

# My Xlendi

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Today I do not enjoy having to go down to Xlendi Bay, in Gozo, not even for a meal in one of the many restaurants that have opened during the last 50 years. It is not the Xlendi I loved so much, anymore.

## My Childhood Xlendi

My childhood Xlendi – the name is a mythical Byzantine word which resonates ‘xelandion’, ‘a ship’ – was one of the most romantic, serene, tranquil places in Gozo. It was a fabulous bay. I loved Xlendi much more than any other bay in Gozo, where I was born and brought up.

Xlendi is a very picturesque bay, geologically resembling a small fiord. It is situated on the western coast of the island, indenting the otherwise high ridge of cliffs which stretches from Dwejra on the northwest to those of Ta’ Ċenċ, on the southeast.

Facing almost directly the setting sun, the small bay used to enjoy seclusion and, then – at least till the 1950s – only the few fishermen who dwelt in the small houses built on the Front, a few meters away from the greyish sandy beach, and those who lived in It-Triq tal-Għajn, alias Il-Fontana, about a kilometre up on the outskirts of the capital city, Rabat – officially named Victoria in 1887 – used to frequent it to make a living with their colourful *dghajjes* [boats], when the sea allowed, but especially in the months of March to October. It was a summer attraction for swimming for my family. And we grew to love it.

## Foreigners

Again, then, more foreigners rather than natives used to be attracted to the bay for quiet, relaxing strolls, and remote peace! The Gozitans preferred



Part of a 1950 post card showing lace-makers in the shade of a large tamarisk tree on the front of the bay in Xlendi [Photo: Josef Karl Bajada of Facebook ‘RetroGozo’].



larger and more popular Marsalforn Bay on the northern coast of the island. In winter, the bay and its surroundings used to be almost empty and, especially at night, one could ‘kill and bury’ as a Maltese proverb ‘*Toqtol u tidfen*’ implies, and only the sea waves, smashing against the rocks around, broke the sacred silence of day and seagulls’ cries that of night.

I remember when the only artificial street light provided was by paraffin lamps in large lanterns – today used as decorating artefacts – fixed to walls some three meters above the ground, which were lit by a Maltese ‘Larry’<sup>1</sup> the lamp-lighter, every evening around twilight, and put out early the following morning, at dawn.



A lantern with an oil lamp within, affixed to the corner of a house in Xlendi [Photo: Josef Karl Bajada of Facebook ‘RetroGozo’].

## A Chapel

As far as I remember, there was one such lantern affixed to the façade or perhaps to one of the sides of the small chapel on the rocks on the right, at the end of the road that from Victoria leads to the bay. The chapel used to be seen alone, perched high up

on the rocks, beside the great cave in which an old mill is to be found. But today the buildings erected around, almost hide it – as in the case of many of our village churches dwarfed by much higher constructions around them.



The chapel, dedicated to Our Lady of Mount Carmel, in Xlendi [Photo: jjpzammit].

It is a small chapel that, fortunately, still retains much of its years old architecture and aesthetics. The only one surviving from some other four chapels, it is dedicated to Our Lady of Mount Carmel. It was built in 1868 and had been enlarged only at the rear.

I still have an impression of a ‘*gostra*’ – consisting of a greased pole fixed on the rocks on the left of the bay, slantingly protruding high up out on the sea, on which players tried to walk to catch a flag at the end – held as part of the water games organised on the feast of the patron saint, on the first Sunday in September. A large crowd clapped and jeered and filled the bay with unusual thunderous shouting, encouraging the arduous daring youths that entertained with their running for the flag, and

<sup>1</sup> ‘Larry’ is the name of a man who used to light and put out similar street paraffin lamps in street lanterns, cited in the poem ‘The Lamp Lighter’, by Robert Louis Stevenson. The Maltese counterpart was ‘Majsi’ – immortalized in a poem most probably inspired by that of Stevenson, ‘*Il-Kebbies tal-Fanali*’ (The Lamp Lighter), by Gozitan poet and once President of Malta, Anton Buttigieg.





The youth who got the flag from the top of the oily-pole, 'Il-Ġostrà', organised on the feast of Our Lady of Mount Carmel in Xlendi, with crowds watching in the 1950s [Photo: Kikku Cremona].

most of them slipping splashing into the sea beneath. It was quite a spectacle.

### Electricity Takes Over

When electricity power reached the bay only a few low-wattage lamps replaced the lanterns, or were fixed on top of poles planted in the ground rocks around, and with their new 'brightness' broke the otherwise pitch darkness of night in Xlendi.

Today the picture is quite different. The building boom of the 1960s and the more recent large construction projects often driven by speculative motives by the owners of the barren rocky sloping heights on the left hand side of the bay. All this, in a few years, led to the uglification of the site, with little – if any – respect for the environment and particularly aesthetics. They disturbed the enchanting characteristics of Xlendi once and for all.



The statue of St Andrew with berthed boats and buildings around [Photo: jjpzammit].



## Xlendi and Its Surroundings

The confines of Xlendi include some interesting places. On the right hand side of the bay there are: a large sea cave called L-Għar tad-Dgħajjes, another sea cave L-Għar ta' Karollina under the heights beneath the village of Ta' Kerċem, and large and wide 'Id-Dkieken' – old Maltese for 'stone benches' – on which salt pans used to provide large amounts of the precious mineral, at the foot of the cliffs, at the mouth of the bay.



The bridge over the inlet Il-Kantra [Photo: Giovanni Zammit].

On the left, there are Il-Wied tal-Kantra and Il-Kantra tax-Xlendi (a little inlet), and a centuries old bridge – 'kantra' is an Arabic word for 'bridge' – over it, which helps one cross from one side to the other and, a rough path that leads to the honey-coloured plain promontory on which still stands majestic, enduring time, weather, and corrosive salty atmosphere, It-Torri tax-Xlendi (Xlendi Tower), built by the Knights of the Order in 1650, to help watch against, and pass on news of threatening approaching enemy galleys.<sup>2</sup> Further up on the left lays the village of Munxar of which Xlendi makes part, geographically, and is under the jurisdiction of the same Munxar Local Council.



Xlendi Tower built by the Knights [Photo: Giovanni Zammit].

## Magic Moments

Fortunately enough, some magic offered by my Xlendi may still be enjoyed.



A couple enjoying the sun set over Xlendi Bay [Photo: jjpzammit].

The sun – that has witnessed all the changes that the bay has gone through over many centuries from when it was used as a harbour by the Phoenicians – never betrayed her charm when setting; it has never ceased to bewitch the beholder with indescribable, spectacular, colourful skies before it descends on whatever mood is the stretch of sea between her and the bay.

Today the tranquility of yesteryear is gone and the nights are no longer deserted, but the memories of Xlendi of my younger days will never fade.

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<sup>2</sup> This tower has been lately restored by the Munxar Local Council and the NGO Wirt Ghawdex.