CLOISTERED SPACES
A Journey through Sacred Gardens in the Maltese Islands

The President’s Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society
FOREWORD FROM HER EXCELLENCY, THE PRESIDENT OF MALTA

Her Excellency Marie-Louise Coleiro Preca
President of Malta

Present and future generations have to face the threats posed by climate change to all of humanity. We need to find effective ways to live in a sustainable manner, that is, a manner adequate for human beings while at the same time respectful of our “common home”. We can no longer avoid facing the consequences of our own excessive lifestyles, particularly of countries that have accumulated wealth at the expense of those environmental systems on which human life is dependent. Humanity needs to re-learn to live within Earth’s boundaries, respecting our complex and interdependent ecosystems.

When facing such threats, we may feel overwhelmed. However, resilience is built upon firm pillars of creativity, innovation, and hope. We know that we need to adapt and correct our ways of living, but how do we achieve that as a society? Cloistered Spaces is a small creative contribution towards these conversations, reminding us of how our ancestors lived: how monastic communities harvested water, and how they farmed. It is a way of remembering how we can return to a simpler way of life and once again valorise those aspects of life which are overlooked today, such as growing one’s own food.

Cloistered Spaces is like a photo album, presenting snapshots of religious communities in Malta and Gozo, of people who valued “poverty” and a simple way of life over the centuries. These may today become creative spaces in which to re-think sustainability, good stewardship of Earth’s resources, and environmental guardianship. Some of these religious spaces are today becoming nurturing places once more, not only for those who visit them, but also for the land they cultivate. This publication celebrates these initiatives which are often taking place in ways that go unnoticed and under appreciated.

The booklet that the President’s Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society has published, through the National Hub for Ethnobotanical Research, is another step towards an invitation to further ecumenical, interfaith, and intercultural discussions about environmental guardianship. Though we may differ in our religious or philosophical beliefs, we all live on this one Earth, and we are responsible to restore its vitality and create conditions for its healing.

I hope this publication offers added value, showcasing the unique flavour of our beloved Islands. May it stimulate further reflection and action, as we continue discussing adaptation to climate change, and ways of meeting the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. Religious communities have a role to play, and this publication is another invitation for both state actors and religious leaders to collaborate harmoniously in the care of our “common home”.

A MESSAGE FROM THE DIRECTOR GENERAL, THE PRESIDENT’S FOUNDATION FOR THE WELLBEING OF SOCIETY

Dr Ruth Farrugia
Director General
The President’s Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society

We are presented with a partial but compelling answer to the great question: What is the good life? This work’s ethnobotanical lens helps us to take a fresh look at our relationships and our communal lives. It helps us to rediscover and appreciate that which is most essential, our emotional ties with each other and with the earth that sustain us — the very sources of our true wellbeing.

Human life depends upon environmental stability; a fact we often overlook. Human wellbeing cannot be discussed in isolation from issues of ecological care and the health of natural spaces. We are at last becoming more aware of the ways in which human wellbeing is intimately intertwined with the life of trees and plants, of other creatures and their homes. We have an innate need for plants, not only as food or vital providers of the air we breathe, but each of us benefits from being surrounded by trees and greenery. We all benefit the gift of a garden in full bloom, and the joy it brings.

Cloistered Spaces takes a creative look at how religious communities integrate gardens in everyday life. These garden spaces have spiritual significance but they are also functional, spaces where food is produced, medicines are discovered, and textiles are made. The publication produced by the National Hub for Ethnobotanical Research, within the President’s Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society, invites the public to reimagine how our urban spaces may become more sustainable and inclusive of botanical life in light of this information. While aesthetics can be improved through the use of plants and flowers, it is human wellbeing that is enhanced by forging a society aimed at creating the conditions for a meaningful and healthy existence.
INTRODUCTION FROM THE CHAIR

Cloistered Spaces was conceived out of a desire to revitalise our relationship with past ecological traditions. The text contains an exploration of the cultural use of gardens and plants within monasteries and their communities. Through this publication the Hub hopes to revisit these folk practices, many of which risk being entirely lost and forgotten, with the hope of further inspiring faith communities to bring these traditions back to life. Dr Censu Caruana, a member of our Hub’s core team, first proposed that we explore the ethnobotanical nuances within Malta’s monastic gardens. Together we agreed that this could be an excellent way of inviting people living in Malta and Gozo, rediscovering their common theological roots.

Cloistered Spaces proposes a focus on the use of plants, herbs, trees, and flowers by religious communities and how they feature in our daily lives and their rituals, both religious and secular. These practices often inhabit the religious calendar, and mediate interaction with the world outside monastic walls. The publication highlights how the cultural use of plants and trees can be conducive to building relationships and strengthening community ties, adding flavour to community relationships and celebrations outside monastic walls.

Monks and nuns were integral members of community life in Malta and Gozo, and in some communities they have preserved this role, responding to the exigencies of a changing world. Cloistered Spaces shows how those leading a religious way of life offered more than spiritual words and prayers to lay people - they also offered remedies to help the body, produced elixirs and ointments, and some alcohol as well. As scientific advancements took place, many of these monastic traditions started to lose their significance, and with them some of those community ties were also lost. As our lives become more technologically demanding, we seem to yearn for a return to that elegant simplicity, those unsophisticated remedies to soothe our bodies and minds.

Cloistered Spaces re-proposes the cloister garden as a community space where relationships can once again thrive, helping people to appreciate that which is simple and gratuitous in life. While nostalgia does colour some of the text within the book, Cloistered Spaces is more than a mere glance at the past. It invites the reader, including those interviewed themselves, to continue to reimagine and reinvent these architectural marvels, to serve present and future generations by keeping environmental guardianship in mind. The publication already identifies a number of religious communities who are responding creatively to today’s realities, replanting and restoring their gardens, with some communities leading the way in sustainable innovation.

The publication also identifies the different ways in which religious communities express their relationship with nature, and how their own spirituality influences their choice of trees and the plants they grow. For example, the Jesuits focus more energy on creating a natural space for prayer and contemplation, utilising indigenous plants, while cloistered monastic communities are more inspired by the Song of Songs and the idea of the closed garden where lovers enjoy fruitful moments.

We hope that reading this book inspires you to visit some of these hidden gardens and cloisters featured here, found within Maltese and Gozitan villages and towns. The information you will find in these pages is mostly derived from interviews that were carried out with those living in these communities, relying on memory and passed-down tradition rather than actual documentation. It is a record of the living sense of the garden, preserved by the community.

We hope that reading this book will inspire you to explore not only these gardens but also the traditions behind them. One may find that it is not only the soul that is restored within these spaces, but also the body, the senses, and relationships, because in these gardens, we are invited to play and experience the innocent pleasures of life, and are made free to share in the abundance of wellbeing.

Mr Mario Gerada
Chairperson
National Hub for Ethnobotanical Research
Ethnobotanical research provides information on the cultural, traditional and anthropological values of a society. It brings together a large number of researchers from different perspectives, combining insight from both the humanities and the sciences.

The present publication is intended to provide basic information to the general public, however it shows convincingly that there are many aspects of Maltese culture that are largely unknown, and worse still, are susceptible to loss. Furthermore, it demonstrates that the information it contains has great potential. It does not only help to make this information more properly valued, but may even help revive lost and ancient traditions.

Modern society is changing so rapidly that traditional lifestyles are often discarded and replaced, with the result that they are forgotten and die out. Therefore, unlike traditional, or past, cultures, modern societies the world over are losing precious information about their past. There may be several reasons for this loss. It may be due to a lack of interest in past values shown by modern generations, or perhaps it is the result of an inability, on the part of older generations, to communicate this information to the succeeding generations. Possibly a lack of interest at all levels does not encourage members of the community to carry out proper research in the field, with the result that data is not collected and analysed.

This last point, the need of research, is essential for a proper understanding of past cultures. Only through proper and systematic research is it possible to support the flow of information from one generation to the next. The meticulous collection of information in the present analysis clearly shows that the collection of information, even when carried out in an informal fashion, provides food for thought to researchers, and academics at higher educational institutions. Let it also induce us to pose questions like “Are we looking into the situation as we should? What more should we do to preserve our precious heritage?”

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Professor Everaldo Attard  
Institute of Earth Systems  
University of Malta

Professor Carmel Cassar  
Institute for Tourism, Travel and Culture  
University of Malta
The Monastery of Saint Peter on Villegaignon Street, in Mdina, the old town of Malta, dates back to the Middle Ages. The exact date of its foundation is unknown, yet records show that the monastery was active within the life of Mdina by the end of the fifteenth century. The building first served as a hospital; however, most of the structure that remains dates back to the 1700s. This is due to the extensive damage endured by the monastery during an earthquake in 1693.
It was once common practice for the second-born daughters of noble families to become part of the Saint Peter’s community. Today, the community consists of five cloistered nuns, including the abbess. The monastery can house up to forty nuns, and large parts of it are now unused. Blessed Adeodata Pisani, a nun beatified in 2001 by Pope John Paul II, lived here in the nineteenth century. Each year, on the 25th February, a commemoration mass is celebrated, and the public are invited to attend and share some time and a simple meal with the sisters.

The history of the community is stored in an old archive, which has only recently been restored. Many of the archive’s records date from the seventeenth century onwards, although some are far older. These books, with their particular relevance to the history of Malta during that period, are often used by students who are granted special permission by the community to carry out their research in the archive.
The building surrounds a large and centrally placed garden, with the main rooms and cells oriented towards the garden. The cloister is a recent addition, dating back to the 1970s and donated by a private benefactor. Unlike other monasteries, where cloisters ring the garden perimeter, this cloister is arranged around the centre of the space.

On the feast of Corpus Christi, the nuns hold a procession in this cloister. A Via Crucis during Eastertide is organised in the garden, following a tradition that dates back centuries. For the ageing members of this community, the cloister offers a place for meditation and silent reflection.

“The cloister inspires peace and tranquility, and offers a space for us to connect with the changing seasons.”

The abbess describes the garden and the cloister as a window into the outside world. The cloister and gardens are open to the public on specific days throughout the year, especially the feast of St Benedict, celebrated on the 11th July.

The garden is large, and contains an impressive number of citrus trees. These include grapefruit, lemons, bitter lemons, and Seville oranges. Fruit is picked by the nuns and given to benefactors in thanksgiving for their help, which is invaluable in maintaining the monastery and its community.

The nuns offer traditional biscuits, sweets, and small items such as shawls and handkerchiefs as part of their work. When the community was larger, the nuns produced a vast array of sweets, honey rings, beverages, chamomile tea, ġulepp (carob syrup) and jams, along with some products of medicinal value. The monastery also used to prepare communion wafers for use during the celebration of mass.

““At the time, we didn’t use to plan for the eventuality of our work not continuing any more. Indeed, what lived with the nun died with the nun. To my knowledge, none of their recipes were written down.”

Over the years, as the number of nuns in the monastery decreased, so have the items produced.
Grandmaster Hughes de Loubenx Verdalle founded the order of the Jerosolimitan cloistered nuns towards the end of the sixteenth century. When this order of nuns began, the community lived in Birgu in a building originally used as a hospital by the Knights. In 1604 it was vacated by the nuns, and the Benedictine sisters of Santa Scholastica moved in. The monastery in Valletta was specifically built for the Jerosolimitan nuns. This monastery was possibly shared with the Magdalene sisters, an order of “penitent prostitutes” in the seventeenth century, but this is uncertain.

