

23 – Gozo

Introduction

The only time we went on an organised tour was to Gozo. It was not ideal: we neither visited all the places on their itinerary, nor saw all the places I wanted for mine. Of course, as a tourist, you can go independently. There is now a reasonable local bus service and Juliet Rix, *Malta and Gozo* (2013) provides a map of its routes. The order of places in this itinerary is historical, rather than topographical or tour ordained. The island is small enough – 9 by 4½ miles (14 by 7km) – for that to be practical.

Gozo is said to be rather different from Malta, quieter, more rural, its own island, with its own pockets of history and its own culture. The subtleties of the different cultures within the Maltese archipelago are epitomised by this finding by LH Dudley Buxton from ‘Personal and Place Names in Malta’ (1921):

In Malta, if a man marries, his wife adopts the family nickname. For example, if he is called Tal Naxaro, she will become Tal Naxaro also. In Gozo, however, the husband, when he marries, adopts the nickname of his wife’s family, in other words the sur-nickname of his mother-in-law.

The difference in tempo is confirmed by the fact that, to get away from it all, many Maltese and several British and other Europeans have holiday homes there. But many visitors go just for the day, and going with a tour group prevents a full appreciation of what Gozo has to offer.

The record of Queen Adelaide’s stay in Malta states only: ‘Saturday, 30 March 1839. The Queen, accompanied by the Governor, the Lieutenant Governor, Admirals Stopford and Louis, boards the *Firefly* to visit Gozo.’

We would be none the wiser about the details of this visit if it were not for Royal Navy surgeon Edward Cree and, particularly, a delicious watercolour – ‘Queen Adelaide and the royal cortège in Gozo’ – in both his original journal in the Royal Maritime Museum, Greenwich, and Michael Levien’s *The Cree Journal*. But there was more than the image, as Cree’s always colourful account suggests:

We all mustered in full dress to receive her. As soon as her suite of about twenty were on board we started out of harbour with the royal standard at the main. The weather was fine but wind NW and we did not go very fast. I was introduced to Sir David Davies, the Queen’s Physician, who asked me to give a dose of quinine to the Countess of Sheffield, one of the Queen’s ladies – a beautiful woman.

We got to Gozo about 2 p.m. and landed at Fort Chambray under a royal salute. All the conveyances on the island were only three calashes – one of which the Queen occupied. There were two or three horses and all

the rest of the suite were mounted on donkeys, and off they set, a motley crowd. Smith, Moore and I soon followed on donkeys.

Cree and his mates then hived off on their own, but he continues,

After a little refreshment we had to return as fast as we could to get to the ship before the Queen and her party. At a turn of the road we fell in with the whole party, and old Smith's donkey, which was a long-legged, bony beast, took it into his head to stop in the middle of the road in front of the royal cortège and bray and commit other unpolite nuisances, which example was followed by the other donkeys. Old Smith whacked and whacked his beast, but it only made him bray the louder and make other unpleasant noises, which caused much confusion and laughter amongst the whole party. Maids of Honour and Ladies-and Lords-in-Waiting and officers of the Household the donkey did not care a curse for, but would just take his own time and complain loudly if they wanted to hurry him.

The Queen was expected to come to Rabbato and when we arrived at the entrance of the town we found the guard turned out and all the inhabitants dressed in their best, who cheered old Smith when he entered on his noble steed, to which he graciously took off his cap and bowed. All the party came helter-skelter down to the landing-place and were all on board by 6 p.m.

When Adelaide visited Malta, Queen Victoria, her husband's successor, had been on the throne for two years; fifty years later, in 1887, to celebrate Victoria's Golden Jubilee, Gozo's capital, Rabat, was renamed Victoria. But Gozitans still tend to use the old name.

Ġgantija and Xagħra Stone Circle

If you pronounce the name of the megalithic temple complex Ġgantija to yourself, it is clear why legend has it that the stones were erected by a broad-bean eating female giant, with her child under one arm and a 20-ton stone slab under the other; or was she the Great Goddess Sansuma, or the Great Earth Mother? Chapter 1 discusses the controversy of goddesses and the figurines found at Malta and Gozo's Neolithic sites.

