

WHEN THE SALT BEDS REST

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Do you ever feel guilty for taking a break? Do you feel you need to complete a flurry of tasks just to tell yourself you've done enough and deserve to rest? When you're not productive or busy, do you feel you're doing something wrong? Stop. Join me for a walk down to the Xwejni Salt Pans – your answer is written in the salt.

No matter where you are on our waterlocked archipelago, you're bound to catch a glimpse of the ever-moving, ever-shimmering blue that feeds the storm clouds so well. Wait long enough, and you will spot the cycle – spouting waterfalls from the sky as the clouds take up water and dispel it soon after.

In a landlocked place, you can cross borders – the earth does not discriminate against itself – and so

lands at the borders always hold some kind of multiplicity in their identity. On an island, our identity is fed by a completely different source of change. An island is a protrusion, unmoved by the washing waves, yet always in flux. Waves clash against the rocks' stubborn fixity, and the two form a near-eternal friction that defines their boundaries.

Our air is salt. We breathe it into our conversations. It slips off the tongue into each other's thoughts. Salt – change – is what we know best. Being on an island means being in constant change, shaped by the elements. Change is what brings life.

MEWĠ IL-BAĦAR (WAVES OF THE SEA)

Driving away from Żebbuġ (Gozo), the winding downhill road of Għajn Mhelhel gives way to views of Xwejni Bay. Above the inlet, il-Qolla l-Bajda and its battery separate the bay from its sister, Qbajjar Bay, where a boċċi club holds sessions for its members even in the colder months. Amidst the pops and clinks of boċċi knocking

against each other, glugs echo deep in the rock, coaxing visitors to approach the boat ramp lined with seaweed and take a dip in its chilly waters.

If the water is serene in one bay, chances are, it will be frothy and crashing ashore in the other. The view at Xwejni Bay is dominated by foamy waters and distinctly yellow soft stone – Ġebbla tal-Franka (Globigerina Limestone). Green-painted apertures and the revving quad bikes are a year-round sight on the commute to the salt pans. Patches of Xebb (*Salsola melitensis*) cling to the soft stone like barnacles – stone soaked in years of sea spray and salt. Each time the wind brushes against the hills, it thins them and deposits flecks of salt that leave cracks in the rocks' soft belly for wild things to sink their roots deeper, breaking the way for more sea spray and salt to creep in.

Just off Sagħtrija road, a hut carved straight out of the hill sports pale blue windows and a sea-facing door with flaky paint and rust. It marks the entrance to the salt pans – rectangular pits carved into



Xwejni salt pans in winter
Photo by Kristov Scicluna

the ground to be filled with salty water in the summer months. Signs warning against barbecuing and littering dot the façade of the hut. Ash pollutes the salt that takes so long to collect, concentrate and dry.

The Xwejni salt pans are actively worked and harvested between May and September, excluding stormy days that disrupt the drying of the salt. Harvesting salt is laborious and time-consuming in the summer sun. Yet winter, in all its lashing and outrage, serves to reset the area, washing away contaminants and preparing the beds for the incoming harvest season. And so, over winter, the salt pans nestled between il-Fanal ta' Ġurdan to the left and il-Qolla l-Bajda on the right sit rejuvenated, whipped by wind and sea. Only the salt remains on their skin.

DISSOLVING STAGNATION WITH SEASONALITY

Seasons come and go, but if we do not pause for long enough to glean some wisdom from them, they will pass us by, taking their benefits

with them. In the summertime, the Qbajjar area feels rich in colour and whimsy. Families visit the bays daily, and children's voices fill the air with play – the sister bays are transformed into an idyllic seaside escape. Yet in winter, it is the direct opposite. The area seems derelict, worn, and almost deserted. People avoid the hostile waters, and many locals remain indoors or return to Victoria – Qbajjar goes into hibernation.

And yet, even when our surroundings undergo physical change as great as this, we often remain unaffected. We ignore the importance of change (or of changing) and set up strict routines that take our days for granted, allowing them to blend into a uniform wash of productivity. In doing so, we not only miss the value of taking extended breaks to compose our next milestone, but we also miss the salt – those small opportunities for change. This is the true source of stagnation. Stagnation occurs when we constantly expect ourselves to be on the go, which inevitably prevents us from resetting and allowing new

perspectives to guide our approach or to pique the growth within us.

A salt pan is only as good as it is able to dry out efficiently and have its minerals collected. If it is constantly flooded by rain, then the salt crystals cannot form properly. Conversely, if the beating sun never gives way to winter respite, then the salt beds and their farmers will be too worn to reap the benefits of harvest. It is just the same for us. By choosing to incorporate more breaks between our productive tasks, we allow ourselves to disengage, change focus and actively decide on what is valuable rather than going through the motions. Breaks could be time spent nurturing a new skill or hobby, appreciating seasonality, or setting up a creative monthly project. The result is better mental clarity and more intentional living.

So whether you are a mainlander or an islander, whether you are inspired by salt or by the fluidity of borders, do not let your life develop the stink of stagnation. Let the only recurrence be salt. **T**