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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Authors and Copyright

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.

2. Practical Information

2.1 General stuff

Language

Malta has its own language, with an Arabic base but containing many Italian and English words. Maltese is written in the Latin script, with a number of minor variations. For example:

Ċ is pronounced as ch so Ċisk (a good local beer) is Chisk

X is pronounced as sh so Xlendi on Gozo is Shlendi

M before a consonant is pronounced as im. Thus Mdina is Imdina

Għ is silent, so the village of Għarb is pronounced Aarb

Almost everyone speaks English as a second language.

Cycling on the left

As with other islands that were within the British Empire (Ireland, Sri Lanka) the Maltese drive and cycle on the left side of the road.

Electricity

Normal European voltage (220v) but the electricity socket requires the standard British 3-pin plug.

Banks and money

Malta is an EU member state and uses the Euro. Banks offer all the usual services and ATMs are commonplace.

Phones

There is full mobile phone coverage on Malta and Gozo. The international dialling code for Malta is 356. In the event of an emergency ring 112.

Crime

Malta is among the safest countries in the world for tourists, a feature which must be very attractive to those who have visited certain countries in South America or Eastern Europe.

Hospitals

The hospital and medical care system in Malta is as good as anywhere in Europe. For EU citizens the European Health Insurance Card (**EHIC**) can be used in respect of emergency medical treatment due to either an accident or illness. You should get the EHIC card from the authorities in your own country before you travel.

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

3.3 Geology

The Maltese islands are situated about ninety km south of Sicily and two hundred and ninety km north of Africa. The combination of a warm Mediterranean climate, physical isolation from other land masses and its limestone base, have led to the formation in Malta and Gozo of rare habitats with endemic species of plants and animals.

The island's rocks are of sedimentary limestone which started to form on the seabed 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 within the deep limestone beds, with each layer representing a different phase of development of the Mediterranean Sea and its inhabitants. These layers can be seen at a number of cliffs (for example near Dwerja, Walk 3). From top to bottom (and from young to old) the five layers are as follows: Upper Coralline limestone (a strong coral material used for concrete), Greensands (no particular use), Blue Clay, (which has a significance for creation of springs), 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

Birds

The island of Gozo consists mainly of a dry limestone habitat with few forested areas and no permanent rivers or lakes. As a consequence the islands have few regularly breeding bird species. The natural habitats of Gozo are somewhat distinct from those of Malta since over 60 percent of Gozo's coast is composed of cliffs, which are largely inaccessible and relatively safe from human disturbance. The cliffs at Ta' Ċenċ on the south coast of Gozo (a designated Natura 2000 site) includes a large breeding colony of Cory's Shearwater (800-1000 pairs), 150-300 pairs of Yelkouan Shearwater and a colony of European Storm Petrels. As the islands occupy a strategic point on the migration flyway between Africa and Europe they play host to an impressive list of spring (March to May) and autumn (September to November) passage migrants. In all, some 384 species have been recorded to date, of which at least 170 are regularly recorded. Only limited wetland and salt marsh areas remain in Malta and these provide important stop-over points for migrants such as herons, rails and grebes while also supporting some breeding birds. Birdlife Malta, part of a worldwide network of bird conservation bodies, provides useful visitor information on their website at www.birdlifemalta.org.

