

Rocks

Lizards And Legends

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One of my most eccentric desires is to visit Fungus Rock, near our sister island of Gozo. I tried to visit the place a number of times, but due to unforeseen circumstances and some unwanted luggage, I never made it.

This profound desire to visit the place has its roots and stems resulting from two reasons: to observe the Malta fungus (which incidentally is a flowering plant!) and the 'race' of the Maltese lizard which only inhabits that relatively small rock, and naturally, to photograph both of them. I have promised myself to do it, and hopefully will do it. (Indeed, I need to get permission from the environment secretariat to visit the islet).

By way of introduction and on a completely different note I will introduce the Maltese lizard as one of the few animals inhabiting our garden which manages to drive shivers down my mother's back. The problem is very simple: my mother is not the only one who likes to sunbathe in the sun near the vine. Reptiles bask in the sun to increase their metabolic rate to a satisfactory level. As a matter of consequence, there is a high possibility of the lizard meeting my mother, and of my mother's scream reaching my ears (definitely not only). Notwithstanding my long homilies on the beauty of this particular reptile, my mother still seems to remain unconverted.

The Maltese lizard, particularly the species living on Filfla is also subject of a superstition which seems to be ingrained in some peo-

ple's minds. Some people believe that the lizard has two tails. This is not true. The lizard has one tail just like the other three 'races' of Maltese lizards living on the other islands. Lizards have the ability to lose their tails if this can help them escape their predator and survive. The resulting loose tail continues to twitch incessantly for some time... enough for the lizard to escape. After some time a new tail starts to grow. Sometimes it is possible for the old tail to remain partially attached and nevertheless, a new one grows.

In the summer months, it is easier to view these reptiles as they bask in the sun. Some seem to be very friendly. The one pictured was photographed in Gozo, in a recent outing with my colleagues, to study the geology of the island. It literally stayed placid on a rubble wall for quite a substantial length of time. In fact, so long, that three of us queued after each other waiting for a chance to photograph it. It is fascinating to closely observe the lizard move and turn its head towards the lens in a slow, graceful manner.

The lizard living on our islands is endemic: this means that it is not found anywhere else in the world. In addition, there are four distinct races living on different islands of the archipelago. One inhabits Malta, Gozo and Comino, one inhabits Filfla, one inhabits Fungus Rock and another inhabits St. Paul's Islands.

The lizards eat insects, snails and other small animals which creep underneath our


The Maltese landscape - ideal for our lizards.



legs. Therefore, they get rid of quite a number of pests which damage crops and fields.

The male lizards are territorial and defend their territory from other males. To attract females, the males display coloured parts of their body. After mating, one or two eggs are laid underneath the soil. The young lizards hatch in the summer months and feed themselves on small animals. Consequently they are easily seen in this time of the year.

Lizards are protected by Maltese law and one cannot collect them or kill them. The lizards are also listed as strictly protected fauna in the Berne Convention. The small populations present on the islets makes them especially vulnerable to disturbance. Legends have made the lizards very popular, but they should be special because of their uniqueness to our islands. The Maltese lizard is part of Malta's (and the world's) natural heritage which we definitely have to safeguard.



