

# Wied il-Mielah and Wied il-Ghasri as Attractions for Rural Tourism<sup>1</sup>

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The valleys known as Wied il-Mielah and Wied il-Ghasri form part of Gozo's attractions associated with rural tourism, which is in turn associated with the island's cultural identity, lifestyle, traditional food and the natural environment.

## Rural Tourism in the Literature

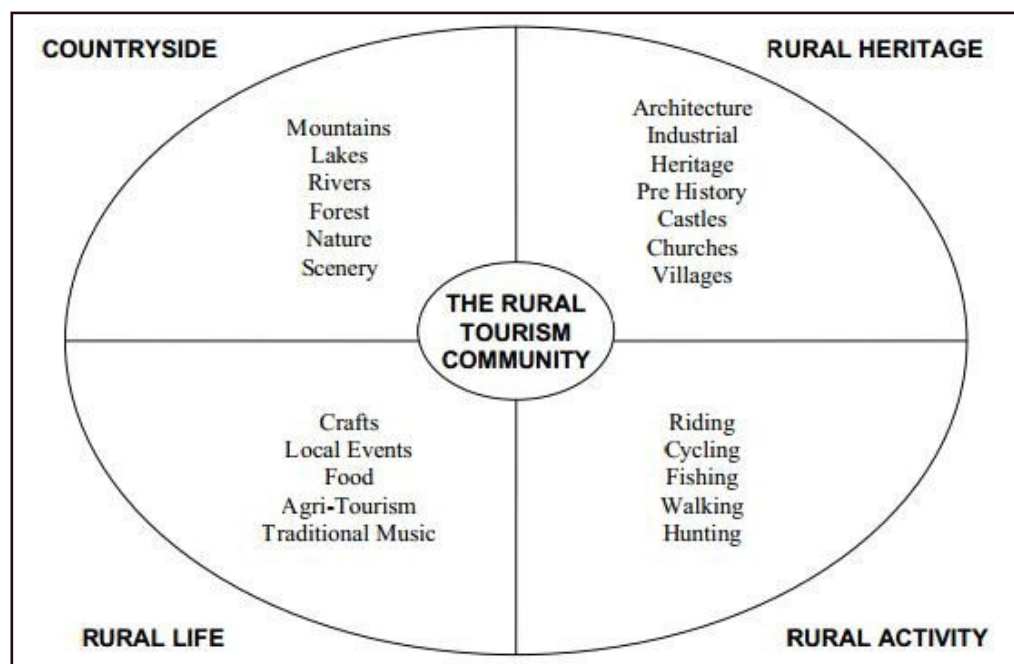
### *Defining rural tourism*

Rural tourism is defined by Lane (1994) as "tourism which takes place in the countryside". This definition is somewhat too simplistic and it raises a number of related questions such as the meaning of countryside and the activities associated with visiting the countryside.

A more elaborate definition of rural tourism is proposed by the World Tourism Organization (WTO, 2005) as that which "... gives to the visitors a personalised contact, a taste of physical and human environment of countryside and as far as possible, allow them to participate in the activities, traditions and lifestyles of local people".

An alternative definition is given by Cabrini (2003), who segments rural tourism in five different perspectives, as can be seen in Figure 1.

Figure. 1: The Rural Tourism Concept (Source : Cabrini, L, WTO, 2003)



### *Activities in the countryside*

Thibal (1988) identified several activities that can be carried out in the countryside such as touring, water-related activities, aerial activities such as hot air ballooning and hand gliding, sporting activities, discovery type activities, cultural activities and health-related activities.

According to Whelan (1991), rural tourism can also be associated with other niche tourist activities including nature/agro-tourism, green tourism and ecotourism. Agro-tourism is often related to farm-based tourism, even though many other elements may relate to it such as museums, crafts and other cultural events. Green tourism, relates to tourism activities carried out in the countryside, where the tourists tend to be more inclined towards environmental awareness. Ecotourism is a type of nature tourism but emphasises the conservation of the environment and the awareness of the need for such conservation by the local communities.

<sup>1</sup> The research for this article was carried out as part of my dissertation for the Bachelor of Arts with honours in Tourism Studies degree at the University of Malta. The study used primary and secondary data. The primary data was obtained through different methods, mostly through semi-structured interviews with the various stake holders, including providers of services to tourists, the local councils and visitors of the valleys. Secondary data was obtained from published data sources (see references).

