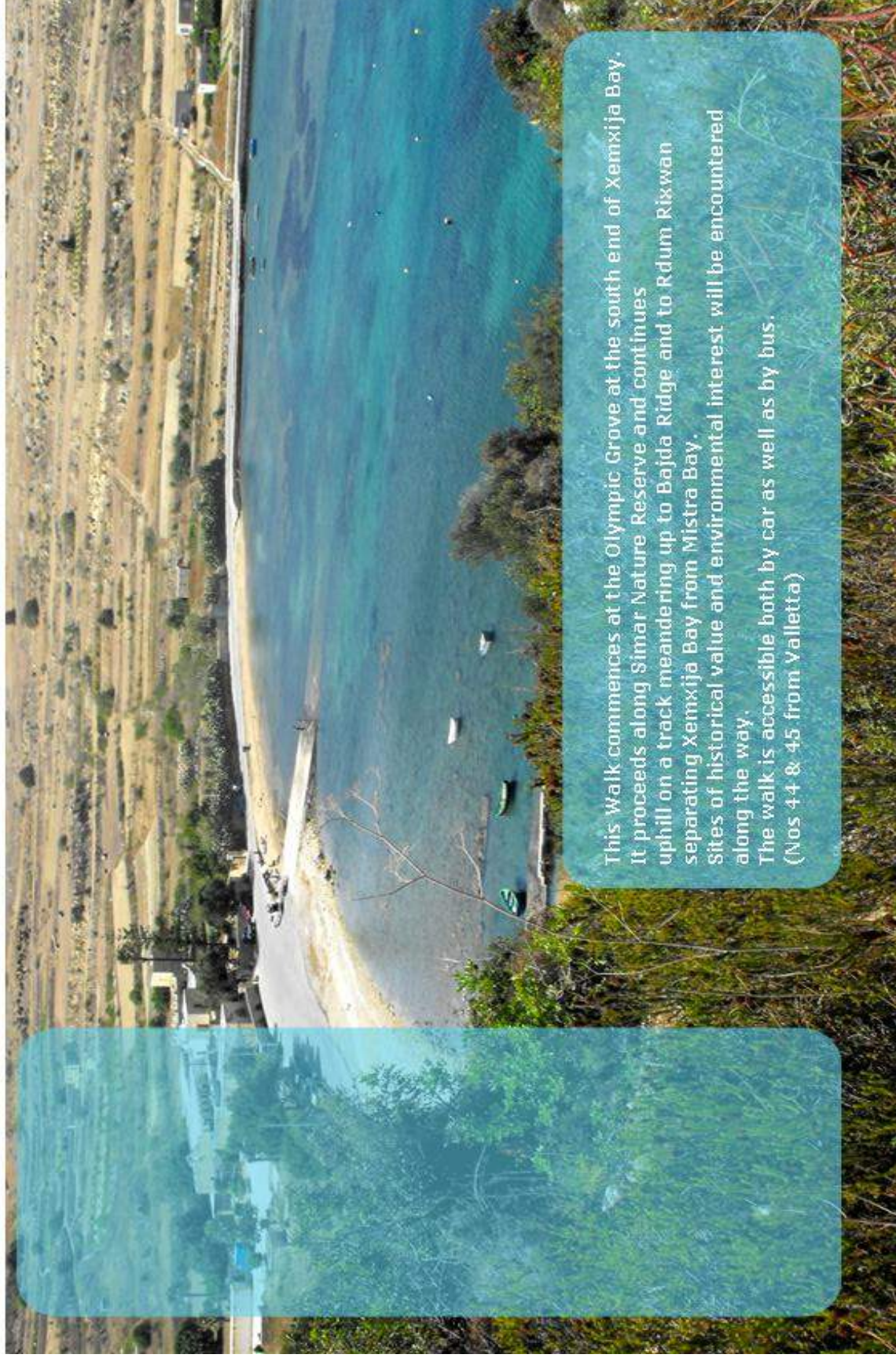


## St. Paul's Bay Walk

### Bajda Ridge and Rđum Rixwan Walk

*A walk to discover the heritage sites and scenic views at  
Xemxija and Mistra Bays*



This Walk commences at the Olympic Grove at the south end of Xemxija Bay. It proceeds along Simar Nature Reserve and continues uphill on a track meandering up to Bajda Ridge and to Rđum Rixwan separating Xemxija Bay from Mistra Bay. Sites of historical value and environmental interest will be encountered along the way.

