mnarja*, Gozitans used to flock to *Il-Buskett* in *Nadur*, where merry makers feasted on rabbit fried in garlic and an abundance of wine. Bonfires and guitarists entertained the crowds. Today, this merry-making is not so much in evidence, except the traditional horse and donkey races held on the day at *Nadur* that attract a large number of people. On the Sunday preceding the 29<sup>th</sup> of June, an agricultural show is organised where a variety of local produce and livestock is exhibited.

*Mnarja* was an important feast in days gone by, so much so, that it was written in wedding contracts the groom had to take his bride to the feast during their first year of marriage.

On the 14 and 15 of August a large scale **Agricultural and Industrial Exhibition** is held at *il-Mall*, Victoria's public gardens. Inspired by the Great Exhibition of London of 1851 and held since 1855, it has



enormous importance for the mainly agricultural community of Gozo. Farmers await this occasion to display the best produce of their fields and farms. They pride themselves with the giant pumpkins and the clearest honey, with the fattest cow and the most colourful plumage of the peacock. Though less people depend on agriculture, the show is still very popular. Prizes to the best exhibitors are distributed on the morning of 15 August by the President of Malta.

The **Ġostra** is held on the first Sunday of September. This was once a very popular summer event in fishing villages, but it survives only in *Xlendi*. This traditional sport consists of competitors going up a greased pole projecting from a headland onto the sea to grasp a flag at its end. Both winners and losers end up in the sea. There are several other traditional sports activities on the same Sunday that coincide with the celebration of the village festa.

Victory day is celebrated on the 8<sup>th</sup> of September. On this day the Maltese celebrate the feast of the Nativity of the Virgin Mary as well as the end of the 1565 Great Siege, when the knights aided by the Maltese inflicted on the Turks a great defeat. There is a pontifical mass at the cathedral and a military parade in *Pjazza Indipendenza*. A scholar delivers a speech to commemorate what is perhaps the greatest victory in Maltese history.

Christmas time in Gozo is becoming increasingly attractive. Since centuries people have built cribs in their homes and bagpipers went through the streets playing traditional tunes. Now the main streets are decorated with twinkling lights and large cribs are displayed in front of churches and main squares. On the evening of Christmas Eve members of the Christian Doctrine Society organize a procession with a statue of Baby Jesus through the village street. All the young boys and girls of the locality take part. In most villages the procession takes the form of a pageant with participants dressed in period costumes. It is concluded in the parish hall with a Christmas play. During midnight mass held in all parish churches, a young boy delivers the sermon.

### **Bays and beaches**

“Gozo’s coast scenery may truly be called pomsizilious and grophibberous, being as no words can describe its magnificence.” Edward Lear, (author) 1866.

**Edward Lear**, a keen visitor to the Maltese Islands, was not alone in his celebration of the magnificence of Gozo’s cliffs, coves, gullies and beaches. Summer and winter, they are breathtakingly splendid and stunningly varied.

There are beaches of red sand like *Ramla il-Hamra*, literally “Red Sands” where turtles once bred and where a Roman mini-potentate long ago built a summer villa, and *San Blas*, white sands like *Dahlet Qorrot*, magnificent deep water inlets that wind their way through the cliffs, like *Xlendi* and *Mgarr ix-Xini*, or coves of pebbles, like the romantically named *Hondoq ir-Rummien*, “Pomegranate cove”. *Xlendi* is where Phoenician galleys sought shelter and where, on storm days, they were wrecked on a treacherous reef, leaving amphorae lying in stillness in the depths of azure waters.

Then there are the wild imposing cliffs, where the breeze carries the scent of wild thyme and the brilliant turquoise waters of comino, the tiny island across the way, sparkle in the sunlight. The Maltese falcon, which gave its name to a Humphrey Bogart film, once bred on these cliffs. But sadly, it does so no longer – though some say that its cry still echoes in the wind.

One of the best – known bays is *Marsalforn*, which hums and buzzes until the early hours of the morning during the hotter months, but which is left to the sea spray and the net-mending fishermen in the winter. Traditionally, this was the summer resort of the middle-class from the town of Victoria, which is all of four kilometres away – a burdensome, hilly journey in a horse-drawn carriage in the summer heat, before cars came along.

*Dwejra*, with its curious rock formations and spilling seas, is also a magical attraction with spectacular deep-sea swimming down a cliff-path, and spell-binding diving through what is known as the "Blue Hole" near the Azure Window and the Inland Sea.

*Dwejra* is also home to Fungus Rock, a solitary outcrop standing in the sea many metres from the shore. It is known, in the local tongue, as *il-Gebli tal-General* "The General's Rock", in memory of the Italian officer who, several hundred years ago, fell to his death while supervising quarrying activities in the area. The rock was heavily guarded by the Knights of St. John, who set great store by a special plant that grew there, and which was believed to have medicinal properties. This was picked by slaves and brought to land using a primitive system of baskets and pulleys, it was then crushed and mixed with soup or wine, to be given to those suffering from intestinal disorders. Anyone found raiding the rock for the spiny orange-red plant was sentenced to death, or a fate worse than that: a lifetime of rowing service on the cruel galleys. The plant, *cynomorium coccineum*, was so precious that it was presented to visiting dignitaries in the customary exchange of gifts.

**The following is a list of all the beaches and other bathing and diving spots beginning from *ir-Ramla l-Hamra* and proceeding clockwise around the island.**

***Ir-Ramla il-Hamra*** (easily accessible by car through *Nadur* or *Xaghra*) is the largest, the best and still the most unspoilt haven of the island of Gozo. The whole beach is a spread of red sand. The sea is shallow and perfect for children, except on windy days. On the right seaward, a path leads up to *Taht l-Irdum* where the water is deeper.