### *The concept of rurality*

The term countryside is defined by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 1994: 11) as: “Rural areas which comprise the people, land and other resources, in the open country and small settlements outside the immediate economic influence of major urban centres. Rural is a territorial or spatial concept. It is not restricted to any particular use of land, degree of economic health, or economic sector.”

Lane (1994) highlighted three main elements of rural tourism, which are the lower population density and relatively small size of settlements. Another characteristic relates to the traditional social structures, connected with the perception that rural areas represent what the urban areas have lost. If tourism is effectively managed it can be a major contributor for the upkeep of the traditional and cultural structures. Conversely, if not properly managed, tourism to rural areas can destroy



Wied il-Mielah.  
Photo courtesy of [http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wied\\_il-Mielah\\_Window](http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wied_il-Mielah_Window)

these traditional social structures (Sharpley and Sharpley, 1997). Therefore tourism development in traditional rural societies face different challenges and opportunities when compared to tourism in urban areas.

With regard to the rural areas in Malta, the National Rural Strategy Plan (RDP 2004-2006)<sup>2</sup> proposed the following definition:

1. A population density lower than 5000 persons per square kilometre
2. A minimum of 10% of the locality as agricultural land, and
3. A minimum 35% of the locality considered as outside development zone (ODZ)

When taking into consideration the above definition, one can conclude that 47 localities in the Maltese Islands can be considered as rural areas: 33 in Malta and 14 in Gozo. (Rural Development for Malta 2007-2013).

### *Benefits of rural tourism*

Rural tourism can generate economic benefits for the local residents, principally because it can create employment opportunities. In addition, such tourism can lead to economic diversification in the host territory due to increased demand for local produce and due to the various services required by tourists.

The social benefits of rural tourism include the instilment of greater appreciation of local produce, local crafts and local cultural assets.

There could also be environmental benefits which include the conservation and restoration of the physical environment and of old buildings (McAreavey & McDonagh, 2011).

There are however various economic concerns associated with rural tourism. These include the possibility of excessive reliance on part-time and seasonal employment opportunities, and the increased pressure on the infrastructure, including roads, and on public utilities, including water and electricity.

<sup>2</sup> Available at: < <https://secure2.gov.mt/MRRA-MA/file.aspx?f=15> > [Accessed on 15th February, 2013].

There are also social disadvantages, where this development might attract large crowds that may disturb the local way of life. There might also be changes in traditions and values because of the introduction of new ideas.

There may also be also environmental costs which arise as a result of the increase in pollution from cars and increased use of air conditioners and other devices which generate emissions.

It is therefore important for policy makers and tourism managers to maximise the benefits and minimise the disadvantages of rural tourism and this calls for the involvement of the main stake holders (McAreavey & McDonagh, 2011), including the local residents, the local councils, the business community and the government.

### **Rural Tourism in Malta and Gozo**

Due to the fact that the Maltese Islands are rather small with a high population density and have transitioned from an agrarian society to one based on industry and commercial services, a major transformation in the land-use patterns has occurred over time. The expansion of the urban settlements has led to several affects, including the creation of a metropolitan area surrounding the harbour regions, rapid rate of building developments in towns and villages often resulting in the reduction in green areas, with very high impacts on the physical environment and on the traditional landscape (Rural Development for Malta 2007-2013). The rural areas have, as a result, decreased their share of the Maltese landscape.

In spite of this, rural tourism in the Maltese Islands is considered as an important element in the tourist industry. This can be seen by the projects constantly being created by the Malta Tourism Authority to enhance the concept of rural tourism. The creation of the project ‘Malta Goes Rural – Sustaining Rural Tourism’,<sup>3</sup> indicates that



