











Ramla Walk

## Saltpans Walk

- **Starting:** Victoria
- **Ending:** Victoria
- Length: 12km
- **Grading:** Moderate, difficulty with some steep inclines and a few rocky areas
- **Landscape:** Urban, coastal, countryside roads and paths
- Trail markings
- Getting there and back: Gozo Channel operates regular ferries to L-Imgarr Harbour leaving from ic-Cirkewwa in Malta. Buses leave regularly from the harbour to Victoria and back.
- Recommended Walking season: October to May



# Overview

This circular walk starts and ends in Victoria, the main town of Gozo. From here the walk proceeds to the breathtaking 'Sara valley'. After visiting Gozo's oldest basilica, the walk continues to 'Wied il-Għasri', a valley flanked by high cliffs, and then to the sea.

Near here is 'Reqqa point', with its traditional salt pans where is salt is produced by evaporation of sea water. The walk proceeds to 'Xwejni Bay' and then 'Qbajjar Bay', where rest facilities, restaurants and public conveniences are available.

Leaving 'Qbajjar' behind, the walk takes you along a dusty road through the beautiful Gozitan countryside and valleys. Passing by the watercourses you can observe the diverse flora and fauna associated with these unique habitats. The walk then continues back to Victoria.

The route map in the centre pages of this booklet, together with several stone plinths located along this route, will guide you along the walk, providing an excellent opportunity to truly appreciate the island of Gozo.

# Notes

### **(**) COUNTRYSIDE CODE

- The route is suitable for hikes, horse rides and pedal bikes. Most of the route is accessible
  to small vehicles.
- If travelling by bus to the route starting point, you should check the local bus timetable to ensure that this fits your own schedule.
- The local weather forecast should be checked before setting off as there is hardly any shelter from adverse weather conditions along the route. A raincoat can come in very handy in rainy conditions.
- As most of the walk is over open countryside, it is advisable to carry a packed lunch. It is
  possible to buy food at Victoria and Qbajjar.
- Public conveniences are available at Victoria and Obajjar.



- Hike only along the set route. Fields are privately owned so do not take any short cuts.
- Do not climb over rubble walls; they are easily damaged.
- Do not leave any litter; dispose of all litter in the dustbins found along the route.
- Respect the privacy of people living along the walk.
- Do not trample upon or pick any flowers and plants; take only photographs.
- Do not widen any trails by foot, this would damage the habitat through increased erosion.
- Do not throw any stones or other objects in the valleys.
- Avoid walking or cycling close to the cliff edges. Sudden gusts of wind can be dangerous to the unsuspecting hiker.
- It is advisable to tackle the route in broad daylight. Therefore when planning your walk, allow time for stops, resting, photographing etc.
- Bird trapping and hunting are practised in the countryside. There are, however, strict regulations determining areas where such activities are permitted and times of the year where no such activities are allowed.

Before undertaking any part of this walk, it is strongly recommended to ensure that one's physical and medical conditions permit the undertaking of these activities. Particular attention is to be made to the often irregular terrain and to refrain from undertaking these walks in prohibitive weather conditions. All walks are undertaken at one's own risk.

Whilst every effort has been made to ensure the accuracy of information contained in this brochure as at time of publication, the Ministry for Gozo accepts no liability for any inaccuracies or omissions whatsoever. Moreover, the Ministry for Gozo accepts no liability for accidents or any type of losses while following these walks.



Trekking along this route, you will definitely come to appreciate how history, folklore and traditions are intertwined within the context of the Gozitan countryside. This walk offers you the opportunity to explore one of the smaller villages on Gozo, L-Għasri and discover the secret of local salt at Xwejni, while rambling through characteristic hills and valleys and enjoying the vast endless stretch of the Mediterranean Sea.



he route starts at the T-junction of the road called Triq Sant' Orsola and the road called Triq I-Imgħallem. The walk proceeds down Triq I-Imgħallem, which is dominated by views of 'Gelmus Hill' to the left and

the towering mass of the Citadel (I) to the right. 'Ta' Gelmus'(2), the hill on the left-hand side of the road, is a flat-topped hill mostly composed of reddish soft sandstone, one of the softest sedimentary types of limestone on the island. Continuous erosion breaks down the soft sandstone into golden sand.







Windmills

The Aqueduct

The road eventually levels out as you arrive at the crossroads at the end of 'Triq I-Imgħallem'. At this point, turn left into 'Triq Wied Sara'. Keep walking along this narrow road, which is reminiscent of a not-so-distant past when people rode on horseback.

