



### The deposits and excavations

A sequence of deposits that once filled the first seventy metres of the cave stands over the Lower Coralline Limestone bedrock. The lowest deposit is a clay layer that contains no organic material. On top of it one finds the so called Hippopotamus layer, with abundant remains of Maltese Pleistocene hippopotami and elephants. Then follows a pebble layer over which was deposited the deer layer. This layer is characterized by huge amounts of deer remains and sparse remains of fox, wolf, bear, and numerous remains of frogs, toads, voles, bats and shrews. A thin calcareous sheet capped the Pleistocene deposits. On top of this sheet lies the cultural layer, which yielded numerous remains associated with the earliest period of human occupation of the Maltese islands: pottery, stone axes, shell beads, flint and obsidian flakes, bone points and domestic animal as well as human remains. It was

from this layer that Malta's most primitive 'Ghar Dalam phase pottery', dating back to 5,200 BC, was recorded and recovered.

The cave was first recorded in 1647 by the Maltese historian Gio. Francesco Abela but its scientific importance was brought to light by the Italian geologist Arturo Issel, who in 1865 investigated the cave for remains of Paleolithic man. Instead he encountered Pleistocene (Ice Age) animal bones and prehistoric remains associated with the earliest human occupation of Malta. Between 1892 and 1937 a series of large scale excavations were carried out by John H. Cooke, Giuseppe Despott, Carmelo Rizzo and Guze Baldacchino. The large amounts of organic remains unearthed from the cave created a huge storage problem and in 1930 the Government erected a small museum to house it. The cave was opened to the public in 1933.



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# Ghar Dalam Cave and Museum

## A BRIEF GUIDE

### Ghar Dalam Cave and Museum

**Opening Hours:** Monday to Sunday 8.15 - 17.00hrs  
Last admission 16.30hrs

#### Reaching the area

*By public transport:* Bus numbers 11, 12, 115.

*By self-drive car:* Drive towards Żejtun and Birżebbuġa. The site is easy to locate as it is situated on the main road leading to Birżebbuġa. Parking is easily accessible close to the main entrance.

#### Other Heritage Malta Museums and Sites:

Hal Saflieni Hypogeum, Paola  
Tarxien Temples, Tarxien  
Haġar Qim Temples, Qrendi  
Mnajdra Temples, Qrendi  
St Paul's Catacombs, Rabat  
The National Museum of Natural History, Mdina  
Museum of Archaeology, Citadel Gozo  
Ġgantija Temples, Xagħra Gozo  
Borġ in-Nadur, Birżebbuġa\*  
San Pawl Milqi, Burmarrad\*  
Ta' Haġrat Temples, Mgarr\*  
Skorba Temples, Mgarr\*  
Tas-Silġ, Marsaxlokk\*  
Tal-Mintna Catacombs, Mqabba\*

\* Open by appointment



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## The Museum

The museum has two large halls on either side of the main entrance passage. The old exhibition hall that was set up in 1936 by the Curator of Natural History Dr Joseph Baldacchino consists of a number of wooden showcases displaying a small sample of the items that were recovered from the cave during the excavations. The display cases contain thousands of identical semi-fossilised bones decoratively wired on wooden boards, in Victorian style. Four showcases with modern skeletons of a brown bear, a young African elephant, a young hippopotamus and a skull of an adult female, fox, wolf and a red deer are also displayed for comparative purposes. In 2002 a new exhibition hall was opened to the public. It consists of a thematic exhibition, clarifying the formation and history of Għar Dalam and information about how and why the remains of prehistoric animals were found in the cave. It also explains the origin of Maltese rock formation and the exposed rock sequence of the islands. Other display cases are dedicated to the Ice Age and its effects on Malta, evolutionary adaptations of Pleistocene animals to island conditions and Malta's most important Pleistocene sites. Prominently displayed are the organic remains of different Maltese Pleistocene endemic species recovered from the cave deposits. The display includes also a historical section dedicated to the scholars who carried out Pleistocene research in Malta. Two large paintings representing 'the fauna present during the Pleistocene' and 'Wied Dalam in modern times' are also on display.

## The cave and its formation

Għar Dalam is a natural, waterworn cave in the lower coralline limestone, located in the southeastern part of Malta about 500 metres from St George's Bay, Birżebbuġa. It is situated in the north-east bank of Wied Dalam. The cave stands 15.5 metres above sea level and is 144 metres deep. For safety reasons only the first seventy metres are accessible to the public. Għar Dalam is the oldest of Malta's national monuments. The Pleistocene mammalian fauna found in it reached Malta from the European mainland at the time of the glacial period of the Ice Age, about 200,000 years ago, when land bridges existed between Sicily and Malta. At that period of time the levels of the Mediterranean Sea were

considerably lower than they are at present. These land bridges provided a pathway for the European fauna in escaping the unfavourable climatic conditions of Europe, when most of its northern and central regions were covered with ice sheets. The ice sheets never reached Malta but the effects of the Ice Age were considerable. The abundant rain of the Pleistocene period caused floods and rivers, which excavated most of the Maltese valleys. At Wied Dalam the river gradually eroded its bed into a subterranean tunnel until finally reached and penetrated the tunnel's roof. Loads of Pleistocene animal carcasses, clay, pebbles, stones, soil and other debris were sucked and deposited in this cavern.



0 10 20 30 40 metres