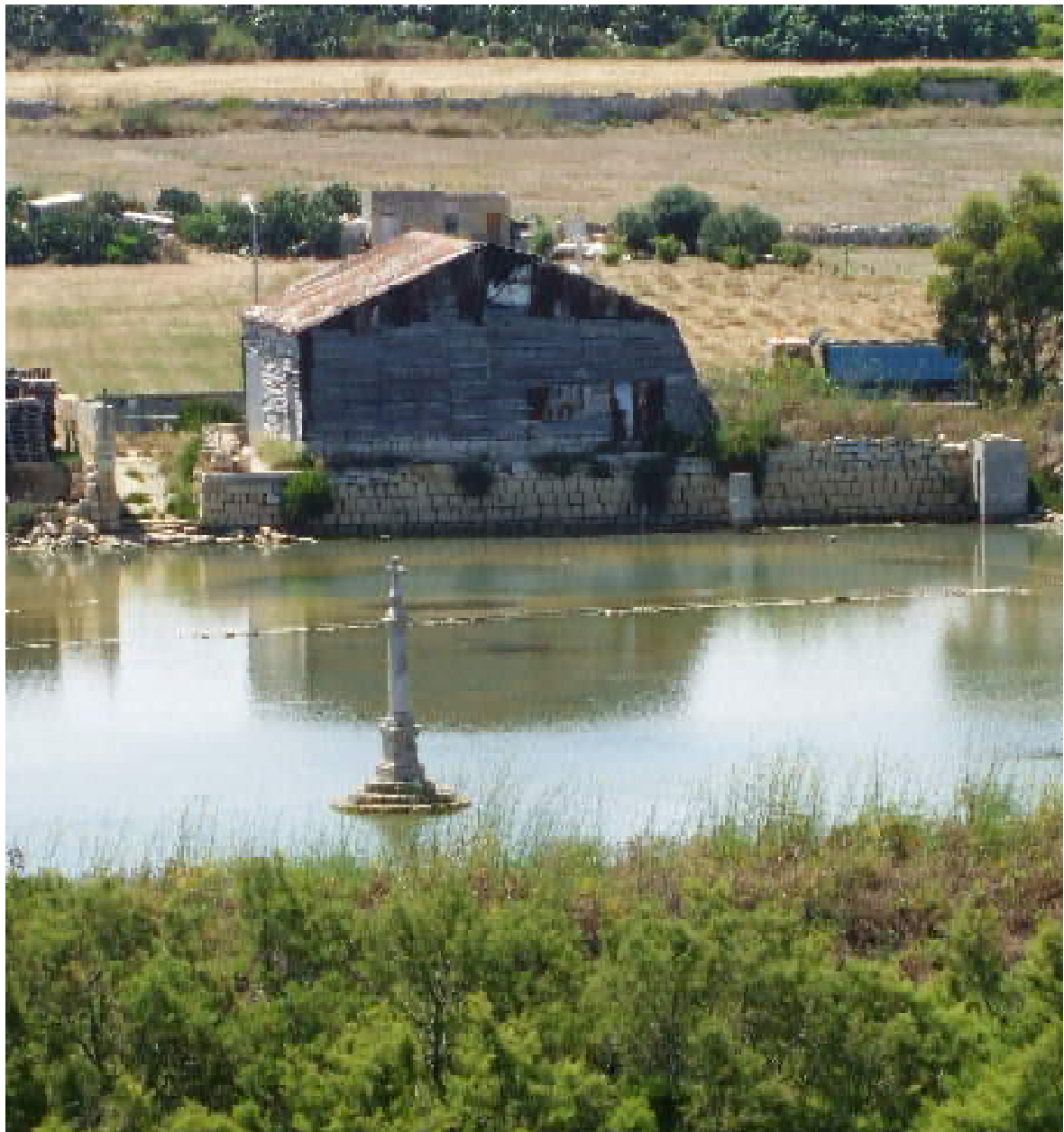




## SALINA & ST.PAUL'S BAY BLUE FLAG WALK



This walk covers the stretch of Ghajn Rihana Valley which joins Wied il-Ghasel at Salini. Along the riparian walk one passes by Three rural chapels, through the Burmarrad plain, past the Tal-Qadi Temple, the Salini Salt Pans, Cart Ruts, Salina Bird Park, Catacombs [for which a torch light will come in handy] and a Fougasse or stone cannon. Finally the walk ends at the Kennedy Grove which forms part of the Salina National Park



