

# IX-XAGHRA



HERITAGE TRAIL

# CALYPSO CAVE

Calypso's Cave is situated along the coastal cliffs to the north of ix-Xagħra. Popular folklore has associated this cave with the one in which Calypso, the beautiful nymph, who according to Homer's 'Odyssey', kept Odysseus as a 'prisoner of love' for seven years. The Odyssey, one of the major Greek epic poems attributed to Homer, was composed towards the end of the 8th century B.C. It narrates the adventures that the Greek hero Odysseus (or Ulysses, as he was known in Roman myths) encounters on his journey home after the fall of Troy. It was popularly believed that this cave was where Calypso kept Odysseus while he was under her spell.

The cave is accessed by a flight of steps. It was formed naturally by fissures in the limestone surface and is not very large, however a large opening inside the cave provides breathtaking views of the golden Ramla l-Hamra Bay beneath it. The size of the cave itself is one reason to dispel the link with Calypso, but its location and the views it offers clearly give it a mythical quality.

The view from the cave offers the best vantage point from where to observe an underwater barrier crossing the whole width of the bay. This barrier is actually a submerged wall built by the Knights of St. John in the 18th century. It's aim was to deter marauding pirates from landing in the bay. Attacks from pirates and corsairs were of great concern for the Knights and Ramla Bay was defended by additional fortifications, the remains of which can be seen at the edge of the bay beneath Calypso's Cave.









# NINU'S CAVE

The area of ix-Xaghra has numerous caves and underground caverns. It is therefore not surprising that some of these were used in prehistory whilst others are still today intriguing visitors with their geological features. One such cave is known as Ninu's Cave which was discovered underneath a house close to the Parish Church in 1888.

The cave, which is accessed by a flight of stairs, is about 20 meters wide and 9 meters deep. It holds multitudes of natural stalactites hanging like icicles from the ceiling, and stalagmites, formations jutting out from the floor of the cave. Stalactites and stalagmites are natural formations found in limestone caves and are formed by the dripping of water which deposits calcium carbonate onto a specific spot. In time the build-up of calcium carbonate forms the stalactites and stalagmites. There are also some helictites which do not necessarily form in a vertical line, but also branch out into curving or angular formations. The dripping water that has created these formations is still continuing today so the cave is still in formation, and in a way is ever changing.

The cave is privately managed and entrance tickets may be bought on site.







# XERRI'S GROTTO



Some 100 meters from Ninu's Cave is larger and more varied cave known as Xerri's Grotto. This was discovered in 1923/24 by Anthony Xerri while he was digging for a well. On discovering the cave, Mr Xerri gave up on the original idea of creating a well and decided to explore the cave. After clearing the debris from the cave, he went about making it accessible by creating a path to enable the public to visit the site. The cave was also used as an air-raid shelter by the Xerri family during World War II.



The cave is at about 10 meters depth. A spiral staircase, built into the space that was originally excavated for the well, provides access to it. The cave itself contains numerous alabaster stalactites and stalagmites, some of which in interesting and strange formations, varying from 25cm to 1 meter in height. It is interesting to note that a few inches of growth can take thousands of years, so this can give us a small indication of how old these stalactites and stalagmites actually are. There are also other interesting formations which developed as the result of calcification of tree roots. As water drips onto tree roots, calcium carbonate or calcite is deposited onto the root surfaces until they are completely covered.



This cave is privately managed and entrance tickets may be bought on site.



# “TA' GĦEJZU”

## PREHISTORIC CAVE

This cave known as ‘Ta’ Għejzu’ was discovered and cleared in August 1933. It can be accessed through a circular opening in the ceiling of the cave at one end and through a narrow shaft at the other. The cave is 13 meters long and 6 meters wide, while the height varies from 90 cm to 1.5 meters.

The rocky plateau above the cave held traces of a megalithic structure, while the excavation of the cave itself yielded a large amount of pottery dating to the Ġgantija phase (3600-3200B.C). Some of the sherds

bore abundant traces of red ochre. Red ochre is a natural pigment consisting mainly of clay containing mineral oxides. It was used on the Maltese islands in prehistory to produce wall paintings, such as those found in the Hal Saflieni Hypogeum in Paola, Malta, to decorate pottery and statuettes, and was also used in funerary rituals for the burial of the dead. Red ochre pigment, although naturally found on the Maltese islands, may have also been imported from nearby lands such as Sicily.





# IL-ĦAĠRA TA' SANSUNA

## SANSUNA'S ROCK

In ix-Xagħra there are treasures in the most unexpected of places. Here, between the houses and buildings lies a mysterious large megalith. This is known as Il-Ħaġra ta' Sansuna, Sansuna's Rock. It is an irregularly-shaped slab of hard Coralline Limestone, the type of stone found in the ix-Xagħra region.