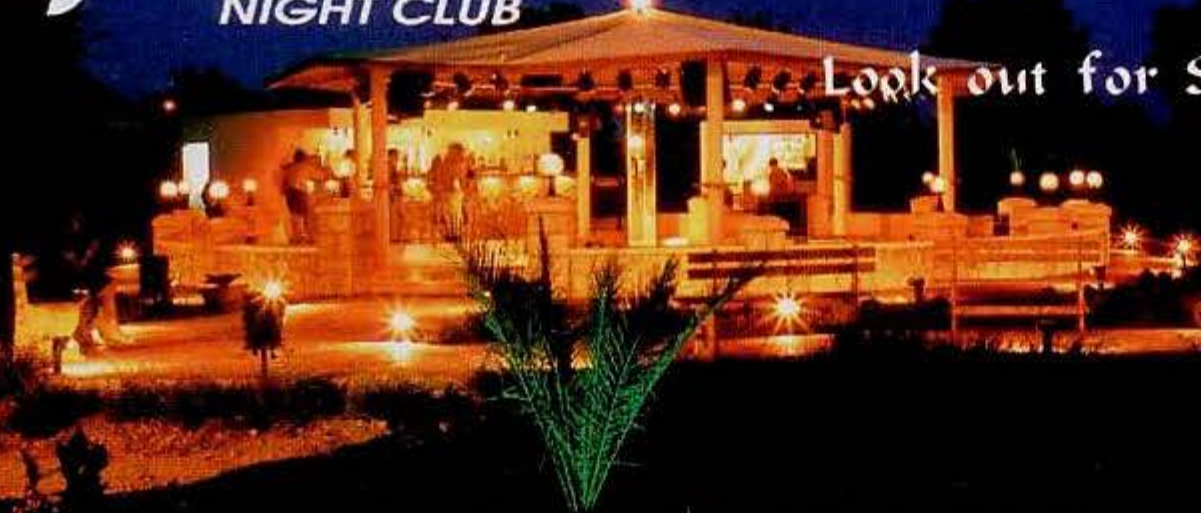
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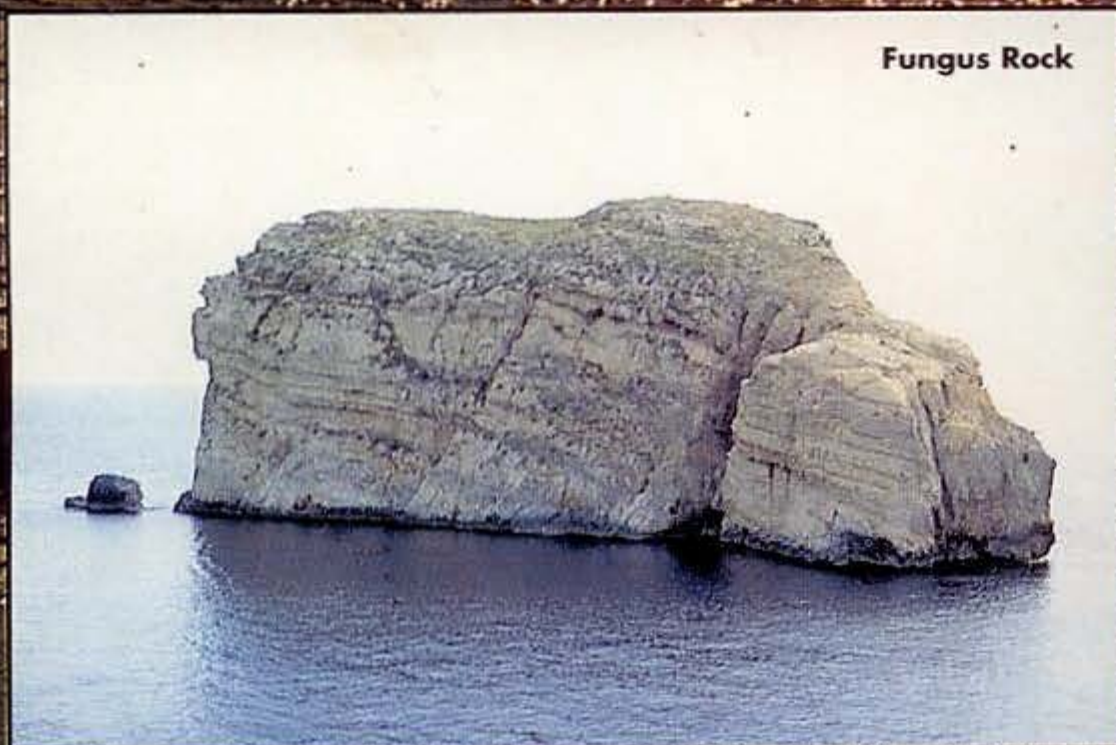
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The Maltese Lizard



Fungus Rock