Since the sixteenth century, the order has experienced various changes in its turbulent history. At the end of the eighteenth century, during the French occupation of Malta, the nuns faced special persecution because they were perceived to form part of the aristocracy. At the turn of the millennium, an effort was made to reunite the nuns with the Order of Saint John, who now provide support and assistance to the community.

The monastery in Valletta used to house a number of treasures from the time of the Knights of Malta, including paintings, religious items, and gifts given by the nobility over the centuries. Many of these treasures were stolen during the French occupation of Malta.

The monastery was considerably damaged during the Second World War. Tradition tells that the church was decorated with beautiful frescoes similar to Saint John’s Co-Cathedral, located a few blocks away. These were completely destroyed during incessant bombings. The church has a titular painting by famed artist Mattia Preti, which fortunately still remains.

“You’d realise that something has been stolen when you find a group of six candle-holders made of silver, and it is obvious that the seventh central candle-holder, the largest one, is missing!”
The nuns live a cloistered way of life inside the monastery. They speak to relatives and friends through an iron grille found in an ante-room beside the monastery entrance, and only during set times of the day. Their life is centred around prayer and their devotion to Jesus Christ. The architecture of the monastery reflects this spirituality, with the “enclosed garden” being located at the centre of both the physical building and community life.

The first community in Valletta welcomed over thirty nuns. Currently, there are twelve nuns in this community, living in their large monastery with a view over the Grand Harbour. The charism of the order is focused on intercessory prayer for families, friends, benefactors, the Maltese people, and the world. Special prayers are offered for the Archbishop and the Pope, the latter being recognised as their Prime Superior. Life revolves around contemplative prayer, the maintenance of the building, and handiwork, including ganutell and the production of so-called “devotional baby hearts”.

The cloistered charism of the order has evolved over time, reflecting developments in historical circumstance and Church teaching. During the Knights’ period, the nuns prayed for the monk-soldiers and their success in battle and at sea. This was officially revoked in the years following the Second Vatican Council. In return for the nuns’ prayers, the Knights gave them a percentage of the spoils of war, called il corsu. When the Knights left the Islands, the nuns were left in the hands of providence.

“The rationale behind the cloister conditions, which may seem alien to us, comes from the ‘hortus conclusus’ derived from the Vulgate Bible’s Canticle of Canticles, 4:12: ‘Hortus conclusus soror mea, sponsa, hortus conclusus, fons signatus’. A garden enclosed is my sister, my spouse; a garden enclosed, a fountain sealed up.”
The cloister is a place of contemplation, and encourages an atmosphere of introspection. It is indeed an enclosed garden, filled with trees and plants. Orange, tangerine, lemon, peach, and olive trees grow together. Prayer, rather than relaxation, is the focus of this cloister. Nuns spend time meditating in the enclosed space. During the feast of Corpus Christi, and the month of the Rosary in October, processions and rosaries take place here. These activities are exclusively organised by the nuns for their own community, and are not open to the public.

Fruit is collected from the trees and is given to benefactors. The Pauline confraternity in Valletta (located in Saint Paul Street, parallel to Saint Ursula) provide assistance to the nuns during harvest time. The nuns ask for help from the confraternity with regard to practical things they cannot manage, while offering them counsel and prayers in return. The confraternity also takes it upon itself to decorate the nuns’ church for festivities. This collaboration dates back a few decades, and confraternity members are among the very few “outsiders” who enter the monastery on a regular basis, thus providing some contact with the outside world.

Jams and marmalades are also made by the nuns. Roses and Belladonna lilies are grown in this garden, decorating and perfuming the church. Basil, rosemary, marjoram and other herbs are also grown here. The nuns speak affectionately about their trees and garden, particularly those fruit trees that have since died.

A stomach elixir used to be prepared by the community, utilising lemon balm and orange flower water. The elixir was produced to be medicinal for both the nuns and the Valletta community.

However, the community still produces biscuits, given to benefactors. The nuns also produce custom-sown cushion hearts, utilising a blessed olive leaf. These cushion hearts are bought as gifts for newborn babies, and their families or carers. This little-known tradition is a way for the community to generate income.

Ganutell is also practised, a local handicraft that uses silk thread, beads, and metal wire to form decorative flowers used for the decoration of churches, statues, and even in wedding ceremonies. Many ganutell decorations found in Maltese churches were created by previous generations of nuns from the Valletta community. Today’s nuns are also seeking to revive the skill of Maltese lace-making, another tradition that has been lost by their community. Lace-making equipment is found throughout the monastery, proof that the nuns of previous generations engaged in this art on some scale.
Hidden away in the heart of Sliema’s bustling streets, Holy Trinity Church is distinctive for its triangular architecture and the fact that it is one of only two Anglican places of worship in Malta. Together with Saint Paul’s Pro-Cathedral in Valletta, Holy Trinity forms part of the larger Anglican Diocese of Europe.

Following the construction of the cathedral in the 1840s, which was built thanks to an endowment provided by the Dowager Queen Adelaide, the Anglican community in Sliema requested a small church located closer to their homes. The land was bought on the 7th April 1866, and included a villa that is today known as Bishop’s House. The foundation stone was laid on the 27th September 1866, and the church was consecrated on the 23rd April of the following year. It has served the Anglican community in Malta ever since, and although the community is far smaller than it once was, Holy Trinity continues to provide a space for spiritual and social connection.

The church on Rudolph Street was built in a distinctive triangular style, combining English and Maltese characteristics. The community provides for the maintenance and upkeep of the building. The interior of the church offers an experience of light and space, with side walls that feature multiple marble slabs donated by British military regiments who attended services in the church. The pews currently in use were obtained upon the closure of a derelict Anglican chapel in the Valletta dockyard.

"Most of the people who attend our services are locals, but we do get quite a number of foreigners during their stay in Malta. They are always made to feel welcome, and comment positively on the calm this space provides in the busy town of Sliema.”

Bishop’s House is located to one side of the church. The house is on loan, with the arrangement that so long as it is used as a residence for priests, it shall remain in the possession of the Anglican community. Due to their architectural and historical value, both the church and Bishop’s House are listed buildings.
The church’s mature gardens extend beyond the church, providing a space of green tranquillity. The gardens are tended by a volunteer from Sliema, who cares for the numerous fruit trees, including orange and lemon trees, a pomegranate tree, and prickly pear cacti. The garden area is used by the community for parties, and as a venue for fundraising events.

“Every spring, we all pitch in to tidy the gardens as a community. Then, we enjoy a strawberry festival!”

The community set up a small allotment initiative a few years ago, and parishioners were invited to care for a small patch of the garden and grow vegetables and flowers of their own. Unfortunately, due to the community’s dwindling and ageing population, the initiative has since been abandoned.

Today, the garden mostly serves as a gathering place. After weekly services, the community comes together in the garden for tea and biscuits. A traditional strawberry tea is produced in the spring, and served with scones. Although strawberries are not grown in the garden, the highest quality local strawberries are seasonally sourced from Mgarr and other rural villages to produce the tea.

Tucked in one corner of the garden is a Remembrance Garden, where roses are cultivated in memory of parishioners who have died. The roses are maintained by the older members of the community, and roses are picked upon blooming and used to decorate the church.

Behind Bishop’s House is another side garden, used for religious processions. During Palm Sunday, a small procession, the only one observed by the community, makes its way out of the church and around the gardens. The community also takes care of a book exchange that opens several times a week.

“We have themed activities as a community. Last year, we organised a maritime-themed party, and we also organised a Scottish night. It’s a way of keeping our heritage, origins, and traditions alive. Members outside of the community are also welcome to attend such events.”

To arrange a visit to this site, please contact: Mrs Aileen Grech
Tel: 7904 8509
SAINT CATHERINE’S MONASTERY
Valletta, Malta

Just down the road from the Grandmaster’s Palace in Valletta is a baroque church dedicated to Saint Catherine of Alexandria. Behind the recently restored church hides a monastery where six cloistered nuns live according to the Augustinian rule. Visitors are greeted through a large wooden doorway at the traditional antiporta, beyond the monastery entrance. Cast-iron grilles serve as a gentle reminder that silence should be observed, in a spirit of spiritual enclosure.

THE COMMUNITY

The monastery dates back to February 1606, when the Marquis Giovanni Olivier bought the buildings surrounding his palace and donated them to the Augustinian sisters. His only request was that the monastery be dedicated to Saint Catherine in memory of his wife, Catherine Olivier. The nuns moved into the building five years later. At the time, the monastery housed over sixty nuns. The building has an aura of serene contemplation and timelessness up to this day.

The six members that form the current community carry on with their work, to bring the Gospel to the people through prayer and spiritual direction.

Interesting features of the monastery include a crypt, tucked away beyond the community gardens under a chapel. An inner vault behind the chapel contains an ossuary that dates back several centuries. Many nuns were laid to rest here, and permission was recently granted to resume the burial of nuns in this vault after that practice had been suspended.
THE GARDEN

The cloister garden flourishes in the shade provided by four high walls. As in other monasteries, the cloister is the heart of the building. Corridors and rooms lead to it and, through the garden, there is a common space for community interaction. Currently, it is being slowly restored with the aim of allowing the public to visit the garden on special occasions, such as feast days.

While visits on special occasions will be allowed, the rule does not permit too much contact with the outside world. Private areas for quiet contemplation are a vital component of the Augustinian rule.

While visits on special occasions will be allowed, the rule does not permit too much contact with the outside world. Private areas for quiet contemplation are a vital component of the Augustinian rule.

"If we keep the cloister and courtyards to ourselves, then what purpose do they serve? We'd rather see them being enjoyed for the good of others while we are still here..."

The cloister serves not only as a place for quiet prayer, but also as an area for relaxation. These days, the nuns tend to prefer having their recreation time on the roof, enjoying views of the Mediterranean across the harbour. The abbess and her sisters fondly remember past summer months, when the community was younger and larger, and together they spent entire afternoons enjoying the sun on the roof in each other's company. They also used to enjoy the view down to the cloister below, a verdant and lush green area in the otherwise honey-coloured grid of stone that makes up Valletta.

The cloister contains a sizeable number of mature trees. Most are orange trees, but lemon and loquat trees also grow in the garden. Some of these trees are hundreds of years old. A banana tree, a newcomer, is growing well – despite the relative lack of sunlight. A variety of fragrant herbs are grown as undergrowth, with mint and rosemary clustering around the trunks of the trees. The community makes use of these herbs in their day-to-day lives, flavouring their meals and giving a unique taste to their famed biscuits.

The community has a long history of using their botanical resources to produce confectionary and medicinal distillations of benefit to both themselves and the community living beside the monastery. As community members aged and died, many of these traditional uses of plants were discontinued. However, the memory of these practices persists, and some nuns are eager to resume them.

The abbess recalls an elixir used to calm stomach upsets, called “i-elżir tal-istanku”. The mixture is made from a herb known as lemon balm, which thrives in this garden. Nuns who joined the community after the practice of producing this elixir had been discontinued looked upon the herb as an invasive weed, and a lot of it was pulled out and lost. Due to the fact that the cloister is shaded for most of the day, not many herbs are easily grown in the nuns' garden. However, lemon balm takes well, and clusters around the trees. The abbess now makes sure it is no longer uprooted.

Other products include a sweet liquor produced specifically for baptism parties. The recipe can be found in the monastery archives, and some of the older nuns still remember it by heart.