Apart from being a beautiful beach, *Ramla l-Hamra* is also a historic site. The Romans built a villa richly decorated with marble and stucco. So sophisticated was this building that it boasted its own hot bath supplied with water from a nearby spring, channelled to the villa. These Roman ruins now lie re-buried beneath the red sand.

The Knights of St. John fortified *Ramla l-Hamra* against enemy intrusion. They constructed Vendome battery, which today is inconspicuous and in 1715, even went so far as to construct a submerged wall to deter marauding pirates from landing on the beach. High up on the cliff facing the sea, the Knights dug a Fougasse, a hole into which explosive material was pressed and fired at the invaders.

Today *Ramla l-Hamra* displays nothing of these disturbances. In the summer months it is popular with swimmers, sun worshipers and idlers sitting around tables beneath sun umbrellas at a kiosk, sipping cool drinks and nibbling snacks. During winter months *Ramla l-Hamra* affords pleasant peaceful walks. A statue dedicated to Our Lady of Hope, stands vigil in the middle of the beach.

***San Blas*** (reached through *Triq San Blas, Nadur*) is a delightful little secluded beach of red sand. The path to the sea is rather steep but the sandy beach is of exceptional charm and worthy of a visit. This quaint idyllic beach is never crowded.

***Dahlet Qorrot*** (accessible by car though the road is steep, through *Nadur*). The beach is tiny but one can swim off the rocks on both sides in crystal clear water. Fishermen use this tranquil bay as a base, and colourful boats dance silently on the waters during the summer months.

***Hondoq ir-Rummien*** (easily accessible by car through *Qala*) is a small sandy beach with crystalline water and there is ample space for sunbathing. Snacks are available from a *gabbana* (Kiosk). This beach is also a good diving site especially for beginners and night dives. *Hondoq ir-Rummien* is very popular with locals and can be crowded during weekends. It is a favoured spot for summer evening barbecues.

***Ix-Xatt l-Ahmar*** (on the *Mgarr – Rabat* road, to the left just after reaching *Ghajnsielem*) is another secluded bay with ample space for diving. The wreck of the "*Xlendi*", a ferry boat that until recently plied between Malta and Gozo lies in the depths of this location, thus enhancing the attractions of this excellent dive-site. Swimming is possible off white rocks, but ladders make getting in and out of the water easy. From this spot lovely view of the west coast of Malta can be seen.

***Mgarr ix-Xini*** (easily accessible by car either through *Sannat* or *Xewkija*) is a fjord- looking cleft with sheer cliffs rising from a pebbly beach and intriguing caves. This secluded spot is ideal for swimming and another quaint and attractive dive-site especially for night diving. This peaceful bay is never crowded.

***Xlendi*** (easily reached by car either through Fontana or from Munxar) is together with *Ramla l-Hamra* and *Marsalforn*, on of the three major each resorts of Gozo. It is possible to swim in a small sandy beach or paddle and snorkel off the rocks surrounding this beach. One can also swim off the rocks beneath the watchtower that stands guard at the mouth of *Xlendi* bay. The reef and rock formations under the sea make *Xlendi* an excellent dive site also for beginners. *Xlendi* is a fishing village and a small *menqa* (small harbour) gives shelter to a number of boats in both summer and winter. A stature of St. Andrew patron saint of fishermen watches over the activities of locals and holidaymakers as they walk along the promenade and sit at the bars and restaurant on the seafront and the tiny streets off the seafront.

***Id-Dwejra*** (easily accessible by car through *San Lawrenz*) is partly enclosed by the *Hagret il-General*. The water here is very deep and the occasional swell may be dangerous. It is however a haven for the strong swimmer. It is also possible to swim at the Inland Sea, where the sea has cut into the cliffs to form a shallow, sheltered salt-water pool with pebbly crystal clear water. Boat trips from the little jetty take the visitor out to the open sea through a natural tunnel in the cliffs. Once through the tunnel the cliffs rise majestically out of the water and the boatmen wander slowly around a number of caves, which dot the coast. The various dramatic rock formations, coves and drop-offs have earned *Dwejra* the reputation of being among the best dive-sites in the Mediterranean and undoubtedly the best the Maltese Islands offer. The variety of fish found in these waters is also a major attraction. Snacks and refreshments are available from *gabbani* (kiosks).

***Wied il-Ghasri*** (reached through *Ghasri* and *Marsalforn*) is a fjord-looking tiny beach wedged between high cliffs and can be reached ideally by boat. The fantastic cove and airlock are the main attractions at this dive site.

***Ix-Xwejni*** and ***Il-Qbajjar*** (easily reached through *Marsalforn* or Zebbug) are two shallow beaches with pebbly corners and rocky stretches very close to each other and are ideal for swimming. They are popular dive sites, especially for beginners. A couple of bars and restaurants line the sea front.

***Marsalforn*** (easily reached through *Rabat*, *Xaghra* or Zebbug) is the most popular summer resort of the island. Here there is a good choice of diving spots off the rocks and on a pebbly beach. Just behind the *menqa* (harbour), one finds the deep clear waters of *Ghar Qawqla* where swimming off the rocks is a delight. *Marsalforn* offers the widest variety of bars and restaurants, most of them al fresco.

***Ghajn Barrani*** (reached through *Marsalforn* and *Xaghra*) is not easily accessible and some scrambling over rocks is necessary to reach this tiny, quiet and secluded sandy beach.

