Cycling Gozo

A practical guidebook with detailed Maps, Bike Hire Outlets, Recommended Routes, Descriptions of Key Features, Weather. Practical Advice and more.

Cycling Gozo

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1. Introduction

The small and historic island of Gozo provides wonderful opportunities for cycling. The attractions of Gozo include stunning landscapes, a beautiful natural environment and a range of rich archaeological and cultural treasures. There are few other places in the world which offer such an array of impressive and readily accessible features. Gozo, a short 35 minute ferry ride from Malta, has its own more tranquil way of life with country lanes leading you past small villages, peaceful valleys, picturesque sea inlets and dramatic cliffs. It has been inhabited from the earliest times and possesses many stone-age monuments, some among the best in the world. The island is so small (14 km long by 7 km) that on any one cycle you can encounter a variety of interesting features.

This book provides maps of cycling routes on Gozo, together with a description of the noteworthy features that lie along each route. This guide also describes the background (historical, cultural and environmental) of the key points of interest to increase your understanding and pleasure. All the suggested cycle routes can be done from Malta by taking an early morning ferry to Gozo and returning in the evening. But, if you can, stay a night or more on Gozo to better understand and enjoy its many natural and man-made attractions. Allowing time for admiring the sights each cycle route represents a day's adventure.

In Chapter 4 we suggest routes that allow you to cycle through (usually) tranquil rural or coastal roads to reach locations of interest to visitors. The suggested routes also encourage you to stop at specific locations from where short walks can bring you to impressive features that cannot be directly reached by bike. The routes are shown on detailed maps and the associated descriptions provide information on the key features to be encountered.

The routes are mostly along level roads though there are a number of inclines that some might find a little challenging. As the highest point in Gozo is only some 195 m above sea level you can appreciate that the uphill sections are relatively modest by international standards. Some of the routes bring you near, but not very near, to cliffs. You may be tempted to cycle along some of the cliff-top paths that are used by walkers. Resist this temptation and, also for safety, do bring a mobile phone with you. Google Earth can help to give you a good appreciation of any route, its features and options. You can always ask the locals for help: they are friendly and English is very widely spoken as a second language. Cycling in Gozo may not be very pleasant during the hot months of mid-June to mid-September and excursions during these months are best done in the early morning or in the evening. If you are planning an evening cycle during the hot season, it is best to allow enough time to be back before dark. Remember to bring water, a hat and sunscreen while a lightweight jacket should be carried in winter and in spring. Though Gozo has a good climate, the weather can sometimes be windy, cold and wet. On such days it is better to visit Victoria or

cities in Malta such as Valletta or Mdina. Have a look at the weather forecast before you set out; many hotels will have one at the reception desk.

Gozo
N
W
E
S
Saltpans
Marsalforn
Ta' Giordan
Lighthouse
Zebbug
Ramla
l-Hamra
Ta' Pinu
Gharb
San Blas
San Lawrenz
Dwejra
Xaghra
Victoria
Nadur
Qala
Wardija
Point
Xewkija
Gozo
Xlendi
Hondoq
ir-Rummien
Sannat
Mġarr
Comino
Ta' Cenc
Mġarr ix-Xini
Malta
0
2
km

1.1 Visiting Key Attractions

There are very many features of interest on Gozo that you will encounter on your cycling expeditions. This guide provides information on such features by means of links (in Blue) within the text. The links are of two kinds. One is a link to an external website (e.g. www.publictransport.com.mt) which needs a connection to the internet. The second type, also in Blue, is to a source of information within this electronic guide (e.g. Citadel). This latter link has the advantage that it does not need an internet connection which may be expensive for foreign visitors. Gozo has many attractions – our favourites are set out below.

Key Attractions of Gozo

The Citadel of Victoria
Wonderfully preserved medieval castle

The Ġgantija Temples
The world's oldest freestanding structure

The Azure Window and Inland Sea
Impressive and quirky geological features

The Saltpans
Getting salt from seawater the Roman way

Ramla Beach
Beautiful sandy beach, clear turquoise water

The Sea Inlet at Xlendi
Visually stunning fjord and beach

Calypso's Cave
A link to the ancient Greeks of Homer's Odyssey

Wild Flowers and Plants
Large variety and abundance

Valley of Mġarr ix-Xini
Deep unspoiled gorge, great biodiversity

Cathedrals, Basilicas, Churches
Ta' Pinu, San Dimitri, Xewkija, Nadur

The cycling routes that we describe in this guide will bring you close to each of these features, and many others. It is you who must make the difficult choice on which to visit - but do not miss out on the Citadel, the Azure Window or the Ġgantija temple complex. The location of key sites in relation to the suggested cycling routes is shown on maps later in this guide.

