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ta' Malta**

Department of Tourism Management

Future Development of Rural Tourism: Case Study on Mġarr

Ema Florekova

Supervisor: Prof. George Cassar

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Abstract

This dissertation explores how rural tourism in Mġarr, Malta, can be further developed in a sustainable way that attracts quality tourists, while benefiting the local community and preserving the environment. Mġarr was chosen as a case study due to its rich agricultural landscape, cultural heritage and increasing interest from visitors. The research aims to evaluate the current state of rural tourism in the area, identify key challenges and opportunities and provide actionable recommendations for sustainable development.

A mixed-methods approach was adopted, combining qualitative data from ten semi-structured interviews with local stakeholders, including farmers, tour operators, local council members and others, as well as feedback from tourists gathered on different occasions. Thematic analysis was used to interpret the data, alongside a review of relevant academic literature and tourism policy documents.

The findings reveal that while there is strong potential and community interest in rural tourism, several issues slow down the progress. These include insufficient coordination among stakeholders as well as lack of clear strategy, lack of agricultural personnel and the risk of over-promotion, which can lead to over-commercialisation. Moreover, events like *Festa Frawli* are facing overcrowding, questioning their authenticity and value for locals. Visitors, however, show a clear preference for authentic, small-scale experiences, which suggests that a quality-over-quantity approach could be more sustainable for Mġarr.

The study concludes that rural tourism in Mġarr can be a key contributor to local economies if it remains small-scale, authentic and community-driven. Recommendations include training and networking for locals, value-based pricing strategies, better site management and careful consideration of infrastructure improvements. The research suggests that future studies could focus on youth involvement, long-term impacts and tourist motivations to further inform sustainable planning.

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CHAPTER 1 - Introduction

1.1. Background

Rural tourism has emerged as a significant sector within the global tourism industry, offering opportunities for a more sustainable tourism development, which brings economic growth and supports the preservation of cultures (Lane 1994, Yanan, et al. 2024). Defined by the UNWTO (n.d.) as tourism linked to nature-based activities, agriculture and rural lifestyles, rural tourism has become a strategic tool for strengthening regional economies (Mura and Ključnikov 2018) and revitalising rural communities (Lane, Kastenholtz et al. 2022). In Malta rural areas are becoming increasingly popular, due to their potential to attract visitors seeking authentic experiences tied to history, nature and local traditions and ways of life. Mġarr's deeply rooted agricultural heritage, historically significant landmarks and natural landscapes make it an ideal location to explore rural tourism dynamics.

1.2. Importance of the Study

The importance of this study lies in its focus on developing sustainable strategies for rural tourism in Mġarr, to address challenges connected to rural tourism. As visitor numbers increase, small communities like Mġarr face pressure to cater to larger crowds with limited resources (Demirović Bajrami, Radosavac et al. 2020). This can lead to strain on local infrastructure, environmental degradation and cultural commodification. Mġarr's small size and agricultural focus (Mifsud 2024) make it particularly vulnerable to these pressures. Therefore, implementing strategies that prioritize attracting high-quality tourists rather than large numbers of tourists is crucial for ensuring long-term sustainability for the area. The findings aim to provide actionable insights for policymakers and stakeholders, contributing to broader discussions on sustainable rural tourism practices.

1.3. Research Question

How can rural tourism in Mġarr (Malta) be further developed sustainably to attract quality tourists while benefiting the local community and preserving the environment?

1.4. Aim and Objectives of the Study

The aim of this research is to explore and analyze the current state of rural tourism in Mġarr, Malta, with a focus on identifying opportunities for sustainable development and quality-focused tourism. To achieve this aim, the study follows multiple objectives.

Firstly, the research evaluates Mġarr's current rural tourism products and infrastructure to understand their capacity to support sustainable development. It gathers insights from local stakeholders through semi-structured interviews to explore their perspectives on tourism growth and sustainability and examines tourist experiences and preferences via surveys to identify key motivators and satisfaction levels. Additionally, it investigates the role of the local community in promoting sustainable practices, emphasising their involvement in preserving cultural heritage and natural resources in the area. Finally, the study reviews findings from these analyses alongside literature reviews to develop recommendations for sustainable rural tourism development in Mġarr.

1.5. Structure of the study

This dissertation is structured into five chapters, each contributing to a comprehensive understanding of sustainable rural tourism development in Mġarr, Malta. Chapter 1 introduces the research topic, presenting the background, significance, research question, aim and objectives of the study. Chapter 2 provides a critical review of existing literature on rural tourism, establishing the theoretical framework that guides the research. Chapter 3, methodology, explains the case study approach, justifies the use of qualitative and quantitative methods, as well as describes the data collection and analysis techniques, including semi-structured interviews and survey data. Chapter 4 presents the findings through a thematic analysis of stakeholder interviews and feedback gathered from tourists. Chapter 5 concludes the study by summarising the main findings, addressing the research objectives and offering recommendations for the sustainable development of rural tourism in Mġarr. It also discusses limitations and suggests directions for future research.

CHAPTER 2 - Literature Review

2.1. Introduction to Rural Tourism

Rural tourism refers to travel experiences that take place in rural settings. As noted by UNWTO (n.d.), these areas are "characterised by low population density, landscapes dominated by agriculture and forestry and traditional social structures and lifestyles". The main focus is on visitors' interactions with nature, agricultural practices, cultural heritage and locals (Lane 1994). It promotes genuine, smaller-scale, often actively engaging experiences that create a connection between the tourists and the local communities and their traditions.

According to Lane (1994) this form of tourism appeals foremostly to the travellers who are seeking to leave the rush of urban life and experience meaningful interactions. It often includes visits to farms or local production sites, hands-on activities, attending small-scale cultural events, participating in community activities or nature-based leisure. Lane, Kastenholz et al. (2022) reaffirm this idea, emphasising that these interactions between visitors and the rural environment are what differs rural tourism from mass tourism models.

Rural tourism experiences usually carry strong educational value, as they provide access into unexplored locations and insights about ways of life that are often unfamiliar to urban populations (Kastenholz, et al. 2012). Guided tours and guided experience are a fundamental tool in rural tourism (Rumble et al 2108), bridging the gap between local knowledge and tourist curiosity (Timothy and Boyd 2003).

From an economic point of view, rural tourism encourages economic diversification in the rural economy, especially when traditional industries, like agriculture, are in decline (Frederick 1993, Mura and Ključnikov 2018, Slee, Farr et al. 1997). Incorporating local businesses into the tourism industry creates a big growth opportunity, increasing demand for local products, services and employment. Furthermore, rural tourism promotes entrepreneurship, as it encourages the creation and expansion of small businesses, including local shops, guesthouses, bed and breakfasts, restaurants, cafés, bars, craft workshops as

well as, agricultural-based activities such as local food and beverage production (Mura and Ključnikov 2018, Smolčić, Milohnic et al. 2015).

According to Sima, Bordânc et al. (2015), this relationship is reciprocal, as entrepreneurship not only benefits from rural tourism but also actively contributes to its development by encouraging innovations in the rural areas. For instance, improvements in infrastructure and the development of local businesses help attract visitors while still focusing on the overall sustainability of local rural economies (Almeida and Machado 2021).

As tourism shifts towards more personalised experiences, small rural enterprises are thriving, driven by their ability to offer products and services that are unique to the area (Wu, Wang et al. 2024). This shift in consumer preferences is playing a significant role in rural development, as these small local, usually family businesses often provide unique cultural and local engagements that larger enterprises cannot imitate (Smolčić and Soldić 2012).

Hall et al. (2005) argue that development of rural tourism can lead to a more resilient and diversified local economy by reducing dependency on a single sector and encouraging the growth of complementary industries. This positively affects both the locals, by strengthening their economy, and the tourists, by creating an attractive environment with plenty to offer. Moreover, as Almeida and Machado (2021) claim, rural tourism can help attract investment into rural infrastructure, leading to improvements in transportation, communication and utilities. Which further helps offset the negative impacts of urbanisation by attracting people to remain in or return to rural areas.

Lane, Kastenholz et al. (2022) claim that rural tourism plays a pivotal role in strengthening the social stability of rural communities. As Liu, Chiang et al. (2023) point out, when visitors interact with locals, cross-cultural exchange is created, which encourages mutual understanding and multiculturalism. Tourists' interests in local culture and heritage encourages locals to embrace cultural preservation and pride in their traditions, like local festivals, harvest celebration, markets, music, like traditional dances and songs, or even

instruments, artisan crafts, food traditions, religious events and more (Lane, Kastenholtz et al. 2022, Liu, Chiang et al. 2023, Alkier, Milojica et al. 2012, Mazilu and Dumitrescu 2012).

This is also connected with the fact that rural tourism can strengthen community identity (Mazilu and Dumitrescu 2012). Residents recognise the value of their cultural heritage and become more aware of the importance of their traditions, which play a key role in shaping the rural tourism experience (Wijijayanti, Agustina et al. 2020). This increased awareness fosters a sense of pride in their unique cultural practices and customs. As a result, local communities begin to take an active role in preserving and promoting their heritage, understanding that it is not only a reflection of their history but also an asset that attracts visitors.

Moreover, the active involvement of locals in the tourism process helps create a deeper connection between the visitor and the place. The people become an inseparable part of the tourism product, sharing their local knowledge, traditions and stories, ensuring authenticity and uniqueness. Their lived experiences and cultural practices allow tourists to gain insights into the local way of life that would otherwise be inaccessible. (Phori, Hermann et al. 2024, Wijijayanti, Agustina et al. 2020)

Moreover, a systematic literature review by Yanan, Ismail et al. (2024) highlights that rural tourism's impact on heritage preservation is particularly significant in regions where local heritage and cultural sites are at risk of deterioration. These communities often lack the resources to maintain heritage sites, but tourism can provide the necessary funding and awareness to address these issues. This is further supported by Lin, Shen et al. (2024) who noted that by providing a platform for locals to showcase their heritage sites, they can motivate authorities to put effort into protecting these historical landmarks.

Similarly, rural tourism helps with environmental sustainability. Lane, Kastenholtz et al. (2022) emphasize that rural tourism differs from mass tourism by being more community-oriented and nature-based, leading to reduced environmental pressures and better integration of tourism within the local ecosystem. Unlike mass tourism, which often results in overdevelopment, pollution and excessive resource consumption, rural tourism tends to be smaller in scale, with tourism activities dispersed across various different locations (Lane

1994). This shift from resource exploitation to more environmentally sustainable tourism helps maintain the ecological balance of rural areas (An and Alarcón 2020).

Many rural tourism activities, such as walking and hiking, wildlife observation or agritourism visits, are nature-based activities that inspire a deeper connection with nature and nurture sustainable mindset and encourage responsible behaviour among tourists (Lane, Kastenholz et al. 2022). By engaging with the landscapes and traditional agricultural practices, visitors are being educated and develop an awareness of environmental issues, therefore are more likely to support conservation initiatives (Egbali, Bakhshandea Nosrat et al. 2011, Hassan, Salem et al. 2022). Furthermore, these experiences help visitors form a stronger bond with the environment, creating a lasting commitment to conservation (An and Alarcón 2020, Egbali, Bakhshandea Nosrat et al. 2011).