The Augustinian nuns also used to produce their own orange-water blossom, a marmalade made from Seville orange trees that grow in the cloister and garden, and carob syrup. While recipes for these products are no secret, these nuns may have some uncommon knowledge on the production of orange-water blossom using their own special method.

Elixirs and liquors were usually given to benefactors as gifts. Other items particularly welcomed by the people of Valletta were the monastery's biscuits. One nun said: “they’re the best biscuits in the City, I can assure you!”

To arrange a visit to this site, please contact:
Sr Michèlina Mifsud
Tel: 2122 1154

“We would get the Melissa (lemon balm) and crush it in the alembic together with other herbs. After that, we would slowly put in the spirits and out would come a pure, white drop - the medicine! We would use it ourselves and hand it out to everyone, as it was in very high demand. Everyone wanted Melissa! We would also add cloves, cinnamon, and other spices to it for taste.”
The Augustinian community in Gozo is one of the oldest orders established on Malta’s sister island. Past oral traditions maintain that a group of monks from monasteries founded by Saint Augustine fled North Africa in the mid-fifth century and landed in Ramla Bay, during a time when the Roman Province of North Africa was sacked by the Vandals. Even though this is not a historical fact, nevertheless, the presence of the Augustinian friars in Gozo dates back several centuries. Historical documentation confirms that the Augustinian community was active in Gozo well before 1400. The monastery outside the citadel was founded around that time, and a community of Augustinian friars has lived in this monastery ever since. When the Turks raided Gozo in 1551, the Augustinians tried to act as intermediaries between the Turks and the Gozitan population, preventing the Gozitans from being sold into slavery. However, this agreement was not honoured, and the population of Gozo was enslaved and taken captive. The archives of the monastery were destroyed during this raid, and conclusive evidence of the community’s origins in Gozo was lost. In the following decades, Augustinians from Malta reoccupied the then-emptied monastery.

In 1946 a narrow staircase in the monastery was opened to the public, and a number of religious and liturgical items, including votive offerings and relics, were displayed. An antique catafalque, upon which dead friars were laid for people to pay their respects prior to burial, is also on display. The museum includes tombstones from an abandoned cemetery, known as the Saint Augustine Cemetery, and other archaeological artefacts from the island’s medieval period. Many of these artefacts are linked to the Crusade of 1270, led by King Louis of France. A number of Knights Templar were buried in this cemetery. The library is presently being refurbished and old documents are being rediscovered. The library is not yet open to the public but will be moved to the lower floor, in a room prepared for this purpose, when archival work is completed.

Three Augustinian friars comprise today’s community in Gozo. The monastery is run as a retreat house, and a centre for Augustinian spirituality. The Augustinian charism is centred around living the Gospel in the context of community life. Thus, the celebration of daily mass, and a life of personal and communitarian prayer and communion of life, together with apostolic service in the church, are the main pillars of Augustinian life. Spiritual direction is also offered to those who seek it. Today’s focus is on providing a place for contemplation and dialogue within the monastery grounds.

The monastery building dates from the 1400s. The monastic cells are relatively large, because these constituted the entire living quarters of the friars when they led a more retired way of life. A unique feature found in this monastery is that each friar had access to a second room directly beneath his cell, where he could privately retire for contemplation and solitude.

The monastery features a museum containing religious and liturgical items, including votive offerings and relics. An antique catafalque, upon which dead friars were laid for people to pay their respects prior to burial, is also on display. The museum includes tombstones from an abandoned cemetery, known as the Saint Augustine Cemetery, and other archaeological artefacts from the island’s medieval period. Many of these artefacts are linked to the Crusade of 1270, led by King Louis of France. A number of Knights Templar were buried in this cemetery. The library is presently being refurbished and old documents are being rediscovered. The library is not yet open to the public but will be moved to the lower floor, in a room prepared for this purpose, when archival work is completed.

A narrow staircase leads to one of the longest air raid shelters in Gozo, dug entirely by hand. Numerous side rooms and exits can be found along the corridor. Many families found shelter here during the Second World War, and different strata of rock, with blue clay veins running through the walls, can be readily observed.
THE CLOISTER AND GARDEN

The monastery’s cloister is spacious, with arches and a barrel vault that surround a central garden courtyard filled with citrus trees and a central well. The cloister was the heart of the monastic community, and all activities revolved around it. The physical structure re-creates a similar atmosphere to that of a miniature village square. The role of the cloister primarily serves as a place of quiet contemplation and reflection, which in the past was used for religious processions. These days, the cloister is put to use as a hub for activities that engage the local population and also serves as a place of quiet reflection for those on retreat.

The monastery features a large back garden, where local vegetables are grown and used by the kitchens. Cabbages, turnips, artichokes, and cauliflower are cultivated throughout the year. Fodder is grown in another section of the garden, to feed the community’s rabbits. Chickens, pigeons, and ducks are also raised by the community.

The garden has lemon, orange, and olive trees, along with loquat and pomegranate trees. Olive oil is abundantly produced each year, with the olives being collected by the community and kitchen staff.

Vineyards are tended by the community, and wine was once produced by the monastery. Today, it is made outside the monastic grounds, but always using grapes grown in the garden. The wine is consumed by the community and offered to guests.

To arrange a visit to this site, please contact: Fr Adeodato C. Schembri
Tel: 2155 6060
Lunzjata is a monastery of the Dominican order, located in the city of Birgu (Vittoriosa), up the road from the Inquisitor’s Palace. With a history that dates back to the early fifteenth century, and as a victim of the ferocious bombing endured by Malta during the Second World War, the Lunzjata monastery has become a symbol of resilience and endurance in the face of adversity. It has been transformed into a social centre for the people of Birgu, bringing communities together in a space of peace and reflection.

THE COMMUNITY

When the Dominicans first settled in Malta in 1450, they lived in Rabat, a suburb of Mdina, the old town of Malta. The community grew to such an extent that by the 1520s the community had to find a new centre for their work, and in 1572 a sub-branch of the order was invited to settle in Birgu. Just before the Knights of St John arrived in Malta in 1530, the Dominicans had set up a new community to serve the burgeoning maritime town.

The Dominicans were given the chapel of the Annunciation, from which the community’s name – Tal-Lunzjata – is derived. When the Knights arrived and settled in Birgu, this monastery served as a parish church for city folk outside the areas taken up by the Knights and their attendants. It also served as a small university before the opening of the Collegium Melitense in 1592.

Presently, there are seven friars and one brother living in the community, although in recent memory it has housed up to twenty friars. The current monastery, for the most part, dates from the late 1940s and early 1950s. The original structure received substantial damage due to bombing on Sunday, 19th January 1941. Following the destruction of their home, the community moved to the Inquisitor’s Palace until the monastery was rebuilt.
THE CLOISTER

The entrance to the monastery leads onto a square paved cloister, surrounded by an arched corridor. In the past, when the friars who lived in the community were not able to leave the building except on official matters, the cloister formed the centrepiece of the community. Following the momentous changes of the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s, these strict rules were relaxed. The cloister was finally opened to the public, a decision applauded by the community’s current Prior.

Today, the cloister is a hub of activities within the city, frequented by young people who enter the cloister and organise cultural initiatives. Birgu’s young people also play an important role in the maintenance and upkeep of the cloister. Other activities include Good Friday events, the observance of the Via Sagra (organised by local groups), and performances by the National Youth Orchestra. The cloister has also been part of the city-wide Bingfest celebrations.

“At first, some members in the community objected [to it being opened to the public]. But we reasoned that it was better this way. What use is it that we keep the cloister to ourselves? We must share it, and use what we have for the good of everyone.”

“We work alongside the young people of our city, but the elderly are not to be forgotten. Indeed, we organise popular receptions and activities for them in the cloister.”

The monastery also contains an archive and library, located on an upper level overlooking the cloister. Many documents were lost during wartime bombing; however, some were preserved and are now used for research purposes. The archive and library, containing documents that date back centuries, are being catalogued by the community’s friars.

The monastery is once again in need of repair, due to the poor quality of the post-war materials available for the original reconstruction, though presently the cloister is being restored through funds obtained from the EU. The monastery, especially its cloister, is a living and joyful hub of activity, used by many members of the local community and visitors to the city.

To arrange a visit to this site, please contact: Fr Frank Borg Tel: 2182 5198

To arrange a visit to this site, please contact: Fr Frank Borg Tel: 2182 5198
The Dominican Priory dates back to the early 1400s and is located on the outskirts of Rabat in central Malta, on the way to the Buskett woodland. The church and priory are built beside a cave where, according to local tradition, the Blessed Virgin appeared to a hunter who slept there. Following the apparition, locals decorated the walls of the grotto with religious images and the grotto was further embellished by the Dominican community.

Fr Francis Azzoppardo, who lived in the priory during the seventeenth century, documented the story of this apparition and his records are preserved in the priory archives. Other documents reveal that in 1414, a wealthy man named Federico de Bordino left oil lamps before the image in the grotto, and granted money for such lamps to be replenished by the Dominicans.

By 1450, Dominican friars from the Sicilian province had arrived in Malta and taken up residence within the grotto. Over the years, various benefactors helped the Dominican community in Rabat, and the convent and church were completed in 1505.

Substantial changes were made to the church of Our Lady of the Grotto between 1616 and 1630, when the church was elongated, the dome was constructed, and the roof, previously made of wood, was rebuilt in stone. The church underwent considerable restoration after it suffered structural damage during the earthquake of 1743.

A chapel, attached to one side of the church, was built by Pietru Caxaro and his family. A notary, philosopher, and poet, Caxaro is today recognised as the author of the Cantilena, the first literary text written in Maltese. The community maintains that he is buried in this chapel.

On the upper floor of the priory is the community’s historic library. In the early 1950s, Princess Elizabeth, later Queen Elizabeth II, asked to visit the priory after noticing the building one afternoon, following a visit through the Buskett woodlands. A photo in the library commemorates this visit. The event is of particular significance because permissions had to be obtained from the Royal Family, Westminster, and the Pope, in order for an Anglican princess to cross the threshold into a male Catholic cloister.

Today, eleven Dominican priests and three novices and students live in the priory. Around sixty years ago, some twenty-three novices and over twenty priests lived in this community. When Dominicans led a more detached way of life, the cloister played a crucial role as a space for meditation and spiritual focus.
THE GROTTO AND SANCTUARY

The grotto, beneath the main church, can be accessed through a staircase close to the main entrance. The original image of Our Lady can be viewed from above through a wrought iron grille, and is in need of restoration.

Marble artwork, carved in the early 1900s, covers the original grotto walls. The marble artwork tells the story of Our Lady of the Grotto as it unfolded over the centuries.

The sanctuary, once known as the “Oratory of the Rosarians”, was linked to a confraternity of devotees to the Rosary. A copy of the original image of Our Lady of the Grotto made in 1982 is found in the chapel which is most frequently visited today.

The original statue is found in the grotto beneath the church, and it has been the object of veneration dating back to at least 1450, with various ex-votos around the chapel through the centuries. Contemporary stories of unexplained activities surrounding the image of the copy of Our Lady of the Grotto persist, including an account from 1999 of the image weeping tears of blood.

THE MARBLE ARTWORK TELLS THE STORY OF OUR LADY OF THE GROTTO AS IT UNFOLDED OVER THE CENTURIES.
THE CLOISTER AND GARDEN

The cloister is square in shape, and high and sweeping in its style. As one walks through the high arches of the cloister, its elegant simplicity reflects the friars’ open invitation to prayer and reflection. The cloister garden is in the middle of the priory and home to many birds who fill the space with their songs, especially during sunset.