Salina Catacombs

## Salini and St. Paul's Bay Walk

1. This walk starts off at the southern confines of St Paul's Bay with Mosta. The starting point is the bus stop on the main Burmarrad Road, which is situated in front of the 17<sup>th</sup> century Chapel dedicated to St. Margaret. This chapel, overlooking the main road, is still in use on a regular basis for religious services. An *Araucaria cookii* tree on its small parvis is a feature of this busy road.

2. Start by walking a few steps North to reach a pedestrian crossing and cross the road.

Turn right and after a hundred metres take the first turning on the left along a country road flanked by a clump of trees, mostly Aleppo pine trees [*Pinus halepensis*]

3. The road passes over a shallow dam crossing the valley known as Ghajn Rihana Valley [Rihana in the vernacular, stands for the Myrtle bush that could have been present in this watercourse in the past]. Rihana valley forms part of the Wied il -Qlejgha Valley system.



Wied Ghajn Rihana during Winter

4. Once past the dam take the first path on the left which is running just above and parallel to the watercourse.

Continue walking along the path bordering the watercourse a few metres below.

5. During the winter months, the four shallow dams that one meets during this walk, constructed during the early 1980s, would be full of rain water run off, which apart from replenishing the water table, offer a pleasant landscape. Youngsters also take the opportunity to practice canoeing along the water course.

Its banks are carrying groups of trees ranging from the Wattle tree [*Acacia saligna*], to Eucalypts, bitter almonds and prickly pears. While walking, one can notice that on one's right the fertile fields are carrying a mixture of vine orchards, market garden operations and cereal growing. Beyond the fields the Great Fault along which the Victoria Lines were built, can be noticed. One of the Victoria Lines' fortresses, Fort Mosta can be easily discerned in the sky line, not far from an active hard stone quarry.



The walk is now passing through fields forming the Burmarrad plain. Originally, this plain was marsh land fed by a number of valleys. It had been drained during the sixteenth century. Documents state that during the same century the area was already productive, and cumin and cotton were already being cultivated. Causeways were constructed criss crossing across the plain. These causeways, meant for pedestrians and also as bridle pathways were built to facilitate access to the fields. These causeways or stone ways built on wet land at about land level, can now be seen acting as perimeter walls for fields. They were sturdily built using large boulders and wide enough to allow pedestrian traffic. To day these causeways can be seen at a higher level than the land level due to the shrinking effect of the land when it was drained.

Soon, a bridge becomes visible, where the valley of Wied il-Qlejgha meets the lower end of Rihana valley. A sign of the fast rushing of rain water during flash floods, is indicated by the reinforced concrete embankments. Mulberry trees are flanking the watercourse.

7. The country road ends in a busy secondary road but before taking this road one can see on one's left, a small room on the edge of the watercourse.

8. The end of the country road is marked by two mature poplar trees, typical tree species of a riparian habitat. One turns right, walking on the asphalted road for about 200 mtrs. until a junction is reached.



6. During the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, after the termination of World War 1, efforts were made to revive the silkworm industry, which, a century earlier had commenced unsuccessfully at Verdala Castle. The silkworm feeds on mulberry leaves. For the production of 1 kilo of cocoons, from 15 to 25 kilos of foliage were needed. It was estimated that an average sized tree, as these, yield about 10 kilos during the growing season. These estimates clearly show that several thousand trees are needed for a commercial venture. Though the project never went off, quite a few mulberry trees were planted alongside watercourses especially in the west and central areas of the island and on Gozo.