This rock is some 4 meters long with one end of it supported on smaller stones. It may have originally formed part of a dolmen dating to

the Bronze Age Period (ca. 2400-900B.C.), but this was never supported by archaeological investigation. Its presence has triggered off local imagination since folklore has attributed it to a giantess who inhabited the area in the distant past. Fr Emmanuel Magri, a local Jesuit, writer and historian recorded the folktale linked to Sansuna's rock in his 'Ħrejjef Missirijietna' (Tales of our forefathers) where it is said that a giantess carried this stone here.

# THE XAGĦRA STONE CIRCLE



The Ix-Xagħra Stone Circle, also known as the Brockdorff Circle, is a prehistoric underground burial complex situated some 400 meters to the west of Ġgantija Temples.

It consists of a series of natural and man-made underground chambers, but a number of collapses throughout the site's history have made it appear like a large hollow in the landscape. It was used for burial throughout Malta's Temple Period (4100 to 2500B.C.) and originally a circle of megaliths ran round the perimeter of the site.

The Ix-Xagħra Circle was first used in the Żebbuġ phase when burials were limited to a rock-cut tomb and some chambers. In the Ġgantija phase more of the cave was utilized for burial, whilst in the Tarxien phase the site was made to look more monumental with the construction of the stone circle around the

site and the use of megaliths, large stones, within the cave system. It was very likely used by the same prehistoric community that built Ġgantija Temples nearby but unlike the contemporary Megalithic Temples where no burials were found, the Ix-Xagħra Circle was used for funerary purposes.

The site was first recorded in the 1770s by the French artist Jean Hoüel. In the 1820s the site was cleared by Colonel John Otto Bayer. Charles Frederick de Brocktorff made a number of watercolor paintings of this excavation including one which shows a man climbing out of the cave holding a human skull. Following this excavation the site was reburied and used again for agriculture. As a result the site was lost and forgotten until the 1960s when it was relocated by local historian, Joe Attard Tabone. It was again excavated between 1987 and 1994. The scientific



techniques used in this excavation have given us an insight into the lifestyle of the first Mediterranean communities and the culture of the first inhabitants of the Maltese Islands.

The site is open by request. Bookings must be made with Heritage Malta at least 3 working days in advance on 00356 2156 4188.

# THE CHURCH OF JESUS OF NAZARETH (IN-NAZZARENU)

A church dedicated to Jesus of Nazareth is found in the area of Ta' Gajdor, also known as Tan-Nazzarenu. It was built in 1904 after the design of the then Archpriest Dun Guzepp Diacono. The main altarpiece and the altar dedicated to Saint Joseph are by Lazzaro Pisani, while the other side altar dedicated to St Anne, has a painting by Ganni Vella.

In 1930, a community of Franciscan Sisters founded by Dun Guzepp Diacono and Margherita Debrincat, moved into a house adjoining the church. They started taking care of the church, giving catechism lessons, and also opened a kindergarten school. The following year the chapel was consecrated by H.E. Bishop Mgr Michael Gonzi.

In 2001, on the initiative of the then rector Rev. Ignatius Borg, the church was adapted in accordance with the Second Vatican Council. The feast includes a procession with the Blessed Sacrament and is celebrated every year in October.



# THE CHURCH OF SAINT ANTHONY THE ABBOT

The chapel dedicated to St Anthony the Abbot is found in the area known as 'tal-Qacca'. Records of it date as far back as 1520. In 1575, the chapel had a small cemetery which probably catered for the small community that lived in the vicinity. Between 1688 and 1692 it was the seat of the newly founded parish, with Dun Bernard Formosa as the first parish priest.

In 1814, following the outbreak of the plague in the area, all the furnishings of the chapel, including the old altarpiece had to be burned. A new altar piece, which can still be seen in the church today, was made by Salvatore Bondi in 1818. It shows the Saint praying in a cave. In the background the artist included a view of Ghajn Lukin, on the outskirts of ix-Xagħra, where those infected by the plague had been confined in camps a few years earlier.

In February 1942, at the height of the Second World War, a bomb exploded in the chapel's vicinity and the blast damaged the ceiling and other parts of the chapel so that it had to be rebuilt and opened again in September 1947. It was later enlarged by having the parvis incorporated into the chapel building. In 1984, the Bajada family donated a statue of St Anthony to the church and in 1988 it was consecrated by Bishop Nicholas Cauchi in



celebration of the 300th Anniversary of the foundation of the parish of ix-Xagħra. A few years later a new vestry was added and the facade altered. The stone statue of St Anthony in the middle of the square next to the church was inaugurated in 2001, and the church's interior restored in 2006.