Gozo's oldest

Along this road you may also appreciate the harmonious blend of past and present, expressed through the rehabilitation and stylish conversion of old farmhouses. Once the houses give way to the open countryside the road takes you over a bridge crossing the stream that runs through 'Sara Valley'.



This valley is not a permanent watercourse, as it dries up during the hot summer months. However, during winter and spring, when water flows through this valley it teems with a wide variety of flora and fauna. Along this route you will be able to catch a distant view of the Aqueduct that used to convey water from 'Ghar Ilma' to Victoria during the British era.

Distant views of the Citadel and the surrounding hills can also be admired from this point. On reaching the outskirts of the village of L-Ghasri the road opens up like a three-pronged fork. The route

continues along 'Triq il-Knisja' where you will see a curious niche (3) on the left hand corner of this road. Moving straight ahead along this road, you arrive at a rectangular square dominated by Gozo's oldest Basilica (4) and a statue of Our Lady. A row of white and pink oleanders flank the road. From spring until autumn, this row of oleanders offers a spectacular flower display.

This church, which dominates the valley, was built in 1739 on the ruins of an earlier one. Sixty years later the church was placed directly under the authority of the Basilica of San Giovanni Laterano in Rome.



The Church is dedicated to the Espousal of Our Lady, the 'Madonna tal-Patrocinju'. Leaving the church behind and walking along the road, you will once again pass by stylishly converted farmhouses.

Along the path you will see a stone cross and the Chapel of Our Lady of Patronage. After passing the chapel you

come to a Y-junction: follow the signs for the valley of Wied il-Ghasri to your right.

Along this road, bordered by terraced fields, you may notice the "dry" farming techniques that are practised here. Dry farming is the growing of a single crop each year relying solely on winter rainfall. The many dry-stone walls serve to prevent soil erosion caused by heavy downpours. You will also notice scattered field houses. or rather dry-stone huts, which are used for shelter, storage and as resting places by the farmers.

When you come to an intersection with four roads, turn left and after about 90 metres turn right; along this road in a field to your right you will notice a windmill, also known as a windpump. This type of windmill, common in fields around Gozo and Malta, was once a very important tool enabling farmers to pump water from underground to irrigate their fields. As the name implies, this windmill is wind operated: the wind turns the mill which makes a shaft go up and down and water is brought up to the surface. Today, electrical water pumps are installed in the fields, facilitating the pumping of water from below. Nowadays, one rarely sees any of these mills in operation.

At the next Y-junction, take the right path. At this point you can explore Wied il-Ghasri (L-Ghasri Gorge) from its edge. You come to a clear area where the sea inlet and beach come into view. L-Ghasri valley is a deep gorge-like valley with very high cliffs carved into the Lower Coralline Limestone and the overlying Globigerina Limestone.

This valley follows a winding path to the open sea. A small, secluded pebbly bay lies at its mouth. Although it seems

Wied il-Għasri Gorge includes many endemic species as well

inaccessible, a series of steps have been cut into one side of the cliff face. The gorge is especially impressive during rough weather, as the swell of seawater rushes through the inlet at the end of the gorge and crashes onto the small beach.

Here you can also view the cliff flora, which is especially interesting since it as species found in North Africa.

The walk continues parallel to the gorge and, after about 300 metres, brings you to the coast. As the road turns towards the coast, you should be able to catch a glimpse of the blue Mediterranean Sea. A number of African Tamarisk and Bianca trees have been planted on both sides of the road, as part of a reforestation initiative.





As you continue along the road, to your right you can see the town of lż-Żebbuġ, safe on its high flat hill, as is typical of Gozitan villages. You soon get your first view of the extensive salt pans (5), which gradually come into full view.

While there are salt pans in several other locations in Malta and Gozo, this is the largest and most impressive system and represents salt harvesting on an almost industrial scale.

Moving along the coast you may come across several enthusiastic anglers who use a mixture of old and new fishing techniques. Fishing is a very common pastime in Gozo, and from Easter onwards, the site is also the haunt of divers. The area offers very pleasant and eye-catching underwater scenery and wildlife. It is also a favourite venue for those who seek cool seaside locations during the hot summer evenings and hold

barbecues with their friends and families. In fact, there are signs warning people not to hold barbecues near the salt pans and to keep the area free of debris or waste, as this negatively affects the quality of the salt produced.