This is the Burmarrad Run off station. A dam, complete with a weir, blocks the watercourse. On the other side of the watercourse one can notice a plynth on a field's retaining wall carrying the initials of GR (Standing for King George 111 of England). This stone- marker indicated that the field in particular was government property. While looking down stream from this point one should notice a fine example of an ancient five arched stone bridge. Similar arches, to allow water to flow, can still be noticed in causeways straddling the plain.



A solitary small pump room sits in the middle of the junction. One turns left into the country road, Triq l-Imdawwra, past a number of typical farm houses. On one's right, close to a farmhouse one meets another GR stone-marker and a small flower bed adorned by a small stone fountain.

Keep following this road and you will soon pass by a concrete Second world war- time pill box positioned in such a way as to control any eventual enemy presence in the plain.

Proceed along, noticing a few specimen of olive trees and fruit tree orchards along the way, until a cluster of greenhouses operated by a



Tal-Qadi Neolithic Temple Entrance



Tal-Qadi Neolithic Temple

9. Contrary to the usual alignment of the main axis of a temple, pointing between east and south, Tal-Qadi is facing straight down the slope to the south-west. The flight of steps facing the plain,

garden centre is reached on one's left. When walking past the second greenhouse, one turns sharply to the right into a narrow lane. After a few steps, the remains of the Tal-Qadi Neolithic Temple discovered in 1916 and excavated in 1927 come into view.

10. Leaving the temple remains continue down stream along the road, past a junction. Ignoring the road on the left, continue ahead for about 80 metres, with open fields on the left and a high perimeter wall on the right. Where this high wall ends, a derelict room and a clump of canes appear. Here the road narrows slightly where a rocky outcrop rises

still well visible, indicates the entrance to what once was a walled temple. Remnants of the boulders sticking out of the soil surface indicate that the temple had a circular design. Unfortunately, the masonry of this Bronze-age temple, over centuries had suffered a lot through pilfering, neglect and cannibalization. A dolmen, composed of a large horizontal stone slab resting on two large upright stones, is still in place. It is believed that dolmens were burial mounds. Below the flight of steps a patch of soil is carrying a number of Sago palms [*Cycas revoluta*] meant for the production of foliage for floral decorations.

11. Such cart ruts abound in our Islands. The most common theory to date, of these cart ruts is that they indicate heavy and frequent travel, which archeologists attribute to the early second millennium before Christ.



Cart Ruts



St. Michael's Chapel

13. This chapel, falling within the limits of Naxxar, and dedicated to St. Michael, was built in 1652 in lieu of a previous one. The circular window over the front door, which incorporates four smaller flower designs sculptured in stone, is unique in the Maltese Islands. A few metres to its left a cistern hewn in the rock

above street level and a well restored chapel comes into sight.

Step up on the rocky outcrop to your right and ascend carefully to find a set of Cart Ruts further uphill.

12. Climbing down the rocky outcrop and on to the road, one should proceed past a solitary farmhouse towards the chapel that came into view earlier.

14. Just across the road, facing the chapel, one notices the entrance to the Salina Bird Park which accepts visitors by appointment\*.

15. leaving the chapel one continues walking further towards a junction. One should take the road on the right and

is still functional. Cisterns close to chapels are a common sight. They were dug out to collect run off rain water. Cisterns in such rural areas were important, not only to the local farming community, but also to the congregation who attend services in the chapel. Furthermore, water, as a purifier, has always been connected to holiness.



Salina Bird Park (\*Tel 21584257 [info@birdparkmalta.com](mailto:info@birdparkmalta.com))



continue walking parallel to the dry watercourse, which links the Rihana valley to Salina Bay and to the busy Kennedy Drive, both on the left. A solitary Eucalypt tree marks where this country road ends in the busy Kennedy Drive.



