

An Archaeological and Cultural Itinerary for Alternative Tourism

Cultural Tourism has for many years been one of the niche markets of worldwide tourism. It provides visitors with an alternative itinerary to the usual mass tourism products that have become the norm in so many Mediterranean countries.

This is starting to be felt in Malta too. For too long, mass tourism has been dominant and will remain such for the foreseeable future. The introduction of low-cost flight is threatening to change all this. It has already altered the tourist demography to the extent that up to 2 years ago, the most common tourist was of the “sun and sea” variety—the package tour visitor.

Today, over 60% of tourists are independent travellers. A good percentage of which can be described as modern travellers who are more educated and seek out a different product than the usual package fare. Such tourists are also more environmentally conscious and more interested in the cultural characteristics of a country, looking at aspects that maybe ignored or only given a cursory look by mass tourists.

The KASA project aims to provide an alternative guide to visitors who prefer to experience a different part of Malta, and appreciate and understand better the various archaeological, geological, historical and natural characteristics that abound here.

GEOLOGY, GEOMORPHOLOGY AND BIODIVERSITY

The series of five walks chosen aim to whet the appetite of the tourist who wants to experience all aspects of our country.

The walks start at Rabat and end at Meliieha – a route that is significant both from the geomorphological and geological point of view. It can be said that the route offers some of the most spectacular landscape on the Maltese islands and combines a wealth of panoramic views, interesting terrain, biodiversity and varied archaeological remains.

Starting from Rabat, the **First Walk** provides one of the best examples of a typical Maltese town, the centre of which still reflects an urban landscape of yesteryear. Narrow streets, quaint lanes and traditional houses surround a small central business district dotted with a veritable wealth of catacombs and hypogea that extend under many private habitations due to the limestone geology that is easier to burrow into.

The upper limestone layers are also geomorphologically significant as they show that Rabat is built on an area where all the five Maltese geological layers are still intact. This is important for a number of reasons. The first, of historical importance is that due to the thickness of the layers, Rabat is the highest town in Malta. This explains why it has been settled since Neolithic Times and why Mdina was chosen as Malta’s earliest fortified capital city.

Height above the sea-level conveys a certain strategic advantage to a settlement. Such towns and cities usually have a much clearer picture of their surroundings and can see further afar—a distinct advantage in times when Malta was attacked by pirates and

Moors. A city built on a hill is also easier to defend, while the enemy below lies at a distinct strategic disadvantage.

Secondly, the fact that all five geological layers are intact meant that a substantial clay layer existed beneath Rabat and Mdina that provided easy access to potable supplies of underground water.

On an arid island such as Malta it was crucial that settlements were built near a water supply. In the Rabat and Mdina area, the impermeable Blue Clay layer stored water which could be extracted by means of wind-pumps and wells. The same underground water-supply also formed a number of natural freshwater springs that provided for people living in more remote areas such as *Mtahleb, Bahrija, Migra l-Ferha* and *Dingli*.

Due to all this, Rabat and Mdina are said to form part of the Rabat-Dingli Uplands—an area of elevated land that extends from Dingli on the west to Mellieha on the North in a series of ridges and valleys. Most of the area rests on the five rock-layers and has substantial quantities of Blue Clay, a good supply of freshwater and considerable stretches of fertile non-irrigated arable land.

The other geological distinct area in Malta is a flat expanse of land that extends from the east (Birkirkara) to the south (Marsaxlokk), and rests mostly on globigerina limestone as the upper layers have been eroded.

The difference in geomorphology results in differences in terrain. While the Rabat-Dingli Uplands can reach elevations of 280m (at the highest point of Dingli Cliffs), the southern plains are flat and devoid of Blue Clay with most of the land taken up by urban areas.

The abundance of water can be clearly seen when walking from Rabat centre towards the outskirts where the **Second Walk** begins; a walk characterised by fertile non-irrigated arable land, wind-pumps, freshwater streams and water-eroded valleys in *Fiddien, l-Ghemieri, L-Andrijiet, Wied Ghomor* and *Wied Liemu*.