**comino** (reached by frequent boat trips from various points in Gozo) has three secluded beach havens with clear turquoise blue water. *Santa Marija Bay*, *San Niklaw Bay* and *Bejn il-Kmiemen* (between comino and the islet of cominotto) also known as the Blue Lagoon. The beauty and attraction of comino islet as a swimming paradise is matched by its underwater caves and reefs which attract experienced divers. Food and refreshments are available from the two hotels on the island.

## **Water Sports**

The sea around Gozo and its beaches and shores are among the most renowned in the Mediterranean.

Pleasure at sea is primarily afforded by swimming, sunbathing, angling, boat trips and scuba diving. At *Marsalforn*, there is also a water polo team. A variety of other sports can be enjoyed at the seaside. Sailing and water skiing have now been practised for quite some time. Windsurfing has also gained ground as constant gentle conditions are excellent. canoes, rowing boats, sailing boats, *pedalos* and speedboats are available in the two main resorts of *Marsalforn* and *Xlendi* and in some other areas, where it is also possible to join a day or half-day boat-trip. Yachting is also becoming extremely popular especially in autumn and spring when force 4 – 5 winds and excellent weather conditions prevail. Boat excursions around Gozo and comino are available and are one of the best ways of enjoying the picturesque and attractive shoreline.

## **Diving**

The Maltese islands attract, every year, tens of thousands of divers, most of whom claim that the best dives are off Gozo. There are fantastic arches, tunnels, wrecks, caves and lagoons to explore and the underwater landscape is as varied as the topography. The most stunning dive of all is that at the Azure Window in *Dwejra*, with its deep, plunging pool of clear blue water, surrounded by breathtaking rock formations, caves and drop-off points. The water is diver-friendly all year round, as the temperature rarely drops below 16°C and the sights and sport fishing get to be exciting even in the winter months. The waters are clear and blue as there are virtually no tides or green vegetation and fertilisers that, elsewhere create poor visibility. On most days visibility of between 40 and 50 metres is enjoyed.

The rocky sea-bed offers many a hiding place for sea creatures, from the gaping grouper to the creeping octopus. Enormous caverns shelter wondrous forms of life, but these are best captured on film. It is the same with archaeological remains, of which there are many, all protected by law. Serendipitous finds may not be lifted or removed, but should be reported at once to the Museums Department.

Though dolphins were once common in the deep waters around Gozo, leading to their one-time incorporation in the country's coat-of-arms and immortalisation in thousands of brass door knockers, they are now a rarity. The occasional dolphin sighting is a great thrill, worthy of note in the local newspapers. There are no sharks which are dangerous to man, and tuna stays far out to sea. To make up for this absence of heavy-weights the waters of Gozo offer divers plentiful sightings of curious groupers, amberjack, bream, wrasse, squid, flying fish, sting rays, barracuda, eagle rays and nudibranchs.

Gozo's diving schools can get people scuba diving in next to no time at all, even if they are starting from scratch. There are several diving centres on the island and the facilities available are excellent. A unique record of repeat customers is proof of the high quality of the service offered. Most centres are open seven days a week every week of the year and offer their services in a variety of languages. The best schools have organised themselves into the Association of Professional Diving Schools, with a guarantee that staff are well-trained professionals. Even the most experienced divers are advised to make contact with a diving school, because this serves as a convenient point of entry to the Gozitan diving scene. The schools, besides teaching, offer a one-stop-shop for all that is connected with diving, hiring of equipment, organisation of dives at special spots and smoothing out administrative procedures like the c-card. Divers are welcome to join other divers of similar experience on accompanied dives or else, if suitably qualified, to dive unaccompanied once they are already familiar with the dive sites.

The diving schools also organise the necessary medical checks. Bringing personal equipment along is not worth the expense and effort, as leasing it is inexpensive. Hyperbaric units are available in Malta and can be reached by a very efficient helicopter transfer from Gozo hospital. The centres can arrange for special dive permits that are necessary to carry out unaccompanied dives. First timers can have a go

at a "try dive" at the shallow end of a safe bay or in a pool. courses leading to certification at various levels are also available.

All centres have their own "dive trucks" to transport divers to dive sites accessible by road. Most centres also have a purpose-built dive boat to reach otherwise inaccessible sites, some are fully equipped with a diving ladder, telecommunications equipment and an echo sounder. These boat dives are planned according to the sea and weather conditions. Shore diving is, of course, more economical.

Most centres have dives twice daily and night dives are organised according to demand. During night dives one can have a close up look at the moray eel, octopus, sepia, cuttlefish, squid and other nocturnal marine creatures. The schools organise these torch-lit expeditions for competent divers in search of adventure. The morning dives leave around 9.00 am while the afternoon tours leave around 2.00pm. There are also full day boat trips to the nearby island of Comino.

### **Walkers' Paradise**

The absence of traffic, the spread of fields and valleys, and the enchanting country roads that wind their way between village and hamlet, make for walks that lift the spirit and enrich the senses. Summer evenings allow a pleasant trek, but best of all is that time of year when the pale yellow winter sorrel gives way to the glowing red of spring-time clover. Even those who are not hardened walkers may stroll through the streets and gaze about them, noting details that delight.

The quaintness of the alleys and centuries old houses exert a magnetic attraction on those who wield brushes or use cameras. The urge to capture these charming sights is impossible to resist, and those who lack the talent carry lasting impressions in their soul. Brilliant postcards on racks spill over pavements in the main town and villages, making it possible to take the sights back home. The finely-carved old stone balconies, disused and renovated farmhouses stand in sharp contrast to the houses of emigrants who have returned from the New World, with their stone kangaroos, maple leaves, stars and stripes, and "God Bless America" mottos, which have a charm of their own.

