

# Comino Walk

BLUE LAGOON TO BLUE LAGOON - 7KM

-  Xlendi Walk
-  Ffondoq Ir-Rummien Walk
-  Dwejra Walk
-  **Comino Walk**

-  **Starting:** Blue Lagoon
-  **Ending:** Blue Lagoon
-  **Length:** 7km
-  **Grading:** Easy
-  **Landscape:** Coastal, valleys
-  **Trail markings**
-  **Getting there and back:** Various passenger boats from iċ-Ċirkewwa, Marfa in Malta and from L-Imġarr Harbour in Gozo. The Comino Hotel also operates a scheduled service when the Hotel is open.
-  **Recommended Walking season:** October to May

-  Daħlet Qorrot Walk
-  Ramla Walk
-  Saltpans Walk
-  Ta' Ġurdan Walk

# Overview

Kemmuna (Comino) and its islets, a highly protected area of a bit less than 3km<sup>2</sup> form part of the municipality of Għajnsielem Gozo. Historically a preferred hideaway by corsairs, Comino is now a haven for birds and tranquillity — hunting is not allowed, nor are vehicles other than those used by the resident population or by hotel staff. Currently the main island has a permanent population of three people and a seasonal hotel operates from San Niklaw Bay. The short walking route described here is a circular one which starts and ends at Bejn il-Kmiemen (Blue Lagoon) in an anticlockwise direction. The trail follows the main pathways but can easily be extended by going off the beaten track to explore the island in more detail especially along the wild cliffs on the east side. The Blue Lagoon is the most popular site among day trippers — it can get quite crowded on sunny days as early as May but otherwise few people venture along the coast or into the heart of Comino.

# Notes

## COUNTRYSIDE CODE

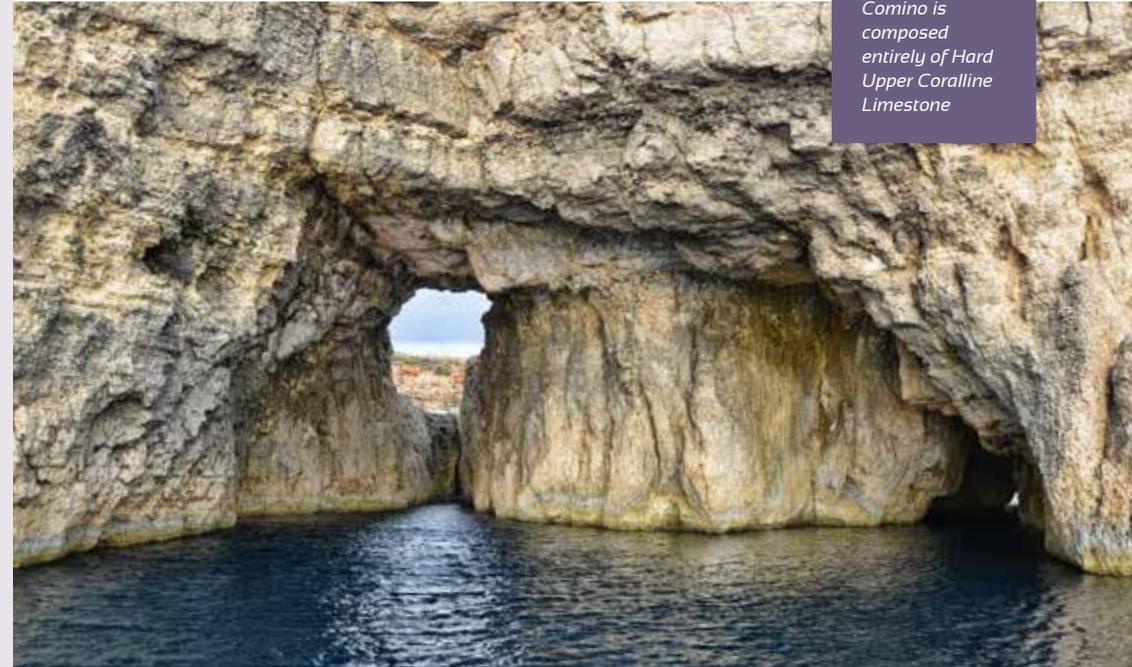
- Refrain from collecting or causing damage to any specimens of flora, fauna, geological items or archaeological artefacts.
- Tread lightly and avoid disturbance.
- Keep to the paths.
- Do not litter or light fires.
- Keep away from the cliff edge.