The **Third Walk** from here towards Bingemma is uphill inclined towards the Great Fault on which Malta's major line of fortifications, the Victoria Lines are built. The Great Fault bisects Malta from east to west and is testimony to the violent earthquakes that must have rocked the island in bygone ages. The area leading up to this Fault becomes increasingly interspersed with stretches of karstic garigue, one of Malta's main ecosystems consisting of eroded fields and exposed limestone bedrock dotted with limited areas of soil.

Garigue is one of the most common types of terrain on the island. It is either formed by the degradation of arable fields or deforestation. A field usually degrades when rubble walls are allowed to collapse and wind erosion is allowed to take its toll. Wind scours the land, blowing the topsoil away and exposing the limestone bedrock. In the case of deforestation, the lack of trees to protect the ground from water and wind erosion results in the transport of soil away from the land. The forest usually degrades into maquis which still has enough soil to support shrubs or garigue which can only support specific vegetation adapted to the adverse conditions of lack of soil, drought and exposure.

Although many arable fields in the area are surrounded by intact rubble walls, some valley areas clearly show the effect of water erosion on rubble walls, their subsequent collapse and clear evidence of excessive soil erosion. In some places, trees have been uprooted due to the lack of soil so essential in anchoring the roots.

It is the soil erosion that characterises garigue areas, while water and wind erosion, and the action of weakly acidic rain-water on limestone, continue to widen cracks and furrows, and deepen holes. By time, these trap soil and a variety of plants have adapted to living in such thin soils by developing long roots, small leaves and woody stems to decrease transpiration (the loss of water from the plant). In fact, the number of plants, both annual and perennial living in garigue areas is quite surprising.

Most of the garigues surrounding Bingemma are Spurge and Thyme garigues with a wide variety of species including annuals such as Mediterranean Heath, Germanders, Sage and Fennel. Perennials include Asphodel, Star-of-Bethlehem and a variety of common orchids.

Although garigue areas look bare and bleak especially in summer, they flourish in winter and provide habitats to a great variety of plants, insects and animals. The insect life attracts many animals, the most common being reptiles such as wall lizards, snakes, geckos and skinks. These in turn attract avifauna including birds of prey that feed on reptiles and field mice, and smaller birds that eat the multitude of seeds available in spring. Bats are also quite common feeding on the ample insect life and sheltering in small caves and cracks during the day. Larger animals include mammals such as the Algerian Hedgehog and the weasel which is carnivore. All are nocturnal.

The terrain of the **Fourth Walk** from Bingemma Gap to Mgarr changes with altitude from garigue to maquis to lightly forested areas containing stands of Aleppo Pines and finally stretches of fertile fields that characterise Mgarr—Malta's major agricultural town.

Agriculture continues to dominate the **Fifth Walk** from Mgarr to Mellieha as the trail passes through the farming village of Manikata eventually traversing a number of ridges including the Bajda and Mellieha ridges that lead to the perched town of Mellieha.

Depressions between the ridges contain important valleys such as that of Pwales and *Wied l-Abjad*. These are surrounded by some of the most intensely cultivated land on the island.

The fifth walk ends at *It-Tunnara* but not before passing through Mellieha where wartime shelters and a cave-church, the Mellieha Sanctuary again reveal the karstic (limestone) nature of the area. Troglodyte caves on opposite side corroborate this and end the walk on a spectacular note, as the vantage point from Mellieha shows the full extent of the Mellieha ridge that falls towards Ghadira Bay until it starts to rise again towards the Marfa ridge.

CONTENT AND IDEAS

The contents of this study follows the idea of offering the tourist a number of alternatives to appreciating our island by providing different types of visits that holistically bring together historic, archaeological, geological, geomorphological and bio diverse aspects all together.

Consequently, each walk offers much more than the usual routes characterised by singular themes such as history and scenery. Each walk aims to familiarise a visitor with all aspects of Maltese life from the cultural to the historical to the geographical; and the idea is to create more of these itineraries around the islands where visitors and locals included would be able to walk paths where archaeology, history, culture, tradition and the environment are shown as integral parts of our country.