As pointed out by Egbali, Bakhshandea Nosrat et al. (2011), revenue from tourism can be directed toward local conservation projects, creating a system, where tourism actively supports the protection of the rural ecosystem. They further note that as rural communities recognise the economic benefits of tourism, they are more likely to preserve the environment, which is crucial for attracting visitors. Since rural tourism relies on well-preserved landscapes, local governments and businesses are driven to implement sustainable land management strategies, carrying capacities, regulate development and establish protected areas to maintain the industry's long-term viability (An and Alarcón 2020).

2.2 Development of Rural Tourism in Malta

For decades, Malta's tourism industry has been heavily reliant on the "sun-and-sea" model, attracting visitors primarily for its warm Mediterranean climate and coastal attractions (Ebejer 2020, Vladimirova 2011). However, as the tourism industry is evolving, so are Malta's tourism offerings, through the development of multiple niche markets.

Cultural and heritage tourism has emerged as a key sector, driven by the island's rich history, dating back around 7,000 years (Cassar et al. 2008, Chirițescu and Păunescu 2024) and the appeal of numerous archaeological sites, including some of the world's oldest freestanding megalithic temples and other UNESCO heritage sites. Another significant niche sector is religious tourism, as Malta is known for its dense concentration of churches, with locals often claiming that there are more places of worship than days in the year (Bettetini 2010). Pilgrimage routes and annual religious festas, also attract both domestic and international visitors (Munro 2020, *Culture Malta* n.d.). Adventure tourism has also gained popularity, especially in Gozo, with water sports such as diving, kayaking or snorkelling, along with land-based activities like rock climbing and hiking (Camilleri 2019). Furthermore, rural tourism has also undergone significant growth.

Historically, Maltese agriculture has been characterised by small, family-run farms where the limited size of fields necessitated manual labour (*European Commission* n.d.-a). Farmers have long relied on hand tools and traditional methods, as the terrain and fragmented land parcels, often arranged in terraces and surrounded by dry stone (*Malta - Rural Development Programme 2023*), made the use of large machinery impractical. This hands-on approach has preserved authentic farming practices, giving rural tourism and agritourism a great base for genuine rural experiences.

The origins of rural tourism in Malta can be traced back to the early 1970s, when the Ta' Mena Estate in Gozo began inviting visitors to participate in agricultural activities like fruit picking and vegetable harvesting, allowing tourists to engage directly with the local farming lifestyle (Guide Michelin 2025).

Since then, both Malta and Gozo have evolved, and today, fruit and vegetable picking activities are just a small part of what the islands offer when it comes to rural tourism.

Nowadays, the Maltese islands offer a wide range of experiences that reflect their agricultural and cultural heritage. These include guided farm tours, educational farm visits or even overnight stays on farms, which allow visitors to engage directly with the Maltese farming lifestyle. During these, participants can attend experiences such as olive oil tasting and wine tastings, as well as cheese-tasting and traditional ġbejna making methods.

Cooking classes, focused on Maltese culinary traditions, are also being offered. These include experiences, such as pastizzi-making or baking traditional ftira, sourdough bread, sourced from local ingredients. (*Maltahotel24* n.d., *Malta Rural Tours* n.d., *Malta Sunripe* n.d.-a)

The rural tourism product in Malta also includes activities like walking and hiking trails, which allow visitors to engage with the island's natural beauty and rich cultural heritage (*Visit Malta* n.d.). These trails are actively promoted through platforms such as Visit Malta, the official tourism website.

Moreover, countryside attractions, such as coastal cliffs, hidden beaches, coastal towers and wayside chapels, offer visitors the opportunity to explore Malta's unique natural landscapes and centuries-old historical sites (*Times of Malta* 2012). These locations are integral to rural tourism, showcasing the island's coastal beauty and its centuries-old landmarks.

Additionally, thanks to smaller villages like Żebbuġ (Gozo), Għarb or Qrendi, maintaining a strong rural character, their village cores serve as cultural hubs where visitors can explore historic old parish churches, traditional town squares, local markets and most importantly engage in conversations with locals (*Times of Malta* 2012). This connection to local traditions is further reinforced through the celebration of traditional Maltese festas, which draw visitors to rural areas to experience religious and cultural festivities as celebrated in those localities. These festas take place in village squares and streets, encouraging visitors to explore less touristy areas of the island and interact with residents (Cassar 2015).

Another key aspect of Malta's rural tourism product are artisanal visits, where participants can appreciate the skill and craftsmanship, or workshops led by artisans focused on both preserving and showcasing the traditional crafts. Visitors engage in hands-on experiences, which brings them in contact with traditional techniques and skills that have been passed down through generations (Ringas, Tasiopoulou et al. 2022.)

Limestone carving, for instance, has played a crucial role in Malta's architectural history, originating in the prehistoric period (Cassar 2010). Visitors can explore this tradition and learn about the historical and cultural importance of limestone while observing artisans at

work (*The Limestone Heritage* n.d.). These visits introduce quarrying techniques and stone carving, which define Malta's traditional built environment.

Moreover, traditional lace-making, known as bizzilla, is another craft that continues to be practised, particularly in Gozo (*Visit Gozo* n.d.).

Further supporting rural tourism, the land component of the Natura 2000 sites network in Malta currently covers around 43.7 square kilometres, or approximately 13.8% of total land area (*Ambjent Malta* n.d.), as indicated in Appendix A (Natura2000 n.d.).

Natura 2000 is a European network of protected areas aimed at preserving biodiversity by safeguarding habitats and species across the EU. This network not only protects natural habitats but also promotes sustainable land use practices, such as agriculture and forestry, which are integral to rural landscapes. (European Commission n.d.-b)

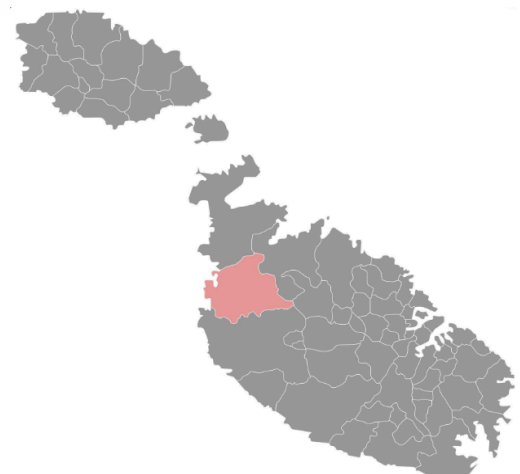
The main objectives of this strategic shift towards niche markets, including rural tourism, diversifies experiences and better cater for modern tourists' wants and needs (Lane 1994), as well as extending the tourism season, thereby distributing visitor numbers more evenly throughout the year. In fact, Malta is the least impacted EU country by seasonality (see Appendix B; Eurostat 2023), which can be attributed to the successful promotion of niche tourism markets, including rural tourism, that appeal to diverse tourist segments and help mitigate the effects of seasonal fluctuations. (Lasys 2023)

Fig. 1: Location of Mġarr within the Maltese Islands.

2.3. Mġarr as Case Study

Mġarr is a rural locality situated in the northwestern part of Malta (Fig. 1), encompassing an area of approximately 16.1 square kilometres.

The area (see Appendix C; Google Maps, n.d.-a) is geographically defined by several notable natural



features, which play a significant role in shaping its landscape and rural character.

The Bajda Ridge serves as a natural geographical barrier, separating Mġarr from neighbouring regions to the north. This ridge contributes to Mġarr's sense of isolation and preserves its rural identity by limiting urban sprawl and maintaining its connection to agriculture. The elevated position of the ridge offers panoramic views of the surrounding landscapes, enhancing the aesthetic appeal of Mġarr. (Environment and Resources Authority 2019-a)

To its south, Mġarr is bordered by the Great Fault, a major geological fault line that separates the locality from the central plains of Malta, influencing both the development of human settlements and the overall character of the region. Its presence serves as a natural barrier that has preserved Mġarr's rural integrity, differentiating it from the more urbanised parts of the island. (Grima and Vassallo 2008)

This geographical isolation has played a significant role in shaping Mġarr's agricultural identity. The locality is known for its fertile soil (Grima and Vassallo 2008), which have historically supported traditional farming activities, such as the cultivation of olives, grapes, tomatoes, strawberries and seasonal crops (*A Maltese Pantry* 2021, *Guide Michelin* 2025). Over the years, the community has managed to preserve its strong agricultural roots, with farming and winemaking serving as foundational elements of local life (Mifsud 2024) and has successfully adapted to cater for the demands of modern tourism by capitalising on its agricultural heritage.

In recent years, the modern traveller's increasing desire for authentic and unique experiences has positioned Mġarr as a leader in agritourism in Malta. Today's tourists are looking for opportunities to immerse themselves in rural settings and connect with it through activities like farm visits, tasting food at local produce markets and engaging in hands-on experiences (Lane 1994). By focusing their tourism offer on these activities, Mġarr is preserving its agricultural traditions, while also generating a sustainable source of revenue.

One of the key attractions in Mġarr's agritourism sector is agricultural, educational farm visits, which allow visitors to gain hands-on knowledge of local farming practices.

Malta Sunripe offers immersive tours that showcase the unique character of Maltese agriculture. Visitors can explore farmers' holdings in the Mġarr Valley, visit greenhouses and fruit farms, learn about the production of wine from grape varieties such as Ġellewża and Girgentina and attend tasting sessions featuring local produce like the traditional ftira, sourdough bread or ġbejna, sheep cheese (*Malta Sunripe* n.d.-a). Their shop also offers a wide variety of fresh, locally grown products, providing visitors with the opportunity to interact directly with local producers, fostering meaningful connections (*Malta Sunripe* n.d.-b).

In addition to Malta Sunripe, there are several smaller, local markets in the area that, while not specifically marketed as tourist attractions, offer visitors the chance to experience everyday agricultural life in Mġarr (*Tal-Plitt Fruit & Veg* n.d.). These markets contribute to the local economy and provide a more informal, yet equally valuable experience.

Similarly to Malta Sunripe, Vincent's Eco-Estate, a fully certified organic farm, provides visitors with an authentic experience of sustainable farming methods and eco-friendly agricultural techniques that align with modern environmental concerns (*Vincent's Eco Estate* n.d.-a). These experiences allow visitors to connect directly with the land and understand the crucial role of agriculture in the local economy.

Times of Malta (2021) stated that Vincent's Eco-Farm in Mġarr has received approval from the Planning Authority to develop an agritourism facility. The project at Vincent's Eco-Farm should include the construction of a five-story building offering tourist accommodation, a restaurant and a kitchen, along with the expansion of vineyards and olive groves, creating new agritourism opportunities. However currently, there is only one accommodation option listed on their website, for a two bedroom farmhouse (*Vincent's Eco Estate* n.d.-b).

In addition to structured agritourism experiences, Mġarr offers opportunities for independent rural stays through the rental of traditional farmhouses (Airbnb n.d.). These accommodations, often restored from historic agricultural buildings, provide a somewhat authentic experience in the rural landscape while serving as an additional source of income for local property owners. The increasing demand for such stays reflects broader trends in

rural tourism, where visitors seek engagement with the natural and cultural environment, rather than just observation (Lane, Kastenholz et al. 2022).