Gozo and Malta have a long tradition of sea salt production. There are reputed to have been salt pans here since Roman times. The Knights held a monopoly on salt production on the islands and those

who harvested salt without authorization faced heavy penalties. The northern coast of Gozo proved very suitable for this purpose because it had extensive stretches of flat coastal limestone into which basins and channels could be cut by hand. The hot summer climate with strong drying winds was also an important factor. The basic production process is simple. In early summer seawater is fed into a series of shallow basins through a system of



hand-dug channels. After concentration and evaporation by wind and sun during the hot summer months, the white seasalt can be collected and bagged.

To the right you can admire the exotic shapes sculpted in the cliffs by wind erosion, a consequence of variations in the composition of the limestone. whimsically should rock-cut chamble the composition of the limestone.

Along this section of coast the flora is characterized by the "coastal communities" habitat, dominated by a variety of halophytic (salt-tolerant) plants. Among the most characteristic is the Golden Samphire (Limbarda crithmoides).

This part of the coast faces north and violent winter storms with high breaking waves can be both beautiful and threatening. The salt pans, a fascinating reminder of earlier, harder times, extend for about 1.5 kilometres to Xwejni Bay.

The route passes rocks and walls in a variety of forms, some regular, others whimsically shaped. Notice a number of rock-cut chambers used for the storage of harvested salt

The next stop is 'Xwejni bay'. This bay owes its name to the Maltese word 'xini', which means galley. A telephone box can be found along the road. This site consists of a bay and a rocky coast composed of Globigerina Limestone displaying its typical pattern of erosion. At some points the area is covered with both Upper Coralline Limestone and Lower Coralline Limestone.

The bay has a shallow reef and a pebbly beach and is very popular with practitioners of all types of water sports

#### SALTPANS WALK





including swimming, scuba diving and fishing. There is also a slipway, where you may come across fishermen preparing to put out to sea.

The traditional fishing boat, known as the 'luzzu', is made of wood and is typically brightly decorated. According to ancient local traditions the eyes painted at the bow (representing the eye of Osiris) are meant to protect the fishermen when out at sea.

on the eastern side of the bay you will notice a small outcrop called 'Il-Qolla I-Bajda'. The area underneath this hill is full of rock pools usually inhabited by glass shrimps. From 'Xwejni' you proceed towards Il-Qolla I-Bajda and walk around it.

The conical shape of Il-Qolla I-Bajda is the result of sub-aerial erosional processes which have acted on the island for the past five million years. This particular shape is due to the resistance properties of the limestone. The rocks of the Maltese islands are of sedimentary origin and were formed in shallow marine water environments. The rocks are

arranged in the following "layer cake" succession:

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

The softest geological material is Blue Clay, followed by Green Sand and Globigerina Limestone, while the hardest is Lower Coralline Limestone, followed by Upper Coralline Limestone. Upper Coralline Limestone tops the geological succession of the island. It is a resistant rock which is not easily eroded but it is porous.

Water permeates this rock mostly through its fault planes, finding its way to the Green Sand and Blue Clay layers below. As these are the softest bands of the geological stratification, they are weathered at a much faster rate. When the clay minerals come into contact with water they tend to expand due to the forces of repulsion between the particles, causing structural weakness in the layer of Upper Coralline Limestone above it. These processes lead to the development of cracks in this top geological stratum and the detachment of sizable limestone blocks that slide down the valley sides towards the sea. In the meantime the layers of Globigerina Limestone are also eroded by flowing water. Thus, these rounded cone-like structures exhibit all the layers of the stratigraphic succession. Millions of years ago they were one whole uniform block extending over a wide area but sub-aerial erosion processes have caused the development of pinnacle structures. Today, walking around II-Qolla I-Bajda, you can clearly observe the clay layer interposed between the Upper Coralline Limestone above and the Globigerina Limestone below.

Along the coast, after more salt pans, you see the 'II-Qolla I-Bajda battery' (6), on the spur of land that separates 'Xwejni bay' from 'Qbajjar Bay'.

This fort was built by the British in 1716 to discourage invasion through these accessible bays. The battery, originally equipped with six guns, came into use again during World War II as an observation post.