## HEALTH AND SAFETY

- Protect yourself from UV radiation – wear a hat and sun protection as even the cooler months can get quite hot.
- Although rainfall is scarce rain sometimes comes in heavy downpours causing flash floods. Avoid walking in valleys during or just after heavy rains.
- Keep a safe distance from the shoreline or cliffs during adverse weather conditions with very strong winds or wild seas.
- As the island has suffered from a lot of soil erosion do try to keep to rocky parts avoiding the vegetation. Shade is as scarce as water on the island so the best time to walk is between October and early May unless you want to include some snorkelling stops to cool off.
- In the Winter months there is nowhere where to get supplies from so it is best to take along some food and drink.
- It is prohibited to dispose of litter on Comino. It is suggested that it is taken back.

*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.*



Comino is composed entirely of Hard Upper Coralline Limestone

**B**ejn il-Kmiemen, translated as “between the Cominos” but popularly known as the Blue Lagoon is where the walk starts and ends — most day trippers to the island alight here for swimming and sunbathing. If you want to enjoy a swim the best time is as soon as you get here with the first boat — in sunny weather the deserted beach will be transformed into a busy space by midday and will hardly be recognisable. Less than 200 meters away lies the sister islet of Kemmunett (Cominotto), the diminutive for Kemmuna. The islet has been proposed as a strict nature reserve for its important ecology whilst the sea around the islands was designated as protected.

Leaving the turquoise hues behind you head up to the right to start your walk alongside the coast and its string of attractive islets which despite their

hardstone nature are all subject to the forceful action of the waves piercing holes right through. Just be cautious along a few stretches where the terrain may be a bit tricky. The garigue vegetation becomes more widespread and diverse as you proceed along this aromatic path of wild plants whose dwarf shrubs are ideal hiding and resting places for the population of Maltese Wall Lizards which race you along the way. On warm sunny days this is also a good place to spot the black Western Whip Snake, as it basks in the sun gathering its energy. The four species of snake known from the Maltese Islands are protected by law as are all reptile species in Malta. None of them is considered as poisonous.



Minor Islets – Major Ecological Importance!



The Roofless Cave

Heading towards the sombre tower crowning the majestic cliffs of Western Comino, the path continues upwards along the cliff. Keeping a safe distance away from the fragile edge do have a look or go down to the crystal clear waters of the next popular spot for pleasure boats — the Crystal Lagoon — known locally as Il-Bejta tal-Fenek (the rabbit’s nest). Indeed the island is renowned for its wild rabbit population which are easier spotted here rather than on the main islands.

The path goes close to one of the few valleys of the island — Il-Wied ta’ Skalanova (the valley of the new port). If you are in an adventurous mode to explore the rugged terrain venture off-route down the valley slope but be warned — there is a massive gaping hole in the rock measuring more than 20 meters in width and lying open just below. This collapsed limestone cave, aptly called L-Għar ta’ Bla Saqaf (the roofless cave), connects to the sea below via a large natural arched entrance home now to several wild pigeons. At sea level, seen only from a boat, is a small hidden

pebble cove - one of the many backdrops to the film the Count of MonteCristo (2002) whose Château d’If was the nearby tower. The narrow promontory of land offers striking views to the tower



The Mediterranean Chameleon was introduced in the 19th Century

and vertiginous cliffs below including the massive stack of Il-Mazz — probably what remains of a large eroded arch. The valley is one of the few sheltered pockets of this windswept area and is a

The Wild Rabbit



good hiding place not only for rabbits or reptiles but also, it seems, for soldiers in wartime. Locals remember them posted on guard here in two rock cut chambers excavated in the valley side — features