Wied il-Mielah window.  
Photo courtesy of [http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wied\\_il-Mielah\\_Window](http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wied_il-Mielah_Window)

the tourism authorities want to project Malta as not just a “sea and sun” destination. It is thought that villages in Malta and Gozo can give tourists the opportunity to experience the traditional patterns of the way of life of the Maltese and Gozitan people. One by-product of the attention being given to rural tourism is the upgrading of countryside walks both in Malta and Gozo. Some examples are the Dwejra Lines walk, the Baħrija walk, Ridge walk and in Gozo such as Ta` Ġurdan walk, Saltpan walk and Ramla walk. Moreover in order for the tourists to have a more enhanced experience, booklets illustrating walks such as the Saltpan Walk, Ta` Ġurdan Walk, Windmill Walk and others are available online at the portal of the Malta Tourism Authority.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> The MaltaGoesRural project seeks to promote the Maltese rural heritage through the set up of walking trails and small scale infrastructural interventions with the main aim to improve accessibility in semi-rural, rural and natural areas. Targeted at the relational tourist and locals, the project activities seek to identify the pull factors that can strengthen the rural tourism product in Malta. Further information is available at: <http://www.mta.com.mt/page.aspx?id=294>.

<sup>4</sup> Available at: <http://www.mta.com.mt/index.aspx>.

The developing of rural tourism in Gozo is also supported by the Eco-Gozo campaign,<sup>5</sup> a project which has the objective that by the year 2020, Gozo will be developed into an eco-island, sustained by a loyal dedicated sustainable community. Several projects are associated with this campaign including the promotion of sustainable energy, construction of new gardens, reconstruction and rebuilding of rubble walls, the cleaning of valleys and the extension of forestation.

Rural tourism in the Maltese Islands was also given importance in the Tourism Policy Document for 2012-2016,<sup>6</sup> which aims to “develop a rural tourism policy which takes into account Gozo`s specificities and Gozo`s potential for this market”.