There are two temples at Ġgantija side by side, the larger south one is older, about 3600 BC and better preserved. The Xagħra Stone Circle was excavated by a team led by Caroline Malone and her husband; there is less female archaeological input into Ġgantija – which is why I latched on to **Nelly Erichsen** (1862–1918) and **Rose Elizabeth Cleveland** (1846–1918).

In *Malta: Phoenician, Punic and Roman*, Anthony Bonanno mentions and illustrates an inscription found on the floor of the south temple. Further investigation reveals that, translated, it says, 'To the love of our Father Jahwe', and that it was found by Nelly and Rose in 1912 at a time

when, as visitors to Hagar Qim believed, these structures were Phoenician (800–480 BC).

Nelly, an English illustrator and painter, and Rose, scholarly sister of the United States President, and often his First Lady, lived together in Italy, at Bagni di Luca. Their life stories are interesting, but nothing seems to be known about their visit to Malta, except the inscription, which they reported to the museum authorities. It seemed to suggest a Jewish presence in Malta dating back to seafaring tribes some one and a half millennia before St Paul's shipwreck, but Anthony Bonanno is satisfied that it is a fake Phoenician one made by a nineteenth-century French engineer and antiquarian. Unfortunately, I learnt of the inscription too late to seek it out.

Since I visited the site, the visitor centre has been rebuilt and a museum created. Some, but not all, of the artefacts from Ġgantija and the Xagħra Stone Circle have been transferred there.

Don't completely ignore the rather touristy stalls, at least those run by women selling hand-knitted jerseys, possibly their own work. They are mostly of artificial fibre and don't wear that well (though I have already enjoyed mine for two winters), but they are very warm, stylish and inexpensive, and provide the makers and sellers such as Frances with a living.

While the Ġgantija site is much visited, the Xagħra Stone Circle (also known as the Brochtorff Circle), 400 or so yards to the west of Ġgantija, related to it, and overlooking it, is only open by appointment. The fragile natural cave, not a built site, was excavated by Caroline Malone and her colleagues, starting in 1987. In spite of its relative inaccessibility, and lack of much to see, this hypogeum/necropolis, from which fragments of 800 or so burials were excavated, has, as Chapter 1 recounts, revealed more about life in Gozo and the Maltese archipelago from 4000 to 2500 BC, than anywhere else, mainly because of modern scientific and scholarly techniques.

One of the finds is the two fat figures sitting on a couch; they are part of the controversy surrounding sex and religion. Professor Caroline Wilkinson reconstructed the skull of a woman who lived here over 5,000 years ago – to be seen at Ġgantija or on the internet – wonderful!

Calypso Cave and Ramla Bay

Just beyond Ġgantija, on Gozo's northern coast above Ramla Bay, is the Calypso Cave where Gozitans and, indeed, the Maltese, believe that the alluring nymph Calypso kept the Greek hero Odysseus in thrall for seven years. This belief was, according to Dodo Selby Bennett Lees' son, fostered by Dodo as part of her tourism project (Chapter 16). The cave itself, set into the cliff, was closed some years ago because of danger, but you can look down at the wild cliff face to where it is, and the view is worth the stop; what is more it is important for tourism, and thus Gozo's economy. The Calypso Boutique sets the scene and we bought two jerseys from Vinny, knitted by her.

Looking down on Ramla Bay beach from the Calypso lookout post, you need to see the 19-room Roman villa, once excavated but now, having given up some secrets, returned for preservation to the sand (Chapter 2).

Rabat's Citadel

The next most useful stop is Gozo's capital, Rabat and, in particular, the Citadel, a bit of a climb up a flight of steps. Immediately facing you is the **Cathedral** which has had several manifestations. When work began after the 1693 earthquake that damaged or destroyed so many buildings in the archipelago, the remains emerged of a Roman temple of Juno and, perhaps, that of the Phoenician goddess Astarte.

In the chapel dedicated to Christ the Saviour there is a bust, taken from the prow of a ship and donated in 1614, of the second- or third-century English martyr St Ursula, a princess of Britannia. She became the patron saint of Gozo, her intercession sought against an invasion of locusts, plague and cholera, as well as earthquakes.