The Citadel

2.2 Hire of Bikes

There is as yet no public scheme for the rental of bicycles on Malta. You cannot take a bike on a public bus but you can take it on the ferry between Malta and Gozo for which there is a charge of €1.15.

You can take your own bike by plane to Malta or you can rent one in Malta and cycle it to Ċirkewwa to get on the ferry to Gozo, a distance of about 35 km. Perhaps the best option for tourists is to rent a bike on Gozo so as to avail of a local service for repairs, emergencies and general support. You can rent a bicycle from the outlets shown below. Each outlet has a website and a contact point. It is important to ring in advance to discuss availability and price and any special requirements you may have. We do not endorse or recommend any particular operator; we merely provide information on their services and contact details. There are also a number of smaller operators who rent bikes from tourist shops.

When renting, make sure your bike fits and is adjusted to suit you. If your bike is too big or too small it will be uncomfortable to ride and can cause unnecessary discomfort. The staff in the shop should ensure that your bike is a good fit. However, don't rely entirely on the bike shop staff and be prepared to ask for any adjustments you feel you need.

Be sure to enquire beforehand about the emergency arrangements offered by the bike hire company in the event of puncture, bike fault or accident. Be sure to take the phone number of the renter with you. Always make sure your bike is in good working order before you set out.

Bike Rental Outlets on Gozo

1. On 2 Wheels

This company, located in Marsalforn on the north coast, offers rental of bikes and motorbikes.

Website: www.on2wheelsgozo.com

email: on2wheels@gozo.com

Phone: 00 356 2156 1503, **Mob.** 00 356 9942 1621

Address: 36, Rabat Road, Marsalforn, Gozo

2. Victoria Garage

Located in Victoria at the centre of the island, this outlet offers bicycles for rent as well as car hire and taxi services.

Website: victoriagaragegozo.com

email: info@victoriagaragegozo.com

Phone: 00 356 2155 6414, **Mob.** 00 356 9925 3053

3. About Gozo

The state of Malta consists of three inhabited island – Malta, Gozo and Comino and a few uninhabited islets. Malta, the largest island, is about thirty km long by fourteen wide, while Gozo is fourteen by seven. With a population of about 400,000 Malta is among the most densely populated countries in the world. The island of Malta contains the capital, Valletta and the major centres of tourist and commercial activity. Gozo, with a population of 31,000, is a more tranquil island with an agricultural base and a more traditional approach to life.

3.1 A very short history of Gozo and Malta

The history of Gozo is strongly coupled with that of Malta since Gozo has been governed by Malta throughout history, with the exception of a short period of autonomy granted to Gozo by Napoleon after his conquest of the islands in 1798.

Key Dates

5000 BC First settlers arrive in Gozo
3600 BC Construction of Megalithic Temples
600 BC Carthaginian rule
218 BC Roman rule
395 Byzantine rule
970 Arab rule
1090 Norman, Swabian, Angevin and Spanish rule
1530 Malta ceded to Knights of St. John
1551 All inhabitants of Gozo taken into slavery
1565 Great Siege of Malta
1566 Foundation of Valletta
1798 French forces capture Gozo and expel Knights
1800 French expelled, British rule commences
1941/43 German/Italian forces lay siege to Malta
1964 Malta gains independence
2004 Malta joins EU

Gozo has been inhabited since around 5,000 BC when Stone Age farmers from nearby Sicily crossed the sea to the island. They are thought to have first lived in caves on the outskirts of the village of San Lawrenz on the west of Gozo. Gozo was an important early centre of cultural evolution, as shown by the construction of the impressive Ġgantija temples during the Neolithic period; these are the world's oldest free-standing structures and pre-date the pyramids in Egypt and Stonehenge. Tradition and ancient Greek historians maintain that Gozo is the

Globigerina limestone (a yellow stone easy to carve, yet strong enough for construction) and Lower Coralline Limestone (the strongest rock of all, used in construction). Fossils such as shark teeth and sea urchins are to be seen at several locations but most obviously near the spectacular Azure Window (Walk 3). It is the availability of the readily quarried yellow Globigerina limestone that has given Gozo such an abundant stock of quality and attractive stone buildings.