Continuing along the coast you come to 'Qbajjar Bay'. This is a very popular area with both tourists and locals. Indeed, quite



a few restaurants and bars have opened in order to cater to visitors. Walking along this coastal road you soon come to a junction. The walk continues straight ahead. Public conveniences are located a little way up the road to the left.

The plateau upon which the village of lż-Żebbuġ stands soon comes into view on your right, while the conical pointed hill you see to your left is known as 'Il-Qolla s-Safra' or the yellow rock. This

hill is composed of sandstone, giving its golden appearance. Another hill known as 'II-Qolla I-Hamra' (the red rock) is known to have stood just below the Iż-Żebbuġ plateau; however, it has disappeared completely as a result of intense natural erosion.

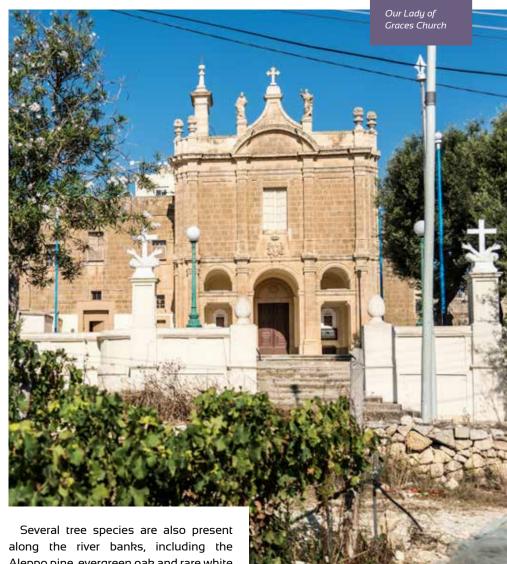
When this dusty track winds to its end, take a right turn and then turn left after a few metres. Once again you may notice many terraced, dry-farmed fields flanking the winding bumpy cart track. One of the main functions of the dry-stone walls seen here is to prevent soil erosion caused by heavy downpours. This road offers a distant panoramic view of the Citadel, perched distinctively on its hill.

The hill with the statue of Christ the Saviour on top is a curious landmark and is known as 'Il-Merżuq', also referred to as 'Tas-Salvatur' (of the Saviour) (7).

This road eventually links up with the main road from Victoria to Marsalforn. On reaching this road, turn right and then left on to the asphalted road leading to Victoria. This country road passes by one of the most picturesque valleys of Gozo (Wied Ta' Gerxija). Here you can observe the rare sharp rush and the southern reedmace that grow abundantly by the banks of this valley. Also found in this habitat is fauna associated with fresh watercourses.

Here the life cycle of the painted frog can be studied in full, while the numerous damselflies and dragonflies engage in courting rituals. The maidenhair fern is present in sheltered areas along the banks.

Walking along the valley you can see a large vineyard flanking the lane. The presence of black plastic pipes in the adjacent fields shows that drip irrigation is now being used to water the crops.

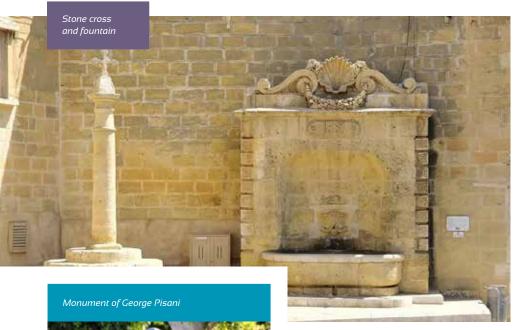


along the river banks, including the Aleppo pine, evergreen oak and rare white poplar. When the lane comes to an end, a footpath on the left leads to the main road linking Victoria to Marsalforn Bay.

As you walk uphill towards Victoria, the large white building to the right is the friary of the Capuchin Fathers.

This church is dedicated to Our Lady of Graces (8). The site was previously

occupied by another chapel that was first dedicated to St. Julian, then to St. Agatha and finally to the Nativity of Our Lady. It is said that one of the secret tunnels used as an escape route from the Citadel led to this very site until it was closed by the Capuchins.





The walk leads uphill until you reach the main crossroads in Victoria. To your left a stone cross and a fountain can be seen. The stone cross is similar to the many crosses found all over Gozo. The fountain by the wall was installed in 1881. It has recently been restored as part of its stonework had crumbled as a result of erosion. In the past, this fountain served as a resting and drinking place for the

donkeys and horses of people coming to Victoria from the outlying areas.