The walk is accessible both by car as well as by bus.  
(Nos 44 & 45 from Valletta)

## Map of St Paul's Bay Walk on Bajda Ridge



Olympic grove (Parting Point)



Xemxija Bay

### Direction of walk

The walk starts at Xemxija Bay from the Olympic grove situated at the foot of St. Paul's Bay by-pass

The grove includes a **public toilet**

Immediately across the Bay one finds the Simar Nature Reserve. Start walking towards the Reserve

Entry by appointment Tel. 21456903

### Points of Interest and Historical Information

**Xemxija Bay** derives its name from the Maltese equivalent to the sun (*Xemx*). It has a sunny east facing position. This Bay is popular amongst pleasure boat enthusiasts as can be noted from the numerous sea crafts berthed from late spring right through summer.

**The Olympic Grove** was created in 1994 and was dedicated to the founder of the Olympic movement Baron Pierre de Coubertin, as the plaque beneath his bust proclaims. The five concentric circles displayed on the cliff face, as well as the three podiums behind the bust represent sporting activities.

**Simar Nature Reserve** was named after the rushes which grow in this wetland. This Reserve is screened from the busy road by mature olive trees, (*Olea europea*). It is a remnant of marshland. The entry to the reserve is from Pwales Road on the northern extremity of the Bay. The Reserve is managed by a local NGO, Birdlife Malta. It offers a unique experience for all those who are interested in wetland flora and fauna.



Simar wetland and Nature Reserve

Leaving the Nature Reserve, proceed towards Xemxija Hill

Take the first sharp turning on the left and proceed uphill into Triq ir-Ridott.

Once in front of a hotel entrance, turn right uphill, still remaining on Triq ir-Ridott.

Take the country track on the left.

One should notice the small clay tablet cemented to a marker consisting of a small mound of rocks, carrying the legend 'Heritage Trail'.

A few paces uphill along this track, to the right, one could see the gaping mouth of a cave at the foot of the cliff.

Mounting a couple of steps, one sees the built entrance to the cave.

Leaving the cave and turning right continuing uphill, after a few metres, on one's right one comes to a huge boulder protruding upright from the low rubble wall. This is a Menhir.



Clay Tablet

Roman Road dated 1<sup>st</sup> cent A.D

This track, which climbs through a rocky terrain leading to the Bajda Ridge, is a remnant of a Roman Empire road dated to the 1<sup>st</sup> century A.D. It is rich in garigue flora and in remains of human activities through the centuries.

This is the start of an interesting Heritage walk well maintained by a group of volunteers with the assistance of the Local Council.

The track is reinforced with old hard-stone kerbing which separates it from a rain-water culvert. This shows that in ancient times man was already channelling run-off rain water from the surface of tracks heavily used by man and beast.



Seafarers' Cave



Graffiti of an ancient marine vessel

This is known as the seafarers' cave, since on the left, the door-jamb is carrying graffiti of a sailing craft.

On entering the spacious cave, one notices its dryness in winter, while in summer it offers a cool pleasant respite. From here, sailors of sea crafts anchored for shelter in the bay and could rest on *terra ferma*. The marshland below would have offered them also the opportunity of hunting the wild fowl of the then marshland of Pwales valley.

A Menhir is a large boulder, commonly found on our islands and is associated with the ancient Temple builders. This Menhir formed part of a conglomeration of similar prehistoric temples and burial sites in the area. Its connection to the temple will soon be encountered again during this walk.