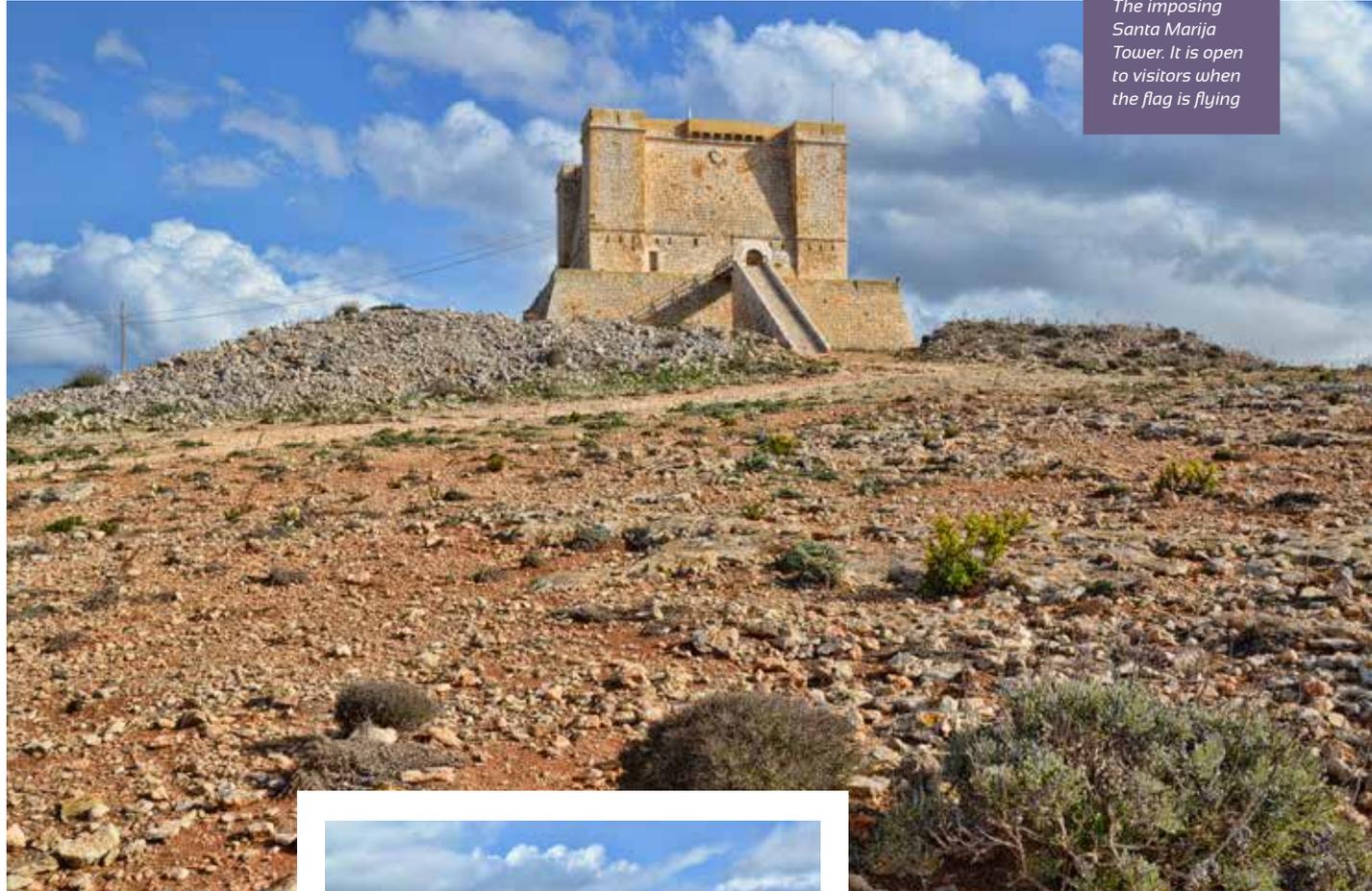
*Azure Stonecrop*



*Scarlet*



*Blue Pimpernel*



*The imposing Santa Marija Tower. It is open to visitors when the flag is flying*

which are as yet undated and unclassified but nevertheless interesting as at first glance they resemble ancient rock tombs. Despite the small surface area of the island to date no extensive archaeological survey has been carried out.

Proceeding towards the Santa Marija Tower the Shrubby Kidney Vetch colours the landscape yellow with many tiny flowers in Spring whilst the high and exposed plateau is enlivened by minute Scarlet and Blue Pimpernels. To the left lies the inhabited section of the island.

Don't miss a visit to the Knights' seventeenth century tower when the flag is flying — the view from the roof is breathtaking. And if you have planned for a longer stay on the island don't miss the appointment with sunset from these wild cliffs.