The great advantage of walking in Gozo is the enormous variety of scenery and character in such a small area: wind-swept cliffs, towers which have been guarding the island for more than 300 years, pebble gorges with rushing waves, clover-strewn fields, and chapels nestling in lonely valleys, with fresh-water springs trickling through. One such is the remarkable chapel of the Annunciation, in the valley of the same name, built in 1347 and rebuilt in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Also spectacular is *Wardija*, where the remains of a Roman sanctuary stand in dramatic solitude on one of the island's highest points.

The isolated chapel of *San Dimitri* is a place to stand and dream, and to remember the legend of a widow who lost her son to pirates, and who prayed in desperation to a painting of *San Dimitri*. The saint promptly rode out of the picture on his horse, and took off across the sea, to return with the young man. The woman's gratitude was eternal, and she lit a lamp beneath the painting for the rest of her days.

Those with tougher leg muscles and greater energy can hire a bicycle and tackle the hills, cycling past carobs, capers, and prickly pears. But this is not for the faint-hearted, though the lack of traffic on the roads makes for safety.

There is a wide variety of very rewarding walks within valleys, around hills, or along the coastline where there is always something new to discover. The whole island can be reached on foot from Rabat, but for a less arduous walk, it is advisable to take a bus from Rabat to the village closest to the route of the chosen walk. The following are a few suggestions but one can literally wander at whim and discover one's own itinerary.

### **Kercem, Ras il-Wardija, Dwejra**

One of the most exhilarating walks all year round is along the coastline of Gozo from rugged *ta' Klula* beyond the village of *Kercem* to *I-Ghadira ta' Sarraflu*, the pool of the archangel Raphael, allows circular depression that fills up with water for most of the year, to *Ras il-Wardija*, where there are the remains of a Punic sanctuary and then along the coastline to breathtaking Bay.

### **San Lawrenz, Ta'Dbiegi, Wied Ilma**

A very fine walk through peaceful and unusual scenery is from the village of *San Lawrenz*, through the street parallel to the Gozo crafts Village and up to *Ta'Dbiegi* hill, the highest point in Gozo. A series of views open up from the top for almost the whole of Gozo is visible. Back to the foot of the hill a short walk to the west leads to the deep-cut valley *Wied Ilma* and ends at *il-Qawra* the well-known Inland Sea.

### **Lunzjata Valley, Xlendi Valley, Xlendi**

*Lunzjata* valley is Gozo's green heart and it is a haven for walks in winter. It can be reached from the road that from the town of Rabat wends its way to *Kercem*. If it has not rained for some days, it is possible to walk wither along the valley or through a path running parallel to it up the Rabat – *Xlendi* road, then along the bed of deep *Xlendi* valley, a riot of wild flowers for most of the year.

### **TacSannat, Ta' Cenc, Mgarr ix-Xini**

An invigorating and most interesting walk is from the village of *Ta' Sannat* and along *Ta' Cenc* plateau, one of the island's most spectacular places with cliffs falling some 140 metres vertically to the sea. Most of the walk is along rough and rugged rock and at the southern extremity there is the tiny port of *Mgarr ix-Xini*. The entrance to the bay is guarded by a tower, raised by the *Universitas* or the local Government in 1661.

### **Mgarr, iz-Zewwieqa, Hondoq ir-Rummien**

From behind the left arm seaward of the *Mgarr* breakwater, a path extends onto *iz-Zewwieqa*. From here it is possible to walk along a fairly well defined track through fields, climbing a little over the cliffs, up to the bay of *Hondoq ir-Rummien* beneath the village of *Qala*. There are splendid views of the island of comino all along.

### **San Blas, Wied ir-Rihan, Dahlet Qorrot**

From the village of *Nadur*, it is easy to find the way to *San Blas* valley and bay, on the east coast of Gozo. *San Blas* valley is one big orchard with several bountiful springs and the bay at its mouth is unique. A path on the right seaward leads to the rugged grandeur *Il-Gebel tal-Mistra*, literally "the Rocks of the Hidden" or "Mysterious Place". From this spot, it is advisable to retrace one's steps up to the valley and proceed towards the left on *il-Qortin* to *Wied ir-Rihan* and the tiny bay of *Dahlet Qorrot*.

### **Marsalforn, Qbajjar, Xwejni, Wied il-Ghasri**

The attraction of this route is the fact that practically all the walk is in close proximity of the open sea and hilly scenery on the other side and passing through the smallest hamlet of *Ghasri* with two hundred

inhabitants.

### **Marsalforn, Ghajn Barrani, Ramla l-Hamra**

This is an ideal walk for the more adventurous, who enjoy undulating levels, manoeuvring some slippery clay ground leading down to *Ramla l-Hamra* from breathtaking heights of *Ghajn Barrani*.

### **Towns and Villages**

**Mgarr Harbour** – the gateway to Gozo is *Mgarr* Harbour, also referred to as *Mgarr*, the only other point of entry being the heliport at *Ghajnsieslem*.

As the Gozo ferry approaches *Mgarr* Harbour and its gangway is lowered, one is immediately enthralled by the breathtaking charm of Gozo's link to the outside world.

On one side Fort Chambray, built by the Knights of St. John in 1749, majestically and defiantly guards the harbour from its vantage point, while the church dedicated to Our Lady of Lourdes is a prominent landmark overlooking the harbour. To the right, the terraced fields slope gently down to the sea.

To this day, *Mgarr* harbour is still the most important fishing base and provides the best winter shelter for the island's fishing boats, while the adjacent marina hosts pleasure sea craft throughout the year.

Beyond the harbour the other towns, villages and attractions of Gozo are just silently waiting to be discovered.