Once past the Menhir the track swerves to the right where, again on the right, a couple of stairs lead to a small field hosting a large carob tree and on the left a south facing, honey coloured stone building containing two low doorways.



One of the ancient Aperies found in the area

This rural structure grafted in the rock face is an ancient apiary. It has its façade punctured by three rows of loopholes. This apiary, which is one of several in the area, probably dates back from the time of the Knights or earlier. This may be indicated by the way the stones are dressed and mortared, their dimensions, the design and finish of the loop holes through which the bees fly. Furthermore, the roof is covered in mortar made of a mix of pottery fragments, sand, lime and battered into place to form an impervious surface indicate that this may be even older, especially, when considering that Bee-Keeping in the Mediterranean goes back some 9000 years ([www.apiterapia.it](http://www.apiterapia.it)) and was practiced all around the Mediterranean during the Roman Empire.

By crouching through the doorway on the right, one comes to the head of a long corridor parallel to the façade of the apiary. Every niche in each of the three tiers of niches had a terracotta beehive.



Holes for bees to enter in their beehive

Harvesting the honey was carried out by cutting away layers of the honeycomb leaving an adequate quantity of comb for the bees to continue working on. These aperies and methods are no longer in use.

Out of the beehive, one can see the Simar Nature Reserve and the fertile fields where once the marsh extended. From here the wide Xemxija Bay and the Wardija hamlet can also be seen. This site was chosen by apiarists, since apart from its south facing orientation, which gives the bees more light and warmth, there is an abundance of Carob trees (*Ceratonia siliqua*) and of a wide range of the local flora for foraging, foremost of which is the Mediterranean Thyme, (*Thymbra capitata*).



Mediterranean Thyme growing on the garigue



Graffiti of Roman Crosses

Leaving the apiary one turns uphill and right in front, one should notice a huge carob tree growing through the cracks of the rocky side of the hill and by its side a gaping mouth of what looks like a cave.

Out of the apery, a small clay tablet beneath the trunk of a carob tree carries a poem extolling the virtues of the carob tree. This old specimen has a huge trunk making it one of our monumental trees. Apart from their aesthetic value, carob trees produce hard timber, firewood and a source of nectar to the honey bee. Moreover its beans or pods are used as fodder for livestock, and a range of by-products, including medicines, are made from its pulp. Its seeds yield an extract commercially known as Long Bean Gum, which is used in food preparations for their coagulating properties.

By climbing the couple of steps hewn in the rock face and turning to the left on the narrow path towards the carob tree, and past its low boughs, one comes to face with another apiary hewn out of the rock face. This aviary was probably used as a burial place then as an apiary and subsequently to house livestock. During World War II, it was used as a wartime shelter. A couple of other similar apiaries can be identified close by.

This cave was a Punic tomb. It was sliced through when the track was widened to take traffic of animal drawn carts, since this was one of the major roadways from St. Paul's Bay to Mellieha, hundreds of years ago.

On one's left, hewn in the rock face, one can notice a number of small Roman crosses roughly carved in the rock face, some of which are dyed in black for easy recognition. These, according to tradition, are Pilgrims' crosses. Here, pilgrims trekking all the way to the Mellieha shrine of Our Lady, would have stopped for a breather once the top of the hill was reached. The pathway, at times is still carrying remnants of a cobbled surface.

Retrace steps to the gaping cave next to the monumental carob tree.

Continue uphill for a couple of metres, along the rough track.

On one's left, a rubble wall snakes its way until the woodland of Mizieb is reached. Pass beyond Mizieb.

Here one should notice a way marker made of a small mound of rocks to which is affixed a clay tablet indicating the way to the Punic tombs.

Follow this footpath along the rocky terrain.

Passing through an opening in a rubble wall, one soon comes to another rubble walled enclosure, in which lies a late Roman era Punic rock tomb (circa 500BC).