The cloister and priory are built out of stones hewn from a large water reservoir beneath the garden. Charnel houses were also built using stone cut from this foundation, in order to maximise the available resources. Other large cisterns and water reservoirs can be found in this building – evidence that water management was a priority, and put to efficient use for the community’s daily activities and their agricultural land.

Expansive views of Malta can be enjoyed from the rooftop of the cloister. While the building tends to be cold in winter, its careful architectural design means that it is cool and fresh during the hot summer months.

Citrus and loquat trees grow in this garden, and their fruits are used by the community. Four sundials dating back to the early 1700s can be seen on all four upper walls surrounding the cloister. The sundials are the work of the Sicilian priest Castronius, who was a prior of the convent. Three of these sundials indicate the time, and the other indicates the month. Under each sundial is a message, inviting those reading it to reflect upon their own lives. An additional sundial can be found on the terrace, facing the south of the island.

“Observe here the hour that shows your fate. It is an hour less - think thus on your death.”

The cloister used to function as a place of prayer and as a place for the community to meet but it is now largely empty. Today, the cloister is sometimes used in processions and other religious activities.

Until the 1960s, animals like sheep and pigs were kept and bred by the community. The fields around the priory were used extensively for agricultural produce, again for the use of the community which was essentially self-sufficient at the time. No records about the produce of this community were ever found.

Many of these fields were sold and are today built up. However, the community still owns a few fields which are cultivated by farmers who share produce with the Dominicans. Vineyards are cared for, carob trees grow in these fields, and some vegetables are also produced.

The priory is likened to a small village by the residents, with various activities taking place throughout the year. These include retreats, the running of a radio station, spiritual counselling, and farming. The cloister still dominates the centre of the priory, like a village square, inviting visitors to enjoy a moment of prayerful stillness.

“Without the Sun, I am silent.”

“It is perhaps proper to say that this cloister now is like a small village, with its own radio station, activity centres, and places in which to live. There is always some activity here - and yet it also is a place of quiet and contemplation.”

To arrange a visit to this site, please contact:
Fr Angelo
Tel: 2145 4592
Dar Frate Jacoba lies on what was once an abandoned agricultural plot. In 2007, two Franciscan friars, together with a group of volunteers, founded the Youth Alive Foundation that bought this plot of land and created a welcoming and respectful space for marginalised young people. Funded through private donations and fundraising activities, Dar Frate Jacoba is now an innovative permaculture project that adopts a holistic approach to community development and sustainability. The project is based on three key principles: spirituality, philanthropy, and environmental conservation.

The project was named in recognition of Donna Jacoba dei Settesoli, a wealthy aristocrat born in Rome in the twelfth century, who dedicated much of her time and money to supporting the development of the Franciscan order. Frate Jacoba – as St Francis of Assisi would call her – forged a close friendship with Francis himself, a relationship that transcended the traditional gender norms of the time.

Work on the site, which is located in Marsascala, began seven years ago. Since then, Dar Frate Jacoba has been completely transformed. It now hosts a garden, an agricultural farm, a farmhouse, and an extension that was built in order to offer housing for the expanding community. The community is currently made up of two Franciscan friars, Fr Mark and Fr Ray, three lay persons, and five young people who were previously homeless. All community members tend to the fields and care for their home in ways suited to their talents and strengths. The young people are encouraged to take an active role in the running of the whole project.

"In this way, they grow to appreciate the beauty of earning the fruits of hard work while also learning to care for nature. Isolation from nature is isolation from God, because nature is a source of spiritual peace."

The garden plays a central role in the spirituality of the community. Frate Jacoba is also home to a number of animals, providing companionship and taking on an important role within the community as guardians and pest control.

"When there is tension, people wind down in the garden without being told to do so."
THE COMMUNITY

The home itself is an old farmhouse, parts of which date back three hundred years. It serves as a centre for Franciscan spirituality, and Lectio Divina sessions are held on Wednesday evenings. These sessions are well attended by people of different ages, who attend from across the Island. It is a place for prayer, and the site is being increasingly used for daily retreats by people from all walks of life. A chapel facing the garden provides a natural environment for those seeking a place of quiet meditation.

The home embraces principles of sustainability. Most of the lighting makes use of energy saving lamps, to minimise electricity consumption, while processes of water conservation are also given great importance. A chapel has replaced the old grind mill, lit entirely by LEDs, and facing the garden. The chapel is oriented in such a way as to minimise excessive heat during the summer months, and maximise natural lighting and warmth during winter.
THE GARDEN

The garden plays a central role within the community. It serves as a place of work and communion, a space for “reaping the fruits of labour” in a very literal sense. It also provides a space for after-work relaxation and enjoyment.

The garden embraces key tenets of the Franciscan tradition, relating to all of creation as a divine gift. Informed by this way of life, the farm is cultivated without the use of any pesticides or herbicides. It is one of few such projects in Malta, letting nature do its work alongside and within the life of the community.

In order to address water scarcity in Malta, a serious concern for a semi-arid island, all plants and trees are watered using drip irrigation. A large fruit garden, including pomegranate and citrus trees, fills one side of the farm. The trees are used to make artisanal produce, such as jams and various vinegars, which is increasing annually and serves as a source of steady income for the community.

The fruit garden is divided from the vegetable garden by a line of young olive trees. The vegetable garden is a large and fertile area where various vegetables are grown and consumed by the community. Vegetables are planted seasonally, and winter produce includes cabbages, lettuce, and cauliflower.

Surrounding the entire garden is a living wall of more than one hundred and fifty cypresses, Sandarac Gum trees, and other indigenous trees. This natural wall serves as a wind, pesticide, and insecticide barrier, while enriching the ecology of the area and filtering out noise.

“this year the trees won’t need additional water. They are now ready to face the elements on their own! That way, we can conserve water resources for the community.”

The garden is thriving, and inspires neighbouring farmers to visit the site and learn the techniques of permaculture.

Adjacent to the house is a second garden with large trees that are not indigenous to the Island, including banana trees. A large reservoir for water storage is located in this garden, with plans to develop this into a larger reservoir and cistern planned for the future. A pomegranate hedge serves as a shelter from the wind and the hot summer sun. A small part of this inner garden also serves as an “experimental area” for the development of innovative permaculture techniques.

Pigeons are kept in this part of the garden – an effective and ecologically sound means of keeping the insect population under control. During seeding time, they are “kept busy through distraction”, say the friars, thereby protecting the precious seeds. Some of these pigeons are cooked and eaten by the community, prepared according to traditional Maltese recipes.

The garden also houses four sheep, a source of milk and cheese. Their manure, together with food scraps, is used to produce high-quality compost for the garden. Their fleeces are shorn and processed by the community to protect trees from dangerous insects. This is done by wrapping the trunks of vulnerable trees in a small fleece, capitalising on its natural insect-repellent properties.

A herbarium sits in the innermost section of the garden. A number of medicinal herbs like sage and thyme are grown by the community, as a “first line of medical treatment” in the event of illness. Herbs and fruits, such as basil and lemons, are used to flavour water. Thanks to this practice, carbonated and sugary drinks were phased out by the community over a year ago.

“We phased out soft drinks around a year ago. Now nobody wants to go back to them, children included!”

The community at Dar Frate Jacoba plans to construct a larger greenhouse, providing an alternative food source for the community. In the humdrum of today’s world, the inhabitants of Dar Frate Jacoba stand witness to the ways in which spirituality, the natural world, and a sense of community can come together and collectively thrive in engaged and authentic relationships.

“Oftentimes, people are in search of quiet, honest labour in nature, away from the busy humdrum of our hectic lives. This place offers them a perfect opportunity, and the numbers of people seeking this increase every year.”

To arrange a visit to this site, please contact: Fr Mark Ciantar
Tel: 2099 5249

“In Dar Frate Jacoba we work on the principle that we can let nature do its work, without intruding too much – in effect we work with nature so that it provides for the community.”
In 1588, the Franciscan Capuchins arrived on the Maltese Islands at the invitation of the Knights of Saint John. The Knights had a special relationship with the Capuchin friars, who for a time were their spiritual directors, counsellors, and confessors. The first Capuchin friary was founded outside the city walls of Valletta, according to the old Constitutions of the Capuchin order; namely, that their friaries should not be enclosed within a city. Grandmaster Verdala kept an apartment in this friary, highlighting the privileged relationship between the two orders. The area where the first friary was built would later be known as Floriana.

In the 1600s, Grandmaster Alof Wignacourt oversaw the construction of the aqueduct between Mdina and Valletta. The needs of the Capuchin friars in Floriana were specifically taken into account when plans for the aqueduct were drawn up, and the Capuchin friary was exempted from paying water bills – and is still exempted, to this day – due to privileged laws dating back to the time of the Knights.

Around one hundred years after the friary was built, it found itself engulfed by the bastions built on the southwestern flank of Floriana. Over the years, the friary in Floriana was expanded, yet the building suffered a direct hit during World War II. The church was totally destroyed, as was part of the friary. A number of artistic works, including gifts by the Knights, were lost.
THE COMMUNITY AND CRYPT

The three-storey high friary hosts a community of fifteen friars. At one time, up to forty friars shared the building, which also included a corridor reserved for those candidates who were studying for the priesthood. However, this friary is still popular and receives a number of visitors and guests regularly hosted by the community.

The friary retains a sense of Franciscan simplicity in its style. The small cells have windows and doors of a fixed size, reflecting the order’s vow of poverty and withdrawal from the world.

The Floriana friary is as low as it is high, with three storeys above and three storeys underground. In 1735, a large crypt was built, where dead friars were laid to rest. Twenty-six mummified bodies in standing positions were placed in niches, and two of these mummified friars are still found in the crypt. After World War II, the crypt suffered partial destruction, as the church above collapsed. The crypt was abandoned for a number of decades, and was only recently restored. The entrance hallway to the crypt is reserved for the burial of lay people, and marble tombstones dating mostly to the British period can be seen here, an indication that people often wished to be buried in the friary. Prominent Maltese families’ names can be observed in the crypt, and many infants are also buried there.

The main hallway, with the twenty-six niches, was reserved for the friars. The walls used to be embellished with the bones of dead friars from the friary. The crypt was in fact a “chapel of bones”, regularly visited by locals and visitors to the country. The crypt has a very good ventilation system through a number of shafts. An ingenious architectural design: it ensures that no trace of the smell of putrefaction is left in the crypt. Humidity is removed, while cool air is constantly circulated, offering a natural and sustainable method of ventilation.

Mummification used to be carried out over the entire year in rooms adjoining the crypt, which are now lost. The process used to accomplish mummification is also lost.

The older remains of the mummified corpses used to be removed from the niches and placed in an ossuary, found at another corridor of the crypt, to make space for more recent corpses. The ossuary is visible through an iron grille through which one can see thousands of piled bones – the remains of friars dating back centuries. The full depth of this ossuary is unknown.