Beyond accommodation, agricultural spaces such as olive groves and vineyards are also being utilised as rental venues for private events. This diversification of land use allows local farmers to supplement their income while fostering deeper visitor engagement with Mġarr's agricultural heritage. (*Conventions Malta* 2025)

The western boundary of Mġarr is defined by its coastline along the Mediterranean Sea, which includes well-known Golden Bay and Riviera Beach as well as several smaller, more secluded beaches (Grima and Vassallo 2008). Golden Bay, famous for its sandy shore and extensive facilities, is widely recognized as one of Malta's most popular beaches and creates the border between Mġarr and Mellieħa. It offers a range of visitor amenities, including restaurants, water sports activities and accommodation options, making it a key site for recreational tourism (*Visit Malta* n.d.-b.). Similarly, Għajn Tuffieħa, known as Riviera Beach, is a popular destination for both locals and tourists, even though its accessibility is more restricted, requiring visitors to descend a long staircase from the cliffs, which naturally limits foot traffic. The site has been the focus of environmental management efforts since the mid-1990s, particularly through the Gaia Foundation, which oversees conservation initiatives in the area (The Gaia Foundation n.d.). It is also part of Malta's Natura 2000 network, highlighting its ecological importance within Maltese coastal tourism (Ambjent Malta, n.d.). Integrated coastal zone management strategies have been implemented to mitigate environmental degradation while accommodating sustainable tourism. These include prohibition of overnight camping on sandy beaches and any camping on sand dunes, restricting vehicle access or implementing educational programs for visitors (*Environment and Resources Authority* 2019-b). Both beaches have been integral to Malta's tourism infrastructure for decades, often featured in promotional materials for both Mġarr and Malta as a whole. (*Visit Malta* n.d.-b, *Visit Malta* n.d.-c).

In contrast, Ġnejna Bay, located just two kilometres from the village of Mġarr (*Google Maps* n.d.-b), or a 30 minute hike from Għajn Tuffieħa (*Google Maps* n.d.-c), offers a more rural coastal experience. This secluded beach is less frequented by tourists and primarily attracts

locals, making it a quintessential example of rural tourism. Its natural environment, combined with the absence of large-scale development, provides visitors with an authentic connection to Malta's countryside and coastal heritage (*Visit Malta* n.d.-d). This may be attributed to its relative inaccessibility, as there is no public transportation to the beach, which aligns with Samková and Navrátil (2023) findings, that tourism is less likely to develop in areas lacking public transportation, as such limitations restrict visitor access.

Similarly, Fomm ir-Riñ known for its distinctive geological features, including vertical cliffs and a pebble beach (Sammut 2019), is one of Malta's most secluded coastal spots, not only due to its remote location but also because of the challenging route visitors must take to reach it (*Visit Malta* n.d.-e). The road leading to the area is a typical example of Maltese rural infrastructure, with narrow and winding roads, bordered by traditional dry-stone walls that are characteristic of the island's countryside (Haslam 2001). Built from locally sourced limestone, they serve both functional and cultural purposes, reflecting centuries-old craftsmanship and creating a rustic and enclosed atmosphere, reinforcing the bay's sense of isolation. Once at the location, the descent to the beach takes approximately 15–20 minutes along a steep and rocky path carved into the cliffside. This difficult access naturally restricts visitor numbers reinforcing its appeal as a 'hidden gem' (*Visit Malta* n.d.-e).

There are other, even more remote, smaller beaches, bays and caves in the coastal border of Mġarr, some accessible via rural paths, while others only by boat. All these beaches and bays contribute to the biodiversity of the region, support marine life and enhance Mġarr's tourism appeal, contributing to local tourism revenues. (Martínez, Intralawan et al. 2007)

Mġarr offers several hiking and walking trails, bringing tourists away from more crowded areas. (*Wikiloc* n.d.). These trails integrate agricultural landscapes with historical features and natural coastal sites. However, the lack of clear signage and informational panels along most of the trails poses a challenge to accessibility and visitor education, highlighting the need for enhanced infrastructure to maximise their potential. (Godtman Kling et al. 2017).

Nowadays, one of the most famous trails in the area is the Victoria Lines Trail. Together with The Bingemma Slopes and Fiddien Valleys it creates the south-east boundary of Mġarr. The

valleys contribute to Mġarr's distinct topography and rural environment, while The Victoria Lines, a 19th-century British fortification, adds historical value to the landscape (*Environment and Resources Authority 2019-a*). It holds significant potential as Malta's first managed national trail, if managed properly (Cachia Zammit 2023). Currently the trail suffers from neglect, lacking proper signage, accessible pathways and maintenance efforts to preserve its historical structures. Galdes (2023) highlights the lack of political commitment to establishing the Victoria Lines as a national trail. Currently, the trail is not even included in the Malta Goes Rural initiative (*Visit Malta n.d.-a*).

There are further significant historical landmarks in Mġarr, some dating to prehistoric times, including Ta' Ħaġrat Temples and Skorba Temples, both UNESCO World Heritage sites (*UNESCO n.d.*). These megalithic temples provide invaluable insights into Malta's Neolithic civilization, but remain somehow hidden from tourism. This may also be attributed to their fragility which needs to be monitored.

The Għajn Tuffieħa Roman Baths also represent a significant archaeological and cultural landmark, contributing to the region's potential as a rural tourism destination. The site remained relatively underexplored and inaccessible since its discovery (*Heritage Malta n.d.-a*), until recent efforts by the EU-funded REBACA (Rehabilitation of Roman Baths and Christian Catacombs) Project that aims to fully uncover, conserve and open the site for public engagement (Cardona, Depasquale et al. 2013). While it remains closed to the public, Heritage Malta has stated that it will soon be virtually accessible for digital exploration (*Heritage Malta n.d.-b*).

Mġarr is also home to a strategically positioned watchtower, Ta' Lippija Tower, built during the era of the Knights of St John offering panoramic views of the surrounding countryside and coastline (*Visit Malta n.d.-f*).

Fort Binġemma, at one end of Victoria Lines trail, is a historical landmark that offers stunning views and a glimpse into Malta's military past, however as stated by Cordina (2023) it remains closed to the public due to ongoing issues with illegal occupation.

Castello Zamittello, or Zammitello Palace, constructed in 1675 by Baron Bernardo Zammit, served as a lookout point against corsair raids, featuring four distinctive guard turrets (*Conventions Malta* 2025). The castle is tied to the haunting legend of Lucia, the baron's daughter, who disappeared on the morning of her wedding to an elderly Sicilian count. Moreover, the tragic murder of its last resident, Count Francis Sant Cassia, on the premises, in 1988, remains unsolved for decades later, adding an intriguing layer to its history. (*Galea* 2024) Although not open for regular public visits, Castello Zamittello can be rented for private functions, such as weddings, contributing to tourism revenue (*Conventions Malta* 2025).

Additionally, The Parish Church of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary into Heaven, is one of the most important buildings in Mġarr, for both tourists and locals. The church was constructed in stages, from 1912 until its completion in 1948, with its elliptical dome being a unique architectural feature that sets it apart from other churches in Malta (*Church Trails of Malta* n.d.). The church's construction was a community effort, as funding for its building came from locals, who were selling eggs and livestock, showcasing their dedication to the landmark (Portelli n.d.). Now, the church is the focal point for religious celebrations, particularly the deeply rooted in Maltese tradition, feast of the Assumption, attracting faith-based and architectural enthusiasts and fosters community spirit within locals.

Mġarr's estimated population of around 5000 inhabitants (*City Population* n.d.), is one of lowest population densities in Malta (see Appendix D; National Statistics Office 2023), which plays a crucial role in shaping its rural character and tourism potential. Areas with lower population densities typically experience less pressure on infrastructure and the environment, naturally reducing the intensity of human impact (Majdak and de Almeida 2022). With fewer demands on transportation, utilities and public services, there is less chance of overcrowding and depletion of resources, creating a more sustainable and enjoyable setting for visitors (Din et al. 2022).

The relatively sparse population allows for the continuation of traditional farming practices while helping to mitigate the negative effects of urbanisation, with less pressure to convert agricultural land into urban spaces as also argued by Din et al. (2022). These conditions

create an ideal environment for rural tourism, with visitors enjoying a more authentic, peaceful experience that can not be easily replicated in more densely populated areas of Malta.

Moreover, the involvement of locals in tourism activities adds a personal touch that enhances the visitor experience, making it more memorable (Wijijayanti, Agustina et al. 2020). This is particularly evident during traditional festas. Mġarr is well known for the Festa Frawli, the strawberry festival, which is deeply rooted in the community's cultural heritage. The festival offers a platform for the community to showcase their products, allowing tourists to enjoy fresh, locally grown strawberries as well as strawberry themed snacks, experience local customs, such as processions and music, explore artisan stalls and engage in conversations with locals (*Festa Frawli* n.d.).

Based on previous research, an uncontrolled influx of tourists can lead to overcrowding, overdevelopment, depletion of natural resources and irreversible damage to the environment (Lane, Kastenholz 2015). As rural tourism in Mġarr continues to grow in popularity, there is a clear need for a comprehensive plan, in order to generate positive social and economic impacts.

CHAPTER 3 - Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a case study design, selected for its ability to provide rich, context-specific insights into real-world phenomena through in-depth analysis (Yin 2009). Mġarr, Malta, was chosen as the case due to its integration of cultural heritage, environmental assets and socioeconomic dynamics connected with rural tourism, allowing the research to explore how these factors interact within a specific context. Moreover, case studies are particularly suited to answering “how” questions (Yin 2003), aligning with the research’s aim to identify how rural tourism can be further developed sustainably to attract quality tourists while benefiting the local community and preserving the environment.

3.2. Data Collection Methods

This research adopted a mixed methods approach, to provide a comprehensive understanding of rural tourism development and potential in Mġarr. Integrating qualitative and quantitative helps to better capture the full extent of the topic, often lacking in single-method designs, strengthening validity of the findings (Creswell and Clark 2007). This approach allows for triangulation, where findings from different data sources are compared to strengthen the credibility of the results (Bryman 2006). This is particularly useful in social science studies, like tourism, where understanding complex interactions between stakeholders, visitors, locals and the environment, requires diverse data sources (Teddlie and Tashakkori 2009).

Alternative methodologies were assessed but ultimately rejected. A purely quantitative approach was rejected due to its limited ability to accurately represent the complex perspectives of stakeholders and visitors (Queirós et al. 2017). Such methods often fail to uncover the underlying motivations and contextual factors that influence tourism experiences (Goeldner and Ritchie 2011). On the other hand qualitative research alone may not provide the comprehensive view required to address all the diverse economic, socio-cultural and environmental factors influencing rural tourism in Mġarr (Aslam et al. 2012).

3.2.1. Primary Data

Primary data is the original data collected directly by the researcher for this specific study. In tourism research, primary data is essential for understanding local contexts, such as visitor preferences and perspectives of stakeholders, that have not already been captured in secondary data.

Semi-structured interviews were used in this study due to their flexibility, as they allow the researcher to adapt questions based on responses and explore themes relevant to rural tourism in Mġarr from the interviewee's point of view (Tisdell et al. 2025). Each participant

was asked a core set of 12 questions, as well as additional questions depending on their answers, with 10 questions being asked to all interviewees and 2 specific questions regarding their role in the sector (see appendix E). Each interview lasted between 15 to 50 minutes, depending on the participant's availability as well as willingness to engage in the topic. Out of the ten stakeholders interviewed, four consented to audio recording, while the remaining six preferred not to be recorded.