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

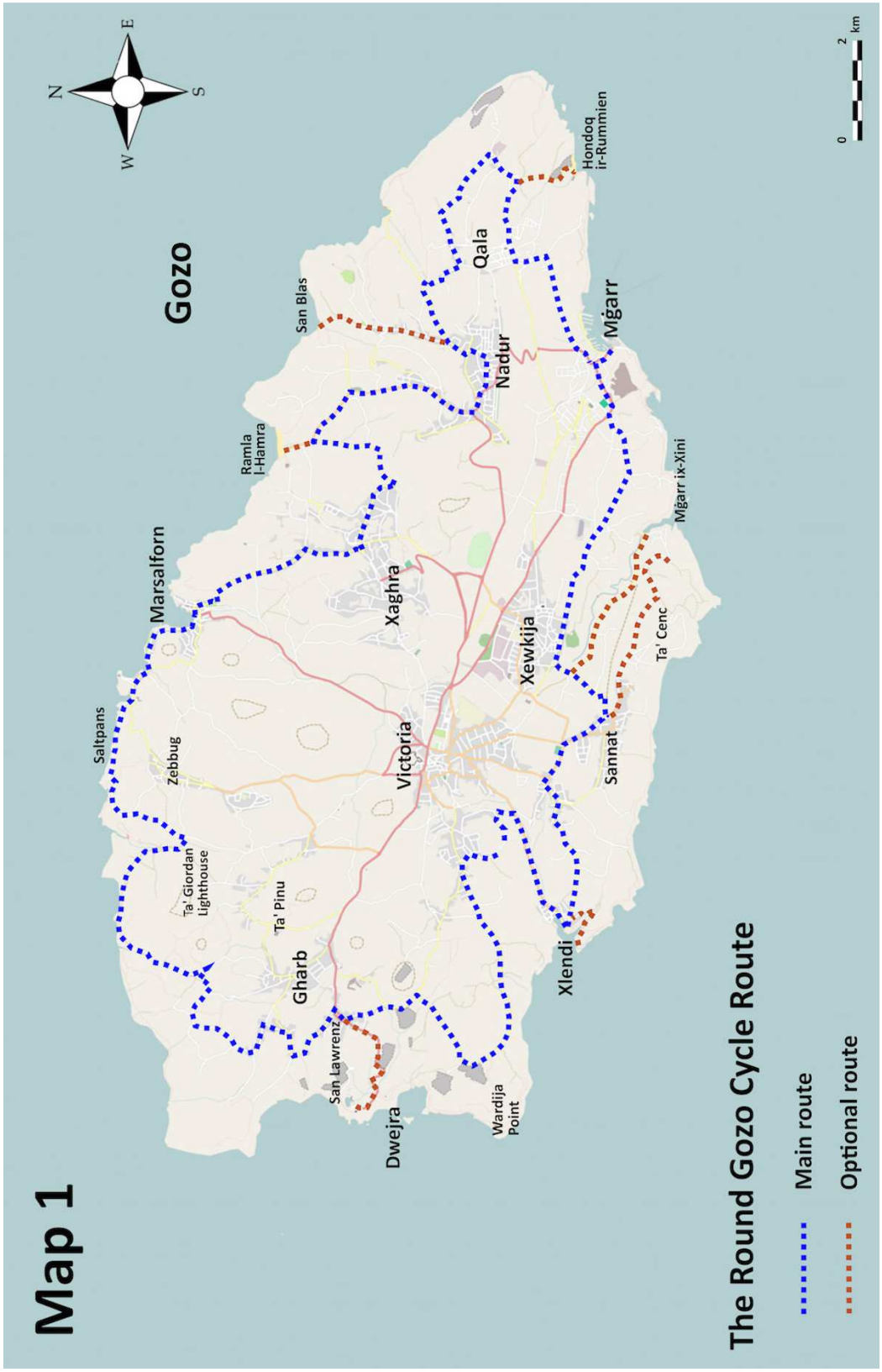
Route 5 Nadur and the North East

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**

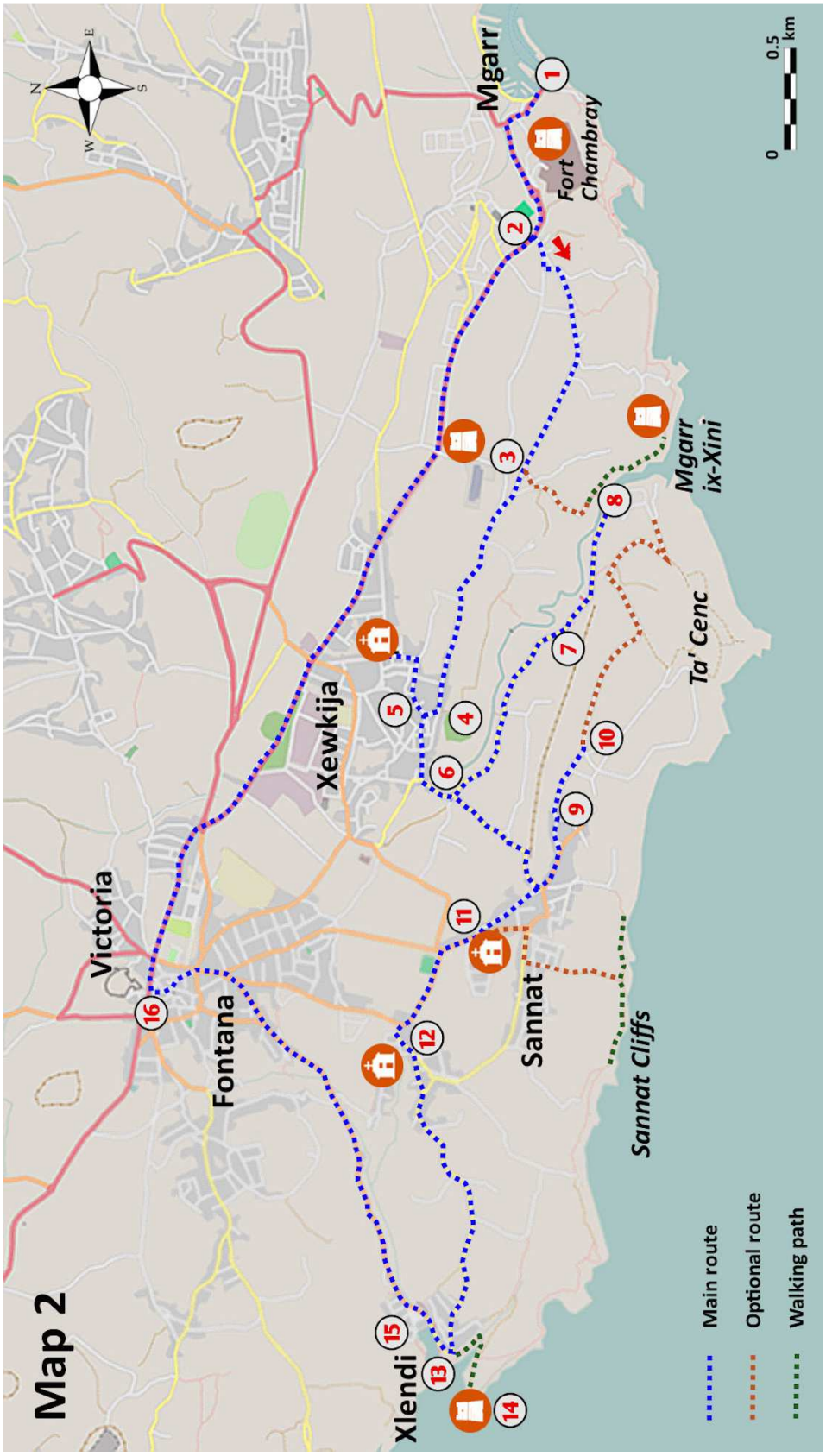
It is not practical to visit all these features on the one trip so you will have to make your own selection. Hopefully this will encourage you to visit the island on a number of occasions. Clicking on any of the above options will take you to a location of further information within this eBook, without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