Best seen from roof of tower is the whole landscape of the island with the highest section rising in the East. A striking feature is the large number of dry stone walls traversing the island — a sign of agricultural activity of the

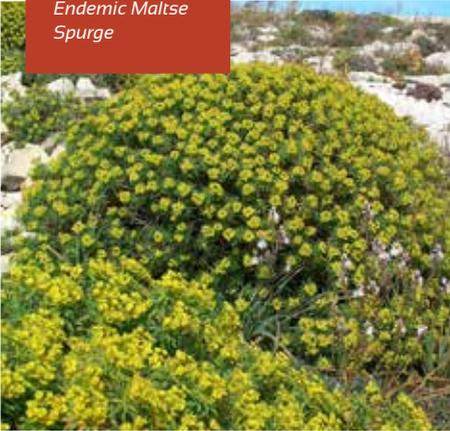


*One of the best views – from next to the tower*

past. Most of the land today is largely abandoned — some areas which were under cultivation are slowly being taken over again by wild plants but in many areas the discontinuation of farming has resulted in soil erosion as dry stone walls lacking maintenance collapse and lose their soil retaining role.

When you are ready to detach yourself from the view, head towards Il-Palazz (the palace) which served as an isolation hospital in colonial times and then turn right. Follow the road which was

Endemic Maltse Spurge



You may encounter the otherwise uncommon Collared Dove

constructed by the Knights to link the Santa Marija Tower with the Santa Marija Battery erected a century later. A small track with a few trees to the right leads down to the small bay of Wied Ernu which used to serve for a while as an unloading jetty.

Continue straight ahead amidst wind sculpted cushion-like shrubs of endemic Maltse Spurge and Olive-leaved Germander holding their ground together with larger shrubs of African Wolfbane. By



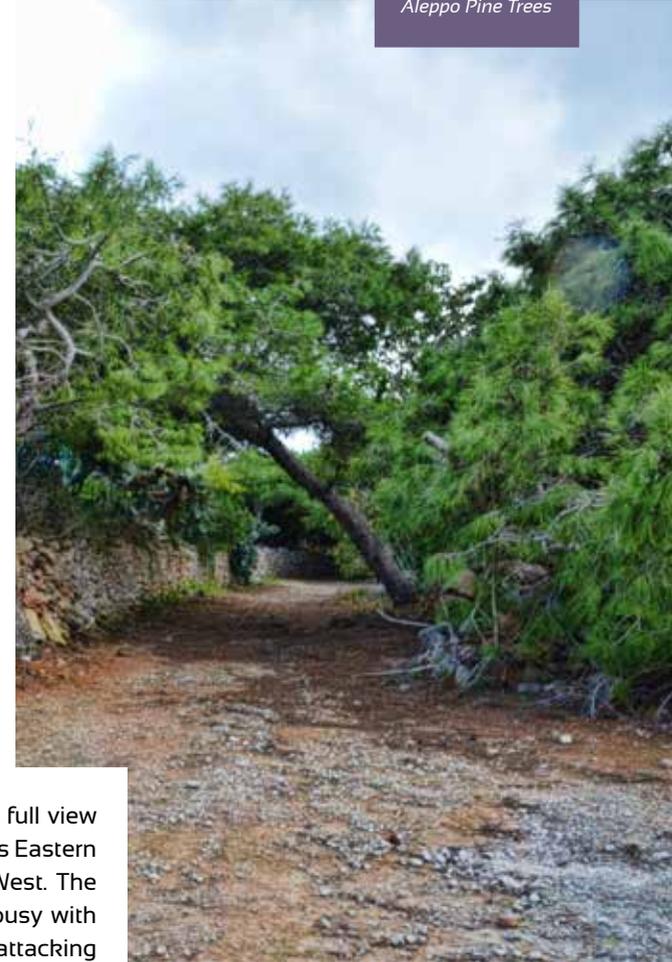
Santa Marija Battery

African Wolfbane



the start of Summer the latter's horn-like pods burst open to release large amounts of plumed seeds which cover the shrub in silky hairs until the wind carries them away. A few planted Aleppo Pine Trees line the parallel road following the ridge above.

Aleppo Pine Trees



The "tail" of Malta comes into full view guarded by the White Tower on its Eastern end and the Red Tower to the West. The Comino channels were always busy with corsairs, pirates and incursors attacking from all sides so it was necessary to have several coastal forts at close range to drive the message through that the island was well guarded.

In this peaceful atmosphere it is hard to imagine such hazardous times along the coast.

Arriving at the defensive battery take some time to enjoy this restored fort

(the only shade you will find) which has had its cannons brought back on site from the various locations in which they were dispersed for years. Have a look at the coast beneath to spot a beautiful arch at Il-Ħnejja and the rich vegetation of spurges with their changing hues\*.

**\*DETOUR:** Nearby are the Mixta caves - reached by a detour down the coast (descend along a path close to the sign marking submarine cables).