For the collection of tourist comments, a total of 30 responses were gathered on four different occasions (see appendix F). Three of these involved approaching tourists at various rural sites and hiking spots in the area, while the fourth was during the Festa Frawli. Most comments (16 out of 30) were collected at Festa Frawli, reflecting the event's popularity and its ability to attract a significant number of visitors. Each interaction with tourists was brief, typically lasting no more than five minutes and included 7 short questions (see appendix G). Gathering quick, on-site feedback is recognised as an effective way to capture subjective tourist experiences and perceptions in specific context (Busagara et al 2023).

3.2.2. Secondary Data

Secondary data plays a vital role in this research by providing an understanding of the context of rural tourism specifically, in Mġarr and supporting the analysis of primary data. Various types of secondary sources were used, including academic literature on rural tourism and policy documents such as Malta's Tourism Strategy 2021–2030 and the Rural Development Programme for Malta. These provided insights into visitor profiles and policy priorities. Additionally, promotional platforms such as VisitMalta and Airbnb listings were examined to explore how Mġarr is positioned as a rural destination and to assess the types of tourism experiences being currently marketed.

Secondary data was essential in identifying relevant themes prior to primary data collection and providing background information about rural tourism concept (Saunders et al. 2023), enabling the researcher to interpret new findings within a well-established contextual framework (Johnston 2014). It provided a foundation of existing knowledge, helping to define key areas for research and design the interview questions.

3.3. Sampling Strategy

The study used purposive sampling to select stakeholders directly involved in rural tourism in Mġarr, such as farmers involved in rural tourism operations, tour operators, local council members, local events organisers and various other stakeholders. A total of 20 potential participants were initially approached for the study, however, only 7 agreed to participate. Two additional participants were recruited via recommendations from existing participants, and another directly at their workplace.

For tourists, convenience sampling was used by approaching visitors at various rural sites and during the Festa Frawli festival to gather diverse feedback (Palinkas et al. 2015).

3.4. Pilot Study

A pilot study was conducted prior to the main data collection to test the clarity and effectiveness of interview questions. It consisted of one interview with a stakeholder, whose feedback helped identify questions that needed clarification. (Malmqvist et al. 2019)

3.4.1. Changes Made After the Pilot Study

Based on the pilot interview, the order of Questions 9 and 10 was adjusted to allow for a more natural flow of the conversation. Additionally, minor wording modifications were made to ensure the questions could be easily understood by participants.

3.5. Methods of Analysis

The data obtained from interviews was analysed using thematic analysis, which focuses on identifying recurring themes within qualitative data (Braun and Clarke 2013). Thematic analysis was chosen to move beyond surface-level descriptions and gain a deeper, more

complex understanding of the experiences and perspectives of participants (Nowell et al. 2017). The thematic analysis was conducted following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework:

The process began with familiarisation, during which transcripts were re-read multiple times to gain an overall understanding. Initial codes were generated by highlighting significant statements across the data and these codes were grouped into potential themes that captured key ideas shared by participants. The researcher has identified 5 themes based on the data collected, each being named to reflect its core message. In the final stage, the findings were written up. (Braun and Clarke's 2006)

To maintain the privacy and confidentiality of participants, each interviewee was assigned a pseudonym, based on their occupation, which were used throughout the report when citing quotes or referencing individual participants.

Responses from the tourist survey were also analysed using thematic analysis. Identifying recurring themes within the qualitative survey data, provided complementary insights to the interview findings. Closed-ended survey responses were summarised using descriptive statistics to highlight trends and patterns among tourists (Reid and Andereck 1989), while open-ended questions were thematically analysed, similarly to the interviews.

3.6. Limitations

Less than half of the approached potential participants replied, resulting in a smaller sample size than anticipated. As a result, the study may be missing crucial insights from other stakeholders.

Using handwritten notes instead of audio recordings for some interviews may induce bias, resulting from missing or inaccurate data. The accuracy of the information is greatly dependent on the researcher's interpretation and memory. (Gall 1996)

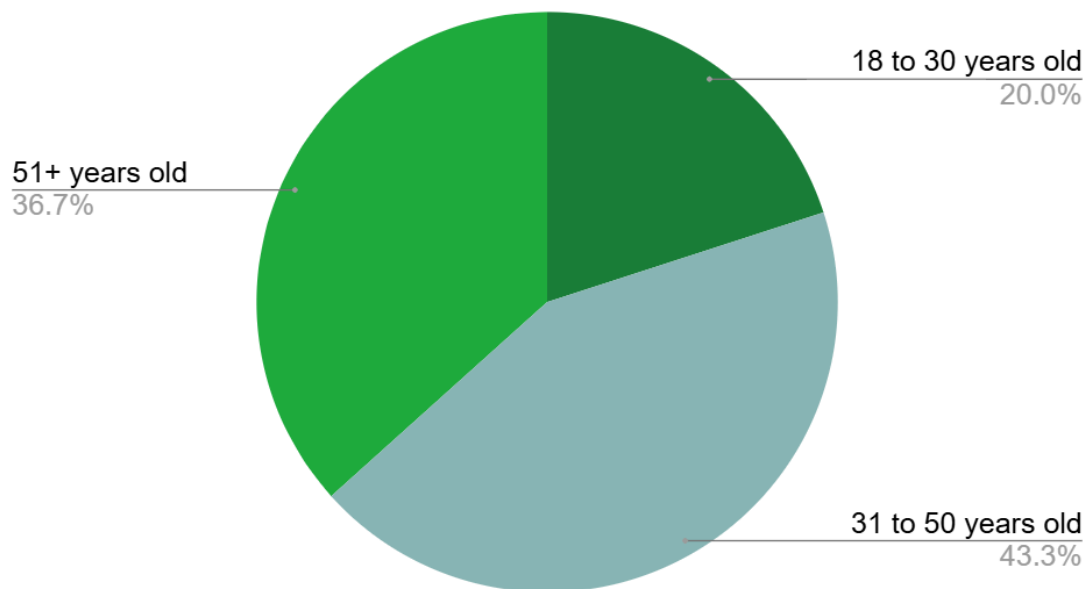
CHAPTER 4 - Analysis and Discussion of the Results

4.1. Comments from Tourists

4.1.1. Age Groups

Most participating visitors fall within the middle (31–50) and older (51+) age groups, together accounting for 80% of respondents (Fig 2). This demographic trend indicates that rural attractions such as those in Mġarr, appeal more to a mature audience, as they seek meaningful connections with the local communities and their traditions (Lane 1994).

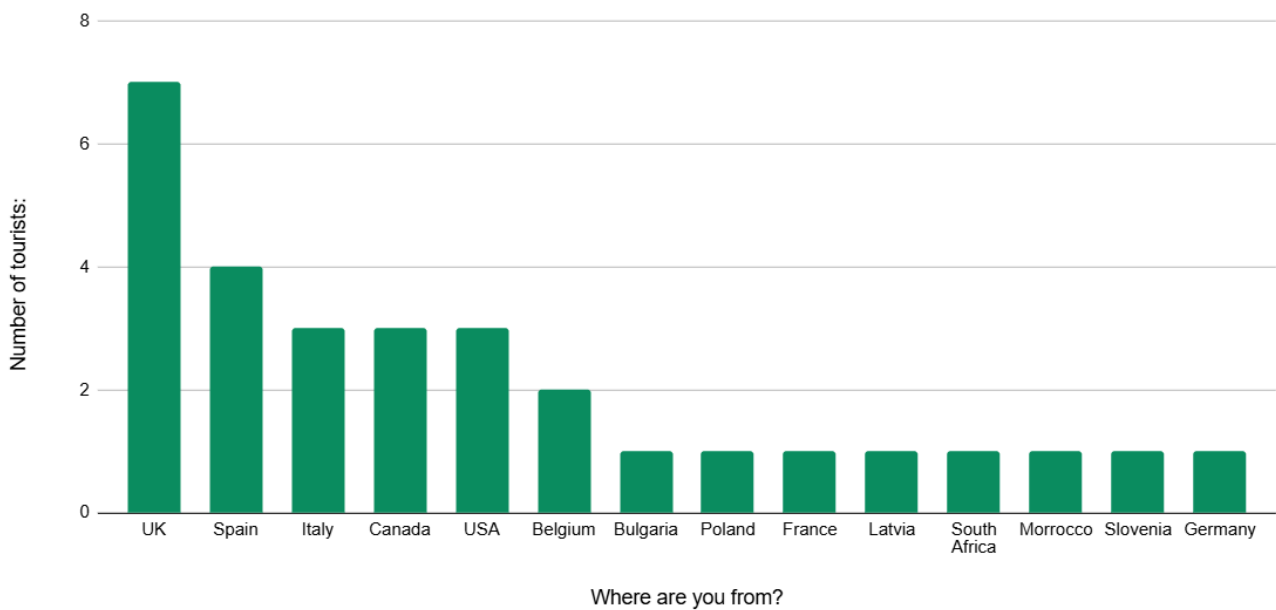
Fig. 2: Age Group Distribution of Visitors to Mġarr



4.1.2. Visitor Nationalities

As indicated in Fig.3, the largest group of respondents were from the UK, followed by Spain, Italy, Canada, the USA, Belgium and other European countries, as well as one respondent each from South Africa and Morocco. This highlights Mġarr's appeal to tourists from various countries and continents.

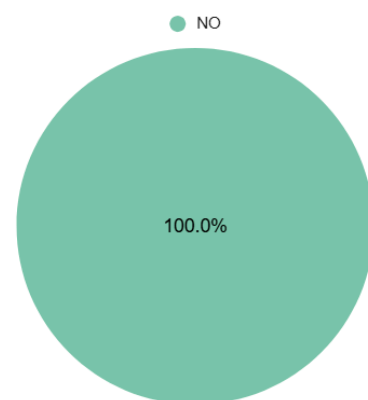
Fig. 3: Nationalities of Visitors in Mġarr



4.1.3. Repeat Visitors

30 out of 30 of the respondents answered "No", when asked if they have visited Mġarr before. This may represent an opportunity, as positive first impressions can be converted into future visits and word-of-mouth promotion between tourists.

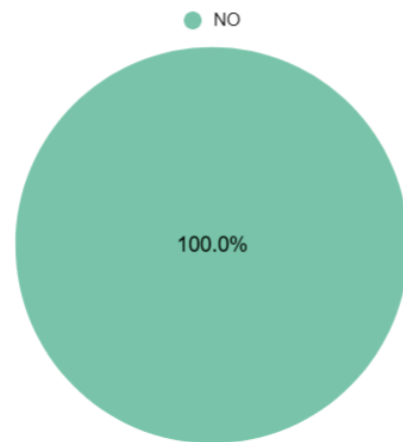
Fig. 4: Have you visited Mġarr before?