The crypt reminds visitors that life is ephemeral. Here, the visitor is invited into a space for recollection and prayer. The crypt is opened weekly for mass during the month of November, a month reserved for the commemoration of the dead in Catholic tradition. Beneath the crypt is an air-raid shelter, used by the friars during World War II. Other points of interest in this friary are a museum and a library, ranked as one of the most important libraries in Malta. It contains thousands of documents and archives dating back centuries, including manuscripts given as gifts by the Knights.
THE GARDEN

In place of a cloister, the friary contains two internal courtyards. Wells can be found in both, tapping into a huge cistern located beneath the friary. The cistern is large enough for one to navigate it using a raft. It is believed that the stones used for the building of the friary were carved out of this cistern. This is an architectural technique used for building other monasteries around the Maltese Islands, which had water harvesting and climate-control purposes as well.

The friary enjoys extensive gardens located on top of the bastions, offering views of the Grand Harbour, Marsa, Birgu, and Senglea. The garden has over one hundred and thirty orange trees, and a similar number of lemon trees. A large number of olive trees are also found in this garden, some of which date back centuries. For the Capuchins, the olive trees hold a special place as symbols of peace. Today, an irrigation system, using water from the vast cistern beneath the complex, has been installed to manage the watering of the trees, given the friary’s limited human resources.

"The oranges and other fruit that grow in the gardens are collected every year by dozens of volunteers who then sell them to raise funds for the poor. One such activity, for example, was used to generate funds for volunteers who went to help a community project in Kenya. We are glad to see that this resource, which otherwise would be too large for us to collect, is used for such a noble cause."

Apiaries are also found in the gardens, and the religious community produces honey. The Capuchins’ garden contains a vineyard, and wine used to be produced by this community. Today, it is no longer produced by the Capuchins in Floriana as the demands of their apostolate doesn’t leave much time for such produce. However, parts of the garden are used for growing vegetables. Cabbages, beans and other food items are grown and consumed by the community.

In the recent past, poultry and pigs were kept in this same garden for community use. On certain days of the year, these gardens are opened to the public. One such day is Floriana Day, where activities take place across the suburb celebrating different aspects of life in Floriana. A Garden Feast is organised yearly by the Floriana Local Council, and hundreds of people flock to the friary, to appreciate the beauty and spectacular views of the Capuchin gardens.

"Unfortunately, no medicinal products are mentioned in the archives, and no oral traditions of priests producing medicinal products exist in this community. However, this is not to be excluded, as there are many archives, and communities such as these were very self-sufficient in the past. It clearly wasn’t part of the Capuchin apostolate or tradition, however."

To arrange a visit to this site, please contact:
Fr Martin Micallef
Tel: 2122 5525
Santa Liberata Convent was built in the mid-seventeenth century, just outside the Cottonera Lines in Kalkara. It is dedicated to Santa Liberata, venerated as a saint and martyr, and patroness of the village of Pizzone in Italy. The Kalkara house was built subsequent to the convent in Floriana, which forms part of the Floriana fortifications. Kalkara was chosen by the Capuchins in obedience to their Rule, which stipulates that friars should live outside the city walls.

THE COMMUNITY

The convent was designed by Fra Giuseppe, a Franciscan monk from nearby Senglea, who later designed the Capuchin convent in Gozo. A generous benefactor donated the land located just outside the Three Cities to the community, who then sought permission from the Knights of Saint John to quarry stone from the site itself. This was a common practice at the time, and provided both building stone and a ready cistern for water harvesting. The water cisterns provided all the water required by the community. Ten friars, including three students, presently live in the convent.

“This monastery was the place where Fra Giuseppe experimented with his architecture, and we can see that he learnt from his mistakes here when it came to the Gozo monastery!”

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THE CLOISTER

The cloister holds a central place in Franciscan spirituality, both architecturally and symbolically. It is the place where the well of water, an image of the spring of life, defines the heart of the community. The Santa Liberata cloister is infused with these symbolic meanings, where the well represents Christ, the giver of life, around whom the entirety of Christian life revolves. The well serves as a physical reminder to the friars and their visitors of the need to orientate a Christian life around Christ, in contemplation and prayer. The well’s more practical purpose is to provide rainwater for the community, who make use of it in their day-to-day lives.

Water from the well is also used for farming and gardening. The friars occasionally use a bucket to collect and “stir the waters”, preventing stagnation. Citrus trees, including orange and lemon trees, grow in the cloister. The fruit produced is eaten by the community. Celery and parsley are also grown around the cloister, in soil beds only recently added after the removal of some of the stone slabs which covered the earth. A simple sundial, still used by the community, is located on one of the upper tiers of the cloister, which is in need of repair. Plans are underway for its restoration.

The rooms of the convent are built around the cloister, and all the activities of the community revolve around this central space. Contemplative processions take place around the perimeter, with priests preparing themselves in the cloister before heading to their prayers in the choir.

The Capuchins own a number of fields around the monastery. These fields are extensively used by the community for growing potatoes, cabbages, turnips, cauliflower and other vegetables. The community, unable to meet the demands of both its agricultural and spiritual work, have offered farming opportunities to prison inmates, who farm their land during the week. Farming has become a therapeutic opportunity, offered by the friars as a means through which individuals may come to terms with their past, and explore new skills for the future. The current farmer has become a cherished member of the community, and he is invited to join the friars for meals.

To arrange a visit to this site, please contact:
Fr Effie Mallia
Tel: 2182 5724
On the road leading to Marsalforn beneath the Cittadella, on the edge of the town of Rabat in Gozo, is the Capuchin friary of Gozo. It is adjoined to the church of Our Lady of Graces and a large parvis, the open space in front of a church, leads to a doorway on one side of the church. This is a typical design feature found in Capuchin buildings.

The Gozo friary is the third Capuchin friary built on the Maltese Islands, following the Mother House in Floriana built in 1588 and the Kalkara friary built in 1736. In 1737, the friars approached the bishop for land in Gozo and were granted access to an area then known as “the desert”, because it was outside the Cittadella and only frequented by hunters. Oral tradition narrates that this particular location was chosen when an old woman, who lived nearby, received a vision of friars entering the small wayside chapel of Our Lady of Graces to pray. The chapel was later expanded into the church that exists today.
THE COMMUNITY

The friary retains a sense of Franciscan simplicity, with its largest building being dominated by a central courtyard. The daily life of the community revolves around this courtyard. The architect was Fra Giuseppe from Senglea, a Capuchin friar who also designed the friary in Kalkara.

The fraternity currently consists of four friars, though this friary used to house up to twelve friars and served as a novitiate for the Maltese Capuchin Province at one time.

The rooms of the friary are architecturally simple and very small, each having a very small window and a small door, following the old Constitutions of the Capuchin order based on the vow of poverty. The refectory is a vast, arched room retaining an original "step" design, and the kitchen has a keystone ceiling. The kitchen sinks are connected to a well which taps into the vast cisterns below.

An intricately painted chapel, in need of restoration, can be found on the upper floor. The upper floor also contains a previously-open terrace, which was later closed in glass. It originally served as a laundry room.

The Church of Our Lady of Graces that adjoins the friary includes an altarpiece by the Maltese artist Stefano Erardi. The painting depicting Our Lady of Graces together with baby Jesus was crowned with golden crowns, and attracted the attention of thieves on two occasions.

On the left side of this church, one finds a small altarpiece with a crucifix believed to be miraculous. The friars narrate that a fire once burnt down the whole house of a family in Gozo, but the crucifix, which is now found on the small altarpiece, remained intact. The family retained this crucifix with great devotion for many years. Later, while travelling from Syracuse to Malta by sea, their ship was struck by a great storm. In fear of shipwreck, they promised Our Lady to give their most dear possession to the church if saved from the storm. They did survive the storm, and upon arriving in Malta, they donated their precious crucifix to the Our Lady of Victories church in Valletta. Over time, the crucifix found its way to this small church in Gozo.

However, another story is told about the origins of this crucifix, also believed to be donated by the famous De Soldanis, a Gozitan priest and historian who also donated his original manuscript, Gozo Antico e Moderno, presently preserved at the Province archives at Floriana, to the Capuchins in Gozo.

A simple, elegant, and well-ventilated crypt is also found here, accessible through the church. Its architecture imitates the crypt in Floriana, with cut niches for standing mummified corpses of friars. An ossuary is found to one side of the church.

The body of the venerated Fra Pascal of Gozo, a pious friar and confessor sought out for his spiritual wisdom in the nineteenth and twentieth century, is buried here.

After exhumation in 1952, fifteen years after his burial, his body was still in very good condition and the bishop consecrated the remains which were placed in a special sealed urn for veneration.

It is believed that deeper beneath the friary is a low-ceiling underground tunnel, which used to connect the monastery to the Cittadella. This was probably used as an escape route in the event of a siege.

"It is such a pity that we had to close off this part of the church, but we had no choice. Unfortunately, a robbery incident in the 1970s led us to increase our security, but it also led to a decline in people visiting the church. A thief hid in the ossuary - he even had a perfumed cloth with him, to withstand the smell of decay in the ossuary while he hid."
THE GARDEN

The cloister is a small and paved area, surrounded by tall archways. A well is located at the centre of the cloister – a source of water that is easily accessible to anyone in the community and central to their livelihoods.

On the north-easterly corridor, the archways are now closed off behind glass. This recent intervention offered shelter to families who used to visit their sons during the young men’s period of novitiate.

A special orange tree can be found in this cloister. The tree is famous for its remarkable longevity when compared to similar trees, which have died over the decades. The tree was planted by Fra Pascal from Żebbuġ, Gozo, who died in saintly reputation. He was known for his piety and confessional skills, for which he was sought out by the people of Gozo.

Gozitans ask for an orange from his tree to this day, in the event of an illness or malady experienced by a family member, as a sign of faith, ensures a speedy recovery. It produces good oranges, and still does after so many years. We take care of it, especially since it is dear to many people.

The refectory, the church, the staircase leading to the upper tier cells, and the library all connect to the cloister. The water source at the centre of the monastery, so that it is never far away from anybody. After all, such an important resource should play a central role in community life.

The friary has seen a considerable amount of land turned into gardens. Until the late 1960s, animals were raised on these grounds, including poultry, swine, and rabbits. Friars used to till the land as part of their daily work – a task mostly given to lay brothers. Today, the friars focus more of their attention on apostolate activities.

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Orange and lemon trees are found in this garden and, as in other sacred spaces in Malta, olive trees are also found. The olive trees found in this friary are very old, predating the building itself, and have received considerable attention and interest today from the fledgling olive industry in Gozo. One such tree is said to be at least 500 years old, and belongs to a native Maltese sub-species. An entrepreneur recently approached the friary to obtain cuttings from these olive trees, with the intention to propagate their unique qualities. It has been suggested that olive oil produced from these trees might be named Oleo Capuccino.

“People still come to us when they are ill, or else they send somebody instead, asking for an orange from is-si'ra ta' Fra Pascal, as they believe that doing so, as a sign of faith, ensures a speedy recovery. It produces good oranges, and still does after so many years. We take care of it, especially since it is dear to many people.”

Water is harvested through a complex system, where an upper cistern feeds into at least three other cisterns located along the hill gradient. The full extent of the system is not known, and it could prove interesting for researchers to examine how such systems were constructed, over three centuries ago. The friary has vast subterranean cisterns designed to provide a year-round supply of water for a considerable number of people, and for the irrigation of the gardens.

Presently, the gardens are mostly taken care of by a regular volunteer. Vegetables such as artichokes, onions, and cabbages are shared between the volunteer and the community.