The feast of Saint Anthony is still celebrated here every January, and the celebrations traditionally include the ceremonial blessing of animals and pets.





# THE PLAGUE HOSPITAL

On the 7th April 1813 an unwelcome visitor reached the Maltese shores; the plague, which is believed to have reached Malta from Constantinople. By February 1814 it hit ix-Xagħra. It is believed that it was carried from Malta in an għonnella or head-dress smuggled from a plague-stricken house in Hal Qormi.

Ix-Xagħra was immediately isolated and a temporary hospital was set up in a large farm known as tal-Qassam in the South of the village. A nearby field was chosen for the burial of the dead thus limiting the risk of spreading the infection while transporting the dead.

A large room was converted into the hospital's main hall, while four other rooms were furnished with the bare necessities for the hospital's personnel. The conversion took place under the surveillance of a British physician, George Mc Adam, who despite the risks of infection, had volunteered for the job. It was ready by March and started being used immediately.

By the 26th of July of the same year the plague was stamped out. 104 people died in all. These included Dr Mc Adam himself. The great precautions taken saved ix-Xagħra and the whole of the Island of Gozo from further devastation. The official proclamation that the plague had ended came on the 8th September, the day ix-Xagħra celebrates its village "festa".



Santa Verna Temple is found to the north-west of ix-Xagħra, close to the church of San Anton. This may have originally been a monumental building rivaling other Megalithic Temples such as Ġgantija. However, it has greatly suffered the ravages of time so that only the traces of the building that once stood here can be seen today. In fact, Santa Verna Temple is a stark reminder of what can happen to a unique monumental site when it is not protected and valued.

Along the east side of the site are the remains of a wall made up of upright stone blocks supported by horizontal blocks which form a low bench. This type of structure is often found along the facades of other Megalithic Temples. There are traces of further walls and structures indicating that this was originally an extensive building.





# THE SANTA VERNA TEMPLE

The site was first excavated in 1911 by Thomas Ashby and Robert Noel Bradley, and was excavated further in 1961 by Dr. David Trump. The pottery discovered indicated that the site was used in prehistory from as early as the Għar Dalam phase (5200-4500B.C.), the very first phase of human habitation on the Maltese islands. The remains of a Neolithic village which was earlier than the temple were also discovered, while the temple was

found to probably date to the Tarxien phase (3200-2500B.C.). The location of this site, in proximity to the ix-Xagħra Stone Circle and Ġgantija Temples clearly indicates that this area was buzzing with activity some 5000 years ago.

# THE TOY MUSEUM

In Għnien Xibla Street is The Pomskezillious Museum of Toys. The museum was set up by Edwin and Susan Lowe, a British couple from Devon and displays a private collection of delightful and curious 19th and 20th century toys.

Pomskezillious is a word coined by the world famous artist, illustrator and writer Edward Lear, to describe the coastal landscape of Gozo during his visit in the mid-19th century. The museum, first opened in 1992 is located in a traditional converted farmhouse and comprises toys from all around the world but particularly from England, France, Germany and Italy, the leading toy manufactures during this period.

The vast repertoire of toys includes an authentic 18th century Maltese doll, as well as a Noah's Ark which belonged to a set of twins who were both killed on active duty during World War II. The toys here represent the life of bygone eras and have fascinating stories to tell.







# TA' KOLA WINDMILL

The origins of Ta' Kola Windmill go back to 1725, when the Manoel Foundation decided to build a windmill in ix-Xagħra. This windmill, however, seems to have incorporated bad quality stones and mortar and had to be dismantled and reconstructed during the 1780's on a different site. The first miller to run the renovated windmill was Marcello Scicluna. He was obliged to pay an annual rent of 400 scudi plus a total of seven roses to the President and two Commissioners of the Manoel Foundation on 1st May, and two healthy cocks to the Foundation's Treasurer on Christmas day.

Eventually, by the 1850's Ta' Kola Windmill passed under the hands of the Grechs, an

established family of millers from Mosta (Malta). The Grechs continued to run Ta'Kola Windmill till the 1980's. Guzeppi (photo), the last of the Grech millers operated, maintained and resided in this windmill until he died in 1987. He was an ingenious craftsman and many of the tools on display were created by him. Likewise, it is thanks to Guzeppi that one can still experience the way millers lived and operated these dominating landmarks. Besides, the windmill's name Ta' Kola is also synonymous with him as he was popularly known as Zeppu ta' Kola (Joseph the son of Nikola).

Ta' Kola Windmill was opened to the public in 1992.