# COMINO WALK



**LEGEND**  
 > indicates route direction  
 X - X denotes a distance of 1km

-  COMINO FERRY
-  VIEW POINT

-  BIRD RINGING STATION
-  OLD BUILDING

-  SWIMMING ZONE
-  FORTIFICATIONS
-  TOWER

-  PUBLIC TOILET
-  CEMETERY
-  CHURCH

The Rugged Eastern Cliffs



The Low-Lying Lentisk Shrubs



Lentisk Flowers



French daffodils briefly scent the air in Autumn



Mediterranean Thyme at the start of Summer

From the battery the route climbs up to go past what used to be an experimental isolation farm\*.

At the top of the path keep straight to start the gentle descent into Wied l-Afmar (the red valley). The small valley system here is quite distinct from the rest of the rugged landscape where the sea seems to dominate all the senses. The sheltered nature of the

site and some slightly deeper soils allow the growth of small trees amongst which are the handsome almond trees with their delicately scented short-lived pale flowers in early Winter and some ancient olive trees as well as planted citrus. Some of the terracing remains intact as parts of the valley are cared for by the residents who produce a few crops for themselves as well

**\*NB:** *Optionally if you want to experience the wilder parts of the Eastern cliffs or climb up to the highest point of Comino at tal-Liebru just proceed along the coast from behind the battery paying attention not to go close to the cliff edge (collapsing in some parts) and to avoid stepping on the vegetation. Another more straightforward rough track can be taken from further up alongside the pigfarm – this track was the access to the helipad used in past times for transporting hotel guests or for emergencies. This area is now home to a thriving maquis community of low Lentisk shrubs – quite an unusual sight for Malta.*

as some fine honey. Few people visit in early Winter but if you do you may be greeted by one of the sweetest surprises – bunches of superbly scented French Daffodils. Although this used to be a very common plant on Malta, it declined extremely rapidly in the last few decades due to the widespread indiscriminate picking of its flowers.

Midway down to Santa Marija Bay a small room and reservoir to the left used to house one of the island's boreholes for pumping up water from the aquifer – today it houses Malta's only ringing station operated as part of an international research project by volunteers from BirdLife Malta.