16. Turn right and continue walking ahead, in single file, for some 100 metres along Kennedy drive, facing oncoming traffic, until a junction is reached. Turn right into the junction and proceeds on the pavement for some 50 metres to reach a curve in the road facing a small traffic island. Here one can cross the road from this vantage point, past the traffic island and walk towards the Chapel ahead.



17. This 16<sup>th</sup> century Chapel is dedicated to the Annunciation and is one of a number of chapels found close to watercourses. It is surrounded by a few buildings which include a few catering establishments



18. Continue walking ahead in Triq il-Katakombi, past the chapel and immediately turn right to where the last villa borders terraced fields. In fact a public footpath climbs over the lower field and on to the second one and under the canopy of a large carob tree one can notice a gaping entrance to a tomb partly buried under the soil. Proceed along this footpath for a few more metres, taking care not to tread on the cultivated fields, until a rocky façade punctured by several tomb entrances can be seen.



19. These are part of the Salini Tombs of the Roman era. Considering the number of tombs in this area, it indicates that there was a thriving community in this area. This is also proved by the number of finds of Roman lead anchors, pottery etc in Salina Bay, indicating that it was a rather busy Roman port. Some of the tombs have caved in, but there are still a few which are practically intact.

Inside one of the catacombs, an Agape or round table served the relatives of the deceased to congregate there and consume some food in honour of the departed. This custom is still alive in some countries where it offers an opportunity to friends and relatives of the deceased to comfort the next of kin. Exploring this catacomb by using a torch light, one realizes that this particular tomb was the burial place of some 20 persons, The elaborate design and finish of the rock cut tombs, the pairing arrangement for the deceased, complete with the head rest, indicate that this was a well to do community. One should also notice the small recesses in this tomb as well as in the adjoining ones where young children and even still born babies used to be buried. This shows a high level of respect for the human body, which draped in cloth was laid down in a foetal position in the tomb and sealed with a tombstone.

20. Retrace steps over the footpath to Triq il-Katakombi, turning right and walking uphill till you come to a country road on the left. While proceeding along this country road, the extensive salt pans can be seen to the left, below, at the inner end of Salina Bay and in the background the heavily built Qawra locality.



Salina Salt Pans

21. Soon one sees ahead the rear of a Hotel building and the open sea. The country road ends in an asphalted road, Triq il-Bajja tas-Salini running down between the hotel perimeter wall on one's right and recently built residences., until it ends in a raised pavement, complete with garden benches and oleander shrubs, overlooking the busy coastal road. Once this is reached, turn on the right past an old Redoubt.



Redoubt - A coastal defense structure which is displaying the coat of Arms of Grandmaster Francesco Ximenes de Texada (1773-1775)

22. Proceeding further on the soft landscaped area and then along the cycle path flanking the busy coastal road one soon comes, on one's right, upon a well kept rock-dominated landscaped area in the middle of which there is a rectangular concrete railing. Walking towards it up the simple path, one reaches the Fougasse or stone cannon.



24. Leaving the Fougasse and turning right, walk towards the traffic lights paying attention when crossing the service road to the Hotel. On crossing, notice the small but clean sandy beach frequently used by bathers. Turn left towards the saltpans, walking on the pavement just above the rocky

23. The Fougasse or stone cannon was devised by a French military engineer Francesco Maradon. The hole one sees before him is hewn out of the bed rock in the form of a barrel of a cannon and devised in such a way as to shower an advancing flotilla of boats with deadly missiles before the attackers reach the coast. The defenders would place kegs of gun powder in the bottom of the hole as a charge, prime the fuse along the groove hewn on one side of the hole, which is till visible, and fill the hole totally with stones , boulders and any hard object lying about. At the sight of enemy landing craft and within range, the fuse would be lit and the fougasse fired. It was a simple way of a type of a coastal defense system which appeared during the times of the Knights. This particular one was test fired at the outbreak of World War 11, in case of an invasion, and was reported to have functioned well.