The single landmass of Malta and Gozo emerged from the sea floor around 8 million years ago and has since been moulded by tectonic activity, sea, wind, rain and humans to create a rare geomorphology and landscape. A number of valleys, flooded by a rise in sea level, have formed spectacular inlets, for example at Xlendi on the south of Gozo. The coastline of Gozo is dominated by impressive sea cliffs with large sea caves and small islets, though there are a few sandy beaches. Other features which provide valuable habitats for wildlife include dolines (collapsed caves), clay slopes, boulder screes and exposed surface limestone with shallow soil cover - a habitat termed Garrigue.

The landscape of Gozo is peppered with flat-topped hills such as Gelmus Hill near Ta' Pinu and these karst hills are a reminder of an ancient plateau. The top layer of these hills is composed of a cap of resilient limestone which has protected the underlying softer layer from erosion by rain (which, being slightly acidic, can slowly dissolve limestone). The mixture of hard and soft layers of limestone has resulted in numerous fantastically shaped but very attractive natural features throughout Gozo but particularly near Xwejni Bay on the northern coast.

3.4 Wildlife - Plants, Birds and Animals

The flora of the Maltese islands is a rich mix of Mediterranean and North African elements and includes both endemic and introduced species. At times of low sea level (during the last ice-age) Malta had a land connection to Sicily which allowed the free movement of plants and animals and provided a refuge for certain European plants which prefer warmer climates, for example, the Carob and Judas trees. The introduction of both plant and animal species by humans (whether intentional or not) has also contributed to the biodiversity of Malta. Cape Sorrel, now widespread in Gozo and Malta (easily recognised through its yellow flowers), was introduced to Malta in 1811 as a garden flower while the Prickly Pear cactus arrived from California around the end of the 19th century. The overall result is that Malta and Gozo host over 1100 wild plant species, around 40 of which are not found anywhere else. Many of these endemic plants are endangered. Wild flowers are one of the delights of walking in the countryside in Gozo, particularly in springtime. Garrigue, where fractured surface limestone hosts a variety of plants in shallow soil, is an important but under-appreciated habitat that you will encounter along several of the cycle routes. Garrigue vegetation is low and usually comprises aromatic shrubs such as Thyme, Mediterranean Heath, Spurges and wild Fennel together with a wide range of other plants including narcissi and orchids.

General's Rock and the Maltese Everlasting

4. Cycle Routes and Maps

The challenge of identifying interesting and practical cycle routes around Gozo must take into account the topography of the island and the location of features of interest to the visitor. Gozo is shaped somewhat like an upturned saucer. The coastal edge has a few inlets and sandy bays while around 60% is composed of cliffs. Over 70% of the coastline is not accessible from land and this provides a high level of protection to a variety of flora and fauna species. Inland, the island is quite level with the average height varying around 120 m above sea level. There are a number of hills; the highest of these (Ta' Dbiegi near San Lawrenz) is 191 m above sea level.

This guide is aimed at readers who enjoy cycling, not just for its own sake, but because it can take them through landscapes of beauty and past features of historic, natural or environmental interest. In this guide we describe the following routes:

Route 1 The Round Gozo Cycle Route

Route 2 Mġarr and the South East

Route 3 Dwejra and the South West

Route 4 Għarb and the North West

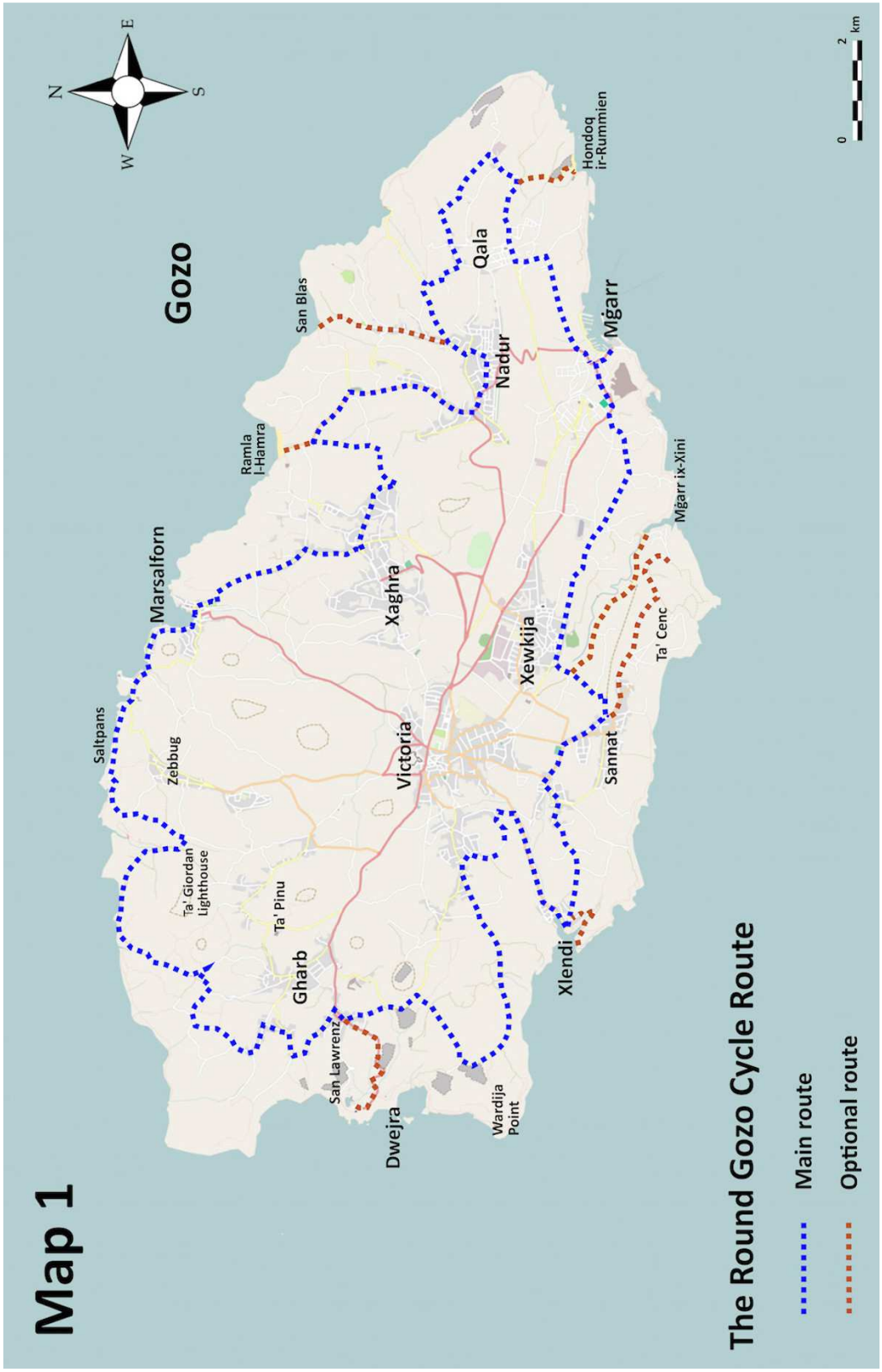
Route 5 Nadur and the North East

In those cases where a number of roads can bring you to the same destination we have selected those routes that are less busy and which bring you through less developed and more interesting areas. The routes are shown on detailed maps and the associated descriptions provide information on the key features to be encountered. On each route we also describe a number of options (**Brown** on the map) which will allow the cyclist to visits points of interest not immediately close to the route. The suggested routes also encourage you to stop at specific locations from where short walks (**Green** on the map) can bring you to features that cannot be directly reached by bike.

Malta has a number of good cycling routes. These are described in detail in the book “Cycling Malta” available at www.greatwalksmalta.com. Comino is the tranquil island between Malta and Gozo. There are wonderful walking tracks on the island but unfortunately none are suitable for bikes.

