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# STEP

# BY

HIKING



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# STEP

## DISCOVERING GOZO ON FOOT

Malta's quieter little sister is best discovered in its serenest places

TRAVELLER

## HIKING

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**loose pebble skitters into the coarse undergrowth,** emerging the other side only to be swallowed by the sudden abyss of open air. I watch it disappear over the cliff edge, vanishing somewhere in the 15-metre drop between where I'm standing and the beauty of the tightly curved inlet below. I'm peering down on Secret Bay, a place which, despite its name, isn't as secluded as some of Gozo's other beautiful coves. It's one of many bays where waves tickle the serrated base of 20-million-year-old limestone cliffs and fragrant clusters of thyme, heath and other Mediterranean herbs crowd the terrain.

I'm on a hike around Gozo's coastline, an activity spearheaded by my mother, who wanted to see 'all there is to see' of the island for her 70th birthday. The walk is close to 50 kilometres and can be completed in two or three days.

**Below: Xlendi Tower on the island of Gozo. Above right: A prickly pear**



I've visited Gozo frequently in the seven years since she moved into a 17th-century farmhouse in Xewkija, so I knew the terrain, the beauty spots, and – I thought – where I was going. I knew spring was the best time for hiking, when the weather is bright, but not too hot, and the scrubland is unrecognisable, disguised as a rich blanket of deep olive heath speckled with the multi-coloured flowers of the islands' 1,100 wild plant species. I anticipated beautiful bays, wind-battered watchtowers and perfect sunsets.

I knew of Malta's little sister's reputation as a wonderful day trip – a few hours spent touring the citadel, sampling Xwejni's famous salt and cooling off in Hondoq Bay. But the island deserves a holiday of its own too, revealing the true magic of this historic place, one that is steeped in myth and legend. Here, a giantess carried enormous stones on her head to build the Ġgantija Temples; there, the Greek goddess Calypso imprisoned Odysseus for seven years in a coastal cave. While I didn't expect to encounter any fauns or sprites on my walk, neither did I anticipate finding so many surprises.

Our route took us from Xewkija to the coast via Mgarr ix-Xini – one of the island's most popular summertime spots and where Turkish raiders landed in 1551 – then around the circumference of Gozo. The proud Lascaris Towers marked our progress, church bells tolled a supportive soundtrack and fishermen hauling in their catch supplied a pungent scent for the trip. My mum's never been a dawdler; as a child keeping up with her in the supermarket felt like a sporting event, but, even so, I was impressed with her pace. At 70, she wasn't only matching me, over 30 years her junior, but was often inching ahead.



In Gozo's ferry port, Mgarr, a weathered gentleman sat swinging his legs on the edge of a slipway while his horse bathed in the shallow water. At Ramla's red sand beach, we haltingly conversed with the self-appointed 'Kings of Ramla', two elderly men who sit on the same bench every day in companionable silence, contemplating the sea. High above the ocean at Wardija Point we stood alongside the remains of a third-century Punic temple while admiring the beauty of Dwejra Bay, uncluttered by crowds. It's also true the moments of wonder adopted a comic edge thanks to my mum's insistence on keeping the bouquet ▶

**'THESE MOMENTS FELT A WORLD AWAY FROM THE ISLAND'S BUSTLING SUMMERTIME ENERGY'**

## HIKING

# 'BEYOND ITS HISTORY, IT IS A LAND SHAPED BY MYTHICAL TALES, TRANSFORMED BY THE SEASONS'

of flowers I'd given her. Refusing to part with them, she shoved them into her open backpack stalk first, and for the rest of the trip walked with a halo of drooping flowers fanning from her bag.

These moments felt a world away from the island's bustling summertime energy, when the heat and the influx of visitors send Gozo's quieter side into hibernation. In late spring, the bayside town of Xlendi was probably the quietest it'd be all year: there were no queues for the diving board, no kids splashing in the shallows, just residents walking their dogs along the water's edge, sipping Cisk beers while gazing at bobbing *luzzus*, the traditional Maltese fishing boats. Bright yellow

hyoseris blooms lit up roadsides and valleys and Maltese spurge softened the rocky ground. We were also introduced to some of the island's more remote treasures, such as the Chapel of San Dimitri, a small, solitary place of worship on the near-deserted hills of Għarb.

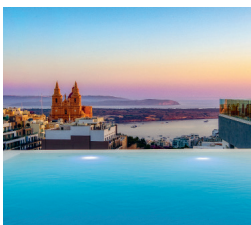
As we rounded the headland of Mgarr ix-Xini and began our return, I realised that our hike had unveiled something deeper about Gozo. Beyond its immense history and photogenic views, it is a land shaped by mythical tales, transformed by the seasons and best discovered in its quietest places – ideally in the company of a fleet-footed septuagenarian with flowers sticking out of her backpack. ■

**Above: A ladder invites swimmers in for a dip. Below right: Sea caves hug the coastline**

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