The community used to produce a variety of food products like jams, orange blossom water, ġulepp (carob syrup), żebbuġ fis-salmura (olives in brackish water), and olive oil. These products were used by the community and given as gifts to benefactors. While these food products are no longer produced, this tradition continues through the giving of vegetables and fruit to benefactors.
Saint Margaret’s Monastery, a seventeenth century building with high, barred windows and steep stairs leading to a church, is located in the upper parts of the city of Cospicua (Bormla). The monastery belongs to the Discalced Carmelites, also known as Teresians, and a small community of eleven contemplative nuns live within its walls. The community mostly dedicates its time to prayer and work.
THE COMMUNITY

Saint Margaret’s Monastery holds a little-known community, hidden away behind the narrow streets of the city. In 1626, Sister Gertrude Anastasi from Valletta decided to found a Teresian contemplative community in Malta; however, her attempts were unsuccessful. Together with her mother and sisters, she went to Palermo and joined a community there, and lived out her vocation until her death. A portrait of Sister Gertrude Anastasi can be seen near the entrance of the monastery in Malta, in honour of her vision.

In 1726, two priests, Father Anton Barbara and Father Peter Saliba, expressed their interest in opening a conservatory for poor young women who desired to follow the spirituality of Saint Theresa of Avila. On the 9th November of that same year, a community of cloistered, contemplative nuns was founded, and numbers grew quickly.

Today’s Prioress is researching the history of the monastery and church, exploring the role of the community and its life alongside the inhabitants of Bormla. The community maintains its traditional sense of distance from the outside world, and the monastery is closed to the public. Silence and contemplation are central to the vocation practised by these cloistered nuns. Contact with the outside world is restricted to visits from family and friends, and those who ask for prayers.

The monastery has an archive that contains documents dating back to its foundation.

THE GARDEN

The garden is located at the centre of the building complex. It is a small space with several citrus trees that include lemon, tangerine, grapefruit, and nectarine trees. Fruit produce is exclusively used by the community. The garden is referred to as the courtyard – il-bitħa, and is most active as a recreation space during the summertime. The nuns use a corridor along the entire length of the convent as their area for meditation, which they refer to, as the garden – il-ġnien. Both spaces are relatively small in size, and were not built with meditative practice in mind. The church choir is used for prayer, meditation, and religious activities. The courtyard comes alive during the feast of Corpus Christi, when, after adoration, a procession is held throughout the whole monastery by the nuns.

Orange flower water – ilma żahar – was produced by the nuns using the Seville orange flowers grown in the garden. The monastery had a distillery especially used for this purpose; however, the tradition of producing and distributing orange flower water has since been lost. While ilma żahar is no longer produced, citrus biscuits are made especially for the community’s benefactors.
The retreat house of Tas-Silġ, run by the Discalced Carmelites, also known as Teresians, is located just outside Marsaxlokk in the southern countryside of Malta.

The Order of Discalced Carmelites was founded in the late sixteenth century by Spanish Mystics Saint Teresa of Avila and Saint John of the Cross. In 1626, a monastery was founded in Cospicua, Malta. The order expanded to other areas on the Maltese islands in the nineteenth century.

The Discalced Carmelites follow a way of life dedicated to prayer and contemplation. Men and women live their consecrated lives in religious communities, or as lay people. The Carmelite nuns of Cospicua live in a cloistered monastery and follow a contemplative life centred around prayer. The Carmelites follow a contemplative life while engaging in pastoral work through their retreat centres, parishes, and churches. Lay people, known as the Secular Order, follow their contemplative call within their daily lives. Devotion to Our Lady of Mount Carmel is a characteristic of Carmelites, and is symbolised by the wearing of a brown scapular.

The community

Beside the monastery in Tas-Silġ is a small church dedicated to Our Lady of the Snows, dating back to the seventeenth century. Both the church and the nearby palace, part of this same building, date back to the period of the Knights of Saint John. The land and properties were donated to the Discalced Carmelites in 1933 by the Testaferrata family. The friars built their house in-between the church and the palace, joining them into one monastery. The Discalced Carmelite friars have lived there since 1937. In 1984, the lower floor of the building was refurbished to accommodate a retreat centre and is today used for spiritual retreats and conferences.

The lower floors are currently being further refurbished to accommodate more rooms for conferences. What once served as stables and pens for animals are now turned into meeting rooms and lodging areas. It is a delight to observe the seventeenth century traditional archways and stonework, restored for contemporary use.

The site at Tas-Silġ is named after the church of Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome, known as Tas-Silġ, “of the snows”, after the legend of the founding of the Roman church. During the fourth century, the Roman patronic John and his wife, who were without heirs, prayed that she might make known to them how they were to dispose of their property in her honour. On the 5th August, at the height of the Roman summer, snow fell during the night on the summit of the Esquiline Hill. In obedience to a vision of the Virgin Mary, which they had that same night, the couple built a basilica in her honour on the very spot covered with snow.

The Maltese church is only one hundred metres away from an archaeological site, located on a rocky promontory overlooking what was once a Roman port. This multi-period site was first inhabited in the Neolithic era, with a modest megalithic temple built in the Tarxien phase (3000 B.C. – 2500 B.C.) of Maltese prehistory. During the Bronze Age, the temple was converted into a settlement and served domestic purposes for many centuries.

The site at Tas-Silġ is on the route of another temple to Juno in the Roman period. Tas-Silġ remained a major site of worship until and during the Byzantine period. It seems that any shrine on the site was destroyed upon the Fatimid invasion of 870; however, evidence has been found of a mosque built on the site during the Arab period. Excavations carried out on the site by the Missione Archeologica Italiana and the University of Malta confirmed that the site was active throughout the Phoenician, Punic, and Roman periods.

The long history of worship at Tas-Silġ seems connected to the natural beauty of this hill, overlooking both the Marsaxlokk harbour and agricultural fields. The location today creates an ideal setting for quiet contemplation, away from the noise of urbanised Malta.
THE GARDEN

The retreat house contains a garden with a number of passageways where people may walk and pray in silence. The religious community cultivates a field located next to the retreat house, in which olive trees were recently planted. The friars plan to join the field to the garden through another passageway, once the trees grow taller.

The field is also used to grow vegetables for the kitchen that services the retreat house. Beans, cabbages and cauliflower are grown, with other vegetables cultivated according to the season. The community takes care of four apiaries for honey production. The tradition of honey production was started by a member of the community, partly as a hobby, but also to enrich the ecology of the area. Harvested honey is used by the community, and is given to benefactors who assist in the running of the area.

At the end of the garden, one can find a particularly attractive small shrine. The inside is almost entirely decorated with coral, marble, and glass. Built in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the shrine is now in need of urgent restoration.

In the past few years, the Teresians have invested in a number of solar PV installations to power the building in an energy efficient way. During some months of the year, the building provides more energy than it consumes. While saving on expenses, the Discalced Carmelites have drastically reduced the carbon footprint of their retreat house. All ovens run on electricity generated by solar panel installations, and gasoline costs have been eliminated. European funds, through the ERDF programme, were used to turn this structure into a self-sustaining building. Plans are being drafted for a battery system, so that instead of exporting the extra electricity, it can be retained for use by the community itself when demand overtakes supply.

The community gives water sustainability equal importance. The retreat house employs a rainwater harvesting system throughout its rooftops. Water is retained in cisterns available on site and is purified by filters for use within the complex, reserving around two hundred and fifty thousand gallons of water.

“As a Teresian community, we strongly believe in respecting nature as God’s creation. We therefore are the first order in Malta to have all its electrical needs supplied entirely through solar power.”

To arrange a visit to this site, please contact:
Fr José Debono
Tel: 2165 1268
Located in Mdina, the old town of Malta, the Carmelite Priory has a venerable tradition of scholastic achievement. Quite a number of its friars were professors of theology and philosophy both in Malta and in Italy. Other Carmelites were confessors and spiritual directors to the Knights of Malta, or consulters of the Maltese Inquisition. In the eighteenth century, there were plans for the priory to become an International College for Carmelite European missionaries. However, this project was short-lived due to the suppression of the priory by the French, when they took possession of the Islands from 1798 to 1800.

The community of the Carmelites in Mdina was never cloistered but rather lived the contemplative ideal in the midst of the people, while also ministering to them. In Mdina, the Priory also served as a social and religious bridge between the nobility and common folk. Visitors are still encouraged to participate in the community's prayer life and liturgy, and the community hosts guests who wish to spend some time within the priory and experience religious life.

Currently, the community is made up of four friars and affiliated to it, as is customary, there is a vibrant secular movement, made up of lay people who live the Carmelite values and spiritual lifestyle. The community's active ministry features spiritual direction and mentoring, preaching retreats, talks, and lecturing, besides the usual hearing of confessions and the daily celebration of mass for the local Christian community.

In line with the particular tradition of this priory, community members are also engaged in academia. The priory hosts the Carmelite Institute Malta, run jointly by Carmelites and Discalced Carmelites, which offers courses in spiritual theology in collaboration with the University of Malta and other institutions, like the Titus Brandsma Institute of Spirituality in Nijmegen, the Netherlands.

For centuries, until relatively recently, the Mdina priory was a house of formation for novices. The priory and its unique historical value are shared with the public through guided visits, led by a resident friar. Another aspect of the priory's specific ministry is in dialogue with culture, and the community hosts and organises exhibitions, public talks, book launches, concerts, and circles for discussion.

The priory is located in the ancient Greek and Jewish quarter, near the Bordello, the old brothel. The priory was instrumental during the uprising of the Maltese against the French. During the French occupation, the church was robbed of its silver in July 1798. When the French returned in September to steal the church's precious damask hangings, Maltese rebels immediately locked the doors of the church as the French approached and, it is said, a young boy climbed up to the belfry to sound the alarm. This event sparked off revolutionary fervour that ultimately saw the French leave the Maltese Islands. During World War II, the priory was used by the Civil Services, and it also provided shelter for both the friars and the locals during bombardments. One may still visit a deep, large war shelter beneath the priory.

The priory still cherishes the memory of Fr Avertanus Fenech, a saintly friar, master of novices and one of the confessors of Archbishop Michael Gonzi. Fr Avertanus still attracts devotees who come to visit his remains in church and his cell within the priory.

Lay brothers also excelled in crib making and the production of pasturi. Elderly people from Mdina, Rabat and emigrants to Australia still own and cherish the aged pasturi and cribs built by Fra Romeo, Fr Telesforus, and others.
The friars report that the priory was built on plans by the architect Lorenzo Gafà, and respects the idea of the cloister understood by the Carmelite tradition, echoing the enclosed garden mentioned in the biblical Song of Solomon. Originally an open cloister, the arches between the pillars have since been closed with doors and window panes to protect the interior from the harshness of winter weather.

The cloister is paved with large stones, and contains a number of citrus trees and other plants. The centrally placed well is enclosed in a stone octagon. Due to the importation of tropical flora, the Carmelites have had to give up trying to save local Sardinella and Stella Maris plants. This is compounded by an infestation of insects that consume these two plants, and friars believe there is the very real danger that the endemic Sardinella will be extinct in few years.

Originally, the cloister was connected to the priory church through a small door, now closed due to the restructuring of the church in the eighteenth century. Nonetheless, liturgical processions of Corpus Christi, Palm Sunday, the Easter Vigil, Christmas Night, the Translation of Relics on particular solemn feast days, and other liturgies still take place from the cloister to the church, or from the church to the cloister. The cloister is also a space, weather permitting, to pause in quiet prayer, hear confessions, and offer spiritual direction. Visitors of all generations and creeds are encouraged to spend some quiet time in the cloister.