The Police Station at Santa Marija Bay



The Old Bakery

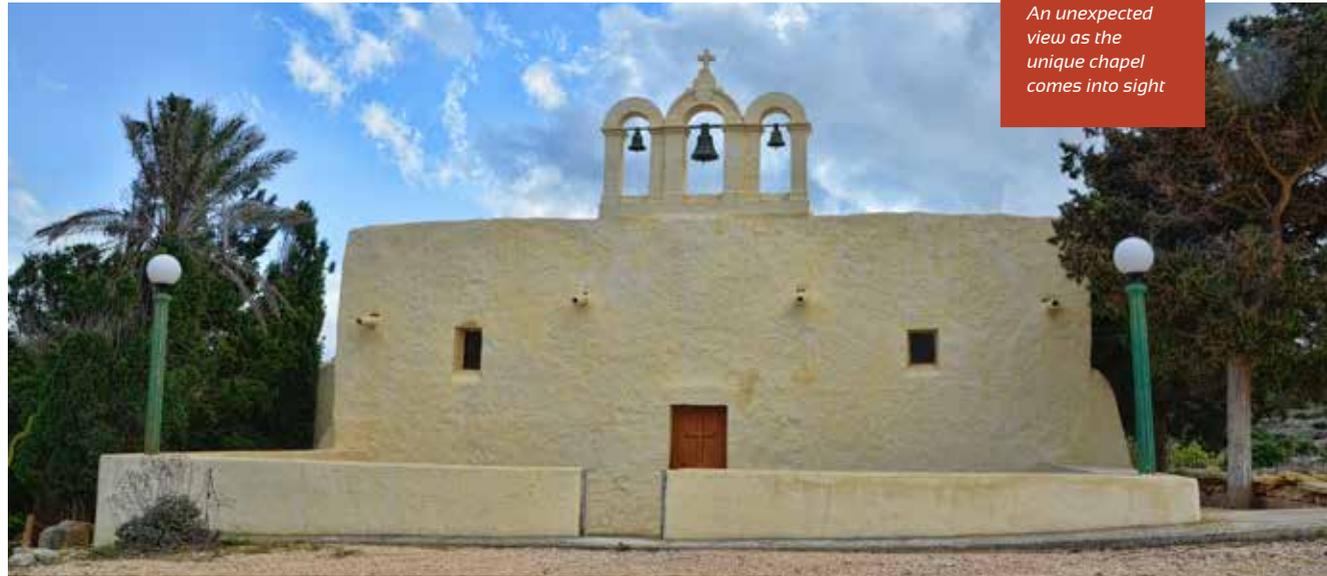


Soon the valley widens up and brings into view a small chapel, Santa Marija Bay with its camping area and Hotel bungalows and Gozo in the distance. A small fortified building to the left houses the police station with officers from Gozo staying on the island on a shift basis. The bay can get busy with boats seeking shelter here in the warmer months — a practise for which evidence has been found dating at least to Classical times with Roman wrecks discovered on the seabed. A unique archaeological find was made on shore

when a skeleton was found buried under a split amphora dating to Roman times.

Before returning to your starting point allow some time to go off route to explore the headland to the East at the tip of which is a high double arch sculpted in sharply pointed rock where only the hardiest of plants dare to grow. There are several interesting marine caves along the coast beneath the high cliffs — some large ones can be appreciated from land with some memorable views if you follow the cliffs all along — another large archway can also be seen at the point known as Id-Darsa (the molar) — resembling an elephant’s trunk as if drinking seawater.

The return route goes up past the picturesque Santa Marija Chapel dedicated to the Flight of the Holy Family to Egypt — one of the oldest chapels of the islands with quite a unique belfry\*.



An unexpected view as the unique chapel comes into sight

Sea Squill



Seaside Ox-Eye Daisy

The road is flanked by a small wood consisting mainly of Aleppo Pine filling the air with its aromatic resinous smell on hot days whilst closer to the ground the yellow-flowered Seaside Ox-Eye Daisy is ubiquitous in Spring. The building to the left is the Old Bakery which currently lies in an abandoned state and ahead on the hillock is the

Comino Cemetery. Turn left to proceed on the walk to see one more small bay at Għar Għana where the large bulbs of Sea Squill sprout from all over the rocky terrain and Wild Thyme fills the air with its aroma. As you approach Blue Lagoon a small arch next to a small flight of steps is a perfect cooling down place before heading back to the boat.

\*NB: A coastal path can provide an alternative route – this is the Comino Hotel path linking the self-catering bungalows to the main hotel in San Niklaw Bay.

# Snippets

## FORTIFICATIONS

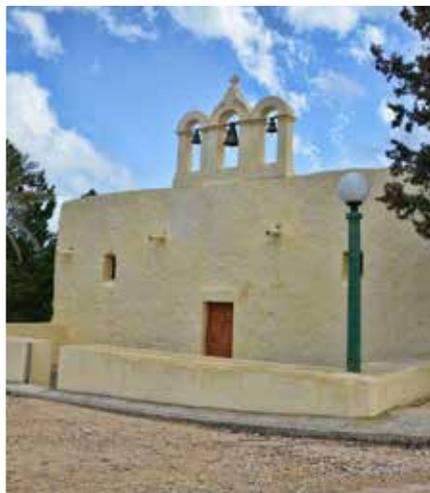
**1** The need for providing protection from corsairs to vessels plying the Comino channels had been felt for a long time but it was only in 1616 that the building of a strong fort on the island was taken in hand. The construction was in the hands of the Order's military engineer, Vittorio Cassar, son of the more famous Girolamo. The Grandmaster at the time, Alof de Wignacourt (1601-1622) whose coat of arms stands proudly on the façade of the tower, financed the work. During the time of the Knights, St Mary's Tower had a garrison of around 30 men and was armed with 6 guns of various calibres. During the British period the tower's role was more in the nature of coastguard duties that is the control of smuggling operations and observance of quarantine regulations. For a long period in the last century the tower was abandoned and vandalised and after being taken over by the Armed Forces of Malta was handed over to Din I-Art Helwa which undertook the restoration of the tower. Members of this NGO regularly open the tower for visitors who can enjoy a stunning view of the Blue Lagoon and all the island. The Tower played the role of the gruesome Chateau d'Iff in the film *The Count of Monte Cristo* partly shot on location on Comino in 2002.

In the 18th century two other defensive works were built: St Mary's Battery and St Mary's Redoubt. The first lies at the South-eastern headland overlooking the South Comino Channel; it was completed in 1716 and mounted eight guns. The small battery was lovingly

restored by Din I-Art Helwa in 1996 and is now occasionally opened for visitors. The second, St Mary's Redoubt, built in 1761 was sited somewhere along the Qala Santa Marija foreshore; unfortunately no traces of this fortification remain and attempts to identify the site have proved fruitless.

