

Malta

C O U N T R Y S I D E W A L K S

Marfa Ridge Walk



Introduction

The walk starts and ends at Għadira Bay (pronounced: 'Ah-dee-ra'; also commonly referred to as Mellieħa Bay). Setting off from close to the Għadira Nature Reserve, the walk reaches the top of Marfa Ridge just beneath the austere Torri L-Aħmar 'Red Tower'. From here the route continues along the spine of the ridge to its furthestmost point, next to the solitary Immaculate Conception chapel. Offering breathtaking views on either side, the walk passes through dry farmed land, garigue, wooded areas and dramatic cliffs.

Before arriving at 'It-Torri L-Abjad', the White Tower, a short detour reveals a spectacular geological formation. Along this shoreline, the walk passes by a number of fortified structures dating back from the times of the Knights of St John, right up to World War II.

The walk turns uphill again and Paradise Bay, with all its natural beauty, soon comes into view. At this point the walk goes off the beaten track again and onto more spectacular views including scenic land and seascapes, with rock-strewn stairways and paths winding down to terraced fields, hanging off the sheer cliff face. The route eventually makes its way past the Red Tower and the Għadira Nature Reserve to the starting point which is also the walk's final destination.

The text, read in conjunction with the route map (found in the centre pages) enables you to follow the route map with added ease. The numbers in the text correspond to the numbers on the map.

How to get there

The starting point is at Għadira Bay, more precisely at the Għadira bus terminus, just in front of the Mellieħa Holiday Centre (Danish Village).

Public Transport

You can get there as follows;

- ✓ *From Valletta, route buses 44, 45, 50 and 452*
- ✓ *From Sliema, route bus 645*
- ✓ *From Buġibba, route bus 48*

All buses alight at the Għadira bus terminus in front of the Mellieħa Holiday Centre (Danish Village). For the return journey the same route buses can be caught. It is advisable to check bus timetables before you embark on the walk as some bus routes are only in operation during the summer months.

Own Transport

It is possible to use your own transport to reach the starting point of this walk as this is also the termination point. You may park your vehicle along the main road.

Length of walk (excluding detours) is 11 km (approx. 7 miles)

Duration is approximately 4.5 to 5 hours



Nature reserve



Ghadira Bay

The Walk

The walk starts at Ghadira Bay, Malta's largest sandy beach. Alighting at the Ghadira Bus Terminus, walk due north. After a few paces you will reach the gate leading to the Ghadira Nature Reserve. The reserve is to your left and is surrounded by a shelter belt of trees and shrubs.

The Nature Reserve covers some six hectares and occupies the flood plain between two ridges. This site was Malta's main producer of salt up to the 16th century, after which period it lost its importance as a salt producer to the much larger salt pans at Salina (near Qawra). The area fell into disuse. In the late 1980's, Birdlife Malta's local ornithological society converted the area into a nature reserve. Equipped with a visitor centre, bird watching hides, and staffed by qualified personnel, it attracts numerous visitors. Foreign visitors are also welcome. Pre-booking is recommended on tel 2157 2603.



A view from it-torri L-Aħmar



Once you pass the Nature Reserve, continue walking uphill along the road. The conglomeration of beach huts to the left is mostly occupied by locals in the summer months. Towering above them is St Agatha's Tower commonly known as *It-Torri L-Aħmar*, 'the red tower', due to its red ochre painted walls. (You will get the opportunity to take a closer look at this Tower on the return journey of the walk.)

The success of the reserve is seen by the species of birds that breed here, such as the warbler (Cetti's, fan-tailed and Sardinian), corn bunting, moorhen and little ringed plover. Recorded species visiting the reserve include grebes, ducks, coots, kingfishers, herons, egrets, waders and many passerines. The reserve also hosts a few species of local fauna and flora like the wild rabbit, hedgehog, chameleon, gecko and leopard snake, as well as salt-tolerant (halophytic) plants.





A traditional stone Girna



At the top of the hill, you will reach a road junction. Turn to the right, following the sign to Armier Bay. The road levels off as it stretches along Marfa Ridge. The ridge overlooks Għadira Bay to the right and Comino Channel to the left. The small island of Comino, with an area of one square kilometre, lies between the larger sister islands of Malta and Gozo.

A *girna* or corbelled hut can be seen on the left. This structure is built solely from loose rocks and stones that are commonly found on local garigue. It is a regular feature in the Maltese countryside and forms part of our rural heritage as the building technique has been passed down from generation to generation. Although it is a simple and primitive structure, it is in fact very sturdy. The *girna's* purpose was to provide the farmer or herdsman with shelter from the elements. Mellieħa is rich in these structures, some of which grouped together were used to house a few farm animals. The form and mode of construction bring to mind the *trulli* of Bari (Italy) and similar structures in Sardinia.