A rectangular hole at the side, hewn out of the bedrock, reveals a low access to a family tomb. It is shaped in the form of a low, squat dome.

Leaving the Punic tomb walk to the left uphill along the established footpath. This leads to a roof-less rural building.

Following the footpath which swerves to the right, after a few metres, one reaches a gaping hole in the rock surface. This is an old grain silo.

The Mizieb re-afforestation project was initially planted in stages during the last century to recharge the water table. The species planted are: Olives (*Olea europea*), Aleppo Pines (*Pinus halepensis*) and the Wattle Tree (*Acacia saligna*).

Large boulders encircled in an enclosed space within the woodlands are remnants of a Neolithic temple.

A small room that used to serve as shelter for the farmers, from the elements, known as a Girna, lies within the woods. Its low, dome-shaped ceiling was built with layers of stone remarkably placed in circles to cover the whole area.



Girna



internal ceiling built with stone in circles

The roof-less building is a replica of a hovel, which man used when he moved out of cave dwellings on learning the art of building structures with stone. In fact just behind the tall Mediterranean shrub, the lentisk (*Pistachia lentiscus*), one can see two cave openings. These were cave dwellings, which were inhabited by man. Once inside one of these cave dwellings, one notices the warm temperature during winter while coolness prevails during summer. The low rubble wall dividing the cave was meant to separate the inner part of the cave where man dwelt, from the front area where his livestock spent the night. The caves are ensconced in the cliff, but within reach of the Mistra and Pwales valleys, which offered ideal grazing, game and water resources.

The tall Giant fennel (*Ferula communis*) is very noticeable even when not in flower. In winter and spring the garigue is lush with vegetation, while in summer most of plant life is dormant, thus exposing the rock surface.

Next to one of the cave openings a rough but short flight of steps hewn out of the rock face, leads to the rocky surface of the ridge above the caves. This is Bajda Ridge separating Pwales valley from the Mistra valley. From here one could see on the left, the southern flank of the village of Mellieha as well as the 18<sup>th</sup> century Selmun Tower.

This is a Roman era grain silo which usually used to be covered with stone slabs and clay. Later this silo was converted into a cistern to collect run off rain water. This ridge is very rich in archaeological artefacts and in the local flora and fauna and so one must keep to established footpaths.

Retrace steps down to the cave dwellings, continue downhill past the Punic Tomb until the small mound acting as marker next to the wide track.

Turn to the right towards a drawbar which prevents unauthorized vehicles from passing through. Soon a military pill-box comes into sight ahead.



Grain Silo



A military pill-box comes into sight

On reaching the pill-box, a stone marker points to the right towards a set of cart ruts, while to the left it points to the remains of Roman Baths.

Retrace one's steps to the Roman Baths

Climbing the few stairs to a lower level in the cliff reveals a finely built old stone wall sealing a cave and carrying a doorway.

Return up the steps and turning left along a pathway to the new housing development on the top of the ridge. On reaching Triq Katrina Vitale, then turn into Triq Piscopo Macedonia which turns left into Triq il-Fuhhar and finally ending in the middle of Triq Raddet ir-Roti.



Selmun Castle

One could have a peep into the pill-box through a gridded window. A solid concrete structure, planned to stand guard over the Mistra valley which flows into nearby Mistra Bay, is one of the many defence structures built by the British Services during and after World War II.

The cart ruts are seen once one climbs the few steps and follows the footpath till they come into view. Cart ruts, which are found in various sites in Malta and in Gozo, are still a mystery, as to who made them and for what purpose.

On entering the spacious cave, one can see various divisions, levels and recesses hewn out of the rock face. These are the Roman Baths which were built next to springs and used by the Romans as male, social centres for relaxation. The Roman Baths at Ghajn Tuffieha, which are in a better state of preservation, show the pools, the *caldarium* where the water used to be heated, the *tepidarium* or a cooling room as well as the *frigidarium* or cold water pool. Springs have now run dry and also the baths have been, over the years, converted to hold livestock, as can be noted from the two mangers built on the inside of the sturdy façade wall. Once outside the baths, one could see the lush growth of the fertile valley below and an old, preserved farmhouse.