**Victoria** is known to one and all as Rabat, meaning suburb, as this city developed as the suburb of the citadel. The name of Victoria was given to the town in 1887, in honour of Queen Victoria in her jubilee year.

Victoria is the capital of Gozo, which lies precisely in the centre of the island and is the most populated town. It is the administrative centre, which includes also the main schools, the hospital, and the law courts, serving the island's community. Its main square is *Pjazza Indipendenza*, popularly known as *it-Tokk*. The main building on the square is the *Banca Giuratale*, built between 1733-38, formerly the seat of the municipal government of Gozo and presently of the Victoria Local Council. An open market is held every morning in this square and several open air cafes are also found here.

Republic Street is Victoria's main street, flanked by shops, banks, theatres, restaurants, Police Headquarters, the Bishop's chancery and *il-Mall* or Rundle Gardens. These gardens were laid out by the British in 1910 and house a variety of local and imported trees, an oasis of peace in the centre of the busy town. Just off the main square in the very heart of the old town, one finds the medieval parish church of St. George Martyr, referred to as the marble basilica, as it is entirely covered in marble. The present basilica was rebuilt by its supporters after the destruction by an earthquake in 1693. It has a profusely gilded interior and very impressive is the bronze and gilded canopy over the high altar. The main attraction is a statue of the patron Saint, St. George, sculpted in wood in 1838.

An interesting chapel, among the many that are found in Victoria, is the 19<sup>th</sup> century chapel dedicated to Saint Martha, built in 1859. During winter months, Victoria bustles with activity from sun rise to sun set. Shoppers and friends mill around its main streets and quaint side roads, greeting each other, stopping to chat and catch up with the local gossip. In summer, however it quiets down as most people seek sea breezes in the popular summer resorts.

From Victoria roads radiate in the four directions towards the villages of Gozo.

**Citadel** – the ancient citadel is situated in Victoria and has been aptly called the crown of Gozo. It was the centre of activity possibly since Neolithic times but it became the focal point of Gozo around 1500 Bc, when it was first fortified by the Bronze Age people. The Phoenicians developed it further and the Romans turned it into their acropolis dominated by a temple dedicated to Juno. The north side of the present fortifications date from the times of the Aragonese, while the southern flank, overlooking Victoria, was raised by the Knights of St. John Between 1599 and 1603.

A visit to the citadel is a must and the fatigue of going up the hill is fully rewarded. From the fortifications there is a superb view all around the horizon with vistas over the tiny fields cut by yellow stone walls, domes of village churches rising from clusters of houses and the *Gordan* Lighthouse.

The number of inhabitants in the citadel is less than ten and half the place lie in archaeological ruins which are continuously being restored. This results from an exodus in the 17<sup>th</sup> century to more spacious houses in Victoria. In the other half there is the Gozo cathedral and the Law courts, as well as the cathedral Museum, the Gozo Museum of Archaeology, the Folklore Museum, the Natural History Museum and the Old Prisons.

The most impressive of all is the cathedral, dedicated to *Santa Marija*, the Assumption. A centuries-old belief, partly proved archaeologically, noted that a temple to Juno that had existed within the acropolis was rededicated by the early christians to the Blessed Virgin Mary. When the present building was raised between 1697 and 1711, remains of this temple were discovered in abundance.

The cathedral is a fine baroque structure in the form of a Latin cross and is built entirely of the local limestone on a plan by the Maltese architect Lorenzo Gafa'. Instead of bell towers, a tall campanile with five bells is attached to the north east side. The interior is very graceful and well-proportioned. A flat ceiling in perspective closes the aperture of the dome. This ingenious painting, raised in place in 1739, is one of the cathedral's major attractions and is so convincing that many visitors have to be persuaded that it is not, indeed, a real dome. The other attraction is the statue of *Santa Marija*, the Assumption, undertaken in Rome in 1897. The statue of the Madonna was embellished with a diamond necklace, a gold belt and a solid silver plinth donated by Gozitans who emigrated to the New World and made good. On 15<sup>th</sup> August, it is taken shoulder-high in a procession around the streets of Victoria.

**Fontana**, suburb of Victoria, means "spring" and took its name from a bountiful spring at the bottom of the road leading to *Xlendi*. People began to inhabit the area because of this useful fresh water spring. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, an arched shelter was built over the spring for the convenience of the people, since people flocked there to wash their clothes, as some still do to this day. Most *Xlendi* fishermen lived in *Fontana* and in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century the proceeds from their catches were used to raise a parish church dedicated to the Sacred Heart of Jesus.

**Ghajnsielem** just off *Mgarr* harbour simply means "Salem's Spring" the monument in the square in the very centre of the village honours Anglu Grech, a farmer who lived in the vicinity and who, according to tradition, had a vision from the Blessed Virgin Mary requesting him to build a church, which was duly built in 1820 and dedicated to Our Lady Loreto. clearly visible from the Gozo ferry as it enters the port, is the church of Our Lady of Lourdes perched above *Mgarr* harbour. From the parvis there are excellent views of the channel.

In 1749 to make the harbour and the channel safer, the Knights commenced the construction of *cittacVilhena*, which however became known as Fort *chambray*, after Jacques Francois *chambray*, Lieutenant General of the Ships and Governor of Gozo, who bequeathed most of his property for its



building. Its impressive gunpowder magazine and the watch-tower as well as most of the fortifications stand to this day.

