

THE MALTA COASTAL WALK

A WONDERFUL WALK AROUND THE ENTIRE COAST OF MALTA



Jonathan Henwood and Emmet McMahon

A circular logo with a yellow background and a black border. It features a black silhouette of a hiker with a walking stick on the left. To the right of the hiker, the words "GREAT WALKS SERIES" are written in bold, black, uppercase letters, stacked vertically.

**GREAT
WALKS
SERIES**

THE MALTA COASTAL WALK

This 155 km walk takes you around the entire island by a route that is interesting, safe, varied and very enjoyable. It is not a uniform sign-posted track but a combination of limestone paths, town pavements, minor country roads and some sections across open countryside. The route goes as near to the coast as is practical and safe but must of necessity avoid coastal promontories, quarries or land in private ownership. There are some slightly challenging uphill sections but the route, in the main, is along level paths. The walk can be done by any reasonably fit person, and a pair of walking shoes is adequate in all but the worst of weather. The overall walk is divided into 13 sections of between 7 and 15 km each. Importantly, there is ready access by bus to the starting and finishing point of each section.

There are few places in the world where walks of moderate distance can bring you past so many fascinating features of environmental, cultural and landscape interest. This guide includes maps and detailed descriptions of the route and the main features to be encountered. Each section includes comments on wildlife, archaeology and geology to increase your appreciation of the many wonderful features to be visited on this pleasant ramble around the coast of Malta.

KEY FEATURES

- ▶ Valletta and the Three Cities
- ▶ Outstanding sea views
- ▶ Dramatic cliffs, sandy beaches
- ▶ Stone Age temples
- ▶ Nature reserves and tranquil countryside
- ▶ Forts, towers and churches
- ▶ Wild plants and varied habitats
- ▶ Blue Grotto and St Paul's Island

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Further information on features of the coastal walk and other walks in Malta and Gozo are in the books - **Malta: 10 Great Walks**, **Gozo: 10 Great Walks** and **The Gozo Coastal Walk**, available at www.greatwalksmalta.com



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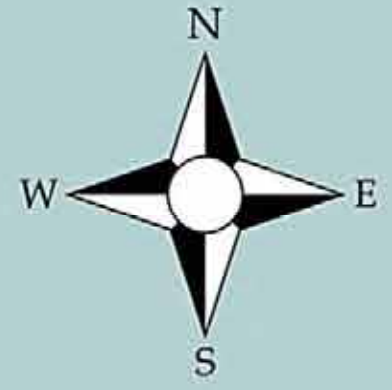
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The Malta Coastal Walk



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- ② The Three Cities
- ③ Kalkara to Marsaskala
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- ⑤ Birżebbuġa to Żurrieq
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- ⑨ Golden Bay to Ċirkewwa
- ⑩ Ċirkewwa to Mellieħa
- ⑪ Mellieħa to Buġibba
- ⑫ Buġibba to Saint Julian's
- ⑬ Saint Julian's to Valletta



MAP SYMBOLS

The following symbols are given as a general guide to the features and facilities located on or near the route of the walk.

	Walking route		Optional route		Cliffs
	Footpath		Major road		Minor road
	Quarry		Valley bed		Buildings
	Public toilets		Ferry		Beach
	Food/drink		Hotel		Museum
	Cartruts		Megalithic remains		Temple
	Fort/tower/ battery		Church / Chapel		Cemetery

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TABLE SUMMARY

Section	Distance/ km	Approx. duration/ hrs	Major inclines	Difficulty	Public toilets	Cafeterias	Avoid
1	7	3	1	Easy	✓	✓	Rough seas
2	14	4-5	0	Easy	✓	✓	/
3	11	4- 5	1	Medium	✓	✓	Rough seas
4	15	6 - 7	1	Medium	✓	✓	/
5	15	6 -7	2	Medium	✓	✓	Windy, wet weather
6	15	6 - 7	3	Hard	✓	✓	Windy, wet weather
7	12	5 -6	2	Hard	✓	✓	Windy, wet weather
8	10	4 -5	2	Medium	✓	✓	Windy, wet weather
9	12	5 -6	2	Medium	✓	✓	Windy weather
10	11	4 -5	0	Easy	✓	✓	Windy weather
11	13	5-6	2	Medium	✓	✓	Wet weather
12	14	5-6	1	Medium	✓	✓	/
13	12	4-5	1	Easy	✓	✓	/