Some of the cloister’s orange and mandarin trees probably date back to the eighteenth century, as noted in the priory’s archives. From these trees, the community produces marmalades as well as Mandarinetto, a local liquor. On Pentecost Sunday, the community observes the blessing of the first fruits of the season.

When the priory was suppressed by the French, records show that the community commissioned a gardener to take care of the trees and cats of the priory. Herbs grown in the cloister for use by the kitchens and for salve include mint, curry, lavender, and Melissa officinalis. Melissa officinalis is still used to produce Eau des Carmes, Carmelite water, an alcoholic beverage, transported from French Carmelite nunneries, and appreciated throughout the ages by historical figures like Louis XIV and Cardinal Richelieu. This beverage can also be used as a tea.

“Carmel actually means ‘The Garden of the Lord’. The Beloved calls his loved one ‘a garden enclosed’ because she is his alone. The lover and the Beloved of the Song of Songs become images of God and Israel, Jesus and his Church, God and the soul.”

The community has a long tradition of beekeeping. Honey is still produced, together with propolis, a form of resin used by bees to reinforce their hive structure and esteemed for its medicinal properties. In the 1970s, the practice of beekeeping was halted for a while following an episode where the bees swarmed from the Priory’s apiaries and invaded Mdina. After a while, they settled in one of the military cannons on display in the cathedral square. The bees at the priory are the Apis mellifera ruttneri type, the endemic Maltese black honey bee. The bee is facing extinction, not only due to pesticides, but also because of non-native pests and mites, and the recent uncontrolled importation of Italian bees.

The Carmelites also produce some traditional Carmelite food, with recipes published in their magazine, Il-Karmelu. One such delicacy is il-Ftira ta’ San Elija – Saint Elijah’s Bread, and also the Farfalle Beato Franco di Siena, a penitential dish eaten during Lent. Carmelites still own and make use of the priory’s kitchen books, dating back from 1693 up until 1943, as well as herbals, containing recipes for medicine.

To arrange a visit to this site, please contact:
Fr Charlo Camilleri
Tel: 2145 4524
Mount Saint Joseph is a retreat house located in the outskirts of Mosta, in the centre of Malta. Built by the Jesuits in the 1960s, it offers restful quiet and the chance to experience Ignatian spirituality through numerous courses and seminars offered all year round. The famous Ignatian Spiritual Exercises, developed by the order’s founder, Saint Ignatius of Loyola, form the backbone of the community’s spiritual life. These exercises are offered as guiding principles, by which Jesuits and visitors to the retreat house practice their spirituality.
THE GARDENS

It is not for nothing that in Genesis we read that God placed Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 2). God therefore desires of us to find our fulfilment in a garden setting which we in our turn need to create and to upkeep. The gardens at Mount Saint Joseph are extensive and were further expanded in recent years. The retreat house’s green spaces are central to the order’s philosophy of the house. “Finding God in All Things” rests at the core of Ignatian Spirituality, says the priest, rooted in the belief that God can be found in everyone, in every place, and in everything.

The gardens are full of trees, including eucalyptus, Aleppo pine (tabluk), laurel (ir-randa), holm oak (ballut) and almond trees (lewż), planted in the 1960s and 1970s. The slow-growing holm oaks add diversity to the ecology of this wooded area, with the aim of offering a verdant place for prayer for those on retreat. Very few of these trees are fruit-bearing; rather, they are chosen for the sympathetic effect they create within the surrounding countryside, creating a quiet green space that matures throughout the seasons.

The trees at Mount Saint Joseph are, for the most part, indigenous. Eucalyptus trees, which are not indigenous, have a relatively short life span and are not replaced. Rather, indigenous trees are being introduced in their stead. Nature lovers and bird watchers are welcomed to the garden, as bird nesting can be observed in this afforested area. Marsh harriers, ospreys, night herons, and other large birds have often been observed in the gardens.

The space also features a number of olive trees, chosen because of their symbolic meaning as trees of peace. In addition to this, they render a considerable harvest which is processed for oil production. The oil is used by the community. Produce from the gardens’ orange trees is also used, and leaves from the laurel trees are dried and crushed for use as a condiment by the community and visitors.

A smaller section of the garden is used for growing vegetables. The gardener who tends these vegetables, who also owns other fields in the area, takes some of the vegetables for personal use, with a sizeable portion left for use by the Jesuit community in the running of their retreat house.

The Jesuits recently completed an afforestation project that involved secondary school students attending Saint Aloysius College. The students planted and cared for carob and cypress seedlings until they obtained a suitable height, and were then moved to Mount Saint Joseph. The project served as an educational tool for students, who in the process also cultivated an appreciation for the local, natural environment.

On special occasions, such as weddings or anniversaries, trees are donated by friends of the Jesuit community. All year round, a turfed area in the back garden is used for recreational activities by families and children, such as games, camping and sometimes for skill sessions or teamwork sessions by different groups. The house is at its best during the Easter period, when a week of silence is observed for those people who need to deepen their spiritual lives or for those who seek a silent retreat. Students attending Jesuit schools also visit Mount Saint Joseph for a day of reflection.

Punic tombs were recently excavated close to the retreat house, and are currently being restored and will eventually be open for visits by the public. A Roman catacomb is also located down the road from the retreat house, further attesting to the site’s long history of religious significance.

To arrange a visit to this site, please contact:
Fr Godwin Preca
Tel: 2276 0000

For all those taking decisions, large or small, in their lives, this garden offers a place where they can pray, reflect, and rest. We offer spiritual advice should it be asked for – when one is in touch with nature, one is more in touch with oneself.

“We take care of the garden just as much as we take care of our house - it is a central part of our apostolate, by offering spiritual retreats. It is a central part of our apostolate to keep the gardens maintained and welcoming because it brings our visitors in touch with Mother Earth, and so in touch with their roots.”
Manresa Retreat House is located on the outskirts of Rabat, Gozo, and is a Jesuit-run retreat house founded in 1810. Within walking distance there are unique views across the Mediterranean Sea and the Gozitan countryside. The retreat house was built by the Curia in Gozo to provide a space of prayerful calm, with a focus on spiritual growth. The Jesuits were asked to run the house in 1953.

The titular painting of the adjoining chapel dates back to the 1850s, and features Saint Ignatius writing his Spiritual Exercises by the River Cardoner in Manresa. The Spiritual Exercises, a landmark text of spiritual formation within the Roman Catholic tradition, inform the particular quality of the Jesuits’ work at the retreat house.

Manresa in Gozo is active and popular with visitors from the Maltese Islands and abroad. The Jesuits organise a number of retreats, including a silent retreat, attracting inter-generational interest.

The community and visitors are accommodated along the retreat house’s simple, barrel-vault corridors, in spacious, comfortable rooms. The house is two minutes away from the countryside, and a nearby country road leads to the cliffs of Sannat. Opportunities for time spent surrounded by the natural world provide occasions for tranquil reflection, enjoyed by the community and their guests.
THE GARDENS

The gardens are located around the retreat house, and are divided into inner and outer sections.

The inner garden is paved with stone and features a few trees, including olive trees, palm trees and a pomegranate tree. It is a popular area during the summer months, when those on retreat make use of the garden in the evening as a place of prayer.

The outer gardens are extensive, and are landscaped in a similar style to the Jesuit gardens in Mount Saint Joseph in Malta. Filled with indigenous trees and plants, the outer gardens aim to create a relaxed sense of the wild, a space for those who seek contemplation in nature.

The garden offers visitors an opportunity to pray the Way of the Cross, with a Via Crucis donated by a benefactor to commemorate the Millennium. On Good Friday, prayer sessions are held in this garden.

Next door to Manresa Retreat House are the Poor Clare Sisters. They recently founded a small community in Gozo, and though this community is only a few years old, it is thriving. On special occasions, a procession is held in the Manresa contemplative garden organised by the Poor Clares.

“Let me tell you - a retreat house without a garden is nothing. One needs a place for walking and praying.”

“They have asked to use the garden sometimes their place is so small, you see. We try to help them as much as we can by offering our gardens for contemplation.”

The gardens are cared for by a team of volunteers. A family offers their time to garden for the community, and the gardens are frequently used by children from nearby villages who play among the trees. Basil, rosemary, marjoram, and other herbs are grown in the herb garden and used by the kitchen staff. The backrooms of the retreat house overlook a grove of orange, lemon, and peach trees, recently planted to produce a harvest that can also be offered to guests.

To arrange a visit to this site, please contact:
Mr Joseph Mercieca
Tel: 2155 6635
Villa Frere is located in Pietà, on the outskirts of Valletta, and its gardens were at one time celebrated as one of the most beautiful British gardens in the Mediterranean. Architect Edward Said and the NGO Friends of Villa Frere are currently working to restore parts of the old gardens, which had been abandoned for decades. Today, construction encroaches on all sides, threatening much of the location’s former beauty.

The Villa Frere gardens exemplified elements of British romanticism, an intellectual movement that originated in Europe towards the end of the eighteenth century, and peaked in the nineteenth century. It was partly a reaction to the harsh realities of the Industrial Revolution, influenced by the social and political movements of the Enlightenment. Romanticism was marked by a nostalgic longing for a forgotten and unattainable utopia.

These influences shaped the gardens at Villa Frere, where one can still find the temple folly, a building in good condition. A nearby gazebo contains inscriptions commemorating the visits of Queen Mary, and Queen Marie of Romania, granddaughter of Queen Victoria.

John Hookham Frere

The Right Honourable John Hookham Frere (1769 – 1846) was an English diplomat, author, and public figure in English politics, having served as a Member of Parliament from 1796 till 1802. After his appointment to the Privy Council in 1805, he served as plenipotentiary in Berlin and Spain. His public life ended following a series of controversial statements on the actions of the British army in Spain during the Napoleonic Wars.

In 1816, he married Elizabeth Jemima, dowager Countess of Erroll. On account of her failing health, they settled in Malta in 1820. After his wife’s death, John Hookham Frere remained on the Island, devoting himself to the study of Greek and Latin authors. He taught himself Hebrew and Maltese, making him very popular with his Maltese neighbours. He welcomed English guests, and befriended Mikel Anton Vassalli, the first professor of the Maltese language at the University of Malta.

Hookham Frere was a keen gardener, and soon after settling in Malta he set about transforming the rural landscape surrounding his villa into a garden. Typical of English gardens of the period, Villa Frere had several sections with distinct characteristics. One area, the “kitchen garden”, was reserved for vegetables and herbs. Another was known as “The Wilderness”, with carob and olives trees planted in large numbers. The estate also included a Dragonblood tree, and countless other species from around the world. John Hookham Frere died at his Pietà villa in 1846, and is buried at the Msida Bastion Cemetery.

After Frere’s demise, the garden was abandoned for decades until Commander Price took it over. Together with his Maltese wife, he restored the garden to its former glory, and it again became a hive of activity, used as a venue for lavish balls, parties, and wedding receptions well into the 1930s.

The post-war period saw the abandonment of Villa Frere and its gardens once again. A school was built up in place of the former Japanese and wilderness gardens. A helipad was later built next to the temple, which led to the destruction of the upper and side flanks of the garden.
THE JAPANESE GARDEN

In true Victorian fashion, Commander Price decided to contribute to the gardens with a space designed in the Japanese style, the first of its kind in Malta. A little river, a bridge, lanterns, and a shrine were all included as essential elements.