Go straight ahead into Triq Taħt Putirjal until a wide space opens up on your left where there is a statue of Gorg Pisani, a Gozitan poet.

Here the bus station enables you to go wherever you like and a tourist information office can provide you with all the information you need.

# Snippets

#### THE CITADEL

The Citadel is one of Gozo's architectural and historic focal points. Its origins are lost in time. The earliest cultural remains discovered so far date back to the temple



The Citadel

period about 3500 BC. The first written reference to a fortified city on Gozo dates back to 1241 and subsequently the Citadel was occupied by a succession of foreign conquerors. The present structure of the Citadel dates to the early 1600's when the Knights, during the time of Grand Master Wignacourt, rebuilt the Citadel as we see it today. The locals used to seek shelter in the citadel during the night. In fact until 1637 all Gozitans were required by law to spend the night within the Citadel walls. A drawbridge provided the only entrance, while a ditch surrounded the Citadel or "Castello" as it was known at the time.

#### THE GOLDEN CALF

Legend has it that gold was extracted from the golden sands found at Ta' Gelmus hill. This in turn gave rise to the common belief that a golden calf still lies hidden somewhere. As legend has it, Sidor, a hardworking farmer, toiled from dawn to dusk in order to eke out a poor existence for himself and his family and often dreamt about finding gold. One day his wish came true. He literally struck gold when he found a golden

calf. After he had polished and secured it in his sack, he hurried to Calogero. the village goldsmith. The latter could not believe his eyes but after the initial surprise he lost no time in working out a plan to get hold of the priceless golden calf. The gleaming calf had aroused Calogero's greed and Machiavellian ingenuity. He explained to Sidor that he could not keep the treasure that the farmer had unearthed in his fields as the Grandmaster had decreed that such valuable items were the property of the treasury of the island. In an apparent show of generosity and sympathy Calogero gave some money to the unsuspecting Sidor in exchange for the golden statuette. Calogero concluded that by taking responsibility for the statuette, the goldsmith would be sparing Sidor a lot of needless trouble. Sidor went back home, unaware of the fact that he had just been taken in. When Sidor told his wily wife about the whole affair, she was furious and after hearing how her husband had been tricked, made sure that the Grandmaster heard about the story. Calogero continued to protest his innocence but was imprisoned for life. He died without revealing the location of the golden calf.

#### AN OLD NICHE

When it was built in 1773 this niche probably stood undisturbed in the midst of the open countryside, a good distance away from human habitation. The niche depicts an angel visiting Our Lady. Its architectural design is worth noting. A

stone balcony that lies in front of the niche stands on three stone pillars, set apart from each other, creating a symmetrical three dimensional design. It is believed that in the past this niche attracted numerous pilgrims. The holy rosary was recited near this niche and followed by a sermon delivered by a priest from the balcony. Some local historians believe that this niche formed part of a countryside chapel, which was abandoned and fell into ruin.

#### **OUR LADY OF PATRONAGE**

This chapel is on the way to Wied il-Ghasri (L-Ghasri Valley). It is dedicated to The Patronage of the Virgin Mary and the feast is celebrated on the second Sunday of October.

The chapel was built in 1739 and soon attracted devotees from all over the island. It was rebuilt on a larger scale in 1754 and consecrated in 1789, becoming the first consecrated countryside chapel in Gozo. It remained the only one for 161 years. The chapel served as a viceparish church for L-Ghasri Village from 1872 until 1921.

The altarpiece is attributed to Francesco Zahra and shows the Virgin Mary, surrounded by angels, protecting beneath her mantle a human being who is hiding from Satan

#### **SALT PANS**

5

It is believed that a rich watchmaker who lived in lż-Żebbuġ, owned a lot of property in Gozo. His avidity was insatiable. At one stage the watchmaker decided that there was a fortune to be made through the production of salt. Therefore, one day he commissioned some workers to build the salt pans by digging them out in the soft coastal limestone. However, filling the salt pans with saltwater proved arduous as the sea level was over fifteen meters below.

As the ridged coastline is full of caves and tunnels, he decided to dig a shaft down to one of the tunnels. In this way when the waves hit the coast, water would rush up the shaft and fill the salt pans with sea water. Having dug the shaft during summer, he waited for the winter months to see if the idea would work. When winter arrived and the sea began to crash against the rocks, water was forced up the shaft and filled up all the salt pans. However, the area where he had dug his salt pans was composed of porous rock and the saltwater was absorbed by the rock instead of evaporating. To make matters worse, when the sea was very rough, the sea water spurted like a geyser and saltwater was sprayed over an area of several kilometers, destroying the crops in the neighbouring fields.