## THE CHAPEL

**2** The small chapel lies on the St Mary's Tower/Qala Santa Marija road. It is dedicated to the Flight of the Holy Family to Egypt. It dates from the early 16th century as is shown by its architecture and more significantly its wooden screen separating the officiating priest from the congregation – a feature which was present in rural chapels from which the original wooden screen has disappeared.



Simple but unique – the only chapel on Comino

Religious services are held regularly for the few residents on the island and, in Summer, for the guests at the hotel. Another small church dedicated to Saint Nicholas once stood in the vicinity of Qala San Niklaw road but now no traces remain of that structure.

## TARGET PRACTICE

**3** When walking along the Eastern cliffs one comes across from time to time chunks and splinters of rusting iron scattered on the garigue. These remains remind us of the times when the British military forces had their target practice. In the *Government Gazette* of 12 March 1925 is a warning that during the following two weeks the military authorities were to carry out artillery practice with live shell from the Marfa ridge on to the island of Comino.

## THE GREENING OF COMINO

**4** During the 20th century, a number of afforestation schemes were launched in several parts of the Maltese archipelago and Comino had its share. In 1911, for instance, some 1,200 trees were planted; in the following year a hundred Carob trees, 400 Fig trees and over 3,000 Vines were planted while in the late 1970's and early 1980's afforestation was carried out on a large scale coupled with the trialling of experimental techniques. A very wide variety of trees were planted including the Olive, Fig, Acacia, Tamarisk, Vine and the Aleppo pine.

## POPULATION

**5** The presence of a church and the long stretches of dry stone walls are evidence of there being, at times at least, a resident population depending in size on the perceived safety of the island

from corsair incursions. Probably the population was largest during, and immediately after, the French occupation (1798-1800) when the island served as a place of exile and imprisonment for criminals and opponents of the regime of the day. For instance in 1799 there were at least 150 such men – pro-French sympathisers or collaborators – who had been exiled there on the orders of British Governor Alexander Ball. The census of the population fifty years later shows a total of 26 of whom 14 were adult males. In 1897 when the island became in effect a quarantine station the population consisted of 34 souls made up of 13 men, 10 women and 11 children under 15 years of age. The entire population in that year were expropriated from their smallholdings on Comino and were given compensation so that they could re-settle in Malta or Gozo. When Comino ended its role as a quarantine station the island began to be re-populated so that by 1948 the number of residents was 68. In the early 1950's at the request of the leaseholder two or three Sicilian farmers with their families settled on the island. Today, if one excludes hotel staff and guests, the resident population consists of four persons.

## ISOLATION HOSPITAL

**6** The largest building on Comino (if one excludes the hotel) is the Isolation Hospital erected by the British military authorities in the last decade of the 19th century to provide a quarantine station for troops returning to Malta from plague-stricken ports in the Levant.

Regulations published in the official Malta Government Gazette state that "As from 6 February 1897 the islands of Comino and Cominotto shall be considered as places for the custody of persons subject to quarantine... no person shall be allowed



Il-Palazz — the building which once hosted an Isolation Hospital

to land in those islands or approach within 300 yards.” The isolation hospital was fully equipped and manned to deal with eventualities, which in reality rarely arose. The hospital now lies in large part abandoned.

## EDUCATION

**7** A school, in the form of an all-age class, was opened in 1948 for the few children living on the island; the class was held in one of the rooms in the hospital. The school continued functioning until 1965 when, apparently, there were no children of school age. In 1961 an evening class was introduced for adult residents of Comino. This “group of jolly people”, as a visiting school inspector called them in his report, met four times a week.

## ENDEMIC REPTILES – THE MALTESE WALL LIZARD

**8** The endemic lizard population of Malta (*Podarcis filfolensis*) is one of the easiest reptiles to encounter on the island.

With a maximum length of a bit less than 30cm in a particular population, this protected species seems to have various morphological forms observed by local naturalists on different islets — ongoing research is being carried out as to whether each population merits the name as a separate subspecies as till now happens to be on the islets of Filfla, Fungus Rock and the extinct population of Selmunett.

## RARE FLORA – THE MALTESE TOADFLAX

**9** The Maltese Toadflax (*Linaria pseudolaxiflora*), a member of the Snapdragon family, is one of the very rare endangered and protected plants endemic to the Maltese Islands and the Pelagian Linosa. The difficulty in trying to see this annual plant is not only its current status but also its diminutive size. You may spot it here when it flowers in spring. It also grows on Gozo where it chose the Citadel’s fortifications as its unlikely home.

