

Għarb

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Għarb, originating from a semitic word meaning West, is a typical old Gozitan village unsurprisingly lying in the west of the island of Gozo. Having been a small hamlet centuries ago, one can still admire its ancient roots in the centre of the village, where some houses are to this day adorned with Gozo's typical decorated stone balconies.

Għarb became a parish in 1679, an important progression which gave impetus for the building of a new baroque parish church. Built between 1699 and 1729, the parish church in Għarb is one of the most architecturally perfect churches in Gozo, being modelled on Francesco Borromini's Sant' Agnese in Agone at Piazza Navona in Rome.

The Għarb village square is often portrayed as one of the key attractions on postcards featuring the Maltese Islands. In the square one may also visit a fascinating folklore museum containing all sorts of memorabilia, retelling the island's rural history.



The Għarb parish church.

On the outskirts of the village, a road leads to the National Shrine of the Blessed Virgin of Ta' Pinu, which was built between 1920 and 1931. Ta' Pinu (of Philip, in English), is derived from the name of the man who looked after the old chapel in the 17th Century. The resting place of this man is found behind the main altar of the new church.

Għarb is a place of natural beauty especially the area surrounding the ancient chapel of San Dimitri. The legend associated with San Dimitri Chapel narrates that after an old woman beseeched the Saint to save her single son from slavery, San Dimitri left the altar piece on his flying stallion and brought back her son Matthew after he had already been taken by the Saracens. The altar piece can still be seen in the chapel.

Għarb is one of the oldest Gozitan villages, where various archaeological excavations exposed the remains of Neolithic and Bronze Age settlements in the area. The name Għarb is purely Arabic, denoting the establishment of an early but organised community during Arab domination between 870 and 1090 AD. However, names of early Christian devotion such as St Demetrius and St Publius, indicate that pre-Arab Roman and Byzantine settlements existed before this westerly village took its present name.

There are no significant historical episodes related with Għarb. However the people of this village with their coastal lookouts, have the merit of having been the first to signal the arrival of reinforcements to the beleaguered Maltese under the Knights of St John in the Great Siege of Malta of 1565. During those terrible years, the Għarb lookouts constantly relayed smoke signals to Malta, alarming the entire population from the constant perils of marauding Berber and Turkish pirates.

The parish is dedicated to the Visitation of Our Lady to St Elizabeth. The feast day is on the 31st May of every year and the outside festivities are held on the first weekend of July.



The *Infiolata* at Għarb.

As from 2002, the Għarb Local Council, after signing a twinning agreement with Gerano (Province of Rome, Italy), has taken up the tradition of organising the *Infiolata* every year, during the feast. The *Infiolata* consists of a carpet made of fresh flower petals and leaves which are cut in small pieces forming a thematic design. The *Infiolata* is placed in the main square so that the procession can pass over this special carpet. When the procession is finished children enjoy themselves playing with the flowers.

The village of Għarb has other churches and chapels that are associated with traditional legends and religious devotion.

The most popular shrine on Gozo, the one dedicated to Our Lady of Ta' Pinu, also lies within the perimeter of Għarb. This architectural masterpiece was built next to an old chapel (still existing), where it is profoundly believed that back in 1883, Our Lady spoke to a devotee from Għarb named Karmni Grima. Ta' Pinu Sanctuary is a place of great devotion and is of national importance. Numerous pilgrims, both locals and tourists, visit Ta' Pinu shrine all year round. The main painting of the church depicts the Assumption of Our Lady, and is the same painting that was enshrined in the old medieval chapel.



Ta' Pinu church.

Museums at Għarb

Għarb also offers the visitor a modest number of unusual museums. Two of these museums are the restored residences of two of the saintly sons of the village, namely Karmni Grima who started the Ta' Pinu devotion, and that of Frenč Mercieca, popularly known as Frenč ta' l-Għarb. The museum of Karmni Grima has been restored through EU Funds and has re-opened its doors recently. Frenč ta' l-Għarb was a wise but rather humble saintly man who lived between 1892 and 1967. He had a distinct ability of curing people, leaving several doctors of the day perplexed by his successes. He combined his knowledge of old medicinal herbs, his prayers and his faith in the Virgin Mary for his cures, and his reputation spread rapidly throughout the entire Maltese Islands and even abroad.

The Għarb Folklore Museum (found at Pjazza Zjara tal-Madonna) is a private owned museum found in the core of the village. Its 28 rooms are full of all kinds of antique tools and artifacts. It is really worth visiting.