# ĠGANTIJA TEMPLES

Ġgantija Temples were the first of the Maltese prehistoric monuments to be excavated. Soon after his transfer to Gozo as Commandant of the British troops and administrator of the island in 1820, Lt. John Otto Bayer cleared the site at his expense by employing convicts from the Gozo prison.

The name Ġgantija comes from the name Ġgant, giant in Maltese. The presence of these mysterious large stones in the middle of the ix-Xagħra landscape probably gave rise to a number of Maltese folktales linked to giants. In the 18th century, Giovanni Francesco Abela, vice-chancellor of the Order

of St. John, recorded the popular belief that these buildings were constructed by giants. Ġgantija Temples are amongst the oldest buildings of such complexity in the world. They are amongst the most important archaeological sites in the Maltese islands, and together with another five prehistoric sites, are inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List as sites of universal importance. The Maltese Megalithic Temples represent a unique architectural and cultural tradition that flourished on the Maltese islands between 3600 and 2500B.C., and are of great significance both for Maltese prehistory and the Mediterranean.





Ġgantija Temples were constructed in coralline limestone; a strong hard-wearing limestone which was quarried locally, probably surface-cut from the Ix-Xagħra plateau. As one approaches the monument, the impressive size and architecture of the buildings' external wall catches the eye. The outside perimeter wall was built with megaliths (large stone blocks) placed alternately face out and edge out, alternately locking into the thickness of the temple walls. Looking at the façade of the temples, the most striking element is the height of the left corner of the façade which stands just over 7 meters. Unfortunately, the risk of collapse of this part of the façade made it necessary to have a support inserted against the façade in the 1990s.

The temples of Ġgantija consist of two buildings with a common façade. The interior of the buildings is split into semi-circular chambers flanking a central passage. It is not clear what went on inside the temples, but although they are known as 'temples' their use may have gone beyond purely religious activities. Considering that they were the only monumental structures on the islands in prehistory, they were very probably focal points for the community that built them – bringing the community together in a concerted effort to construct them, serving as markers within the landscape, and probably also serving as a focus for a variety of communal activities throughout prehistory.



# THE COLLEGIATE -BASILICA OF THE NATIVITY OF OUR LADY (MARIA BAMBINA)

Ix-Xagħra was separated from the Matrice Church in the Cittadella and established as a parish by Bishop Davide Cocco Palmeri on 28th April 1688.

In the 17th century the first chapel was built to serve the first few houses that formed the village of Ix-Xagħra, formerly known as Casal Caccia. This was funded by the noble family Camire Hinzi, and is known today as St. Anthony's Chapel.





In May 1692 a small church was built where today we find the choir of the ix-Xagħra Parish Church. This was dedicated to the Nativity of Our Lady in October 1692. As the population of ix-Xagħra increased, the need arose to construct a larger church. In 1813 the parish priest Rev. Vincenzo Cauchi started collecting money for this project. His nephew Canon Salv Bondin designed and prepared the plans for the new church, but its construction was halted in 1814 when the plague broke out in the village and funds became scarce.

After the plague the then parish priest Rev Mikiel Buttigieg restarted the efforts to continue the construction on the church, and before he had to move to another parish, saw the building of a large part of

the church. Efforts were continued and by 1850 the small church was demolished and part of the new church started being utilized. In 1855 the church was completed except for the dome. In 1878 the church was consecrated by the Bishop of Gozo Mons. Pietru Pace. Construction on the dome started in 1892 according to the design of Dun Guzepp Diacono and was the first of its scale in Gozo.

On 9 March 1899, Pope Leo XIII founded the fourth Collegiate of Gozo in this church, and it was eventually elevated to a minor Basilica in 1967 by Pope Paul VI. In September 2003, the Basilica was affiliated with the Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome.

The Basilica, built in typical baroque style, has two bell towers with six bells, the oldest dating to 1770 and the largest weighing 2778 kg. The clock on the facade was assembled in 1885 by the Maltese clock-maker Mikelang Sapiano.

The church's interior, in the form of a Latin cross, is a polychromatic wonder with the marble of the flooring and the pilasters intertwined with the paintings and gilded cornices along the length and breadth of the vault. Of particular importance are the fourteen Stations of the Cross, designed by Ruman Buttigieg and the firm Garibaldi e Lazzarini. All the paintings on the vault, in the nave, the transepts and the aisles, except one, are by Virginio Monti, a Roman painter (1922-1928).

The ten chapels in the Basilica are dedicated to various saints. The titular statue (il-Bambina) was made by the renowned Gallard et Fils (Marseille, 1878). It has a solid gold crown with precious stones (1973) designed by Joseph Sagona. The village feast is celebrated every year on 8th September.



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