Turn left from the Cathedral (right from the steps leading up to the Citadel) and you come to the **Archaeological Museum**. Some of the finds from Ġgantija and the Xagħra Stone Circle are still here.

Roman finds are on the first floor. Most immediate as you enter is the headless statue of Empress Julia Augusta (also known as Livia) whose story is told in Chapter 2, together with that of the Gozitan priestess Lutatia. The inscription of Lutatia's dedication to the Empress, offered some time between AD 14 and AD 29, is beneath the statue. Another inscription was dedicated in AD 195 to Empress Julia Domna. Although its existence is known, its whereabouts are not. There are also some exhibits from the Ramla Bay villa.

There are some intriguing displays on the ground floor as you enter the exhibits. Beyond the inland village of Kerċem is the coastal Punic temple site of **Ras il-Wardija** from where, as Chapter 2 relates, the graffito that may, or may not, have been the symbol of the goddess Tanit was stolen and then recovered. The graffito is in the Medieval section because, as curator George Azzopardi explains, it may, in fact, be 'a graffito of that period. This is not certain but less certain is the (presumed) Tanit symbolism borne by the graffito'. You may need to establish the accessibility of the archaeological site, with its stunning position, before planning to visit it. Alternatively, it can be viewed on YouTube.

Malta fell to the Arabs in AD 870. From AD 1173/4 comes the touching funerary slab dedicated to the Muslim girl or woman Majmuna. Its authenticity, too, has been questioned, as Chapter 2 describes. A translation of the Kufic text is also in the chapter.

For the final exhibit of womanly interest, we leap to the time of the Knights and the function then of the citadel, for it is redolent of both danger and safety. Until 1637, all Gozitan citizens had, by law, to make their way there every evening during the summer, the corsair season, to spend the night and, thus, be protected from raids by Turkish corsairs. In 1533, as Chapter 5

relates, Michael Danfasio did not take his family to safety so that the women were kidnapped.

It was in 1551, though, that the worst of these raids took place: the citadel fell to the Turks and over 6,000 women, children and men were taken into slavery. A thousand died during the raid, including the De Opuo family because, to spare them from slavery, Don Bernardo De Opuo killed his nameless wife and daughters and was then himself felled in the fighting. A plaque commemorating this was affixed to the site of their house; the original is now here in the same hall as the Tanit and Majmuna artefacts.

The other side of the Cathedral from the Museum of Archaeology is **Triq Bernardo De Opuo**. So momentous was 1551 in Gozo's history, and so brave was De Opuo considered, that the street in which the family's house was situated was named for him. The house built on the site of their original home is opposite the Folklore Museum; the plaque is a replica. With a different surname, the family's end is told in Dorothy Dunnnett's *The Disorderly Knights*.

In the **Folklore Museum** artefacts concerning women include a room-sized loom, lacemaking equipment and costumes.

It is not clear within today's citadel where the Castrum (or fortified castle) was in medieval times when, in 1299, Countess of Malta Lukina's mother, Clara de Rocka was impelled by her husband's will to continue living there. The Citadel was much rebuilt by the Knights, particularly following 1551 and 1565. As the Folklore Museum consists of houses of Sicilian-Catalan architecture, this street may be as close as you will get.

The Opera Houses

Visitors go to Gozo for the peace and quiet, the landscape, the churches, the archaeological sites, the museums or the beaches and diving, but there is more. Perhaps the island's most enticing modern cultural event is the opera season. There are two opera houses in Rabat – the Astra and the Aurora – both in Republic Street, the main thoroughfare, both with chandeliers and tiers of boxes. The standard of production and performance is apparently high, often with foreign soloists. Unfortunately, we have not been in Malta late enough in October to benefit. As I write, *La Traviata* and *La Bohème* are going to vie with each other. One year, when neither would back down, they both performed *Aida*.

Rundle Gardens

The countryside may be peaceful, towns filled with tourists rarely are, so if you are seeking an oasis on a hot, tiring day, just past the Aurora Opera House are the Rundle Gardens (Gnien Rundle) where in August an annual agricultural fair is held, as well as occasional concerts and other events. The gardens are apparently named after Sir Leslie Rundle, governor 1909–1915 who, it is said, personally established them. But I suspect that his wife **Eleanor Rundle** (née Campbell, 1856–1934, m.1887) had a hand in it.