View from Rđum il-Ħmar
Photo: Micheal Parlato Trigona

Soon the asphalt road passes through a wooded area. This site was first planted with olive trees and bordered by a row of carobs. The trees were planted in the late fifties in pits blasted in the rocky terrain with explosives. The site proved to be too exposed to the harsh north-westerly winds and so the trees made little progress. Later, forestry-type seedlings of the Aleppo pine and the wattle tree were planted to provide added protection. The olive trees subsequently prospered. In this wooded area you will come across

evidence of local, traditional activities, namely hunting and trapping.

The straight road runs along the entire length of the Marfa ridge. From the cliffs at *Rđum il-Ħmar* overlooking Mellieħa Bay, you can see the floating pens or cages of a fish farm. Local fish farms mainly produce sea bream and sea bass. These have a cycle of some 18 months from fingerling to maturity. Keep to the main road till the end at *Rđum tal-Madonna*.

The road narrows and you will pass beneath another canopy of wattle and olive trees. A short gradient follows. A road on the left, leads to *Daħlet ix-Xmajjar Bay*. On the right, through the acacia copse, a path winds down among the cliff boulders and leads to a small, secluded beach, commonly known as Slugs Bay.



At this point, you can see the Immaculate Conception Chapel perched in contemplative solitude at the cliff edge. The chapel, built in 1961 replaced an earlier one which was built at the end of the nineteenth century and was situated closer to the drop-off. Being on a fissured cliff edge, the old chapel was in danger of collapse. A new one was built further in. It is alleged that the old

chapel was built as a votive thanks to Our Lady by a fisherman who had survived a tragic ordeal at sea. He was the sole survivor when a boat with several fishermen on board capsized. For years, the old chapel served as a landmark to all fishermen out at sea. Today, racing pigeon enthusiasts let off their pigeons from here for training purposes.

Slugs bay
Photo: Micheal Parlato Trigona



The statue of Our Lady, erected in 1870 on a stone plinth nearby, inspires a silent prayer from visitors. The cliff edge is in danger of crumbling due to erosion so please avoid going too near the edge. The



walk continues along the path with the chapel on the left and the cliff edge on the right. The path soon turns slightly to the left through a few clumps of a cactus-like plant – the agave. The path runs down through a grove of Aleppo pines until it reaches a concrete crossroad **2**.



A typical rubble wall

Turning right, the road slopes slightly downhill. Note the long, white thorns of the acacia karoo. This thorn bush was planted to keep grazing sheep and goats off the pine and wattle seedlings during the afforestation of the ridge. The road continues downhill towards *It-Torri l-Abjad* ‘the white tower’ and *Dahlet ix-Xmajjar* Bay. It is bordered to the right by garigue carrying the wild thyme as the dominant plant species. On the left you can observe agricultural activity in the form of dry farming, irrigated land and a greenhouse unit.



At the end of the road, the walk proceeds to the left. **3** However, you may wish to take a short detour to the right to see a spectacular depression in the rocky foreshore at *il-Ponta ta' l-Aħrax* or 'Dragunara Point'. This wide, deep, open cavity came to be when the roof of the cave or caves beneath collapsed. The rocks, gouged out by the relentless crashing of the waves created a link to the open sea through natural tunnels and fissures. In calm weather, it looks tranquil and clear. However in rough weather, relentless waves crashing into the depression create an impressive sight.

Return to the main route **3** and proceed to the next bay, namely *Ir-Ramla Tat-Torri*. This bay is named after *It-Torri l-Abjad* 'the white tower', which is one of many towers built in 1658 by Grand Master de Redin as part of a coastal defence system. These towers were not meant to hold a large garrison. Normally, up to four sentries were



Geological dipression at il-Ponta ta' l-Aħrax or Dragunara Point

dispatched to every tower. If pirates were seen approaching the coast, the burning of straw signalled the danger.

The alarm was relayed from tower to tower along the coast. Signals from this Tower were clearly visible from the towers at Selmun, Mellieħa Ridge (St. Agatha's Tower) and Comino. *It-Torri l-Abjad*, is currently being leased as a private residence.