On the corner of the *Ghajnsielem – Victoria* road, just in front of the road leading to the Heliport, there is *Santa –ecilja* tower, built in the 17<sup>th</sup> century to ease communications between coastal towers. Next to it there is the derelict chapel of Saint Cecilia, the oldest chapel in Gozo. Also on this road one comes across the Gozo Heritage, a historical re-creation of the momentous episodes of seven thousand years on Gozo life, from prehistory down to recent times.

**Gharb** meaning “west” is the westernmost village in Gozo. On the road from Victoria to *Gharb* there is an aqueduct built by the British in the early 18940s to carry water from *Ghar Ilma* to Rabat. Further on in the same direction, one can still see an old fortified country house raised in the 1600s and parallel to this on the other side of the road, there is an old windmill known as *tal-Qasam*, “of the agricultural estate”.

Just before you approach the village a road forks right to the Shrine of Blessed Virgin of *Ta'Pinu*. The monumental shrine was built between 1920 and 1931./ worth a climb is *Ta' Ghammar* Hill right in front of *Ta' Pinu* Shrine. A *Via crucis* or Way of the cross made up of fourteen marble statuary groups line the way to the top. There are two small museums related to the Shrine. The first houses the *Karmni Grima* Museum, home of young country woman who received a message for prayer from the Virgin Mary in the venerated tiny chapel attached to the Shrine. In the village square of *Gharb* one can also find another folklore museum.

The parish church of *Gharb* is one of the most architecturally perfect churches of Gozo and is designed on Francesco Borromini's Sant'Agnese in Agone at Piazza Novana in Rome. It was dedicated in 1729 to the Visitation of the Virgin Mary to Elizabeth and beautiful sculptures are to be found both on the exterior and interior.

*Gharb* is a place of intense natural beauty, especially in the area around the ancient chapel of the bishop-martyr *San Dimitri*. The story goes that after an old woman beseeched the saint to save her only son from slavery, *San Dimitri* left the altar-piece on his flying stallion and soon brought back her son *Matteu*. The altarpiece can still be seen in the chapel.

**Ghasri** is the smallest village in Gozo and its name is possibly derived from an Arabic family name. This small village reached by forking right on the *Rabat – Gharb* road, is dominated by a lighthouse on *Gordan* hill. *Gordan* lighthouse, rising 180 metres above sea level was inaugurated in 1853. Its beam can be seen up to 50 kilometres away. Marvellous views can be enjoyed from its upper terrace.

*Ghasri's* village church was built early in the twentieth century and is dedicated to Christ the Saviour. Other chapels in *Ghasri* are St. Publius chapel and on the road to *Wied il-Ghasri*, the rural chapel dedicated to the Patronage of Our Lady.

From the village square, a road leads to *Wied il-Ghasri*, at the mouth of which there is a quiet tiny beach wedged between the cliffs. The coast from *Wied il-Ghasri* goes on to *Marsalforn*.

**Kercem** is the village closest to Rabat and its name is probably derived from that of a family living in the area in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. The *Rabat – Kercem* road passes through the upper part of *Lunzjata* Valley. This fertile valley is one of the most picturesque in Gozo. It is further embellished by a charming spring dating back to 1698. The Knights of St. John were so taken by this spot that they favoured it for their hunting. Just at the point where the road forks on the left to the valley, there is *Ghar Gerduf*, the site of

3<sup>rd</sup>/4<sup>th</sup> century christian catacombs. Once, some four chapels were clustered together in this spot and excavations in the vicinity revealed that there might also have been a group of Roman baths.

A traditional procession used to wend its way from the cathedral in the citadel to the parish church of *Kercem*, on 12 March, the feast of Pope Gregory the Great, to whom the parish is dedicated together with the Virgin Mary of Perpetual Succour. Before marriage, Gozitan bridegrooms used to promise their brides to take them to this procession every year.

***Santa Lucija*** is a suburb of *Kercem* and takes its name from an old chapel dedicated to Saint Lucy, recorded as early as 1575. the present parish church, dedicated to the same Saint, is invoked by those who have problems with their eyesight.

The *Rabat – Santa Lucja* road leads to the village square with a typical stone cross in its centre. From the square a street on the right leads towards *Ghajn Abdul* plateau and by forming right after two hundred metres, up to *il-Mixta*, the site of the earliest settlement in Gozo.

The street on the left of the church proceeds to *I-Ghadira ta'San Rafflu* and from there, a path in the fields parallel to the cliffs leads to *Ras il-Wardija*, the site of a Punic settlement that included a small temple. There are still some remains.

***Marsalforn*** is the most popular summer resort of Gozo. The name is a composite word, meaning the "harbour of caves hollowed by the sea". Up to the seventeenth century, before the development of *Mgarr Harbour*, *Marsalforn* was the principal seaport of Gozo. The seaside resort is well served with hotels, apartments, restaurants, bars, as well as diving and water sports clubs. It comes to life during the warm summer evenings. Then a festive atmosphere prevails with people relaxing over al fresco meals, and meting friends on the promenade for walks and talks.

The church of *Marsalforn*, dedicated to St. Paul Shipwreck is recorded very early. The present building dates to 1730. Tradition holds that St. Paul, after his three month stay in Malta left the island from the tiny port just beneath the church. *Marsalforn* is the closest port to Sicily from the Maltese islands.

A scenic promenade leads from *Marsalforn* to *Qbajjar* and *Xwejni* where a number of salt pans dating from Roman times are still in use. A redoubt dating back to 1620 still stands on the shoreline.

***Munxar***, a suburb of *Sannat*, lies on the very southern tip of *Rabat* and its name is the Maltese name for "bucksaw". The church of *Munxar* is dedicated to St. Paul Shipwreck, the same as that of *Marsalforn*. Beyond the church, a road leads to *Ras il-Bajjada* and then to *Xlendi*. The area offers the visitor breathtaking views over the open sea and is ideal for relaxing walks.