I have two reasons, slight, perhaps, for thinking this. One is a story told to Nicholas de Piro by his grandmother, **Nicolina, Baroness of Budach** (née Apap Bologna, b.1875, m.1901) which he then relayed in *The Sovereign Palaces of Malta*. It starts, ‘... Lady Rundle wandered about the lovely gardens of San Anton as other governors’ wives had done before her. She was alert to any improvements worth suggesting ...’. The story continues with her buying a dozen plant pots for the garden and filling them with geraniums, not quite appreciating Maltese ways – they were chamber pots. At least it gave Maltese visitors a laugh.

The second clue is perhaps more telling. In ‘Rundle Gardens in Gozo’, Albert Abela writes, ‘The Rundles’ love for gardens was evinced by their great interest in the Malta Horticultural Society ...’. It occurs to me that Eleanor would have had more time than her husband to superintend the establishment of the gardens in Gozo.

The other end of Republic Street leads out to the north-west of the island.

Sanctuary of Ta’ Pinu

Though the guided tour takes you to the centre of Rabat, it does not take you round the citadel, which is no bad thing, though it gives you limited time to explore there. You are given plenty of time at the next stop.

On the way to Għarb from Rabat, standing alone on a low flat hill, is a very large modern church. There used to be a small chapel here and in the 1880s **Karmela Grima** would stop to pray there on her way home to Għarb from the fields. One evening, she heard a woman’s voice calling her from the



57. Karmela Grima, from Abela, *Grace and Glory*

chapel and, on entering it, was told to say three Hail Marys. Karmela became ill, but when she recovered, news of it spread and the chapel became a place of pilgrimage and prayers for the sick. In the 1920s, the grander church was built, funded by the local community, on land donated by the De Piro family. Hanging on the walls of the side chapels leading to the old chapel are hundreds of votive offerings, crutches, children's clothes, photographs, letters. There is a statue of Karmela in the front garden.

In the church square in **Għarb** itself, Karmela's house, built in the early eighteenth century, is now a **Folklore Museum** of 28 rooms depicting the past life of Gozo's inhabitants and their crafts, including a weaving room, a bread-making room, a cheese room, and a jam-making mill.

Azure Window

The reason you may lose time, and thus miss sites that were on the programme, is because of overlong enforced stays at sites like the Azure Window on the north-west coast. This natural arch, formed millions of years ago when a limestone cave collapsed, should be a must, but it is spoilt by a dozen tourist stalls and a basic café where we impatiently roosted, while watching divers getting in and out of wet suits. There was a time, almost within living memory, when this place would have been quieter, tempting one to clamber over the rocks and appreciate it. If you were to visit it by sea, or take to the sea, archaeologist Gertrude Caton-Thomson's experience of 1922 might prove useful:

There was a memorable visit to Gozo in a naval launch organised by a Commander Noel, who brought, besides the Pringles, Mrs Mayo and me, and Sir Edgar and Lady Barnard. We lunched beneath the great megaliths, and on the return journey to Valletta harbour pulled into a well-known 'blue grotto' in the cliffs. It was indeed a limpid, vivid blue; but having got in on a swell, it was only with the greatest difficulty we got out again. The tide had turned, the wind had risen, breakers pounded, soaking us, and the launch refused to back out in spite of its crew of four sailors whose united strength eventually succeeded.

St Lawrence, Kerċem and Xlendi

These villages to the west of Gozo are where mainlanders and foreigners, often artists and writers, have bought houses over the years. In **St Lawrence**, which you drive through to reach the Azure Window, the artist Anna Grima and her husband have a house. Journalist **Ann Monsarrat** (née Griffiths, b.1937/8) and her novelist husband Nicholas lived there from the late 1960s. Their house, and similar ones built to deter Turkish corsairs, is an unassuming, low stone building along worn tracks, with a single door set in the wall.

Ann, as an unwell widow, has had to move to Valletta in recent years, but she has written and been interviewed about her early life in Gozo. In 2005, she told how it had been, and how it had changed:

There used to be many shabby areas and a general feeling of poverty. In the villages many houses were without electricity and for many families their only supply of water came from the village pump. America was still sending food parcels to the older inhabitants. Kerosene for cooking and light was delivered door to door by donkey cart. Children, especially the boys, left school at a very early age, often at ten or eleven, to help in the home and fields and many women rarely left the house except to go to church. ...