Ir-ramla tat-Torri





Pancratium Maritimum
Photo: Pauline Dingli

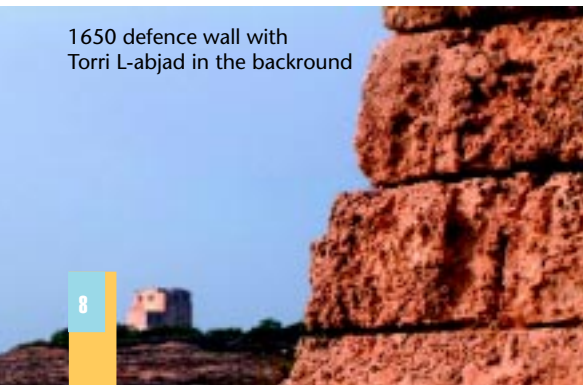
Continue past the access road to the Tower and over the small hill onto the sandy bay, *Ir-Ramla tat-Torri*. The fenced area in the bay protects a small sand dune habitat. Such habitats are rare in Malta and contain plant species such as the stunning sea daffodil (*Pancratium maritimum*) and the spiny sand holly (*Eryngium maritimum*)

amongst others. Walk along the coast, past several boathouses and slipways. Behind these buildings you can see a defence wall, built in 1650 to fend off enemy landings.

Continue walking round this walled peninsula until you reach the next sandy beach. Note the ruins of a small seventeenth-century battery or ‘redoubt’ built by Grand Master Lascaris.

Comino appears to be very close to this coastline. Directly facing Malta, on its eastern tip, you may discern St Mary’s Battery built in 1715.

1650 defence wall with
Torri L-abjad in the background



The *Posidonia Oceanica* or Neptune Grass (seaweed), an endemic plant of the Mediterranean, is found in submarine meadows skirting the Maltese coast. It offers excellent breeding grounds for fish and other marine organisms. During the winter season the dying seaweed floats to the surface and subsequently gets carried away by the sea currents. Hence the washing up of seaweed onto the shores.

In fact, if you have embarked on this walk during autumn or winter, you are likely to encounter mounds of dead seaweed washed ashore. Anglers sieve through the seaweed searching for a particular type of worm to be used as fishing bait. During the winter the



Photo: MTA

seaweed is left on the beach, as it helps to stabilise and maintain sandy beaches naturally. When eventually removed, seaweed is sometimes used in coastal land reclamation for tree planting as well as bedding for farm animals.

Following the coastline you will pass by several beach huts. In order to follow the route set out in this walk you will have to cross the sandy beach at Little Armier. You will then reach a small flight of steps leading on to Armier Bay car park. Continue along the asphalt road ahead. Within a few metres you will reach a road junction. The main road turns sharply to the left, towards Mellieħa Village. The first narrow road to your right leads to the Vendôme Battery. The rear of the Battery is visible from this junction. This seventeenth-century Battery was named after the French knight who commissioned it. He was the brother of King Louis XIII.

At this junction **4** proceed directly ahead onto a narrow road lined with beach huts. This road comes to an end in the bay named *Ramlet il-Qortin*. Walk across the sandy beach, past a redoubt. Keep walking along the coast up to a wide clearing facing a hotel.

Artichokes



Little Armier Bay



Walk towards the hotel's main entrance next to the palm trees. This leads to the hotel's Car Park. Turn left just before entering the hotel's premises. **5** The

concrete path leads you around the hotel boundary wall, past a clump of canes and finally towards the beach. Arable land may be seen to your left. The route passes by the ruins of another redoubt built by the Knights, which faces the centre of this bay.

Continue walking towards the west side of the coast, where another hotel comes into view. Nearby is the Marfa quay, used by Gozo ferries before the larger Cirkewwa terminal was developed. Today the quay is used by the Comino ferry and other seacraft.

By now, you must have noticed the dominating presence of the tower on Comino. It was built under Grand Master Alof de Wignacourt



between 1601 and 1622. At that time the tower contributed to preventing hostile sea craft from harassing sea traffic between Malta and Gozo.

Marfa Quay





Il-Palazz l-Aħmar (Red Palace)

The walk proceeds along the asphalt road. Continue walking uphill towards the bus shelter in front of *il-Palazz l-Aħmar* “the red palace”. This red ochre building was originally built in 1657 as a watch tower but was enlarged to its present state during the early 20th century.

Walking in the direction of the Ċirkewwa Terminal, you will soon pass by the Ċirkewwa Reverse Osmosis Plant on the left side of the road. Seawater is pumped from the sea and converted into drinking water by a process called reverse osmosis. A significant part of Malta’s water supply is produced from similar plants.

Take the first road on the left, and follow the sign to Paradise Bay. Just

past the reverse osmosis plant are two wartime shelters partially embedded in the rocks. The road passes through stretches of garigue, which are largely dominated by the wild thyme. It is from the flower of this herb that the thyme honey is produced. Local beekeepers also produce red clover honey and mixed flora honey.