Route 1

The Round Gozo Coastal Route



Rainwater falling for millennia has eroded the limestone base of Gozo to create valleys, sea inlets and deep gorges which impede the construction of roads and tracks around much of the coast. The result is that it is not possible to drive, cycle or even walk around the island by a route that is always very close to the coast. On Map 1 we show a route that takes you around the island by a network of roads and tracks that is as near to the coast as is practical and safe. The 60 km (including options) route is mostly along tranquil country roads but must at times take you through short sections of urban areas. On the maps you can see other tracks that are used by walkers and farmers but these, in the main, are not suitable for cycling because of the rough terrain or their proximity to cliffs or other hazards.

Many of the impressive natural and man-made features of the island are located at/near the coast and are not immediately beside our suggested Round Gozo Cycle Route. Map 1 shows a number of options for short diversions from the main route which will allow you to visit the following features.

Options off the main cycling route

1. **Mġarr ix-Xini**
2. **Ta' Ċenċ Nature Reserve**
3. **Xlendi**
4. **Dwerja**
5. **Ramla Bay**
6. **San Blas**
7. **Ħondoq Bay**

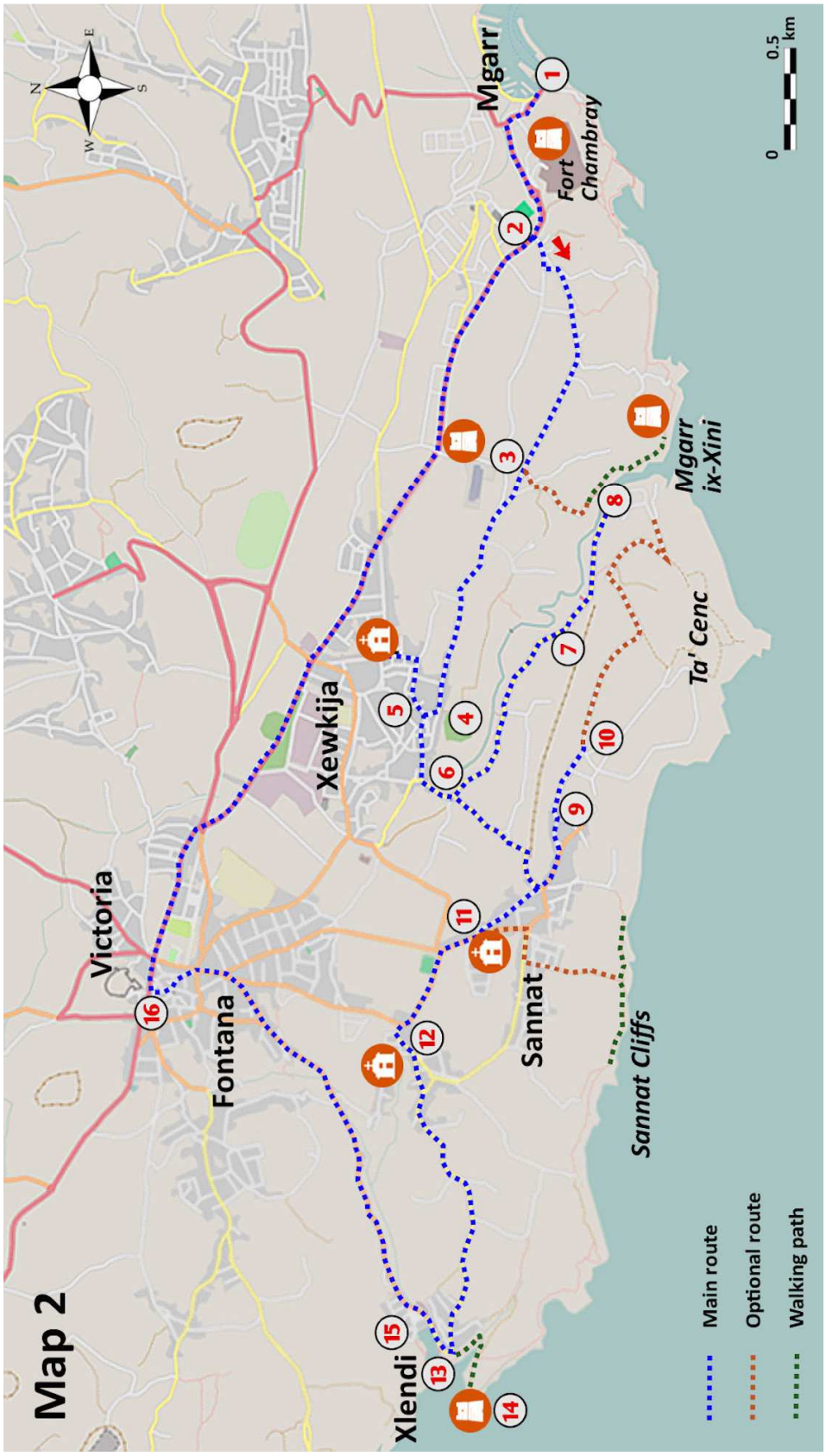
It is not practical to visit all these features on the one trip so you will have to make your own selection. Hopefully this will encourage you to visit the island on a number of occasions. Clicking on any of the above options will take you to a location of further information within this eBook, without the need for an internet connection.