## BIRDS

**10** As a Bird Sanctuary and Important Bird Area Comino is a haven for birdwatchers. Keep a special look out in Autumn when the Lentisk’s red berries are an irresistible attraction to flocks of Starlings whilst Song Thrushes and SkyLarks hunt for food in the open garigue.



Woodchat Shrike

Springtime sees the Giant Fennel flowering all over the island and is a good landmark plant for observing the Woodchat Shrike and Whinchat. For larger birds the high land and valleys in this area coupled with the population of wild rabbits is another attraction... for the numerous birds of prey which migrate over the islands in large numbers in Autumn and Spring. BirdLife Malta carries out an annual bird-ringing camp in both Spring and Autumn. For more info contact [info@birdlifemalta.org](mailto:info@birdlifemalta.org)

## HERMITAGE

**11** Experiencing this place’s tranquillity especially in the early morning or late evening leaves one no doubt as to why Comino seems to have attracted some interesting hermits. One can easily

imagine two caves in a nearby hillock to have served as cave dwellings for a serene and inspiring hermitage. Having said that Comino was probably anything but tranquil in past centuries before it was fortified. Two notable characters are linked with the island — one was Saint Corrado who is still venerated to this day across the sea in Qala and the 13th Century mystic founder of the school of Prophetic Kabbalah Avraham ben Samuel Abulafia (from Saragossa) who is thought to have spent the last days of his life as a hermit in Comino after travelling the Mediterranean far and wide to spread his controversial Messianic doctrine in which he strove to unite Judaism, Christianity and Islam. For this was also imprisoned and sentenced to death — which he narrowly escaped and found refuge in Comino where over three years he wrote an important work: the poetic Sefer Ha-Ot (The Book of the Sign).

## COASTAL HABITATS

**12** The waters coming down from Wied I-Afmar (the Red Valley) after rainfall used to feed a long gone salt marsh. Heavy rains occasionally remind us of its previous natural state as it can get flooded as is expected at the mouth of a valley.

A couple of deciduous water-loving trees grow nearby — the only specimens of Chaste Tree to be found on this island and in general a very rare tree on mainland Malta. The pretty sandy bay is lined with cool Tamarisk trees which release salty drops of water in the evenings to survive in this hyper-saline place. Although Santa Marija Bay is a very small beach it still manages to support, thankfully, one of the few remnants of small sand dune habitats on the island. A prominent plant here is the Sea Daffodil which flowers in the hottest month of the year with delicately scented white flowers. Dense banquettes of the dead leaves of the marine seagrass Posidonia often accumulate on the beach



Santa Marija Bay

after stormy weather.

Associated with these ecologically important microhabitats, which also act as a vital natural barrier to wave erosion, are rounded or oval compact balls of fibres



Sea Daffodil

from this plant which the sea rolls neatly together and deposits on land.

## IMNIERI CAVES

A boat or scuba gear is the best way to explore the coast but there is one cave which you can reach on foot. The Imnieri caves are located along the North coast near Santa Marija Bay just before the cliff starts getting steep – if you venture in here you need a torch and be careful as it is a bit dangerous and gets extremely slippery. Avoid going anywhere near the cave if the sea is rough.

There is a beautiful natural indoor pool connected with the sea on the other side of the cliff face via an underwater opening used by divers as well as an overlying rocky window through which one can get a good close-up view of the cliffs.

13

caves are located along the North coast near Santa Marija Bay just before the cliff starts getting steep – if

# Info Pages



## WEBSITES:

[www.gozo.gov.mt](http://www.gozo.gov.mt)  
[www.visitgozo.com](http://www.visitgozo.com)  
[www.ecogozo.com](http://www.ecogozo.com)  
[www.gozochannel.com](http://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:

[www.publictransport.com.mt](http://www.publictransport.com.mt)



## GOZO FERRY TIMETABLE:

[www.gozochannel.com](http://www.gozochannel.com)

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MINISTRY FOR GOZO



Xlendi Walk



Hondoq  
Ir-Rummien Walk



Dwejra Walk

# OTHER WALKS IN THE SERIES



Daħlet Qorrot Walk



Ramla Walk



Salt pans Walk



Ta' Ġurdan Walk

## Rural Development Programme for Malta 2007-2013



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



*Europe Investing in Rural Areas*