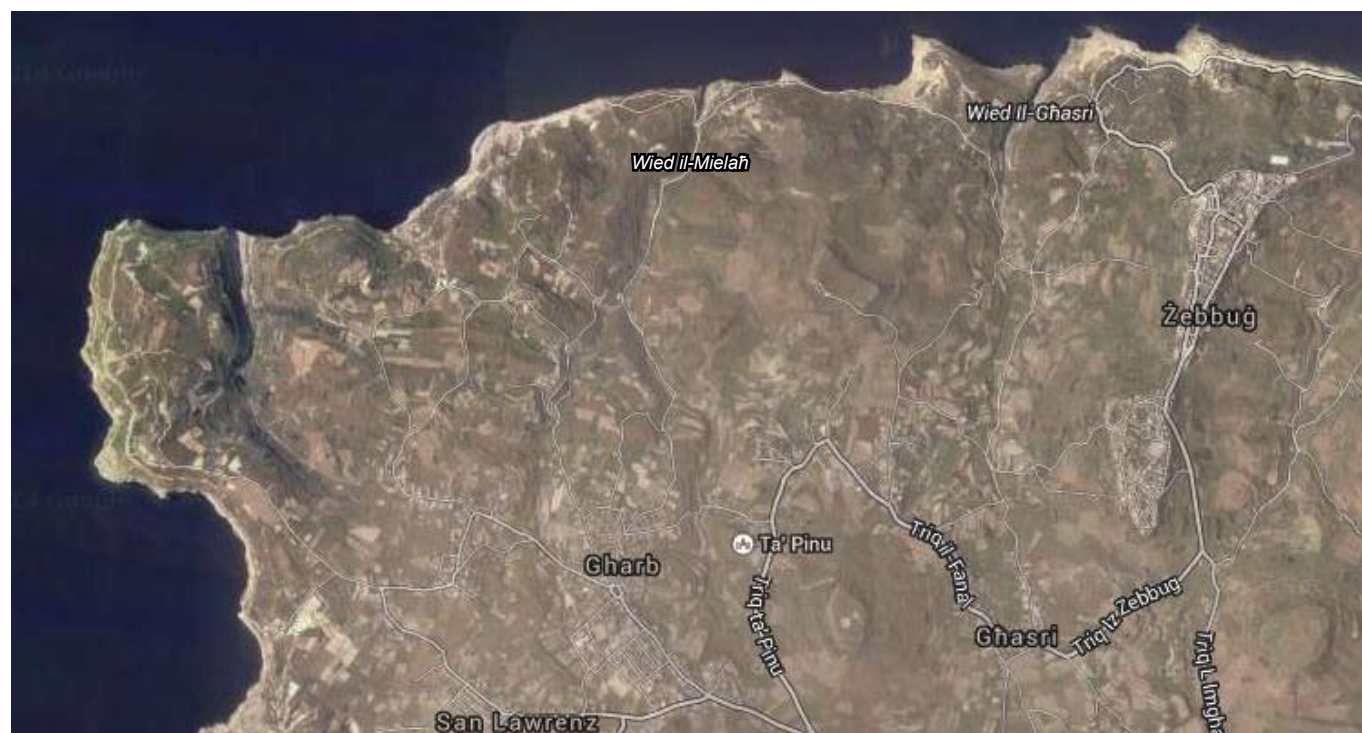
### The Valleys

Wied il-Mielah and Wied il-Ghasri have similar geomorphologic characteristics due to the fact that they are both narrow V-shaped valleys. Wied il-Ghasri starts from Ta` Dbiegi Hill, passes through Ghasri, Żebbug and Ta` Gurdan Hill. On the other hand Wied il-Mielah commences from the upland area of both Żebbug and Għammar.

Wied il-Mielah is over two kilometres long stretching to the coastal cliffs on the west areas of Gozo. It commences from beneath the Ta` Pinu Sanctuary. It is also one of the valleys of the eleven situated in the region of Għarb. This valley is located in a quiet and natural setting far from inhabited areas (Curmi, 2007). At the end of the valley one can find a large natural window.

The village of Għarb is part of a European Union project called European Destinations of Excellence (EDEN), which promotes sustainable tourism development. In the website<sup>7</sup> of the project entitled ‘Wied il-Mielah: Towards an ecologically and culturally sensitive, sustainable tourism’, Wied il-Mielah is described, and reference is made to the many rubble walls and to the flora and fauna to be found there. The website also refers to the restoration of the valley carried out by the local council thanks to the EU funding in an area that until recently was not seen as an important tourist attraction.

Over the years, mismanagement and lack of corrective measures at Wied il-Mielah have led to the degradation of this valley. Before the restoration, sewer mains ran through the valley and untreated



Wied il-Mielah and Wied il-Ghasri as seen on Google Maps (Available at: <https://www.google.com/maps/place/Gozo,+Malta/> )

<sup>5</sup> Information about this campaign is available at: <http://www.ecogozo.com/>.

<sup>6</sup> Available at: <https://secure2.gov.mt/tsdu/tourismpolicy2012-2016>.

<sup>7</sup> <http://wiedilmelah.gharbnat.com/wiedilmelah2/background.html>.

sewage was released off the coast rendering this valley somewhat malodorous. In addition rubble walls were not taken care of and because of the rain and other pressures, these walls crumbled, leading to the loss of fertile soil and to the uglification of the place. The dams found in this valley were also degraded and lost their original purpose.

The main objective of this project was “Supporting Malta’s efforts to improve the tourist product on the Island of Gozo, by making it more competitive as a unique rural destination”. The rehabilitation and conservation of this Wied il-Mielah valley formed part of this project and consisted of two phases. The first phase was implemented by the aid of the EU funds under the Cohesion Policy for Malta in 2004-2006 and revolved around the environmental aspect of the valley. Such examples were the rebuilding of the rubble walls and also the clean-up of the valley.

In order to proceed to the second phase of this project, the Għarb Local Council managed to obtain additional EU funds. These funds, under the Cohesion Policy for Malta 2007-2013, covered 85% of the expenses for the entire project. In this phase initiatives were taken in order to turn this area into a site for sustainable tourism. Railing, security cameras powered by solar panels, signs, published material with regards to the heritage trail in Għarb, audio-visual equipment and also large observation binoculars were installed.

The other valley, known as Wied il-Ghasri, is very well known with divers due to the several underwater caves. Additionally the beach found at Wied il-Ghasri is the perfect location, for individuals searching for a quiet and relaxing swim. Another interesting element which is found at this beach is a cave with a drilled hole at its top. A windmill used to exist there to pump up sea water which was used to produce salt in the nearby salt pans. These salt pans give an added value to rural tourism in Gozo.

A legend states that the Holy Family passed through the area. On way of Wied il-Ghasri, there was a rock where the footprints of Jesus as a child, Joseph and Mary were said to exist. It was said also that the devil followed the Holy Family and left a big deep footprint a few steps away. On their way to the beach people and the children used to stop and measure their feet against the footprints of Jesus, Mary and

Joseph, but not against the devil’s because of the enormity of that footprint. These so called footprints of the Holy Family and of the devil can no longer be found due to road constructions (Attard, 2010). This legend and other legends which relate to the valley act as an added attribute to the experience of the tourists, giving a sense of mystery to this valley and thus creating another motive to visit the area.