4.1.4. Overnight Stays

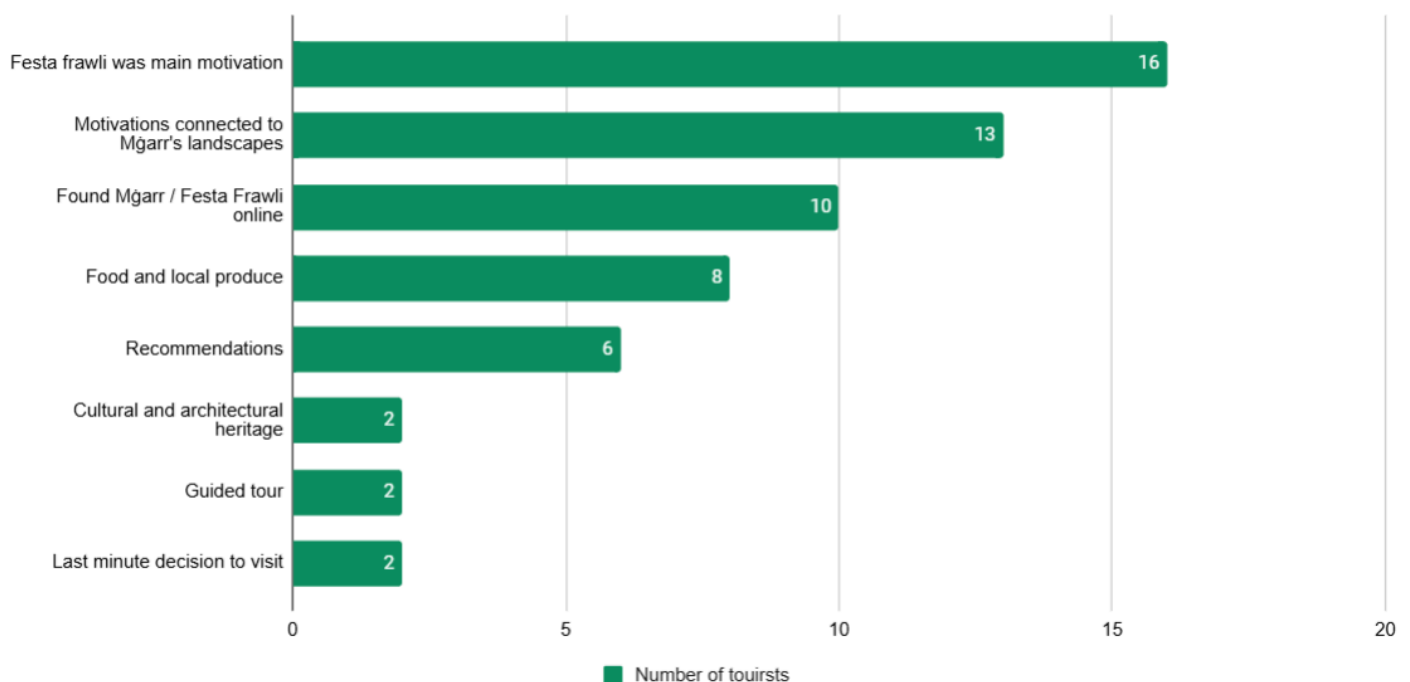
Same pattern occurred when tourists were asked whether they were staying in Mġarr overnight - 100% of respondents stated they were not. Tourists' consistent preference for short, purposeful visits without overnight stays indicates Mġarr's potential as a destination for day-trippers. This form of tourism mirrors the rural tourism model described by Lane (1994) and Lane, Kastenholz et al. (2022), which aims to promote environmental sustainability, by providing tourism experiences without the need for extensive development.

Fig. 5: Are you staying in Mġarr overnight?



4.1.5. Key Motivators

Fig. 6: Common themes in tourists' motivations to visit Mġarr / Festa Frawli?



The majority of the tourists were surveyed during Festa Frawli therefore, the event itself was their main motivation for visiting Mġarr (see appendix F), except one tourist who said “*we were going to the beach and saw this so we came to visit.*”

The common theme among visitor responses regarding their motivations to visit Mġarr, was their desire to experience nature, views, greenery or just break from the urban environment. 13 out of 30 respondents’ answers were connected to the rural environment, such as seeking more quiet spaces, greenery, countryside, peaceful atmosphere, hiking and the coastline. For example, Tourist 12 said that Mġarr is a place to “*take a break from the people and cars,*” while tourist 4 was visiting after seeing pictures from a hike from the area online. This supports the argument presented in the literature that the natural landscapes of Mġarr are not only reason for its well preserved rural integrity (Grima and Vassallo 2008), but also form a key part of its rural tourism appeal.

A total of 10 tourists mentioned discovering Mġarr or Festa Frawli online, proving that digital platforms and websites, such as Visit Malta, influenced their decision to visit Mġarr.

Eight visitors spoke about food and local produce, from which 2 specifically mentioned Vincent’s Eco-Farm, and one talked about “*wanting to taste the Maltese rabbit,*” in a restaurant. Another 4 Festa Frawli attendees talked about coming specifically for strawberries (see appendix H).

Another pattern that can be observed is the influence of personal recommendations, with 6 visitors stating they came to Mġarr or Festa Frawli based on suggestions from friends, locals, their accommodations or online.

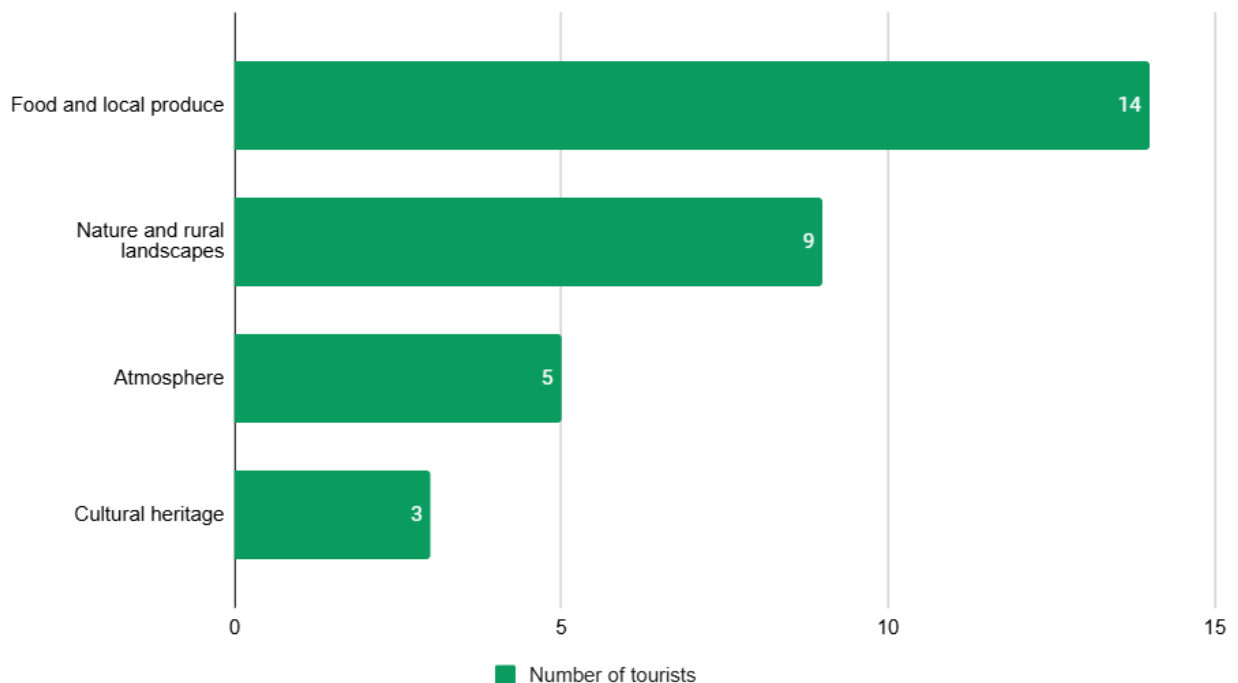
Only 2 tourists mentioned the cultural and architectural heritage of Mġarr, with both tourists visiting the temples and one the Parish Church, noting “*it is a truly local village.*” The limited mention of other significant historical sites indicates that Mġarr’s other heritage offerings, such as the roman baths (*Heritage Malta n.d.-b*), may not yet be known to tourists nor promoted on a large scale.

Similarly, only 2 were visiting Mġarr as part of a guided tour, which is a key practice for introducing visitors to less commercialised, rural areas (Rumble et al 2108).

Additionally 2 tourists decided to visit Mġarr last minute, with one saying, “*we were going to the beach and saw this (Festa Frawli), so we came to visit.*”

4.1.6. Positive Feedback Gathered from Visitors

Fig. 7: Common positive feedback gathered from tourists



Thanks to the community's strong agricultural roots (Mifsud 2024), Mġarr's local produce plays an important part of rural tourism. The most positive comments talked about food and local produce as the favourite part of the visit for many tourists. These were mostly gathered from visitors attending Festa Frawli, with strawberries being the central attraction. For example, Visitor 27 stated that “*the strawberries were delicious,*” while Visitor 26 praised the wide variety of strawberry-based items offered, such as sweets and flavoured drinks, adding that “*the food, definitely was worth it, the fresh salad with strawberries,*” and several other visitors simply stated, “*the food.*”

Strawberries clearly play an important role in attracting visitors to Mġarr, especially during the festa period. Tourist 17 highlighted this by saying, *“It’s so special that they celebrate them, there is everything from strawberries and people are wearing costumes, they go all in for this”* as well as describing Festa Frawli as a *“unique event.”*

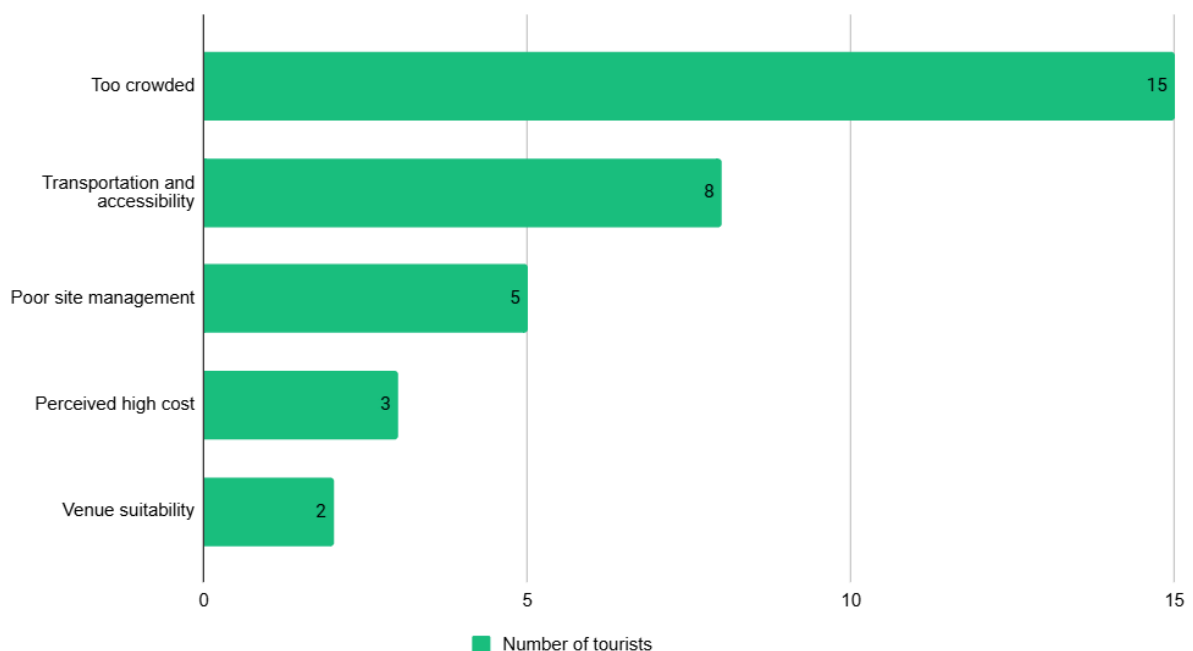
The second most common theme among tourists’ favourite aspects of their visit to Mġarr is its natural environment, which was mentioned 9 times. For instance, tourist 1 appreciated the area because of *“no cars, no crowds, views for taking pictures”* and tourist 5, *“mostly how much calmer it is.”* Which aligns with Lane’s (1994) findings that successful rural destinations offer an opportunity to escape urban life.