INTRODUCTION

There is something especially fulfilling in rambling around the entire coast of an island. This is particularly true in the case of Malta as the route of this coastal walk takes you past a wide variety of impressive features, both natural and manmade. This 155 km walk leads you around the entire island by a route that is as near to the coast as is practical, safe and accessible.

Walking is one of the best ways to discover and appreciate Malta's natural environment, beautiful landscapes and man-made marvels. There are few places in the world where walks of moderate distance can bring you past so many fascinating features in such a short distance, and with ready access through public transport.

The many points of interest along the Coastal Walk include:

- Valletta and the historic Three Cities
- Wild countryside and nature reserves
- Dramatic cliffs and sandy beaches
- Outstanding sea views
- Neolithic temples and enigmatic cart ruts
- Castles, towers and forts
- Chapels, churches and cathedrals

The Malta Coastal Walk is not a uniform, sign-posted route but a combination of limestone paths, town footpaths and promenades, minor country roads and some sections across open countryside. There are some slightly challenging uphill sections but the route, in the main, is along level paths. The coastal walk can be done by any reasonably fit person with a pair of adequate walking shoes, in all but the worst of weather.



WALKING ALONG THE COASTAL CLIFFS

This guide has divided the overall walk into 13 sections (see map inside the front cover), with each start and end point easily accessible by public transport. The walks take longer than their lengths (7 – 15 km) would suggest, as the path can be slow and challenging in places, and because there is so much to see and admire. Each section (except the first around Valletta) comprises about four to six hours of walking (including some small breaks), and most can be extended or shortened to suit personal preferences. Almost all sections provide opportunities for minor diversions from the main route to visit nearby features of interest (caves, botanical gardens, churches, etc.). Taking into account important stops for coffee, toilets and for viewing, you should really allow a whole day for each section so as to get most pleasure from the experience.

You may start on this circular route at any point you like, but we have chosen to begin and end at Valletta which has excellent bus connections to the rest of the island. From here you may get a bus (at least every hour) to all the towns and main points of touristic interest on Malta. Using the maps in this book, you can undertake the walk in any way that suits you, although we describe the clockwise route. You may walk in an anti-clockwise direction but it is easier to follow the directions by going clockwise, as a walk described in one direction may prove quite difficult to follow from the opposite direction.

The route goes as near to the coast as is practical and safe but must of necessity avoid impassable coastal promontories, quarries or land in private ownership. At times you may have to use your own judgement about minor route details or suitable short cuts. You can always ask the locals for help - they are friendly and English is very widely spoken as a second language. Some parts of the route take you along cliffs, though rarely close to the cliff edge. It is best not to walk alone on cliffs, particularly in windy conditions. For safety, do bring a mobile phone with you - there is virtually full mobile phone coverage throughout the island. You are rarely far from a village or café (and a toilet), but do always carry water with you, a hat and sun-screen as there are many days of long and bright sunshine.

As there is so much to see, examine and enjoy along the 155 km route it is recommended to visitors that the walk be spread over a minimum of thirteen days, with some days in between for relaxation. For that reason the coastal walk is divided into the following sections, each of which can be completed in a day. Importantly, the starting and end point of each section is accessible by public transport.