Paradise Bay

The road continues uphill. The hotel on the right overlooks both the Ċirkewwa ferry terminal as well as Paradise Bay. The road turns slightly downhill, curving to the right, into a large car park. Walk past the flight of steps, which leads to Paradise Bay below. The asphalt road soon gives way to a track going uphill along the cliff edge.

Turn to the left, past bird hides, **6** and walk over the rocky terrain,

along a low rubble wall. **7** Soon you will reach the top of the ridge, **8** where you will also reach level ground and a well-formed path. This path ends in a T-junction.

Turn right on the asphalt road, which leads to the cliff edge viewing point. **9** Looking down below from this vantage point, you can see the numerous boulders embedded in small terraced fields.



Photo: Michael Parlato Trigona

A short flight of steps leads to a path cut out in the rocks. This path gives access to a number of small fields and to the shore. The site offers sanctuary to a variety of fauna and flora.

Turn to the left, up a steep, rock-strewn path. **10** Half way up the path you will come across an opening in the rock-face to your

right. Look through this fissure onto the picturesque scene below: the small fields huddled between large boulders and a tall date palm tree against the backdrop of a rugged cliff face beneath.

While continuing uphill along the rough path you may realise that it was carved into the cliff on one side and constructed manually on the inward side. The weathered kerbing stones, grey with time, are proof of man's labour. This path was built by the British military units. It was designed to give access to strategic posts found in this area as well as to the military structures at the top of the ridge.

Old Military Path





Photo: Michael Parlato Trigona

To the left, is a small dry valley supporting terraced fields. The path soon levels out, passes through garigue, and ends in an asphalt road. This is the walk's last uphill trek. Before proceeding left, at the top of the hill, you can walk towards the edge of the cliff on the right. **11** The Ta' Ċenċ cliffs in Gozo may be seen in the distance. This is another location from where racing pigeons are released. It is also ideal for viewing spectacular sunsets. The derelict buildings are remnants of a wartime NATO Base. The walk proceeds along the ridge, on the asphalt road flanked on both sides by garigue.

The terraced fields below are well managed and irrigated by farmers. As they face the south, they are favourably protected from the north-westerly winds.





It-Torri l-aħmar (Red Tower)

Below, you can also see the large, circular cleft in the sea cliff of the valley floor. This was formed by the battering waves and in rough weather spouts out clouds of sea spray. This cleft is aptly called *Iċ-Ċumnija* - 'the chimney' since the clouds of fine spray resemble clouds of smoke.

Proceed along the asphalt road. You will arrive at St. Agatha's Tower also referred to as *It-Torri l-Aħmar* 'the Red Tower'. This is an austere and imposing building commanding views of the ridges of Marfa and Mellieha. Built by Grand Master Lascaris in 1649 the tower was recently restored by the local *Din l-*

Art Helwa, a non-profit environmental organisation. The tower was an important link in the defence of this part of the island.

Looking to the right, from the vantage point next to the tower you can see the boundaries of the



Iċ-Ċumnija (The Chimney)

Għadira Nature Reserve below, from where this walk started.

The road proceeds downhill until it reaches the main road leading to the Gozo ferry. Turn sharply to the right where you will pass by a small wayside shrine dedicated to Our Lady of Sorrows. Continue down the steep, busy road for a few metres. Take the path to the right until you reach the main road once more. This path runs through an afforestation site being developed by a number of NGOs, assisted by the Malta Tourism Authority. The walk continues past the Għadira Nature Reserve gate and ends at the bus terminus situated close to the traffic island.















The hotels along the way offer all services expected. A number of phone booths, bars, and restaurants can also be seen along the route. Public conveniences are located in Għadira Bay and Armier Bay.

Thank you for choosing to embark on this walk. We sincerely hope that you have enjoyed it. Other Countryside Walks around Malta and Gozo are also available for you to explore. Please send us your comments on this or other walks in the series on info@visitmalta.com


