***Nadur*** is spread over the top of a tale-flat hill. It's name is most appropriate as it means to "keep guard".

Overlooking the little bay of *Dahlet Qorrot*, *Ta'Sopu* Tower was built for this purpose in 1667, however in 1798 French troops still managed to make a landing in Gozo at an area known as *Ta'Venuta*, a location close to *Ta'Sopu* Tower, but unfortunately out of its range.

The restored *Ta'Kenuna* Tower, is used for artistic exhibitions and was built in 1848 by the British to serve as a telegraph link between Gozo and Malta.

On the *Rabat – Nadur* road, one finds the Gozo horse-racing track and the Gozo scrambling track. The best way to *Ramla Bay* is by this road. Beyond the village school the road leads to fertile *Wied San Blas* and *Dahlet Qorrot* Bay.

On the *Nadur – Qala* road an area known as *il-Buskett*, once a very wooded area, was the venue of the traditional feast of *I-Imnarja*, the feast of St. Peter and St. Paul, to whom the parish is dedicated. On the eve of the 29th of June, people used to gather in the area to spend the night barbecuing rabbits and singing to the accompaniment of guitars.

The monumental church of the Saints Peter and Paul was begun in 1760, however the façade and aisles were built at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The church is entirely covered in marble and has also a pulpit sculpted in marble.

The Gozo Maritime Museum is just off the village square.

**Qala** is the easternmost village of Gozo and its name means “sheltered harbour”.

The *Rabat – Qala* road, just before a lane on the left leading to the village of *Ghajnsielem*, passes over a Neolithic settlement known as *Tal-Qighan* an *I-Imrejzbiel*. There are several megaliths of considerable sizes still in place.

Also of interest at *Ras il-Qala*, there is a defensive battery constructed by the Knights of St. John.

In *Qala*, in *Triq il-Wileg*, there is a windmill with sails and equipment and another windmill close by is found in *Triq TacGrunju*. The main street passes through the village square and on towards the bays of *iz-Zriezaq* and *Hondoq ir-Rummien*.

On the way to these two bays one finds the Sanctuary of the Immaculate conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary. The church houses one of the best paintings in Gozo, an oil on canvas of the conception by Federico Barocci di Urbino. People use to flock to the chapel seeking divine intercession and the walls of the chapel were once covered with ex-voto paintings donated by those who were healed. This chapel is one of the oldest in Gozo. The parish church of *Qala* is dedicated to St. Joseph and was built between 1882 and 1889, in the baroque style, a style much favoured in the 17<sup>th</sup> and the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

**San Lawrenz** takes its name from an old chapel that stood in the area from at least 1575.

On the *Rabat-Gharb-San Lawrenz* road at the village approach one can find the Gozo crafts Village. It lies below *Ta' Dbiegi*, the highest hill of Gozo. The village church, dedicated to Saint Lawrence, was built between 1888 and 1897, on the site of the old chapel.

From the village square one takes the road down to *Dwejra Bay* where there is a chapel dedicated to St. Anne. Also in *Dwejra* is a well preserved watch tower dating back to 1652, built to guard the then famous medicinal plant which grew on Fungus Rock. This is one of the towers that the Knights of St. John erected during the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Most of these towers survive.

*Dwejra* boasts of several natural wonders foremost "*Il-Gebla tal-General*" referred to as "*Fungus Rock*", the "*Azure Window*" and "*Il-Qawra*" the "*Inland Sea*". Such is the impact of this beautiful area, that it is frequently used as a filming location for the movie industry.

**Sannat** lies to the south of the island and its name is probably another Arabic family name.

The *Rabat-Sannat* road proceeds past the church to *Tac-enc*, an expanse of prime interest. Besides the excellent views of the countryside and the sea, there is a great variety of wild plants for the nature lover

an several prehistoric remains. The most prominent is *L-Imramma* Temple, a primitive type of temple made up of a sort of oval court with a series of more or less oval rooms to the north. Other interesting remains are three dolmens.

The small bay of *Mgarr Ix-Xini* is at the end of the plateau. It is guarded by a tower which alerted the citadel by firing mortars or lighting a bonfire. The *dejma* or local militia would then rush to the spot to hinder a landing. Today pleasure boats in the bay encounter no such problems.

The village church of *Sannat* is dedicated to St. Margaret Martyr and was begun in 1718, and has an excellent altarpiece by the famed local artist Stefano Errardi.

***Xaghra*** rises on a hill in the central northeast of Gozo. Its name refers to the wilderness of the hill before it was inhabited.

On the village approach, from the *Rabat-Xaghra* road one finds the *Ggantija* Temples and about half a kilometre to the north of the temples, there is the Stone circle, an underground cemetery of the temple builders. The site was first excavated in the early 1990s, but it has since been covered. Further up at the end of *Santa Verna* Street there is a group of three upright megaliths in the middle of the fields. Three horizontal blocks lining the east side of the uprights are similar to the high bench on the facades of some of the major temples, suggesting that another temple might have stood on the site.

Just off the *Ggantija* Temples one can visit *Ta'Kola* Windmill. Built in 1725 and named after an early miller, this windmill is still in working condition. During the Axis blockade of the Second World War, the mill was put to good use saving many from starvation.

Just off the village square one can also visit two small stalagmitic caves, *Ghar Ninu* and *Ghar Xerri*. On the *Xaghra – Marsalforn* road that starts on the left of the church, the side road to the right, leads to the legendary cave of calypso, where legend has it that Ulysses bewitched by the nymph spent seven idle years. Once inside the cave the views of *Ramla l-Hamra* bay and the valley are indeed breathtaking.

