Nadur and its Countryside

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Introduction

Gozo still offers tourists an opportunity to enjoy a beautiful, unspoilt natural environment, away from everyday routine, tensions and pressures to satisfy both their physical and mental needs. One of the picturesque places in Gozo is the village of Nadur. Mother Nature endowed it with enchanting bays, citrus orchards, green fields, abundance of natural spring-water and valleys offering a good living for the villagers.

A Historical Glimpse

The word “Nadur” which in Maltese means “a spacious stretch of land situated on a hill top from where one can watch the surroundings” is derived from the Arabic word nadar (Erin Serracino-Inglott, 1979: 6 vol. 240). The town’s motto “Viġilat” which means “on the lookout”, is in line with this description. Nadur is situated on the northeast of the island between the villages of Xaghra and Qala. It lies, on top of the first of the three hills, synonymous with the topography of Gozo. The hill, or plateau, which is 160 metres above sea level, greets the sun rising from the east every morning. This explains the rising sun on the emblem of Nadur.

We do not have many documents or archaeological evidence which could shed light on the colonisation of Nadur by its first inhabitants. In December 1990, two Dutch archaeologists Adrian van der Blom and Veronica Veen, unearthed several shreds from an otherwise unspecified triangular fields in the Ta’ Kenuna area. This points to the fact that there might have been a community living on the spot around 4000 BC (Bezzina, 2007: 11). Nevertheless, the plateau and its surroundings, with a few farm houses scattered here and there, were in existence for many years well before the area became a parish in 1688. The only trace of
archaeological evidence we had were a number of huge rocks with a large flat stone laid horizontally on them as if to form a roof. The field found between San Blas Bay and Dahlet Qorrot Bay is also named after this structure, *l-Għalqa ta’ l-Imsaqqfin* (field of the roofing rocks). According to the Gozitan historian G. P. F. Agius de Soldanis these roofed structures which are not in existence anymore, once used to serve as a sort of temple to the gods. This popular historian imagined that these slabs of stone couldn’t have been placed there by normal people but by very strong people or giants (Agius de Soldanis, 1999: 87).

Throughout history Nadur played a very important role in the defense of the island from ruthless corsairs who used to come by sea to rob and drag the inhabitants into slavery. During the reign of the Knights of St John (1530 – 1798) a watch tower was built by Grand Master Nicholas Cotoner (1663 – 1680).

**Ta’ Kenuna Tower and Maltese Garden**

Nadur has been embellished with a number of gardens where the whole family can enjoy a few hours of relaxing in a nice and safe environment. One of these gardens, Ġnien il-Kunsill, is situated in Triq il-Madonna ta’ Fatima. From here one gets a magnificent view of Mġarr Harbour and the channel between the islands with Gozo Channel ferries plying across it.

A few metres away there is another belvedere which will lead you to Ta’ Kenuna tower and garden. Ta’ Kenuna tower was one of the three semaphore (flag based) signal stations built by the British in 1848 on the cliffs on the southwest tip of the Nadur plateau. Its towering structure was employed as an Electric Telegraph and Cable Station between 1861 and 1883 to pass signals to ships and other posts. In the 1990s the Nadur Local Council with the help of Maltacom sponsored the restoration works of the tower. A beacon to warn ships that they are nearing land, as well as a number of communication antennas were recently installed on the roof. One can even ask permission from the watchman to go on top of the covered roof of the tower. From the top of the tower one can get a panoramic view of most of the island, Comino Islands and the northern part of Malta.

The surrounding area has been transformed into a Maltese Garden with indigenous plants, amongst which one can observe the Maltese National Plant, Maltese Rock-Centaury, *Widnet il-Bahar* (*Palaecyanus crassifolius*), wild flowers and shrubs. Nadur is renowned for its valleys, cliffs, beaches and garigue together with its monumental church, historical towers and lavish agriculture. The aim of this article is to help the visitor to discover parts of Nadur which are not that familiar to foreigners and Maltese alike. Two such spots are Ta’ Sopu Tower and San Blas Bay.