5 visitors talked about the atmosphere of Mġarr and the impressions it left on them, with tourist 29 feeling like *“being part of a big family celebration.”*

Cultural heritage is another most enjoyed aspect of the visitor experience. Tourist 11, visiting the temples during a guided tour felt like *“looking to the past,”* and tourist 13 noted the *significance of the parish church and “how unbelievably huge,”* it is.

4.1.7. Negative Comments and Suggestions for Improvements

Fig. 8: Recurring issues and improvement suggestions noted by tourists



The most common complaint was overcrowding and lack of event organisation, mentioned by 15 out of the 16 participants surveyed during Festa Frawli. Visitors described the atmosphere as *“too crowded, not organised”* (Visitor 30) and repeatedly commented about *“long queues and lack of seatings,”* (Visitors 17 and 25). Tourist 28 noted that they *“wanted to take a picture with the sign but there were too many people,”* suggesting that even simple activities were difficult.

Overcrowding not only affects visitor satisfaction (Lane 1994) but may also threaten the authenticity of the event experiences. For example, the main square in front of the Parish Church lacked a presence of local farmers and was dominated by more commercialised brands like Maypole or Eatwell. Additionally, just a few stands served traditional Maltese food, many others offered mainstream items such as burgers.

Another frequently mentioned issue was related to public transportation and accessibility, with 8 participants expressing dissatisfaction. Tourist 4 commented on the long travel times from Valletta, while tourist 5 highlighted the lack of available buses and expensive alternative options: *“the bolt is too expensive.”* Moreover, tourist 18 criticised the subtle service from Rabat *“waited for more than an hour for the shuttle bus.”*

Poor sites management is also an evident concern. Tourist 10 criticised the lack of interpretation at Skorba Temples, a paid site, and tourist 1 suggested that *“more information should be available regarding hikes, trails etc.”* Similar issues have been noted across the area of Mġarr, for example with the Victoria Lines missing information signage (Galdes 2023) or squatters at Fort Binġemma Cordina (2023).

Feedback from 3 visitors suggested that they felt the value did not match the price. Tourist 19 opined that food and beverages on Festa Frawli were *“overpriced”*.

Venue suitability was also raised as a concern, with some tourists suggesting that Festa Frawli could be hosted in larger spaces, such as local farms. Visitor 20 asked, *“why don’t they do it on the fields?”* while visitor 23 recommended using venues like Vincent’s Eco Farm, which could be an opportunity for deeper integration between the event and Mġarr’s rural landscape.

4. 2. Interviews

4.2.1. A Growing Interest in Rural Experiences

All the interviewed participants have observed an increasing interest from tourists, in meaningful, memorable experiences, reflecting the global trend towards experiential tourism, which creates an emotional connection between tourists and the destination (Lane, Kastenholz et al. 2022). Tour Guide B, spoke about the tourists he meets with: *“They won’t miss bits of what I’m saying, they want to know as much, about the rural and rural lives, as they can possibly get in one day,”* while Restaurant Owner talked about guests who asked for a local recipe: *“If I show them that’s not enough, some of them would go into the kitchen... next to the chef,”* implying that the visitors wish to experience Mġarr on a personal level.

The fact that Mġarr is still relatively unknown, compared to other destinations in Malta, was highlighted. Tour Guide A noted, *“Mġarr is still somewhat undiscovered,”* supported by findings from tourist surveys, which showed that 100% of visitors were new to Mġarr, as well as by Vincent’s Estate Representative saying: *“Most tourists wouldn’t know too much (about Mġarr) per se when you compare it to other villages,”* noting that while Mġarr has long been one of the most productive areas for supplying crops and produce in Malta, it has not received the same attention in modern tourism. They added that even its historical landmarks, such as the Parish Church or Prehistoric temples are being often overlooked and visitors prefer other locations across Malta for cultural tourism. Tour Guide B suggested that lesser-known stories, such as the one about locals selling eggs to fund the construction of the church, deserve more attention and *“should be written somewhere,”* as tourists often enjoy this side of the history more, than dates and names. Although the Events Organiser also mentioned the *“egg story,”* they did not expand on its significance.

Several stakeholders, including the local council member, event organizer and restaurant owner, agreed that this "undiscovered" status could be leveraged as a competitive advantage. In a country crowded with tourists, its hidden nature allows it to stand out and turn into one of Malta’s hidden gems, creating an opportunity to attract quality tourists looking for off-the-beaten-path experiences.

Stakeholders who come into direct contact with tourists in Mġarr consistently report a high volume of positive feedback regarding their hands-on rural tourism experiences. Tour operator A said: *“The feedback is very positive. And when they come to these experiences and tours that we organise, many, many times, the feedback we receive is ‘this was the highlight of my trip’. Even for example, they’ve been on a cruise around the Mediterranean or European tour, and it’s very encouraging, and very satisfying to hear the words,”* demonstrating a strong impact on tourists, as they often consider the Mġarr experiences the Mġarr most memorable parts of their journeys. Tour operator B agreed that the most popular experiences are *“the hands-on ones, like the pastizzi workshop.”*

Moreover, Farmer A shared that he hosts tourists with pleasure: *“Because I see that lots of, the majority of them in fact, are interested in what you are saying,”* proving tourists active engagement and Farmer B talked about creating deep connections with guests: *“Send us postcard many times a year,”* which last for long periods of time.

These insights suggest that Mġarr already has a strong position as a rural tourism destination and the consumer’s increased interest in engaging activities creates valuable opportunities (Lane, Kastenholz et al. 2022).

4.2.2. The Role of Agriculture and Food

As discussed in the literature review, agriculture is deeply rooted in the community of Mġarr (Mifsud 2024), shaping its tourism offer. Vincent’s Estate Representative reconfirmed this: *“Mġarr is known as sort of one of the main agricultural spots in Malta, for growing and cultivating produce,”* as well as Tour Operator B: *“It’s important to note that Malta’s remaining green areas exist largely thanks to our farmers and landowners — and visitors do recognise and appreciate that.”*

In fact, most of the interviewed stakeholders involved in rural tourism in Mġarr, stated to have some direct connection to agricultural activities themselves. This close relationship between agriculture and tourism offers visitors authentic, farm-based experiences that set Mġarr apart from other destinations. Tour Operator B pointed out: *“We only work with local, authentic farms and venues and farmers. If it is not a real farm, or real artisan, anyone can*

bring the person, tell them this is how things go..." putting emphasis on the importance of genuine agricultural roots for delivering meaningful experiences.

As supported by the survey analysis, gastronomy is a dominant aspect of tourists' motivations to visit Mġarr. Tour Operator A highlighted this by stating, *"I think our key products are the food and wine tours,"* suggesting that culinary experiences form a core component of rural tourism in the area. The Restaurant Owner described how excited tourists are to try local dishes, sometimes ordering without even knowing what they are: *"I tell them take the ħobż biż-żejt and they say 'ok' without asking what it is. If they come to taste, so they taste."* Tour Guide A further portrayed this enthusiasm, noting that *"They are curious about the preparation of traditional foods, asking questions or compare them to the foods from their home."*

Moreover, gastronomy's importance in Mġarr is highlighted by the annual Strawberry Festival, a major event dedicated entirely to strawberries. The Event Organiser shared that in their opinion: *"majority (of the tourists) come just for the strawberries,"* demonstrating the festival's success is directly dependent on local produce. Local council member pointed out: *"you never know if there will be any strawberries, because that's nature,"* underlining its unique connection to the uncertainties of agriculture.

One of the most important benefits of rural tourism - its ability to support the local economy by generating supplementary income for farming communities - was clearly reflected in the interviews. A common theme was sourcing food for tourism operations from local sources, which was mentioned by Farmer B: *"Because even me, when we host tourists I buy lots of products from local farmers so they are gaining money, other farmers,"* as well as Tour Operator A: *"we always aim for local (food)"* and Restaurant Owner who talked about featuring local wines or beverages on the menu. Tour Guide A highlighted the broader impact: *"If they do it correctly, they get the extra revenue. Nothing much has to change, and they will enjoy some extra revenue,"* from rural tourism bringing income for local farmers. While Tour Operator A suggested that this income can be reinvested, for example, *"to restore the rubble walls,"* referring to necessary improvements in rural venues.

4.2.3. Infrastructure and Accessibility

Three stakeholders noted the recurring problem of limited public transport to Mġarr, which in their opinion could deter potential visitors, especially those relying on public transport. As the Restaurant Owner mentioned, tourists often express frustration about delayed public buses and Vincent Estate Representative complained about the limited number of bus routes serving the area, Tour Guide A added that better transport access would increase the likelihood of them visiting Mġarr.

Conversely, five other participants discussed the issue of accessibility from an opposite point of view. Based on their insights, Mġarr's relative inaccessibility is what adds to its appeal and only the more motivated tourists will make the effort to reach the village. In conclusion, this could be a way of attracting quality tourists who value authenticity over convenience.

Additionally, stakeholders expressed concerns that improving accessibility, *"could and would,"* as noted by Tour Operator B, lead to overdevelopment. More tourists often mean more construction, such as new accommodations and restaurants, which many do not support. For example, Farmer A stated: *"We have to work for it, not promote it, not to build more buildings in this unique area in Malta."* Tour Operator B stressed that: *"Overdevelopment is the biggest potential issue".*

4.2.4. Community Involvement

Involvement of the local community is central to the rural tourism product in Mġarr (Wijijayanti, Agustina et al. 2020), as tourists are deeply interested in the personal stories and daily lives of locals, as highlighted by Tour Guides A and B. They indicated tourists engaging in long conversations and enjoying listening to what the farmers had to say. One thing they get asked a lot, as noted by Tour Operator A, is: *"Please speak between yourselves in Maltese. So that they will at least hear the Maltese language."*

Several interviewees highlighted the need for stronger community involvement and better organisation of rural tourism in the area. When asked about weakness, Tour operator A

replied: “As I said, getting more people on board. It's very important. So, to get them to trust you, first of all, they need to see what you're doing.” More than half of the participants spoke about the lack of young farmers or shortage of farmers and individuals involved in agricultural activities in general, raising a question, whether Mġarr will be able to cater for the increasing number of tourists. Farmer A suggested having meetings and discussions, adding: *“I would include all the people that are interested in these things. Because if you're not interested, it's in vain.”* Such meetings can be a way of connecting those passionate about rural tourism aspects, combining their knowledge and improving the experience. Tour operator B proposed networking events to connect farmers and artisans, to create a community where hosts recommend one another. This approach is a form of sustainable promotion, taking advantage of tourists already visiting the area. The Local Council representative also emphasised the importance of *“having a common goal,”* aligning with this method.