- 1 The Peninsula of Valletta
- 2 The Three Cities
- 3 Kalkara to Marsaskala
- 4 Marsaskala to Birżebbuġa
- 5 Birżebbuġa to Żurrieq
- 6 Żurrieq to Dingli
- 7 Dingli to Bahrija
- 8 Bahrija to Golden Bay
- 9 Golden Bay to Ċirkewwa
- 10 Ċirkewwa to Mellieħa
- 11 Mellieħa to Buġibba
- 12 Buġibba to Saint Julian's
- 13 Saint Julian's to Valletta

THE PENINSULA OF VALLETTA

KEY FEATURES

- ▶ THE MAGNIFICENT GRAND HARBOUR
- ▶ DRAMATIC FORT SAINT ELMO
- ▶ THE WORLD WAR II SIEGE BELL
- ▶ BEAUTIFUL BUILDINGS, MUSEUMS AND CHURCHES
- ▶ MASSIVE DEFENCE WALLS



This first section of the coastal walk takes you around the edge of the magnificent peninsula of Valletta with its great walls and its wonderful views of Marsamxett and the Grand Harbour. At seven kilometres, it is the shortest section of the overall walk and for many, the most interesting, as it takes you back in time around a city that still retains many of its original medieval elements. The walk begins at the gate of Valletta and passes around, on top of, and outside the historic and imposing battlements that form the perimeter of this UNESCO world heritage city. The route provides stunning panoramas across the island and exciting views from sea level. It passes a myriad of historic sites and allows you opportunities to make short diversions into the city itself to see points of special interest such as museums and churches. Further information on museums and visitor attractions in the city may be found at www.heritagemalta.org.

This very pleasant walk should take you about three hours. However it is so rich in features of interest that you should allow an entire day to linger over the magnificent views or to visit some of the many cafés, palaces, museums, gardens and churches along the route. The walk is entirely along pavements and coastal promenade and is without difficult ascents. Avoid the walk in stormy weather as some parts down at sea level are very exposed to wind and waves. The route starts and finishes near the Valletta bus terminus, next to the main entrance to the city.

THE WALK

The route, shown on Map 1, begins at the central entrance to Valletta, near the impressive Triton's Fountain. The Triton's fountain was designed by the famed Maltese Sculptor Vincent Apap in 1959 as part of the original bus terminus for Malta. It depicts three mythological Greek gods with an upper body of a man and tail of a fish, holding a central plate. It is a stunning piece of local sculpture, more so due to the unique system of hidden pipes, passage ways and chambers which channel water into the upper plate. Happily, the formerly drab entrance to this historic city has recently been redeveloped to a design by the Italian architect Renzo Piano restoring part of the original glory to this square.

"A CITY BUILT BY GENTLEMEN FOR GENTLEMEN"

Valletta, a UNESCO World Heritage site, is situated on a peninsula overlooking the Grand Harbour, one of the great natural harbours of the world. The Knights of Malta commenced its construction in 1580 shortly after the defeat of the Turks in the first siege of Malta. The Knights decided they needed a stronger and better base and so they undertook the development of a new capital city on the formerly empty peninsula and named it Valletta after their Grand Master and hero of the siege, Jean de La Valette. As the Knights were members of the richest families of Europe finance was not a constraint. A main design requirement for the city was the ability to withstand another sea and land siege and so the leading architects of Europe were employed in its design and construction. Valletta is still today completely surrounded by walls of a staggering size, extent and beauty. For the following 220 years or so, under the generally benign rule of the Knights, Malta enjoyed an age of peace and prosperity. There are excellent buildings throughout Malta, but Valletta is exceptional in having so many fine churches, museums, palaces, and historic buildings, all within a well preserved walled city. There were significant losses from bombing during the Second World War but much remains to astound the visitor with the style and beauty of its medieval past.

Begin the walk by rambling across the bridge into the city **1**. Looking down into the moat from the right of the bridge you can see what was formerly the terminus of Malta's only train line that linked the capital to Mdina/Rabat in the centre of the island. Entering Freedom Square, the modern building to your right is the parliament building. Note the nearby Opera House **2** to the left of the parliament building. This was bombed in 1942 and remained a ruin until 2012 when it was redeveloped and brought into use as an open-air theatre. Admire the intricate designs of the building opposite the opera house, a remnant of pre-war Valletta. Sadly, many such buildings were destroyed by bombing in World War II.