**Ta’ Sopu Tower**

Ta’ Sopu Tower in Nadur is one of the watch towers built along the coast of Gozo during the reign of the Knights of St John. In fact it was the last one in a series of towers built in Gozo by the Knights. We can state that before the coming of the Knights there were no towers or any sort of fortifications in Gozo except the Gozo Citadel. The coast used to be guarded by the Gozitans themselves (Zammit, 1999: 72).

When it was constructed it was called *La Torre Nuova* (Samut-Tagliaferro, 1993: 181). Throughout its history, it has been referred to by a number of names: Dahlet Qorrot Tower or San Blas Tower for the two bays lying on either side of the tower, or Rdum il-Kbir Tower for the Mistra Rocks on which it is situated. This tower is perched 120
metres above sea level. The position of this tower is a bit curious. It cannot be reached from the sea because of a labyrinth of rocks and the high cliffs. The tower, although set on a high level above the sea, cannot be seen from any place in Nadur except from San Blas Bay and Dahlet Qorrot Bay. This is because the cliffs on which the tower is built continue to rise to form a higher ridge called *il-Qortin* or Mistra Rocks. On the rocky land one can find a diversity of flora. Here one can come across pennyroyal, Mediterranean thyme, cape sorrel, rosemary, borage, squirting cucumber, and Maltese savory, various types of thistle, daffodils, and fennel. One can also find many natural holes in the rocks which catch the rain water and thus attract migratory birds. Here one can also find a masterfully constructed girna with its intricate style of masonry.

On the west lies San Blas Bay and on the east Dahlet Qorrot Bay and Qala Point. The best view one can get of Dahlet Qorrot is from this tower. One can enjoy a bird’s eye view of this bay together with the surrounding small inlets of San Filep, Ghajn Berta and Rdum iż-Żghir. To the north, the tower faces the open sea, on the east side on a clear day one can see St Paul’s Bay, St Julian’s and as far as Dragonara Point. On the west side one can easily see Ghajn Damma which used to be Gozo’s main dumping site and is now being converted into a national park. In olden times there used to stand a small tower called Marsalforn Tower. Qolla s-Safra in Marsalforn is also visible from Ta’ Sopu Tower.

This tower, apart from being part of the defense of the island, was also one of the signaling posts. Francois Charles de Bourlamaque, Brigadier of the French Army, in his report about the fortifications of Gozo and Comino dated 24th October 1761, wrote that this tower is good for signals (Samut-Tagliaferro, 1993: 184). He came to Gozo with a retinue of five military engineers in mid-July to inspect the fortifications and make recommendations for strengthening the defenses.

The tower started to be built in 1667 but most of the work was carried out in 1669 and 1670 during the reign of Grand Master Nicholas Cotoner (Bonnici, Vol. I 1984: 232). The expenses for the masonry work was forked out by the local administration.
called the Universitas and so this means that it was paid for from the taxes imposed on the Gozitans. The Universitas also paid for the salaries of the soldiers working in the tower and was responsible for any maintenance needed from time to time (Zammit, 1999: 74).

The Order of St John was asked by the Grand Master to provide the artillery needed after he visited the tower on 19th April 1670 and ordered the supply of these armaments himself. This was not a normal procedure because the tower was not the property of the Order nor did it fall under the administrative control of the Commander of the Order (like the towers of Xlendi and Dwejra, which although belonging to the Universitas, were under the administration of the Order). The Commander of the Order, Fra Jean Jacques de Verdelin requested a written statement from the Council of the Order. Due to this technicality six months passed before the Council decided that the armaments and ammunition should be passed on to the tower but on paper to appear in the form of a donation to a Religious Order.