The routes we describe in the following pages overlap in many places with the Round Gozo Cycle Route. The route descriptions provide detailed information which will be of interest to those cycling the Round Gozo Route.

ROAD TO MGARR IX-XINI
8 14:45

Route 2

Mġarr and the South East



Route 2 Mġarr and the South East

Mġarr - Xewkija - Mġarr ix-Xini - Sannat - Xlendi – Victoria - Mġarr

Key Features

Mġarr ix-Xini sea inlet

Ta' Ċenċ nature reserve

Xewkija Parish Church

Cliffs at Sannat

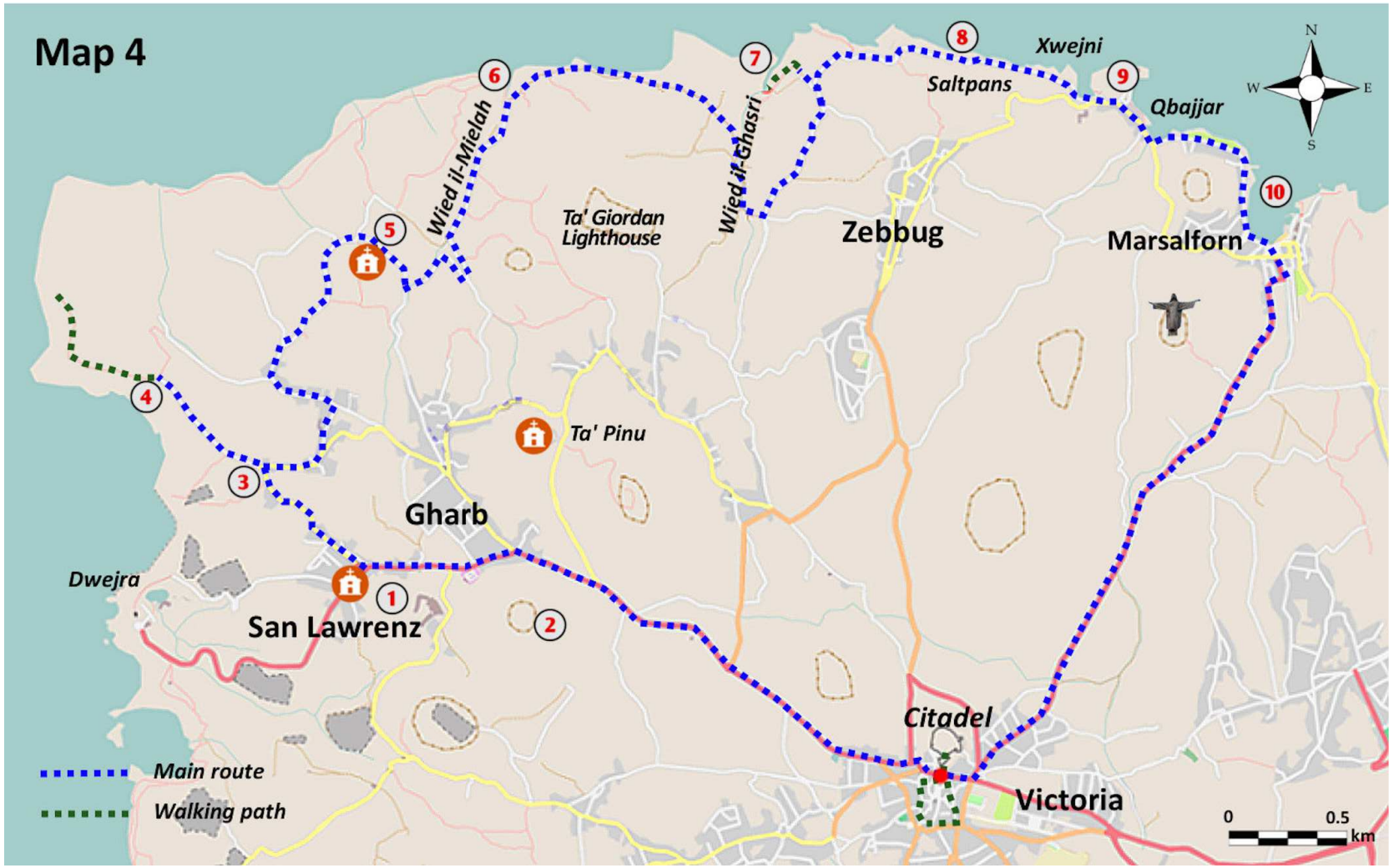
Xlendi sea inlet

Citadel of Victoria

The 18 km route (26 km with options) is graded easy to moderate (see Map 2).

Route Description

The coastal town of Mġarr is the principal entry point to Gozo for people and goods. Starting from the ferry arrival point **(1)** you face immediately into a challenging climb up to the central plateau of the island. Though the rise is only about 100 m, it can seem much more. Within a few minutes you are travelling along the level main road towards Victoria (aka Rabat) in the centre of the island. You pass through a roundabout to take the second turn on the left **(2)**, just beyond the Rexy Restauant. You are now on a country road heading towards the town of Xewkija about 1.5 km ahead. Xewkija sits at the head of the Ħanżira valley, a deep gorge hosting great biodiversity.


Map 4
N
W
E
S
1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10
Wied il-Mielah
Wied il-Ghasri
Ta' Giordan Lighthouse
Ta' Pinu
Xwejni
Saltpans
Qbajjar
Zebbug
Marsalforn
Gharb
Dwejra
San Lawrenz
Citadel
Victoria
Main route
Walking path
0
0.5
km

Route 4 Għarb and the North West

Victoria - San Lawrenz - Għarb - Saltpans – Marsalforn - Victoria

Key Features

Saltpans

Xwejni Bay

San Dimitri Chapel

Ta' Giordan Lighthouse

Ghasri Gorge