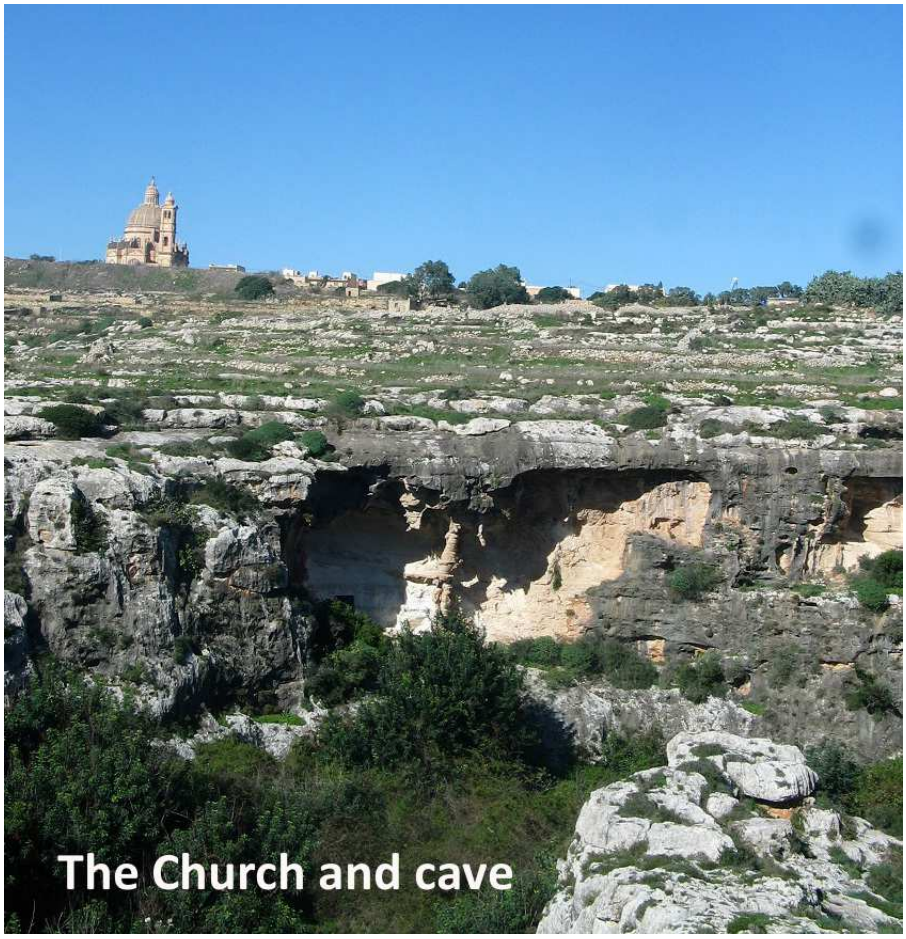
Xlendi sea inlet

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.



You can get a good appreciation of this feature by turning left at point **(3)** and cycling down a track which leads close the valley edge (see map). You may care to park your bike and wander down along the beautiful sea inlet of Mġarr ix-Xini. After enjoying the views and the varied plant-life of the valley you continue your cycle into the town square of Xewkija. You pass near an old olive grove at Ta' Blankas **(4)** and then turn right past the local Council building **(5).** The town square has a number of cafés, a traditional stone cross, public toilets, free Wi-Fi and the very wonderful parish church of Saint John the Baptist. The church has a surprisingly modern interior and a lift that will carry you up to its impressive dome. As it is the third highest dome in the Christian world, the view from the top is breathtaking.

Xewkija, the oldest village on Gozo, became in 1678 the first parish to be established outside the Citadel in Victoria. The census of 1663 records Xewkija as a fast-growing countryside district with 403 inhabitants and 90 households. Archaeological excavations carried out in 1904 in the fields east of the parish church confirmed that the area has been inhabited since Neolithic times.

To Mġarr ix-Xini

Cycling along this beautiful coastal track you can admire the yellow cliffs and the strange shapes created by wind erosion of the limestone. This part of the coast faces north and violent winter storms with high breaking waves can be both beautiful and threatening. Following the coastal path you come to Xwejni Bay and are surprised by the strange hillock **(9)** at the tip of the peninsula. The view across the saltpans and the shallow bay to the mound is almost surreal. The mound is composed of quaternary deposits which filled an ancient doline (a collapsed cave). As the doline eroded, the harder infilled material remained as an out-of-context hill. The water in the bay is shallow and there is a reef just offshore making this is a good place for diving and for those learning to dive. The peninsula separating Xwejni Bay from the adjacent Qbajjar Bay contains a battery built in 1716 to discourage invasion through these accessible bays. The battery, originally equipped with 6 guns, came into use again during World War 2 as an observation post to protect the small harbour of Marsalforn. The coast here is now somewhat overbuilt but does contain a number of cafes. The Horizon restaurant on the sea front is a good location for a snack. Leaving Qbajjar Bay you stay on the scenic coastal road which takes you past a number of apartment blocks into Marsalforn **(10)**.