Another museum is the Parish Museum – Ecclesia Mater – which has been set up at the Għarb Collegiate and Basilica complex and which houses a permanent exhibition of sacred art. The museum is hosting an exhibition of sacred arts that reflects



The museum of Karmni Grima.

the old roots of the community of the Għarb together with the Rev. Chapter courtroom which has been recently renovated.

The exhibits cover a period of history starting from the Phoenicians to the Arabic period up to the present age. In fact Punic pottery remains, found in the area of Għarb, are among the exhibits proving that there were early settlements in the western part of Gozo. The collection of Arabic and Jewish coins that were found in these western areas of the island are a sign of the business which was carried out by those stopping on the shores of this part of the island.

Another attraction of the village of Għarb is the Ta' Dbiegi Crafts Village, where various handcrafts are made and sold. Visitors can find hand-made pottery, mouth-blown glass, Gozo lace and filigree. Għarb is the place where glass blowing and pottery could be watched being made.

Other Cultural Events

Carnival

A carnival soiree is an activity organised by the Council annually during February. The activity includes performances by various dancing

companies, carnival floats defile, children's costume competitions and 'il-*Maskarat Misterjuż*' competition where a popular person from the village is chosen to disguise himself and the first person who recognises him wins.

Seħer il-Punent Festival

Since 2007, the Għarb Local Council has been organising the festival of 'Seħer il-Punent', a festival of arts, culture, history and music. The aim of this festival is to attract visitors to Gozo and to promote the treasures found around the island, thereby also helping the local businesses during the lean winter months. Various activities and performances by popular local and foreign groups take place during the festival together with a variety of competitions. Since its first edition in 2007, the festival has always been of success and the Council has included this event in its annual cultural events calendar.

Għarb Day

Since 1994, the Għarb Local Council has been organising Għarb Day, annually, on the 29th August. This day has been chosen by the Council because on 29th August, 1679 Għarb was declared a parish by Bishop Molina. On this particular day the Council prepares a soiree of culture and entertainment for the residents. One of the activities which has been organised annually since 1996 is the 'Premju Għarb' Award. Each year the Council selects a person who contributed to or did honour to the locality through his or her work, and presents this person with the *Premju Għarb* Shield on Għarb Day. As from 2002 the Council started awarding 'Premju Qlub Ġenerużi' to a person who committed an act of humanity or generosity towards people in need.

On an initiative of Mayor David Apap, the Għarb Local Council introduced the Għarb Gozitan Cultural Award in 2004. This award is presented to a talented person or a group of persons who distinguish themselves in a specific area. The subject which is different every year is chosen by a sub-committee which committee also decides the winner. Another award that was introduced in 2009,



One of the activities held during 'Seher il-Punent' festival.

is 'Premju Volontarjat Lokali' which is awarded to a person doing voluntary work in the community.

Projects

The Local Council has also committed itself to implement various projects including the following.

The rehabilitation and regeneration of Wied il-Mielah, where dams were constructed to retain water for the benefit of the farmers who own fields in the area. In connection with this project, a road has been resurfaced and rubble walls constructed. This area is now a family recreational area and a pleasant country walk.

Restoration projects were also carried out by means of EU funds including the restoration of San Dimitri Chapel, the restoration of Taz-Żejt Chapel, the restoration of the historical bridge at Sdieri Street, the restoration of the pilgrimage cross at Għarb Square, the restoration of the Għarb Church façade including the belfry, the restoration of the war shelter at Għarb Square, the restoration of rubble walls and the restoration of Għarb Square.

The Council has also built a leisure park at Tumas Cassar Street which is complementary with the already existing playing field in the same area and comprises

a 5-a-side mini pitch with synthetic turf and picnic areas. Additional to this project, the football ground has been resurfaced with synthetic turf by means of funding from the Gozo Football Association and the Council has taken care of the installation of new fence, lights and a jogging track.

Conclusion

With all the above attractions, Għarb is the village that the visitor to Gozo should not miss. Its panoramic countryside tracks and valleys are ideal for walks and for relaxation. If one is not interested in museums, a walk to the cliffs at Wied il-Mielah would be very rewarding. There, a spectacular natural "window", not as popular, but similar to the Azure Window of Dwejra, is found. One could opt also to sit relaxed in the peaceful and picturesque village square, enjoying the view of the church, the lethargic strokes of its clock tower, or curiously study the unique shape of old hand-sculptured balconies that adorn the village's oldest homes.

Although many people think of Għarb as a small village without any resources, the location is rich in culture, folklore and environmental attractions.

David Apap is the mayor of the Għarb Local Council.