This very interesting 18 km route (24 km with options) is shown on Map 4.

Route Description

Setting out from Independence Square in Victoria you take the signposted road to the village of San Lawrenz **(1)**. On the left as you approach the village you can see Ta' Dbiegi Hill **(2)**, which at 195 m is the highest point on Gozo. To the right you can see the beautiful Basilica of Ta' Pinu.

Passing through San Lawrenz you take the road to the north-east on the left-hand side of the church to cycle past traditional houses and small fields. The view opens up on your right towards the village of Għarb and the Ta' Gordan Lighthouse. At a Y-junction **(3)** you turn left along a tranquil road among fields with a light coloured soil, formed from the globigerina limestone which dominates the area. The road winds between rubble walls rich in Golden Samphire and Maltese Salt trees. After about 700 m the rubble walls on the left come to an end and the view opens up towards Dwejra. Continue on this track until you reach a point unsuitable for bikes **(4)**. Here, we suggest, you leave your bike to ramble along the safe cliffside path. This walking path could take you all the way to Marsalforn so you may ramble along it as far as you like, enjoy the tranquillity and dramatic scenery of this, the least visited spot on the islands.

The cycling route heads back the way you came to reach Y-junction **(3)** after which you take three consecutive left turns. Beyond a small playground you take a right and then left along this curving country road to reach the isolated chapel of San Dimitri **(5)** constructed in 1805 on the site of a 16th century chapel. This isolated chapel has a wonderful altarpiece showing Saint Dimitri on horseback, an old woman praying and a young man in chains.