... It is very different now when so many families have television and there is a sense of real prosperity. There is also more compassion for the disadvantaged and fewer restrictions for the young. At festas when we first arrived, the girls all stood on one side of the square and the boys on the other, eyeing each other from a distance. Only the boys were allowed to follow the procession. However, there are several things I miss from those earlier, simpler days, like the great flocks of sheep and goats which rustled past the house every morning and evening and the donkeys, which pulled the ploughs and were for many the only means of transport. It was a much quieter island then.

Barbara Greene Strachwitz, who trekked with her cousin Graham through Liberia in 1935, and wrote a first-rate account of the journey, *Too Late to Turn Back* (1981; 1991), owned a similar house to the Monsarrats in Kerċem. Her daughter, Ilona, who inherited the house, tells me how a Polish friend of her mother's learnt to come to grips with Gozitan ways. When her swimming pool needed repair and help from the architect failed to come after two months, she offered him a bottle of whiskey and an end to nagging; but if the workmen did not come the following day, he had to give her a bottle. Workmen were there at 7.30.

In *Dodo*, Dodo Lees (Chapter 16) wrote of **Xlendi**:

In May, '65, Cecilia [de Trafford] wrote to me from Xlendi, the fishing village in Gozo where she had a little house, informing me that, because of all I'd done for Malta, Fidel, a fisherman – he's dead now – was willing to sell me his house for a thousand pounds, the price he would ask from another fisherman. ...

... Cecilia said, 'You must come out and look at it. I'm sure you'll want it.' So I went out immediately because Xlendi is very, very pretty. It's in a bay which is like a little fjord, and it's down a sort of gorge with rocks on either side and enormous, spectacular cliffs, very high and very steep that go sheer down to the sea.

And she writes engagingly of her life on and off there. In the epilogue to her book, her husband wrote: 'Dodo died on 26th August 1991, a few days after returning from her beloved Gozo.' Her son James replied to my email:

We still keep her house in Xlendi where she used to entertain Dom Mintoff and Admiral John Templeton Cothill during the negotiations with the British Government. I can well remember them both coming to Sunday lunch several times and seeing the prime minister and the senior British naval officer in the Mediterranean sitting in the hammock and a deck chair reading my 'Beano' comics! We still have the hammock but not the comics. I also remember Dom skiing into Xlendi Bay behind the Admiral's barge.

Dodo's ashes were scattered in that bay.

Like everywhere else, Xlendi, on the south-west coast, has moved on, though our tour missed it out so I cannot tell you first hand exactly what to expect. But remnants of the past are still there, such as **Ta' Carolina**, the secluded bay where the Dominican nuns of the order founded by Carolina Cauchi in 1889 could swim in private when they visited her Xlendi house. So is **Our Lady of Mount Carmel** on the Xlendi Road which she funded (Chapter 11).

Joan Alexander wrote of **Dr Constance Strickland** (1912–1979), Cecilia and Mabel's youngest sister, that, aged 27, 'She had bought herself a tower in Gozo, perhaps to establish her independence, where she escaped from the



58. Carolina Cauchi, from Abela, *Grace and Glory*

tensions of Villa Bologna generated by her step-mother and Mabel.' In 1956, Constance set in motion the restoration of the **Xlendi Tower**, built originally in 1650, but it was not entirely successful. The tower is on the headland the other side of Xlendi from Ta' Carolina and, until further work is done, is not open to the public.

Dodo Lees' reading of the difference between the people of Gozo and those of the bigger island makes a fitting end to this introduction to the women's places of the archipelago:

Gerald de Trafford, Cecilia's eldest son, lent me a plumber and a drains chap from the Villa Bologna. They would arrive on the first ferry at six and leave on the last ferry at five. They wouldn't sleep in Gozo. They were poles apart in those days, the Maltese and the Gozitans. For a Maltese peasant to go to Gozo, and for a Gozitan peasant to go to Malta, was much more difficult than going to Australia.