25. Nearing the saltpans one should notice that the first pan is actually a sea water reservoir The existence of these saltpans [*Salini* in the vernacular] date back to c. 1565. The pans were simply built by cutting off an inner section of the bay, pumping the area dry, building the requisite reservoirs, canals, pans and leaving one entry to the sea via a sluice gate. In old maps these are called the New Salt pans, to differ them from the older ones at Ghadira Bay, in Mellieha, which now have been converted into a nature Reserve to provide an aquatic habitat. The salt pan complex is made up of two reservoirs on the seaward side. Behind them are spread out thirty three pans. Ten of these, nearest the road and the black sheds, are floored with sandstone slabs set in heavy clay and were used exclusively for salt production. The other twenty three pans were used to warm up the water to

coastline which is favoured by amateur anglers.

26. The estuary of the Wied il-Ghasel valley system is reached but one continues walking parallel to the perimeter of Kennedy Grove, until the pedestrian entrance is reached on one's right. Walks towards the circular monument which is approached from behind.

supply the salt pans. These warming pans have floors of clay covered with a tightly rolled layer of silver sand. Some of the dividing walls are used as open channels thus interconnecting all the pans with each other and with the reservoirs. There are also, set at intervals, shallow wells for use in pumping water when necessary.

The salt pans continued producing salt for the local culinary market, right up to the seventies. The wooden sheds, used for the storing of salt, were originally connected to the salt pans and to a landing jetty via a small gauge railway.

In the salt pans one sees a stone cross mounted on a column. This used to demarcate the boundaries between the parishes of Mellieha and Naxxar, since, prior to 1905, when St. Paul's Bay was declared a parish, it formed part of Mellieha.

Along the whole length of the saltpans runs a wide channel and part of the estuary which links the end of Wied il-Qlejgha Valley system to the sea. Thus it supports an interesting flora and fauna community where sea water meets fresh water. As one walks along notice the common reed [*Phragmites australis*] together with rushes [*Juncus sp.*] A small colony of Mullard ducks look quite at ease even being so close to fast moving traffic.

27. The Kennedy Grove consists of a mass of trees and flowering shrubs facing a modern but simple monument. The tall arches of the monument directs one's attention to the central bronze plate commemorating John F. Kennedy and surrounded by a star studded railing, representing the states. Kennedy Grove, was inaugurated in 1965 to commemorate President John F. Kennedy, [1917 -1963] President of the United States of America, who was assassinated just 2 years earlier. One's gaze drifts to the writing on the wall at the back of the circular monument, which carries a famous quote of President Kennedy.

Facing the monument, there are two low fountains ejecting a 'Champagne' type of jet onto a bed of white smooth pebbles. The main axis of the Grove runs from the monument towards another fountain and the estuary.

Salina is one of the last remaining salt marshes in the Maltese Islands. It supports a variety of endemic flora and fauna as well as a considerable number of rare, endangered and locally threatened species. Hence it is scheduled as an Area of ecological importance and a site of scientific importance since it carries a mixture of fresh water elements and marsh species. In the past the marshland used to be more extensive.

The walk terminates here at The Salini Park, which being situated so close to the tourist town of St Paul's Bay, is popular with both locals and tourists, as it offers an outdoor recreational area in a historic coastal setting.



Kennedy Grove Monument

28. Behind the Kennedy Monument a short flight of steps takes one along a timber faced path running between two rows of the Lawson's Cypress trees, ending in a spacious turfed area adorned with a central fountain thus forming a continuation of the main axis with the monument. A catering establishment offers a service to visitors.

In 2007 more land next to Kennedy Grove was allocated for extending the Grove into a larger Park, to take more trees and to offer to both locals and tourists more park facilities. Tree planting activities supported by public subscription, has resulted in thousands of trees and shrubs being planted within a short time. The name plates of the donors are proof of the supportive interest of the local community in the tree planting campaign. The first phase of this extension was inaugurated in March 2008. Restoration of the salt pans, together with the building of a visitor's centre, are planned as the next phase of the project.

***Route and text by Joseph Borg***

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