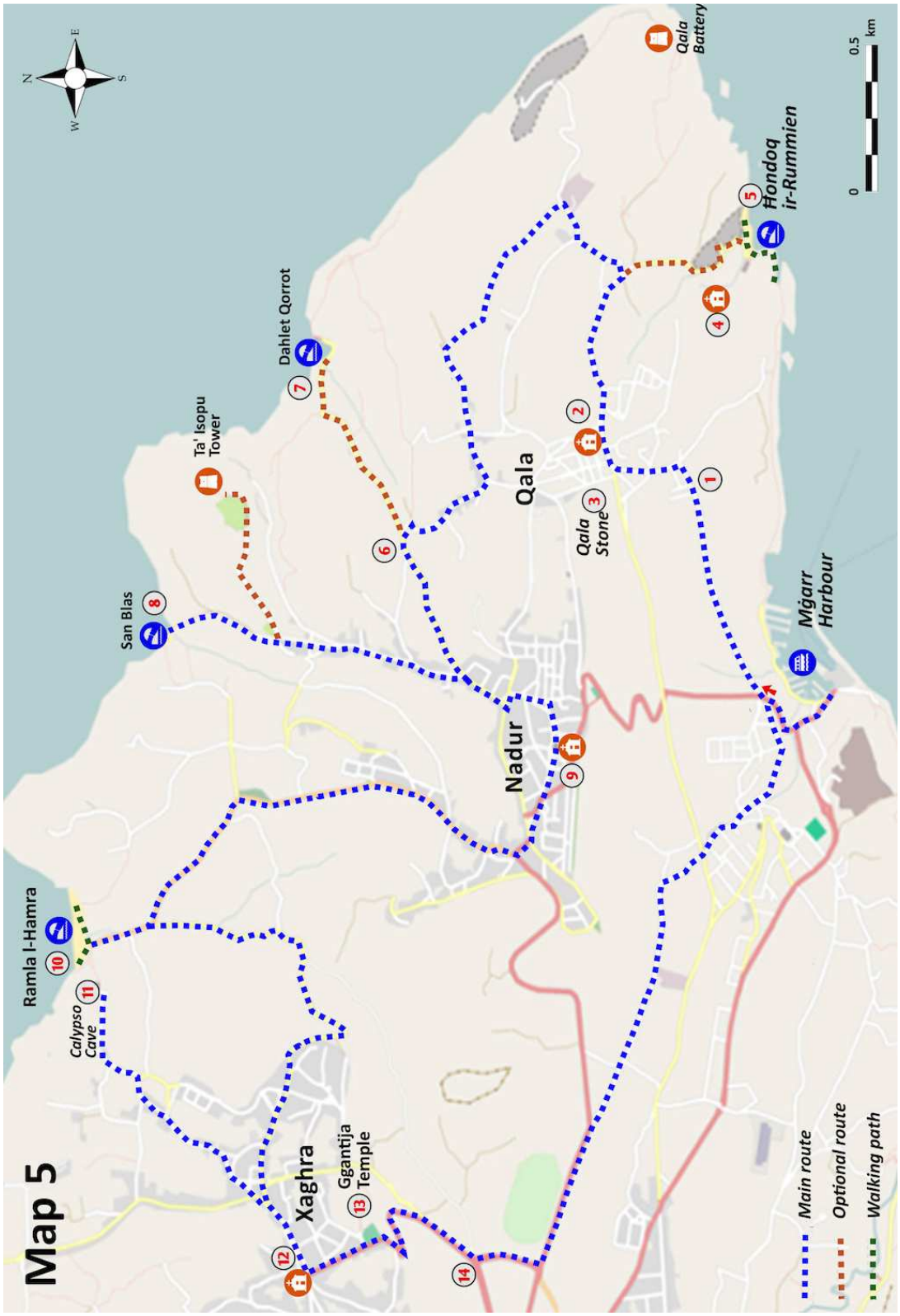
Marsalforn promenade

Return to Victoria

The pleasant seaside town of Marsalforn, situated within a beautiful bay, is popular with locals and tourists. After perhaps a ramble around the town and a

Route 5

Nadur and the North East



Route 5 Nadur and the North East

Mġarr - Qala - Nadur - Ramla - Xagħra - Mġarr

Key Features

Ġgantija Temples

Qala village

Wonderful views to Comino

Bays of Ramla and San Blas

Nadur Parish Church

The 18 km route (24 km with options) has a number of climbs from sea level up to about 120 m (see Map 5).

Route Description

You set out from Mġarr on the rising road to the north east which leads to the traditional village of Qala, about 1.5 km away. After the steep climb, as the road curves, take a right. The houses soon give way to open countryside with fabulous views of the Gozo-Comino Channel, particularly from the belvedere viewing point **(1)**. The road curves uphill to the left to bring you to the main square of the village with its rows of trees and the impressive parish church **(2)** dedicated both to St. Joseph and the Immaculate Conception. The village is at its most beautiful on the first Sunday of August, when the gilded titular statue of St. Joseph is carried in procession through the streets to mark the end of the annual festa. At other times this is a peaceful town where locals relax and chat on benches around the square. While in the village go to see the Qala Stone **(3)** which is located near the square, between two modern houses. This is the only remaining stone of what is considered to be a Neolithic temple. You might also like to visit a traditional windmill in the village. Named after its original owner, Randu's Windmill was built in the 1850s at the highest point of the town. Its design is similar to other mills on the island - a quadrangular building and a circular tower about 15 m high. The mill, now a private residence, was in use up to the 1960s for grinding maize.

The coastline of Gozo is dominated by cliffs and Qala particularly so. The only access to the sea is at nearby Ħondoq **(4)**, the former port for Qala. Its pleasant beach is popular with local families in summertime. You have the option of cycling down to this beach but the uphill return is challenging as Qala is at 125 m above sea level. Leaving Qala you cycle east towards the road down to Ħondoq **(5)**. Reaching a chapel and cemetery you take the uphill road to the right which brings you to a wide Y-junction. On the left you can enjoy views of Qala village. The road curves left and after about 400 m you reach a T-junction **(6)**. Take the