Wayside shrine dedicated to Our Lady of Sorrows

Tips for the road

-  The route is suitable for trekking, cycling and horse riding. It is advisable to dismount when proceeding near to cliff edges and along main roads.
-  Bicycle rental is possible from shops in the Mellieħa area, including some hotels which may be found along the route.
-  Along this walk there are three instances where the route may present a physical challenge. These are found at the initial uphill which leads from the nature reserve to the top of the ridge, the uphill from the Reverse Osmosis Plant leading to Paradise Bay (between markers 5 & 6) and the Old Military Path (between markers 10 & 11).
-  The local weather forecast should be checked before setting off as there is hardly any shelter from adverse weather conditions along the route. A raincoat can come in handy in inclement weather.
-  The table below highlights average weather conditions based on historical readings. These must not be taken as forecasts as they are only indicative of typical weather conditions.
-  Allow enough time to complete the walk in broad daylight. Make allowances for time required for resting, taking photographs and observing nature.
-  The table below demonstrates typical hours of sunshine at different times of the year. It is advisable to wear a hat and apply sun protection.
-  It is recommended that you wear appropriate footwear and carry a packed lunch and a bottle of water.
-  Always follow the designated route. Short cuts are to be avoided as many fields are privately owned. Some rubble walls are marked with blotches of white paint and may also carry the letters RTO. These markings indicate private property.
-  As part of the walk includes a stretch of cliffs, avoid leaving the footpath to walk closer to the edge. Rock erosion as well as sudden gusts of wind are a real danger. Safe view points along the route are indicated.
-  In some valleys and gorges, mobile phone reception may be poor or there may be none at all.
-  Respect the fragility of the countryside. Do not climb over rubble walls or throw stones into valleys or over cliffs. Do not take souvenirs from historical sites or from the countryside. Do not disturb animals, plants or their natural habitats. Leave only your footprints behind you and nothing else.
-  Be culturally sensitive and respect local customs. Take photographs but respect the privacy and dignity of others. Ask permission before photographing people.
-  Bird trapping and hunting are practised in the countryside. There are, however, strict regulations determining areas where such activities are permitted and times of the year where no such activities are allowed.

The following table depicts typical average weather conditions including temperature, hours of sunshine/day, rainfall and sea temperatures. Walking conditions are most favourable during the months of January, February, May, November and December.

	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
Typ												
°C	13	13	15	17	21	23	27	28	25	22	18	15
	5.5 hrs	6 hrs	7 hrs	8.5 hrs	10 hrs	11 hrs	12 hrs	11 hrs	9 hrs	7 hrs	6.5 hrs	5 hrs
	98 mm	65 mm	38 mm	29 mm	12 mm	3 mm	0.3 mm	7 mm	56 mm	71 mm	122 mm	109 mm
	15 °C	15 °C	15 °C	16 °C	18 °C	21 °C	24 °C	26 °C	25 °C	23 °C	21 °C	17 °C

Facilities

The hotels along the way offer all services expected. A number of phone booths, bars, and restaurants are also found along the route. Public conveniences are located in Għadira Bay and Armier Bay.

Hotels that you will encounter along this route include:

Seabank Hotel	4*
Mellieħa Holiday Centre (Danish Village)	3*
Mellieħa Bay Hotel	4*
Ramla Bay Hotel	4*
Barcelo Riviera Resort & Spa	4*
Paradise Bay Hotel	4*

Disclaimer

Every effort has been made to ensure that this walk is safe and sensitive to the needs of the visitor, locals and environment. The Malta Tourism Authority is not responsible for any personal injury and/or loss of, or damage to, personal property whilst on this walk or any other in the series.

Useful telephone numbers.

<i>Emergency & rescue</i>	112
<i>Ambulance</i>	196
<i>Nearest Health Centre (Mosta)</i>	2143 2062
<i>Mellieħa Police Station</i>	2152 3457
<i>Mellieħa Local Council office</i>	2152 1333
<i>Malta Tourism Authority</i>	2291 5800
<i>Telephone enquires</i>	1182



Other useful information

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Feedback and comments are welcome. Write to info@visitmalta.com

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Marfa Ridge Walk

Relish the breath-taking views of bays, cliffs and vast horizons as well as the idyllic Gozo Channel including the islands of Comino and Gozo. Natural habitats, geological formations and spectacular shades of marine-blues and leafy-greens serve as a middle-space where land and sea interact; at times in serene harmony and at times in violent conflict. The walk trails through parcels of farmland, wooded areas, garigue and beaches. The path also brings forward remnants and reminders of Malta's military legacy and its bitter struggle for survival, as several fortified defensive structures are encountered en route.

Other walks in the series



Baħrija Walk

Passing through *Baħrija - Baħrija Valley - Mtaħleb
Tal-Vigarju Cliffs - Fiddien Valley - Rabat*



Dwejra Lines Walk

Passing through *Mġarr - Bingemma - Dwejra Lines
Speranza Valley - Mosta.*



Girgenti Walk

Passing through *Buskett - Għar il-Kbir - Girgenti Valley
Siġġiewi - Il-Maqluba – Qrendi*



Tas-Silġ Walk

Still to be published

Passing through *Marsaskala - St. Thomas Bay - Tal-Munxar
Xrobb il-Għajin - Delimara - Tas-Silġ - Marsaxlokk.*

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