The Japanese garden was designed during the First World War while the Japanese navy was in Malta. Edward Price asked an officer and his friends to help design the garden and shrine, and a small Buddha statue could be found within the shrine. The shrine represents the end of a journey, seen from the bottom of the garden, reached by walking through the “giardino degli uccelli”, and all the way up to the upper sections of the garden.

After the death of Edward Price in 1934, the land was evaluated by the church and the Japanese garden and shrine were described as a “Cappella Cinese” — in reality, a misnomer. Photos of this garden are available and were published in a book about Villa Frere’s gardens by Josephine Tyndale-Biscoe.

FUTURE RESTORATION

The site where the Japanese garden used to be is now an abandoned patch of land. Friends of Villa Frere are proposing a restoration of the area to its former condition. It is likely that underneath the dumped soil next to the school, the historical finish of the garden is still present. A cherry tree remains, bearing witness to the garden’s past. Perhaps this tree can be given one last chance to survive if the soil, currently choking it, is removed. It is hoped that through funds, the lost garden shall be restored and perhaps, one day, its hundred lanterns shall be lit again.

To arrange a visit to this site, please contact:
Perit Edward Said
Tel: 9944 7075

PHOTO CREDIT: MS. JOSEPHINE TYNDALE-BISCOE
The tiny island of Comino, straddling the channel between the larger islands of Malta and Gozo, has, throughout history, been seen as a place of exile and solitude. Over the centuries, Comino has served as a military outpost, a place of quarantine, or, in its most recent incarnation, a popular tourist destination enjoyed for its unspoilt beaches and clear waters during the summer months.

The garigue is the natural environment of the island, with small patches of shallow soil in between exposed rocky shafts of Upper Coraline Limestone. It is a harsh environment, yet has developed its own unique flora. The most common plant found on the island is wild thyme, filling Comino with its subtle, sweet perfume during springtime. The island itself is probably named by cumin seed, which was commonly grown on the Maltese Islands. Due to the small island’s exposure to the elements, agriculture has always presented a challenge, although an agricultural community successfully settled on the island in the twentieth century. This rural community declined during the 1950s, as farmers moved away, and is now represented by a single family.

During the Middle Ages, the island hosted small communities of hermits and monks who found refuge from the piracy prevalent on the island and surrounding areas. The island hosted monks and hermits between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries. This was a time of Christian asceticism, the impact of the Byzantine Empire, and the rise of the Knights of Malta. The centre of the island was an unsettled place, and piracy was rampant. Monks and corsairs may have lived side by side in the rocky bays and secluded caves of Comino. The island hosted monks and hermits from diverse traditions. There were those who seem to have followed the Basilian monastic rule, rather than the elaborately written Rule of Saint Benedict, which was adopted by monastic communities in the West. The Basilian rule is the earlier of the two, focusing on prayer asceticism. It is the basis of Eastern Orthodox monastic communities today. It is likely that these Christian communities coexisted alongside Jewish and Muslim holy men. The most famous of these was Abraham ibn Abulafia, a noted practitioner and scholar of Kabbalah, a mystical school of thought developed within Judaism. After his failed attempt to convert Pope Nicholas III in 1280, and his self-imposed exile in Sicily, Abulafia was exiled to Comino where he wrote his most important work, the Sefer ha-Ot, or Book of the Signs. The fate of this exiled hermit is unknown: however, it is commonly believed that he eventually left Comino, intent on converting the Byzantine Emperor to the Kabbalistic mysteries.

Ghar il-Hamrija Caves, located towards the centre of Comino, were a particular hub for hermitical life. It is theorised that these caves developed as an extension to a burial place used during the Punic period, and a tomb entrance is found just beside the cave mouth. A large and healthy fig tree marks the spot. The entrance was surmounted by a crude hewn arch that collapsed some fifteen years ago in a storm. As one enters the main cave, one finds an earthen ramp, which was probably raised by the farming community which used the caves as animal pens. It has been suggested that the original steps may be found should the earth be removed. A frieze can be seen to the left of the cave entrance, with a red tinge, suggesting the use of ochre pigment. Inside, the cave opens up into a central chamber having two lateral chambers. A cross is deeply incised in the rocky ceiling overlooking the entrance to each of the chambers, strongly indicating the use of the complex for Christian rites. On the side of the lateral chambers, there are two burial shelves which were later adapted as mangers. Very rough chisel marks show that the cave was extended, though the work was left unfinished. Similar hermit caves are found in Mellieha, Malta, and may also have been used as hermitical dwellings. The more recent low rubble walls surrounding the cave entrance probably date from the late nineteenth century. The small plateau outside the cave offers a view across the Mediterranean Sea, to the island of Gozo and the village of Qala. The chapel of Qala, which faces Comino, can be clearly seen. In the past, this chapel provided an opportunity for the Comino community to participate during the celebration of mass, whenever the parish priest could not make the journey across to Comino due to stormy weather. The nearby Qala Church, dedicated to the Immaculate Conception, is a minor place of pilgrimage for pregnant women who visit this chapel up to this very day.

One well-known legend from Comino is that of San Corrado, also known as San Kerrew. It is believed that this saint lived during the twelfth or thirteenth centuries. San Kerrew was a hermit who lived in Wied il-Ghasel in Mosta. According to local hagiography, he was critical of the sinful ways of the people of Mosta and his life was threatened by the village people. In search of peace and safety, he moved to central Mediterranean region, and according to legend, Kerrew was seen crossing the sea using his cloak as a boat.

**Monks and Hermits**

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A chapel dedicated to the Return of the Holy Family from Egypt overlooks a campsite in Santa Marija Bay. The chapel is the oldest standing building on this island. It is also the only chapel in the Maltese Islands dedicated to the Return of the Holy Family from Egypt, a dedication that is associated with the Eastern tradition.

Various elements of the chapel, including its apse, may date as far back as the thirteenth century, although the present fabric is eighteenth century. The roof comprises six half-domes, an architectural feature unique to this chapel. Both architecture and dedication point towards the chapel’s origin before the Latinisation of the Church in the Maltese Islands, between the thirteenth and the sixteenth centuries. The Eastern tradition has left some marks on the religion of the Maltese, mostly in the language used for religious ritual and in the practice of the liturgy, such as the terms quddies (mass), and magħmudija (baptism).

Over the centuries, the chapel was often abandoned, as witnessed by various apostolic visitations reporting missing decorations, damage to the main door, and broken altars. Since the nineteen-twenties, when the chapel began to serve the liturgical needs of the farming community which had settled on the island, its internal decoration is touchingly reflective of the tastes and imagery characteristic of the popular piety of the period.

On a low ridge to the northwest of the hermit caves is a short trench covered by a layer of lime, which may have been used during the Punic period for cleansing rituals. It is possible that a small temple used to be located there, although no dolmens or other structures have yet been found in this area. Over the years, various archaeological remains have been found, including early Roman lamps, coins, and pieces of pottery. Other features, possibly of ritual significance to the Punic inhabitants, have been discovered, although little is known about the cultic practices of the people who may have been permanently settled in Comino during this time.

The most dominating landmark on Comino is the Saint Mary’s Tower, built at the order of Grandmaster Wignacourt in the early seventeenth century. It housed a regular garrison, to deter corsairs and secure the islands. Up to the mid-nineteenth century, the north of Malta was virtually uninhabited. At the time, Comino was only inhabited seasonally for agricultural or pastoral purposes. It was only during the early twentieth century that Comino became part of a larger strategy of national resettlement – the last community resettling there during the twentieth century. After the 1950s, its population began to slowly decline: at present, it numbers four elderly residents.
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REMARKS

Cloistered Spaces is a collection of narratives which seem to echo the story of the moon, with her waxing and waning, when she is full, bright and illuminating the night with the promise of abundance, and when we, humans and mortals, experience the dark of the moon on some other nights.

A number of communities interviewed mentioned the waning period of their own orders, though Cloistered Spaces found the flames of renewal burning within the hearts of those interviewed and the ways in which they are working towards the regeneration of the Earth and their spirituality, to recover the greeness of the human heart.

Fernando Caruncho describes gardens in the following way: “The garden is the only living art work that men can do, and in which the walker enters an experience that transforms him by returning to his own origins.” Cloistered Spaces hopes that the reader is seduced into visiting these spaces of origins and enters into dialogue with them, with himself and herself, and with other traditions as well. The monastic cloister inspired by the Song of Songs and the stories of Eden, can become an opportunity for interfaith dialogue, particularly with Islam and Muslim gardens, which are theology themselves, offering opportunities for meaningful encounters. The Jesuit garden style seems to borrow from the principles of the Japanese “shakkei”, creating a sense of place through borrowed scenery which hide and reveal, inviting those visiting to contemplate the mysteries of our Creator and our own lives.

The last two chapters of Cloistered Spaces may seem to not fit well. Villa Frere garden was never a monastic garden, and yet its story seems to be telling something of the sacred, an echo of the desire for Eden, humanity’s search for Utopia. Commander Price’s lost Japanese garden with the Buddha statue enshrined at the end of the garden-journey sounds like there is more to it than simply being an exotic attraction. Was Commander Price trying to tell us something else, that our spiritual journey takes us to that place called Śūnyatā, which the Carmelite mystic Juan de la Cruz describes as Todo y Nada? The surviving cherry tree may tell us more.

The last chapter in this book is about the cloister in the wilderness, the one whose architect is Mother Nature herself. This cloister is all embracing and does not distinguish between religious traditions or a lack thereof. It speaks the language of nature, whose call only the pirates and hermits seem to heed, and which only ancient traditions withstand. Cloistered Spaces is the first step towards a long journey in search of peace, and we hope that the reader embarks on this journey with us. If one had to look for a golden thread within this book, it would be the language of flowers, or rather, the language of gardens, which is able to transcend divisions and call us back home, to share life as brothers and sisters, children of that same Creator. Cloistered Spaces is about remembering, but remembering that is grounded in hope, to look at the future rooted in wisdom.

We hope that this small publication shared with you, the reader, some of that warmth we experienced while doing this work.
“Contemporary life provides little refuge for the genuine contemplation needed to seek, build, and maintain peace. These rich and accessible narratives describe the diverse life-worlds of cloistered spaces where such reflection is at the heart of community life, past and present. In some moments bustling with activity, while in others serenely calm, the religious communities inhabiting these spaces have always turned to nature to sustain themselves materially and spiritually. From these narratives, we come to appreciate how the built environments of cloistered spaces create intimate and energizing connection to the natural world. The bench looking out over the citrus grove or the portico where bird songs echo invite deep individual reflection, even in the midst of vibrant community life. The vulnerability of these precious spaces, threatened by abandonment, overgrowth, commercial use, and erosion, should prompt in readers new commitment to preserve spaces where repose in proximity to nature provides a path to peace.”

Prof. Susan F. Hirsch  
School for Conflict Analysis and Resolution  
George Mason University

“The present publication... shows convincingly that there are many aspects of Maltese culture that are largely unknown, and worse still, are susceptible to loss. Furthermore, it demonstrates that the information it contains has great potential. It does not only help to make this information more properly valued, but may even help revive lost and ancient traditions.”

Prof. Carmel Cassar  
Institute for Tourism, Travel and Culture  
University of Malta  

Prof. Everaldo Attard  
Institute of Earth Systems  
University of Malta