On the façade of the tower facing the land there are four escutcheons or coats-of-arms (now undecipherable through weather erosion of the stone) affixed to the wall above the entrance and drawbridge. The two most important coats-of-arms are those of the Grand Master Nicholas Cotoner and of the Governor of Gozo, Ludovic Xedler y Gomez. The other two coats-of-arms probably represented the Gozo Universitas and the Seneschal (Bonnici, Vol I 1984: 232). This tower had its own Castellano (Capo Mastro) who was a Bombardier in charge of the soldiers working in the tower. During the night there used to be three persons on duty. All the personnel were paid by the Gozo Universitas. In 1702, the Castellano of the tower or captain, was GioMaria Gafa’ and was paid €2.52 every four months or €7.56 annually (Bezzina, 2002: 9).

Ta’ Sopu Tower remains renowned for its inadequacy to defend the island against the French invasion of Gozo on the 10th June 1798. The French Commandant had chosen an inlet between Sopu Tower and Ramla Bay called Rdum ta’ Vnuta. When the Gozitans saw the ships loaded with French soldiers making their way towards land, the soldiers on guard in the Tower started firing on the incoming armada. But their efforts were soon neutralized by the cannons on L’Etoile and La Pluvier. Needless to say, on the tower there were only two cannons available. Therefore Reynier’s troops soon landed without any further resistance (Debono, 1997:13).

The tower remained in operation until 1st April 1873, after which, no more soldiers were stationed for guard duties in the tower. Since then, it has been abandoned. During World War Two the tower was not utilized for defense but some bombs were still dropped in its vicinity. Fortunately none hit the tower. Until a couple of years ago the tower had been in total abandonment and the elements of nature had left their mark.

Today, thanks to the collaboration of the NGO, Din L-Art Ħelwa, together with Nadur Local Council, the proper repairs and restorations have been carried out and the tower has been restored to its former glory, and thus saved from total destruction forever.
Mixta Cave and Ramla Bay

Another picturesque spot in Nadur is Il-Qortin tar-Ramla. From this plateau one can get a breath taking view of Ramla Bay, Xagħra and Marsalforn. One can follow the path leading to a natural cave overlooking Ramla Bay called l-Għar tal-Mixta. This is one of the last intact trogolodytic abodes in Gozo and must have been inhabited from early times till the early twentieth century (Bezzina, 2007: 36). The entrance to this grotto is through a rock hewn passage and steps. This large cave was used as shelter for cattle and even the peasants used to live in it to look after their herds. Mixta is Maltese for a place where one shelters in winter together with the cattle (Serracino-Inglott, 1979:173).

During the time of the Knights of Malta this cave served another purpose that of defending Ramla Bay from approaching ships. In 1743 the opening of the cave was blocked with stones and they left only two openings for cannons to fire against enemy’s ships. This could be the reason why the French in 1798 didn’t land in Ramla but used Ta’ Vnuta which cannot be seen from Mixta Cave. According to a local historian there was a secret passage leading from the cave down to the bay where there was a man made cannon in the rocks (the fougasse). The fougasse is one of the most fascinating adjuncts of coastal defence introduced in Malta by the Knights of St John in the 18th century. The fougasse formed part of broader military arrangements that were...
designed to protect the shores of the Maltese islands against invasion. Carved out in the rock, the Fougasse-Perrier (as it is technically known) is a sort of large well dug close to the shoreline that was cut at a 45-degree angle. Technically, this hollow was shaped to simulate a mortar and designed to fire a huge mass of stone boulders. The objective was to shower about 300 boulders of various sizes to hit the enemy ships and boats intent on disembarking their troops at a nearby bay. In Gozo it is believed that there were fourteen of these defensive systems, however most of them have been destroyed.

Several hundred feet below lies Ramla Bay, where the sea is a deep iridescent blue and the sand a distinctive fiery orange. In the middle of the bay there is a statue of the Holy Mary Star of the Sea and behind the beach are swathes of dunes and mature tamarisk trees. High up on the opposite side lies Calypso’s Cave, overlooking the bay, which is believed to have housed the nymph in Homer’s Odyssey. Far away to the west one can see the Qolla s-Safra (Marsalforn) jutting out into the blue sea. Ramla Bay was mentioned by the Sunday Times of London as one of the best beaches in Europe.

References


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