The need for a strategy or a plan was repeatedly mentioned by stakeholders. It should be one that ensures economic gains are reinvested within the local community, providing direct support to residents and landowners. Tour Operator B suggested: *“Direct support for rural landowners, funding for environmental upkeep or incentives for younger generations to remain involved in agriculture.”* Another suggestion, given by both Tour Operator A and Event Organiser, was to invest in training. Whether it is training for agricultural personnel, tour guides, farm hosts or event volunteers, it improves experience for visitors and makes hosts more comfortable.

4.2.5. Cultural Heritage

When discussing cultural heritage, interviewees repeatedly mentioned only the temples and the church, as the main attractions, repeating the pattern that occurred in the survey analysis.

Several also criticised the management of the Victoria Lines trail, aligning with both literature and survey findings. Tour Guide B negatively commented: *“We actually do not recommend the Lines to clients, there is much better places to go,”* further proving that the

site requires attention. Effective protection and promotion of the Victoria Lines involve not just restoration but a long-term preservation strategy.

CHAPTER 5 - Conclusions and Recommendations

5.1. Meeting the Research Aims and Objectives

This study's main aim was to explore how rural tourism in Mġarr, Malta, can be further developed sustainably to attract quality tourists, while benefiting the local community and preserving the environment. Several objectives, outlined in the introduction, have been met: To evaluate the current state of rural tourism in Mġarr, the area has seen growing interest from tourists. However, tourism activities remain fragmented, unorganised and heavily reliant on a few individuals, putting the long-term sustainability at risk. Moreover, the key challenges emerging from the interviews are insufficient coordination among stakeholders and the risks of over-promotion and over-commercialisation. Visitors' motivations have been confirmed to align with rural tourism principles, while very positive feedback gathered from tourists and confirmed by stakeholders' insights confirms Mġarr's role as a rural tourism destination.

Overall, the research confirmed that there is both potential and willingness within the local community to support sustainable tourism development; however, this requires an organised strategy or a plan.

5.2. Recommendations

5.2.1. Locals as a Resource

The need to involve more members of the local community in rural tourism activities emerged clearly from the interviews. Existing farmers and residents should be introduced to the opportunities available within agritourism and rural tourism, by clearly communicating the potential benefits, locals may be encouraged to participate more actively.

As suggested by participants, regular networking events and informal meetings could provide a platform for farmers, artisans, hosts and other stakeholders to share their experiences, discuss challenges they face and exchange knowledge and best practices. Such learning can be especially effective in rural contexts, where word-of-mouth and personal trust are more influential. Even a single successful example can serve as a motivating force for others to join, gradually building a more engaged and collaborative local tourism network.

Moreover, hosts and guides must be well-prepared, especially since many rural visitors want to be engaged and often have background knowledge of specific interests. In such cases, giving incorrect or superficial information can be easily noticed and negatively affect the experience. To address this, training programmes should be developed for both new and existing guides and hosts. This idea was reconfirmed by multiple participants, with Tour Operator A saying: *“So, when a guide is licensed, and is engaged to conduct a rural tour, he or she are not prepared because you need to be knowledgeable about agriculture, about local traditions, rural traditions, about rural, even food, ...”* Training can also help individuals feel more comfortable in their roles, improving the overall quality of interactions.

5.2.2. Festa Frawli

The issue of overcrowding during Festa Frawli emerged consistently across all aspects of the research. While the event plays a key role in promoting local produce and the agricultural culture of the village, the current scale and crowd size risk undermining its original purpose. The event is already shifting from a community-focused celebration into a mass tourism attraction, reducing its authenticity and value for both locals and quality tourists. To address this, a coordinated plan involving all relevant stakeholders is needed.

Several suggestions for improvement included relocating the event to a more spacious venue, such as local fields or farms, which could better accommodate the growing number of visitors while staying true to the event's rural character. Other recommendations include

implementing a carrying capacity for the event, to make sure attendant numbers stay manageable.

5.2.3. Infrastructure and Accessibility

While accessibility is important for a destination, some stakeholders noted that the limited public transport to parts of Mġarr has unintentionally helped preserve its rural character by discouraging mass tourism to the area. This can be leveraged as a means of attracting more quality tourists, who are more likely to support local businesses. Moreover, for places such as Fomm ir-Riñ, participants suggested that these should be kept less accessible so as to protect them and maintain that authenticity that makes it special. Therefore, it is advised to prioritise the efforts to protect rural sites and less commercialised areas of Mġarr, rather than bringing more tourists.

Better site management is evidently needed across Mġarr, particularly in the context of cultural and architectural heritage. Despite the value of these assets, current protection and interpretation efforts are insufficient. For example, the temples, though designated as a paid heritage site, were pointed out to lack effective interpretation. By improving the interpretation signage and leveraging storytelling, the site could gain educational value. Similarly, the village church presents an opportunity to incorporate the "egg story" mentioned during interviews, thus creating emotional connections with visitors. The Victoria Lines were also identified as having strong potential. Recognised in both the literature review and stakeholder interviews, it was set to become Malta's first managed national trail. However, this vision will require considerable improvements in trail maintenance, signage, accessibility, available information, as well as heritage interpretation.

5.2.4. Added Value

Another key recommendation emerging from this research is creating added value, rather than simply increasing visitor numbers. Instead of focusing on mass tourism, efforts should

be made to attract visitors who are genuinely interested in the rural offerings of Mġarr and who are more likely to appreciate the area, support preservation initiatives and financially support the local community. For example, participants agreed that local temples should not lower their entrance fees, but instead focus on improving interpretation and overall site quality.

Moreover, agritourism increases the demand for local produce, as discussed in the findings. A key recommendation emerging from the analysis is that of encouraging farmers to recognise the uniqueness of their products and take pride in them. By understanding that their produce is limited, authentic and becoming increasingly valued, farmers may be more motivated to engage in tourism activities and position their produce as premium offerings.

5.3. Suggestion for Future Research

This study was limited to one locality and to a relatively small sample of stakeholders and tourists, therefore future research could focus on larger numbers of participants. Longitudinal studies could also be carried out to track changes over time, related to community involvement and economic impacts of rural tourism in Mġarr.

Deeper understanding of visitors' motivations and satisfaction level, can provide researchers with a more detailed description of what type of tourists are visiting Mġarr.

Another interesting topic deserving attention regards the involvement of youths in rural tourism and agricultural activities overall. Further research that would help in revealing how to promote and encourage more youth participation.

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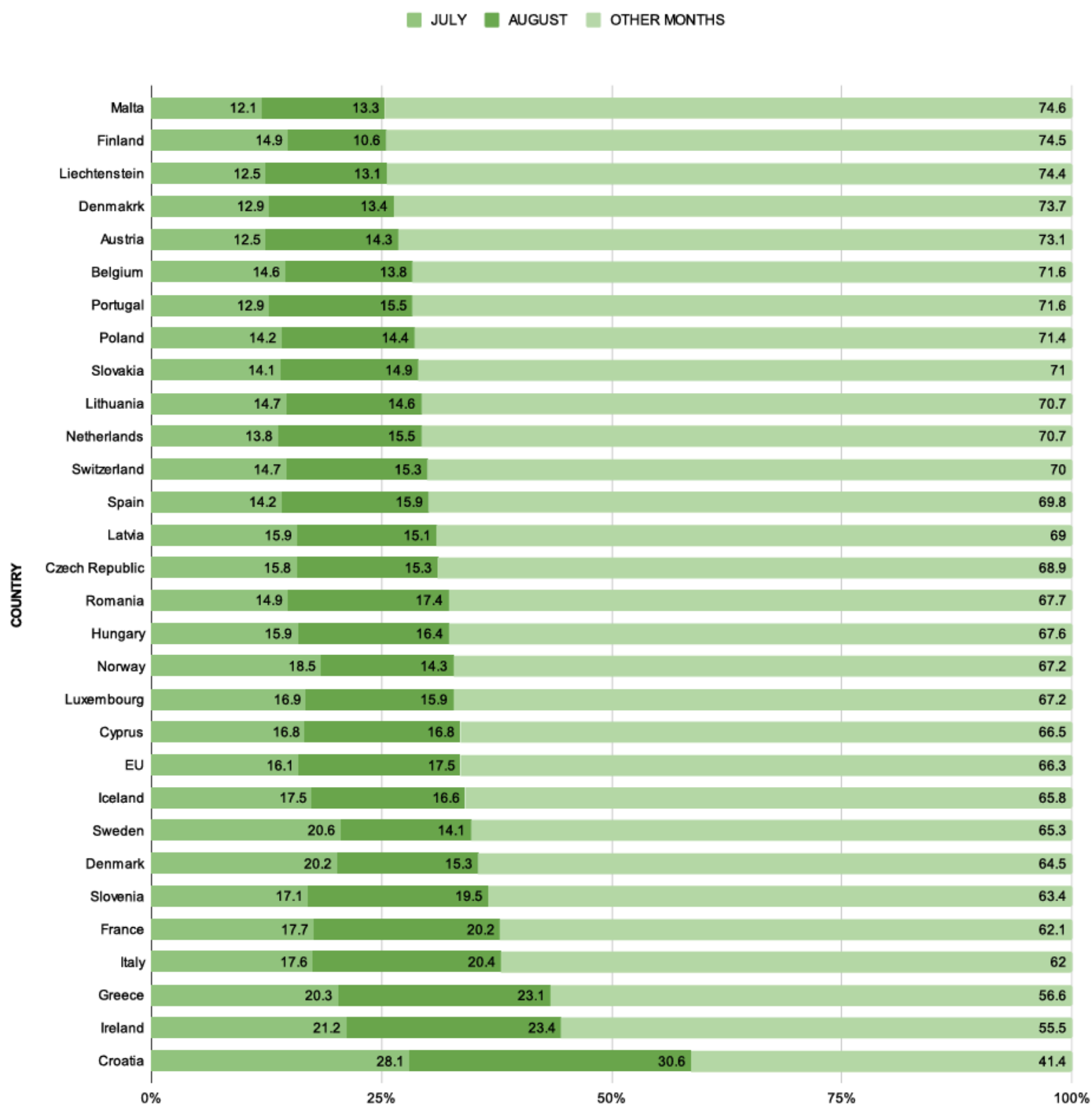
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Appendix A:
Area Included in Natura 2000