TRITON'S FOUNTAIN

BIRŻEBBUĠA *to* ŻURRIEQ

KEY FEATURES

- ▶ PRETTY BAY
- ▶ TRANQUIL COUNTRYSIDE
- ▶ CAVE OF GHAR HASAN
- ▶ ANCIENT TOWN OF ŻURRIEQ




This 15 km section of the walk starts at the popular sandy beach at Pretty Bay in Birżebbuġa. You pass by the busy Freeport commercial area to reach Fort Bengħisa, an abandoned British Fort. The cliffs in this area are impressive and beautiful but because of their inaccessibility you get few opportunities to admire them. You should take the opportunity of visiting the dramatic cliff-side cave of Ghar Hasan. After viewing the impressive gorge of Wied Żnuber the route takes you a little inland around an industrial zone, then past the remains of the medieval chapel of tal-Bakkari and on through tranquil countryside. The walk concludes at the ancient town of Żurrieq, inhabited since prehistoric times.

There are opportunities for a coffee and toilet break at Birżebbuġa and Żurrieq, but none in between. Frequent buses will take you from Valletta to Marsaxlokk and from Żurrieq to Valletta.



THE PROMENADE WALK

You come to a small parking area  where you notice a fence that keeps the public away from the cliff edge. Although the rocks appear sturdy, rock falls are not uncommon and near here, a large section of rock plunged in one piece into the sea in 2012. If you wish to visit the cave of Ghar Hasan (see box below) you should pass through the gap in the fence next to a small rural room, bearing in mind that the instability of the cliffs makes it somewhat dangerous. Proceed along the concrete path beyond the fence and down some steps towards the edge of the cliffs. The path turns left and you go down the face of the cliff on rock steps (with a railing) to reach the mouth of the cave.

LEGEND OF GHAR HASAN CAVE

This cave, situated some 75 m above sea level, provides breathtaking views of the Mediterranean Sea and cliffs. Its extraordinary internal shape is a result of the erosion action of underground water that has dissolved limestone held between two layers of hard coralline limestone. This is evident in the smooth surface of the rock and the many fractures in the wall and roof. A 16th century legend relates that during Count Roger's rule of Malta (1092), an Arab named Hasan kidnapped a Maltese girl and sought refuge in the cave, keeping her imprisoned there. Seeking to escape from Malta, Hasan established contact with some Berber pirates. Just as he was lowering the girl down the cliffs to a pirate ship waiting on the sea below, Hasan was surprised by a group of Maltese who had come to rescue the girl. In the ensuing commotion, he let go of the rope and both Hasan and the girl plunged to their death in the merciless sea below. One of a number of alternative versions recounts how Hasan was killed by his captive who managed to return safely to her village.

Explore this amazing cave with care, perhaps going through the right side tunnel towards another opening. Do not attempt to go past the inner gate as the innermost part of the cave hosts a rare community of Mediterranean mouse-eared bats.



GHAR HASAN

Walk 7



DINGLI CLIFFS *to* BAHRIJA

KEY FEATURES

- ▶ DRAMATIC CLIFFS OF DINGLI
- ▶ OUTSTANDING VIEWS
- ▶ LUSH VALLEY OF BAHRIJA
- ▶ RARE FRESHWATER CRAB



This magnificent 12 km walk leads you from the town of Dingli to the majestic southern coast with its high cliffs and small fertile fields on a plateau close to the sea. You ramble parallel to the coast along a safe cliff-top road, enjoying breathtaking views. To avoid an impassable coastal strip the route turns inland to bring you through peaceful countryside, lush valleys and past an ancient church. This is the most rural area in Malta and you will enjoy the small well-tended fields and the diversity of wild plants. You get an option of a challenging but rewarding detour along a section close to the coast with outstanding scenery. As you approach the village of Bahrija you have the opportunity of exploring one of the last remaining refuges of the freshwater crab.

