

## A villa in paradise... - Alan Deidun



The dense maquis surrounding the ridge at Żebbuġ, Gozo, earmarked once again for residential development.

Unspoilt ridges are a candidate for the single most evocative feature of Gozo's landscape, with the alternation of undulating valleys and ridges being the mainstay of the sister island's rural character. Thus, it is very understandable that ridge development is firmly legislated against in several planning guidance documents, including the former Structure Plan and the local plans.

Last year in this column I had reported on PA 01397/17, which proposed the construction of six apartments, complete with garage, along a ridge in Żebbuġ, Gozo, with the application being withdrawn by the applicant on the eve of decision day. A completely metamorphosised planning application – PA 08279/18 – which proposes the construction of a Class 1A villa on a smaller footprint of the same site, has been submitted.



Interestingly enough, the site earmarked for the villa development is classified within Planning Authority's online search facility as "within development zone", contrary to the previous ODZ designation of the site. Despite this 'concession', the veracity of which I cannot verify, concerns that had been raised regarding the previous application are still valid.

These include the sensitive nature of the site in question, both in terms of ridge positioning and also in terms of the dense maquis vegetation, as well as the lack of road access to the site, which would entail the widening of an existing winding rural track and an incursion into a currently inaccessible and unspoilt landscape.

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### Alien fish alert.....

The 'Spot the Alien Fish' citizen science campaign ([www.aliensmalta.eu](http://www.aliensmalta.eu)) has recently been alerted to the capture of yet another individual fish of the toxic silver-cheeked toadfish (*Lagocephalus sceleratus*), an alien species of puffer fish which is native of tropical Indo-Pacific regions, which was first recorded in the Mediterranean in 2004, off the coast of Turkey.

The species is extremely toxic, such that its consumption is responsible for a number of deaths in countries where there is a lack of sufficient awareness among fishing communities, including Tunisia and Egypt. The toxic nature of the fish is due to the presence of the TTX (tetrodotoxin)

venom, one of the most potent non-protein neurotoxins known to man, which infuses various organs within the fish, including its liver, ovaries and kidneys, besides muscle tissue.

As a result, this fish species, which has to date been caught on at least three different occasions in Maltese waters, is considered to be one of the worst of the Mediterranean's marine invaders, having spread all the way from the Suez Canal to Spain. Symptoms of TTX poisoning include a tingling sensation over the entire body, nausea and vomiting, dizziness, headache, abdominal pain and muscular paralysis of the limbs, with cardiac arrest resulting in extreme and unassisted cases.



This highly toxic silver-cheeked toadfish was recently caught off Ġnejna. This alien species should definitely not be eaten.

Intriguingly enough, TTX is produced by marine bacteria, and members of the puffer fish family (Tetraodontidae) have the ability to accumulate TTX in their tissue as a way of dissuading predation. On average, a mortality rate of 10 per cent is reported for countries where cases of TTX poisoning are reported, including Japan and Bangladesh.

The latest individual of this species was caught by a veteran fisherman off the mouth of Ġnejna bay, at the same spot where the first individual of this species was caught in 2015. The 'Spot the Alien Fish' campaign is run by the Department of Geosciences at the University of Malta and is supported by the International Ocean Institute (IOI), the Environment and Resources Authority (ERA), the Department of Fisheries and Aquaculture and the Malta Tourism Authority (MTA).

Anyone interested in supporting the initiative by submitting reports of marine alien species (not just fish) are encouraged to download the campaign smart phone app, to join the campaign's social media page and to visit the campaign's website, from where complimentary copies of the user-friendly, flagship campaign A3 poster can be requested. Reports should be accompanied by good-quality photos and, where possible, the fish individual should be adequately preserved (such as through freezing) when caught.

## **Annual IOI Ocean Governance Course underway**

The 14th edition of the annual five-week International Ocean Institute (IOI) Malta Training Course on Ocean Governance is currently under way.

The course content spans over contemporary approaches to coastal and ocean management, with an emphasis on moral, ethical and legal values in Ocean Governance (equity and peaceful uses of the ocean) under the governance architecture of UNCLOS and related international instruments and agreements.

One of the main objectives of the course is to assist in the formation of a core of decision-makers to be aware of the complex global and regional contemporary issues of coastal and ocean management.

This year's participants to the course, which is accredited by the University of Malta, hail from 12 different countries, including Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt, Sweden, Lithuania, Russia, Georgia, Cyprus, Turkmenistan, China and Malta.

A landmark feature of this year's course will be the seminar addressing Marine Genetic Resources (MGRs) on December 3, with MGRs being one of the four planks currently underlying the BBNJ (Biological diversity in areas Beyond National Jurisdiction) Treaty currently being concocted at the UN.

Further details about the course offered by the IOI, an international NGO with special observe status at the UN and whose headquarters are based in Malta, can be gleaned from:

<https://www.ioinst.org/training/loi-training-programmes/loi-training-programmes-portfolio/loi-malta/>

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