More than presenting walks, the authors have tried to offer a completely different thinking with regards to cultural visits. This thinking rests on the idea that the main sites in Malta are well visited. They are practically always crowded with tourists and sometimes with schoolchildren as well. The majority of these places have been marketed as must-see places, which explains the crowds of ever-present visitors. Yet, the modern concept of cultural tourism, and to the more informed and better educated visitor, these places need to be augmented and alternated with other less popular places where mass tourism still has not reached. Some of these places although interesting are not even visited, mostly due to the vagaries of tour packages that usually include the “hot” spots and have no time for newer places.

For this itinerary, Rabat was chosen as the point of departure. There are many advantages to this. Although Rabat can be described as a mass tourist site due to its proximity to the medieval city of Mdina, it offers a starting point to some of the most spectacularly varied terrain on the island, immersed in historical and cultural significance.

The itinerary chosen is meant for tourists who are after something different. The walks indicate a number of items of interest along the route that are usually not taken into consideration. It is also for this reason that it is being suggested that the best way to carry out the walks is on foot, although there are sections that can be traversed by bike.

THE ITINERARY PROPER

Rabat is the main focal point from where the first of these walks starts. The whole length of the walk to Mellieha is about 22 kilometres, so only those having the required stamina should attempt it.

The whole itinerary includes urban villages and hamlets, streets and squares; open countryside, downhill pathways into valleys, and uphill stretches that maybe quite steep.

Rabat, the suburb of the old medieval city of Mdina was chosen as it has always been

a hotbed of activity. It is a lively town with a quaint old centre characterised by traditional narrow streets reminiscent of medieval times, while the outskirts are surrounded by newer urban areas that have been developed to house a growing population. It is here where a wealth of walks can be found leading into the countryside and ending in small hamlets such as Bahrija, Mtahleb and Bingemma, and associated valleys and cliffs.

Rabat is an ideal starting point for many walks of different durations. Apart from being a well-known destination easily accessible by public transport, it is an ideal meeting place for hikers and ramblers interested in exploring the surrounding countryside on foot. From Rabat centre one can proceed towards the countryside, which is rich in historical and environmental details.

The route has been planned to offer the possibility of accomplishing the whole walk in stages. Each walk starts where the previous walk ends and it is very easy for hikers to retrace their paths and repeat the same walk or take on another part of the itinerary.

All the stops can be reached by public transport, and therefore it is easy to plan one's activity for the day. The **First Walk** features the centre of Rabat itself with a number of Museums and archaeological sites included. Due to the richness of this area, a good half a day can easily be spent here and the walk's theme is basically a historical/archaeological one.

The second itinerary is only five minutes away from Rabat centre. Part of the **Second Walk** passes through the narrow medieval streets of Rabat leading to the countryside. It continues through narrow streets and country lanes amid rural scenery.

The **Third Walk** leaves Rabat and leads into the open countryside. Yet, it is still possible to pass by isolated farmhouses and small hamlets belonging to farmers who are still working surrounding fields. A number of archaeological sites including Medieval Chapels and Cave-churches, cart-ruts and Punic rock tombs are easily accessible here confirming that the area was also well populated during ancient times.

This walk can be easily extended into the **Fourth Walk** passing through the farming hamlet of Bingemma and ending at the agricultural town of Mgarr. While part of the third walk has a number of small uphill stretches, the fourth walk is almost completely downhill, making it easier to continue into the fifth walk. The rural roads here are quite in a good state of repair and the traffic is sparse, particularly during week days offering pleasant cycling routes.

The **Fifth Walk** begins at the centre of Mgarr, passes partly through the main road until the small farming hamlet of Manikata is reached. Then it eventually leads towards the coast where Mellieha is situated. From here onwards, the last part of the walk is downhill towards the large and picturesque bay of Ghadira.

The printed itinerary is easy to follow. There is an introduction to the whole itinerary of walks, which have been divided into five. Then, each walk is introduced and described generally. Each item of interest found along the route is set in bold and snippets of information about each and every item are highlighted. These walks can be followed easily without the need of any help except for the simple maps that are included.