## **Findings of the Research**

The main question of the research carried out by the present author was whether or not valleys contribute in attracting rural tourists to Gozo. For this purpose a survey was conducted with the respondents being eight private stake holders, 39 visitors to Wied il-Mielah (19 Maltese and 20 foreigners) and 39 visitors to Wied il-Ghasri (22 Maltese and 17 foreigners).

In response to the first question, all the respondents agreed that valleys contribute to rural tourism in Gozo, although these valleys are only a part, albeit an important one, of the many elements of rural tourism in Gozo.

The two questions that followed were intended to elicit information as to how the valleys are seen by the various stake holders and to assess whether these valleys are being promoted effectively. All the respondents recognised the potential of the valleys for the promotion of rural tourism in Gozo, although, unfortunately, in some instances a degree of mismanagement of the valleys was identified.

Promotion for Wied il-Mielah would seem to be adequate through the creation and publishing of brochures and also the effective direction signage leading to and within the valley. In the opinion of the respondents, Wied il-Ghasri could be promoted better, through, among other things, brochures about this valley.

## **Proposed Measures**

The study also put forward a number of recommendations relating to rural tourism in Gozo and to the two valleys in particular.

The main recommendation related to education of the local residents so as to foster a wider



understanding of the importance of rural tourism and of the two valleys under review. This could be done through the printing and distribution of brochures, television programmes and the use of social media.

Another recommendation related to the involvement of suppliers of services to tourists. It was recommended that there should be more consultation with such stake holders. Lack of consultation with the providers of tourism services can lead to lack of interest in decision-making and to lack of involvement by these stake holders.

It was also recommended that there should be training schemes for these stake holders in order to enable them to give the best experience possible to the rural tourists visiting Gozo. This could be done through short courses on rural tourism and the various ways in which to welcome rural tourists.

There should also be schemes and incentives involving farmers and other entrepreneurs who are interested in investing in rural tourism so that the niche tourist activities described above, in particular those identified by Whelan (1991), could be created.

Another recommendation related to destination branding, which is an important tool that can be used to attract rural tourists to Gozo. Gozo, branded as a rural destination, could help portray

a clear image of the island to potential visitors. Branding should be built on real attractions and facilities offered in the host territory.

The attractions to tourists visiting Gozo, would be enhanced if more country walks, with accompanying guidebooks were created. In addition farmers having a building in the countryside should be aided in order to create some type of facility offering local products to the tourists walking by. Due to the fact that planning restrictions exist in building facilities in green areas, the authorities could consider the benefits of such development in enhancing the rural experience in Gozo, given that such development is done in a sustainable manner.

An important recommendation related to the proper management of all the Gozitan valleys, including the further reconstruction of rubble walls so that fertile soil is preserved.

Destination signage should also be improved. Currently if one tries to enter Wied il-Mielah valley from Xwejini or from Żebbug one finds it difficult to arrive due to the lack of signage. Signage not only offers information about the direction but also acts as an advert for the place.

Likewise there should be more interpretation and information panels regarding the valleys, including the legends associated with such valleys.



Panoramic view of Wied il-Ghasri

Available at: <http://www.maltapanorama.com/portfolio/gozo-wied-il-ghasri-ref-pfm120173/>

## Conclusion

Gozo is an ideal destination for rural tourism and this is recognised by the Malta Tourism Authority and by the Ministry for Gozo through the Eco Gozo campaign.

Maintaining the natural characteristics of the rural areas in Gozo is very important as this is a niche area in Gozo, given that population density is much lower than it is in Malta and given that rural characteristics are to be found in most Gozitan localities. Rural tourism, involving traditional activities in the villages, the local gastronomy and all the accompanying cultural elements, if well organised, could constitute a major tourist attraction in Gozo. The valleys of Gozo are an important element in this regard.

As already argued, this requires involvement and collaboration by all the stake-holders involved. If these stake-holders benefit from rural tourism, more Gozitans will benefit either directly or indirectly, as tourism is an economic activity which has a high multiplier effect on the economy.

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