To proceed to Rdim Rixwan turn left along Triq Raddet ir-Roti and continue walking past the buildings and a walled development site until the busy arterial road is reached. Directly ahead beyond the traffic island is the Church dedicated to St. Joseph the Worker.



Roman Baths and Selmun Castle seen along the walk

Cross the street from the Pelican lights close by and turn left. Pass the church and walk along the block of apartments until a car park is reached.



Church dedicated to St. Joseph the Worker

Facing the station, walk right and take the footpath along the station's long perimeter wall.

Once past the perimeter wall, the footpath meanders on the garigue, but turns slightly to the left to overlook Mistra Bay.

Once the foot path starts descending, to the left, a large old open quarry appears.

At the far end of the car park, a Civil Protection Station can be seen.

This walled part of Rdim Rixwan was the site of a fuel depot that is not in use any more. Whilst walking along the pathway flanking the old fuel depot, Xemxija Bay can be seen through the tree cover. This is an opportunity for a scenic peep of Xemxija Bay and the coastline encompassing St. Paul's village and the holiday area of Qawra.

This is one of the quarries which provided boulders for the Grand Harbour Breakwater in the early 20th century, whose foundation stone was laid in 1903.

At the bottom of the quarry one can see a successful attempt in Aleppo pine tree planting.

The cliffs of this ridge are known as Rdim Rixwan. From this vantage point one could also see the secluded Mistra Bay, home to a commercial fish farm and popular with boating enthusiasts. On its northern coast there lies the 17<sup>th</sup> century military Battery, which was armed with 6 canon, and built during the reign of Grand Master Martin De Redin (1657-60) in order to prevent invaders from landing in the bay.

This walk ends here, but for those who wish to get a closer look of this secluded beach, a rough footpath drops down to the beach.

Other interesting features in the vicinity include the underground flour mills and the Mistra Gate.

Facing the back of the beach, to the left is a road that leads back to the church, however, it is a busy road so be extra cautious if you decide to retrace through that route.



Mistra Gate

Mistra Gate is linked to a special fund, called the *Monte di Redenzione*, set up during the reign of Grand Master Aloff de Wignacourt (1601-1622) for the redemption of Christian slaves in Barbary lands. It received monies from rented lands and property especially those, bequeathed by a wealthy Maltese Lady Caterina Vitale and a considerable sum of money by Giovanni Domenico Felice. The Gate was erected at the entrance to a large estate in Mistra and Selmun. The Foundation was granted its own coat of arms which depicted three hills surmounted by a letter R for *Redenzione*. The coat of Arms of Grand Master Pinto de Fonseca (1741-1773) also appear above that of the Foundation. This indicates that Pinto was involved in its restoration during his reign, indicating the importance attached to this Foundation.



Underground emergency Flour Mill

An opening in the rock face is a tunnel entrance. This is the entrance to an Underground flour mill which is one of seven, built as an emergency measure when in fear of a nuclear attack on the Grand Harbour area, where many commercial mills were situated. The emergency flour mills were built by the British Services after World War II.

The flour mill is contained in a large underground room at the end of a tunnel hewn out of the solid rock. Grain seeds used to be off loaded on the top of the ridge down a chute situated on a hopper. The old mechanism is powered by a diesel engine. The mill's entrance is facing north in order to avoid any blast repercussions in case a nuclear attack targeted the Valletta harbour area. This is a stark reminder of the Cold War era of the fifties. The mill was restored, painstakingly, into working condition by a group of volunteer enthusiasts. *(Viewing through an appointment with St. Paul's Bay Local Council)*





*Walk coordinated by Joseph Borg  
Edited by Pauline Dingli  
Photos Joseph Borg and Pauline Dingli*