Saint Dimitri Chapel

Gorge of Wied il-Għasri

After the visit to the chapel, cycle downhill to the east and then left. The road curves down into Wied il-Mielaħ (wied means valley) where you cycle left along the valley floor towards the sea and the Wied il-Mielaħ rock window **(6)**. The route now heads east along the coastal cliffs towards the wonderful gorge of Wied il-Għasri **(7)**. You reach a Y-junction where you take the left across the valley, to follow a path along the valley edge. The stream in the valley floor (seasonal) flows into the sea at this beautiful gorge. As you approach the coast you take a turn to the left. Here you can leave your bike to admire this impressive gorge with high steep cliffs and small shingle beach. Notice the lush vegetation of the valley sides, with spherical Tree Spurges and wild Carrots dominating.

The Saltpans

Returning to your bike you continue to the east along a rough track which curves to the right and then to the left, to run parallel to the sea and is flanked on both sides by uncultivated land with high bushes. After about 400 m the track brings you to the coast where you get your first view of the ancient system of saltpans **(8)**. The low shelving limestone ledges are sculptured with hundreds of hand-cut basins of varying shapes and sizes. This fascinating saltpan complex extends for about 1.5 km along the coast. While there are saltpans at several other locations in Malta and Gozo this is the largest and most impressive system and represents salt harvesting on an almost industrial scale. Salt pans have been used since Roman times as a means of harvesting salt from the sea. Seawater is fed into the shallow depressions through a system of hand dug channels and, after

interior is very beautiful.

Xagħra hosts a range of interesting archaeological sites and features. There are several temple sites, the most important and intact of which is the Ġgantija site, recognised as the oldest free-standing sacred structure in the world. Many beautiful and interesting objects have been found at these locations, particularly at the Xagħra Circle. The route continues along the road to the right of the church (as you face it) to pass the Ġgantija temple complex **(13)** located near a children's playground. This magnificent Neolithic site is the earliest of a series of megalithic temples in several locations on Malta. Their makers erected the two Ġgantija temples during the period of 3600 - 2500 BC, which makes these 5000 year old temples among the world's oldest manmade structures. Together with other similar structures (the Megalithic Temples of Malta), these have been designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The entrance to the temple complex is beyond the parking area. There is ample information available on site and guided tours are available. A visit to the site should take about 1 hour.

Return to Mġarr

The quickest and easiest way back to Mġarr is to go south from Xagħra to join the main Victoria - Mġarr road. At a roundabout **(14)** take a left and then follow the road left. Continue along the signposted road passing through Ghajnsielem village on the plateau above Mġarr Harbour.

Annex

Information on Key Features

When the features below are mentioned anywhere in the Text they are linked back to a box here in this annex.

Boxes

1. Citadel of Victoria
2. Walk to a Punic Sanctuary
3. Dwejra
4. Basilica of Ta' Pinu
5. The Saltpans
6. Ramla Beach
7. Ġgantija Temple Complex

The Citadel of Victoria

Victoria, the capital of Gozo (locally known as Rabat) was given its classy name in honour of the British Queen's Golden Jubilee in 1897. The town (population 6,500) is dominated by the Citadel, a fortress designed to safeguard the inhabitants of Gozo against the constant threat of piracy and abduction in the middle ages. The Citadel, with its cathedral and component buildings, is at the heart of Gozo's history and culture. The first records of a fortified castle on the site go back to 1241 but there is archaeological evidence of a much earlier use of the site, including a Roman temple dedicated to Juno.

The early Citadel withstood a siege of three days by Ottoman raiders in 1551, surrendering after the island's only gunner was killed. A tombstone in the cathedral conveys some of the horror in its commemoration of the nobleman Bernardo Dupuo who died fighting the Turkish pirates, after first killing his wife and daughters to save them from slavery. Almost all the inhabitants of the island were taken abroad into slavery, most never to return. The present Citadel dates to the early 1600s when it was rebuilt in the form we see today. The Citadel contains strong bastions, small medieval streets, an old prison, the Museums of Archaeology and Natural History and the imposing Cathedral of the Assumption with its 17th century Baroque facade.