The parish of church of *Xaghra* is dedicated to the Nativity of the Virgin Mary, locally known as *Il-Vitorja*, "*The Victory*", so called because it celebrates the victory of the Knights over Islam. The main attraction of the church is a beautiful statue of the young Virgin Mary, brought from Marseilles in 1878.

In January, a ceremony of the blessing of animals is held in the little square of the chapel of Saint Anthony the Abbot. This is an old tradition dating back to the Knights of St. John.

***Xewkija*** the village of the rotunda church, takes its name from a place where thistles grew.

At the crossroads (and traffic lights) on the *Rabat-Xewkija-Mgarr* road, there is a unique windmill. Instead of a square building, it is an eight-sided edifice corresponding to the eight points of the compass and the eight dominant winds.

A most spectacular effort is the parish church dome dedicated to St. John The Baptist. completed in 1981 and paid for by the 3,500 villagers, it boasts the third largest supported dome in the world, coming in after St. Peter's in Rome. The dome is 74 metres high, with a diameter of 27 metres and a circumference of 85 metres. Its total weight is calculated to be around 45,000 tonnes.

Of particular interest is the chapel of Our Lady of Mercy around which revolves a legend about a thief who wanted to steal a golden chalice, but ended up joining a hermit to repay his sins.

*Wied Hanzira*, literally meaning the "valley of the sow" is one of the deepest valleys on the island and a veritable haven for the lover of wild plants. It flows southwards from the end of the village.

*Xewkija* is an active village. It comprises Gozo's industrial zone, where factories produce a number of articles for local use and for export. During weekends, the road that from *Xewkija* leads to *Rabat*, is thronged by football fans intent on an afternoon's entertainment at the adjacent football stadium.

***Xlendi*** is a typical fishing village and a popular summer resort. It takes its name from a type of Byzantine vessel that used to shelter in this port.

Wedged between majestic cliffs, *Xlendi* is the most picturesque and the most romantic fishing village of Gozo. Before the present high rise buildings, constructed since the 1960's, a white statue of the apostle Saint Andrew, patron saint of fishermen, reigned over the port. It still dominates the little harbour where fishing boats create a colourful collection when they are moored.

The cliffs bordering the inlet on this side can be reached by walking past the statue to a steep flight of steps cut into the rock. From the top there is a bird's eye view of *Xlendi*. Further down the path, there is *L-Ghar ta' Karolina*, "caroline's cave", a natural grotto one used by nuns for swimming.

*Xlendi* tower, on the opposite promontory, was raised in 1650. It is a massive building that was able to resist gunpowder shots. Its stairway was detached from the main structure and the moat was spanned by an elevating drawbridge. *Xlendi* church is dedicated to the Virgin Mary of Mount Carmel and the front section dates in 1868.

*Xlendi* is a main summer resort. Restaurant line the seafront, keeping the little bay busy from morning till late evenings entertaining their patrons to al fresco meals. Diving centres, hotels and a couple of clubs may also be found in *Xlendi*.

***Zebbug*** is perched on a hill to the north of Gozo. It takes its name from the Maltese word for "olives".

The village is actually built on two adjoining hills, from where the most panoramic views of the Gozitan countryside and the Mediterranean can be enjoyed. On a slope facing *Gordan* Lighthouse, there was a deposit of onyx. It was discovered by the owner of the field in 1738 and many churches in Malta and Gozo have works of art sculpted out of this onyx.

The village church of *Zebbug* is dedicated to *Santa Marija* and is literally covered with this semi-precious stone, most notable are the high altar, the choir and baptistery. Worthy of special mention is the altar-piece of the Immaculate conception in the chapel in the left transept known by the people as *tal-Virtu*, "of virtues". Several folk swear to this day, that they see the radiant face of the Virgin turning yellow and pale before an impending natural catastrophe. It is also said that when some corsairs dared to devastate the countryside, advancing as far as the village, a lady resembling the image of the altarpiece appeared on the spot hurling stones to repel the foe.

The people of *Zebbug* are known for the high quality of their lace, weaving and woollen blankets. The villagers are very proud of their religious heritage, as can be judged from the priority given to the maintenance of street niches. The best is that of Our Mother of Mercy, better known as *tac- $\rightarrow$ icri*

**Comino** and the uninhabited islet of **Cominotto**, lie midway in the Gozo-Malta channel. The name comino is derived from "cumin", a plant whose seeds are widely used a condiment in Mediterranean and Eastern countries. A reference to the island is first encountered in 2nd century AD writing by the geographer Ptolemy.

comino was haven for pirates and corsairs. Its many hidden inlets and coves sheltered their craft and make it an ideal base for their regular forays on Gozo.

In 1618, the Knights of St. John determined to be rid of the intruders and financed St. Mary's Tower to defend the Gozo channel and repel the enemy from shipping and finding shelter in comino's caverns. The Tower houses a small army unit to this day. In the same year, a chapel dedicated to the Return of the Blessed Virgin Mary from Egypt was built. It has uninterruptedly served the spiritual needs of the guardsmen at the tower and the small farming community that still lives on the island.

There are no cars on comino as it is still very rural. It is best known for the stretch of sea between the two islets, know as the Blue Lagoon. The clear turquoise waters here are unique. crowds descend on comino every summer when its bays are filled with pleasure boats and yachts.

The island hosts a police station and two hotels. It is also an excellent dive site and ideal for water sports.

The view of comino, cominotto and Malta in the distance as seen from the heights of *Qala* and *Nadur*, are undoubtedly an unforgettable experience.