The route brings you near to cliffs but the path is generally at a safe distance from the edge and there is little danger to the sensible walker. One should take particular care in wet or windy weather. There are public toilets and cafés at the main squares of Dingli and Bahrija, but none in between. Buses from Valletta and other regions will take you to the start of the walk in Dingli. The town of Bahrija is connected by bus only to Rabat/Mdina, from where you can catch a bus to Sliema or Valletta.

THE WALK

The walk starts at the bus stop in Dingli square (see Map 7), and proceeds uphill along the main road ① to the nearby cliffs. The cliffs reach a height of 253 m making this the highest point in Malta. From the cliff top you can enjoy wonderful panoramic vistas out to the island of Filfla. You can admire the small fields on the fertile plateau nestling between the upper cliffs and the lower coastal cliffs.

Your walking route is along the upper level as access to the lower plateau is often difficult or hindered by private ownership issues. Having admired the view, you ramble along the cliff-side road towards the north, to pass the well known Bobby's Restaurant. Keep on this road for about one km and, after passing some old villas, you come to a Y-junction close to a disused explosives factory ②. Take your time to admire the view of the peaceful agricultural land around you and, towards the north, the impressive cliffs of Miġra l-Ferha.

A LESSON IN GEOLOGY

The rocks of Malta are of sedimentary limestone which started to form underwater some 200 million years ago through the compaction of shells, coral, sediment and other material that fell to the sea bed. Five distinct layers can be distinguished, with each layer representing a different phase of development of the Mediterranean Sea and its inhabitants, and showing an interesting timeline of events, including drying up of the sea. The rocks are arranged in the following layer cake succession:

- Upper Coralline Limestone
- Greensand
- Blue Clay
- Globigerina Limestone
- Lower Coralline Limestone

Malta emerged from the sea floor around 8 million years ago and has since been moulded by tectonic activity, sea, wind, rain and humans. Tectonics have played an important role in causing a tilting of Malta towards the north-east. This has resulted in high cliffs along the south (such as at Dingli) and low lying coast along the north-west (such as at Sliema). On the upper Dingli Cliffs you are standing on a layer of tough coralline limestone underlain by an impervious clay layer. Rain falling on the fractured surface of the top layer percolates into the ground until it meets the clay layer. The water then travels sideways to emerge as a spring along the cliff edge. The lower plateau is composed of clay washed out by groundwater and resting on a layer of lower coralline limestone. This fertile lower strip is largely devoted to agricultural, made possible by springs along the cliff walls.



VIEW OF MIGRA L-FERHA

OPTION TO MIGRA L-FERHA

The detour to Migra l-Ferha provides a rare opportunity to explore the lower level of coastal cliffs and their wild shoreline. The path is somewhat strenuous and there are some challenging parts where you may need to get down on all fours, for a short distance. Do not undertake this optional route if the weather is wet or windy or if you have a fear of heights.

To take this option, you ramble down the winding road from the Y-junction 7, admiring the pleasant views. At the bottom of this steep road you come to a wide clearing, used as a parking area. From the edge of the car park you can admire the lower cliffs. You should explore this area by walking to the right towards a deep gorge 8 which leads down to the water's edge. The path down to sea level is slightly difficult to follow. At the innermost part of the gorge, next to the car park, take the rocky track along the edge of the valley towards a promontory which divides the gorge in two. On the right of the promontory, a set of rock steps leads downhill along a magnificent (though slippery) path. The views at the bottom are truly wonderful. Back up from the gorge, the path heads left into a clearing, and at its opposite end there is a narrow footpath, along the cliff edge. Take this level path which is generally set safely back from the cliff edge, though there are three sections at which it comes close to the edge. Enjoy the many sights and sounds of this wild coast, and observe the many boulders along the way.



VIEW AT BOTTOM OF GORGE

After about two kilometres, the path reaches a low ridge of yellow limestone 9. From the innermost part (on the right) of the ridge you can easily climb a few metres down along the rock face towards the lower level. This area, known as il-Blata tal-Melħ (literally Rock Salt), is so named because of the salt pans in the area. Climb down carefully from the ridge and walk along the lower rock level towards a set of quirky boulders. You can locate a set of steps