The farmers were angered by this threat to their livelihood and decided to fill up the shaft with large rocks.

#### **IL-QOLLA L-BAJDA BATTERY**

This battery was built in 1716 and was mounted with six guns. During World War II it served as observation post No. 5.

Later in the 1980s it was rented out to a private enterprise that converted the battery into a disco. This battery is one of the only two remaining batteries on the island; the other is located in Il-Qala.

At some points the area is covered with both Upper Coralline Limestone and Lower Coralline Limestone. The bay has a shallow reef and a pebbly beach and is very popular with practitioners of all types of water sports including swimming, scuba diving and fishing. There is also a slipway, where you may come across fishermen preparing to put out to sea.

#### **TAL-MERZUQ HILL**

Tal-Merzuq Hill is a place of popular religious, myth and legend. According to tradition, black smoke was once been seen coming out of the hill and this led to the belief that it was a volcano but it is an absurdity.

Another legend says that God punished the people of Gozo by engulfing the Island in darkness for three whole days. At the end of these three days a ray of light (merżuq) was seen coming out of the hill (hence the name Tal-Merżuq).

A statue of Christ was first put on the hill in 1904 when Gozo was consecrated to Jesus the Redeemer (leading to the popular name Tas-Salvatur) replacing a wooden cross that had been erected even earlier. The first statue of Christ was not resistant to the weathering and was replaced in the 1960s. The second statue was also destroyed when its



Tas-Salvatur

supporting pedestal gave way during a thunderstorm. Parts of this statue can still be seen strewn around the hilltop. Today's statue is made of reinforced concrete and is so far surviving well!

## OUR LADY OF GRACES CHURCH

The main altar piece of the church depicts Our Lady of Graces, and a procession entering the church. This was painted by the artist Stefano Erardi. Up to 1968 the Cathedral chapter used to come in procession to the church every second Sunday of January. This procession was held in honour of a vow connected with the repeated earthquakes that shook the Maltese islands on 11th January 1963 and caused a great deal of damage. Many Gozitans vowed to visit the church and hold thanksgiving services in honour of Our Lady. The tabernacle on the high altar is made of Gozitan alabaster brought from the village of

lż-Żebbuġ. The crucifix over the altar of the third chapel to the left, is claimed to be miraculous and has considerable artistic merits. It dates back to the 17th century and it belonged to a rich man from Messina in Sicily. One day the residence where it was housed caught fire and everything was destroyed except for the crucifix. On another occasion the crucifix was on a schooner travelling to Syracuse, when a terrible tempest broke out. The crew made a vow that if they survived the tempest, they would donate the crucifix to the inhabitants of the place where they landed. The place happened to be Malta, so it was donated to Our Lady of Victories Church in Valletta. Then it changed hands and it was given to Canon Aguis de Soldanis who in turn presented it to the Capuchin friars. Below this crucifix lies the body of St. Fortunatus Martyr. The body of St. Facundus lies in the opposite chapel whereas Fra Baskal, who hailed from lż-Żebbuġ lies buried in the crvpt of the church.

# Info Pages



#### **WEBSITES:**

www.gozo.gov.mt www.visitgozo.com www.ecogozo.com www.gozochannel.com

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#### **TOURIST INFORMATION OFFICE IN GOZO:**

No. 17, Independence Square, Victoria, Gozo, VCT 1021 Tel: (+356) 22915452

#### **OPENING HOURS:**

Mondays to Saturdays: 09:00 to 17:30 (Last admission 17:15) Sundays and public holidays\*: 09:00 to 13:00 (Last admission 12:45)

Note: \*except on Christmas Day, New Year, Good Friday & Easter Sunday



#### **BUS TIMETABLES:**



#### **GOZO FERRY TIMETABLE:**

www.publictransport.com.mt

www.gozochannel.com

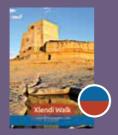
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Direct enquiries may be forwarded to the Ministry for Gozo.

FSE Mark







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Hondoq Ir-Rummien Walk



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#### Rural Development Programme for Malta 2007-2013



Axis 3 – Improving the Quality of Life in Rural Areas
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The European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development
Co-financing Rate: 75% European Union: 25% Government of Malta