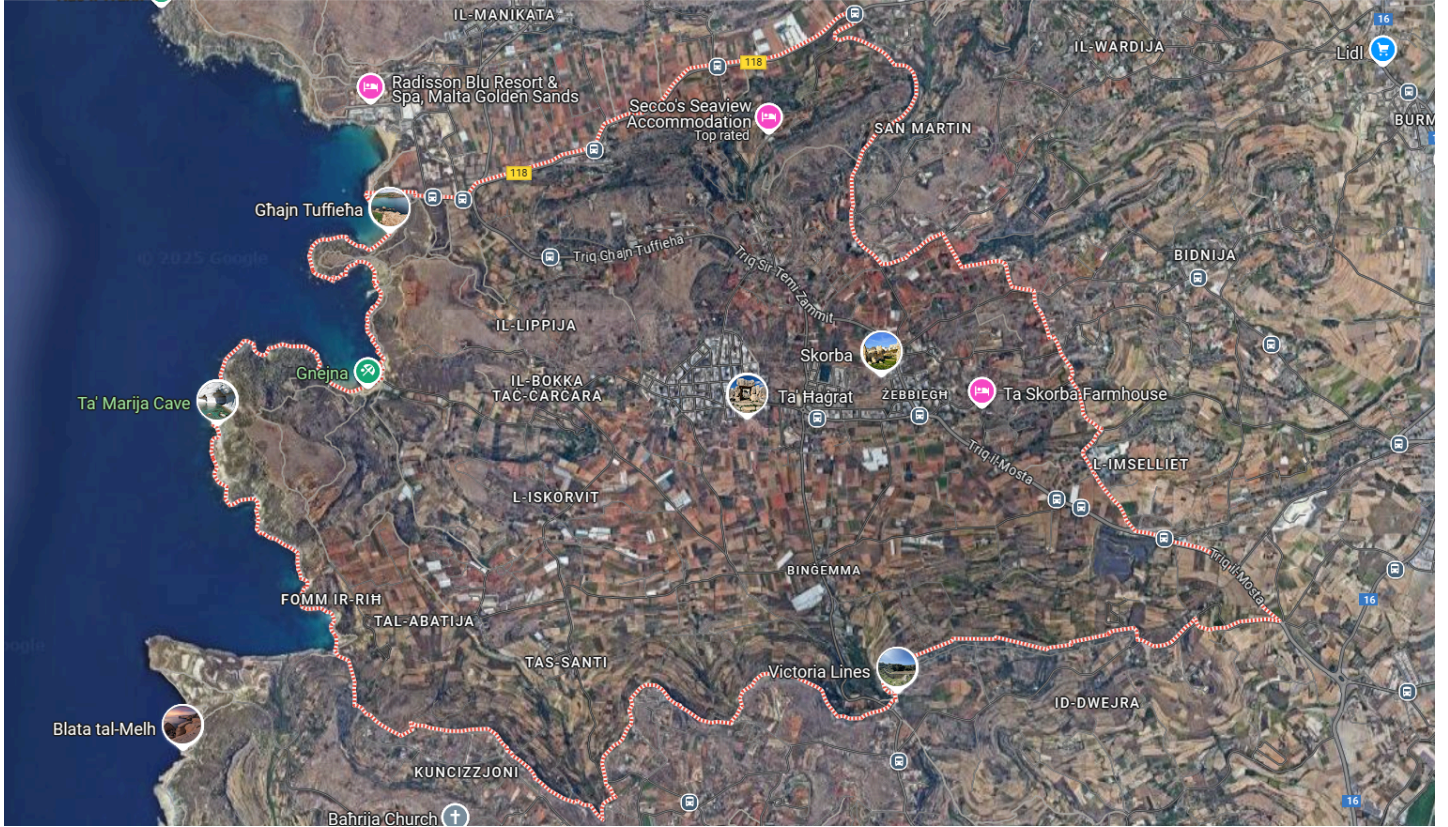


Appendix B: Seasonality in Tourism in the EU

NIGHT SPENT IN TOURIST ACCOMODATIONS IN JULY AND AUGUST

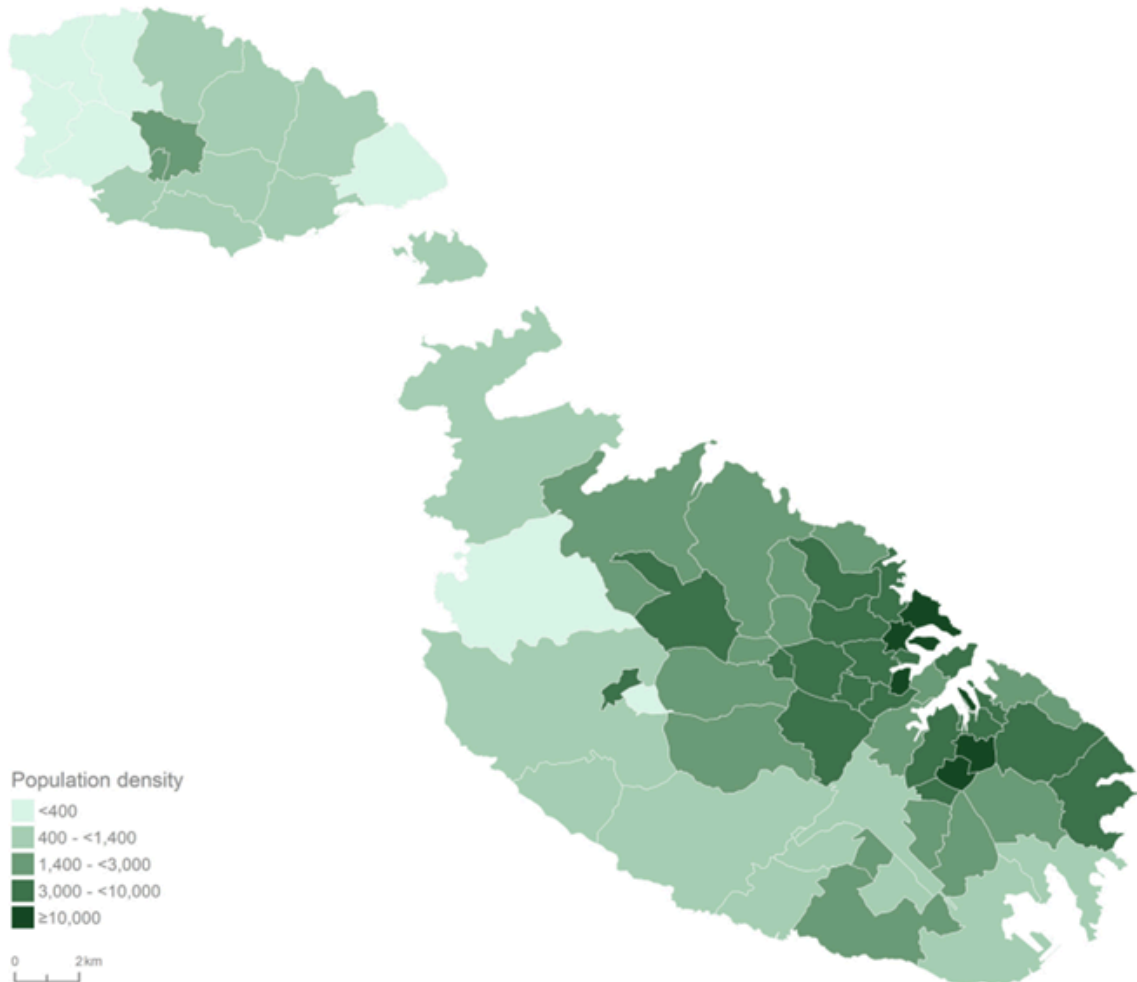


Appendix C: The Area of Mġarr



Appendix D:
Regional Population Density of Malta

MAP 8. Population density



Appendix E:
Questions for Interviews

GENERAL QUESTIONS FOR ALL OF THE INTERVIEWS:

1. Could you describe your connection to Mġarr and its rural tourism sector? What is your role and how long have you been involved?
2. In your opinion, what makes Mġarr unique as a rural tourism destination, and how can this uniqueness be highlighted?
3. In your opinion, which do you consider to be the weaknesses regarding Mġarr as a rural tourism destination? How could these be addressed?
4. Do you think that the local community is being engaged enough? If yes, how? If no, why not?
5. How can Mġarr ensure that tourism revenues are being reinvested in the local community and the environment of the locality?
6. Do you know what type of tourists typically visit Mġarr, and what do they look for in a rural experience?
7. What feedback from tourists do you usually receive regarding their experiences with the rural products in Mġarr?
8. What challenges does Mġarr face in promoting rural tourism?
9. Are you aware of any planned initiatives in Mġarr focused on enhancing the sustainability of its rural tourism offer?
10. Do you have any suggestions on how to improve the rural tourism product in a sustainable way?

QUESTIONS FOR RURAL TOURISM OPERATORS:

11. How do you incorporate sustainability into your tourism offerings?
12. What challenges do you face in operating rural tourism experiences in Mġarr?

QUESTIONS FOR GOVERNMENT STAKEHOLDERS:

13. Do you think rural tourism in Mġarr is effectively marketed to attract quality tourists? What improvements could be made?
14. How does the government monitor and address issues related to over tourism or unsustainable tourism practices in rural areas?

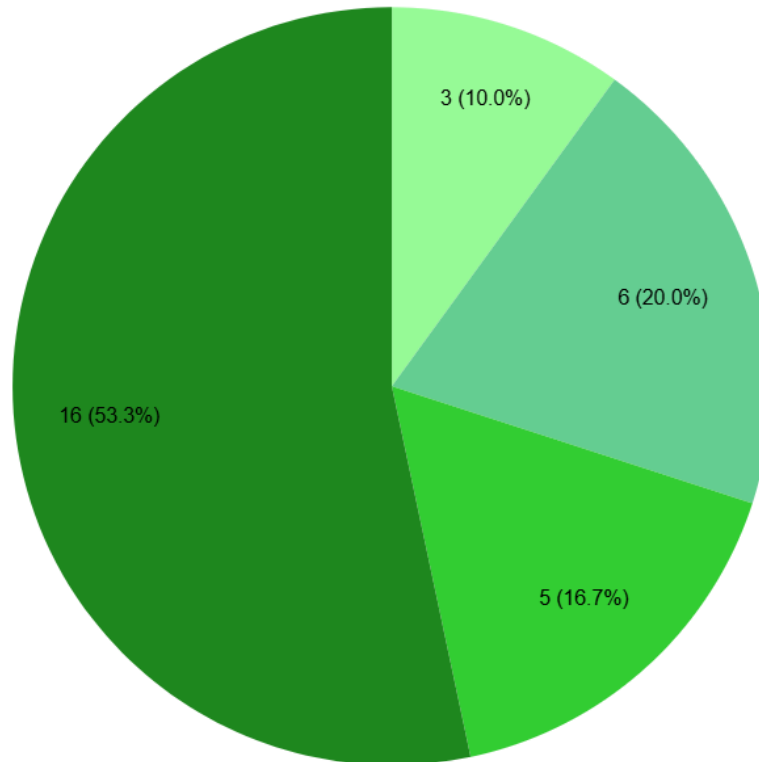
QUESTIONS FOR LOCAL FARMERS / LANDOWNERS INVOLVED IN TOURISM:

15. In what ways does tourism contribute to, or support, local agricultural production and sales?
16. What challenges do you face in integrating tourism into your farming activities?

QUESTIONS FOR PRIEST:

17. Do you believe that Mġarr's religious and cultural heritage plays a role in attracting visitors? If so, how?
18. How can religious and civic institutions contribute to sustainable tourism development in Mġarr?

Appendix F:
Tourist Recruitment Locations



● hike from Ġnejna Bay to Fomm ir-Riħ ● Mġarr city center ● Ta' Ħaġrat and Skorba Temples + Żebbiegħ ● Festa Frawli

Appendix G:
Questions for Tourists

1. What is your age group? 18-30, 31-50, 51+
2. Where are you from?
3. Have you visited Mġarr before?
4. Are you staying in Mġarr overnight?
5. What motivated you to visit Mġarr / Festa Frawli?
6. What did you enjoy most about your visit?
7. Was there anything you did not enjoy or that could be improved?

Appendix H:
Key Local Produce Attractions Mentioned by Tourists

