



Initial concept ideas for Qbajjar Battery, Gozo



The brief

Emma Thomas, General Manager for the National Trust at Seaton Delaval Hall was invited by the National Trust for Malta (DLH) to visit Gozo in September 2021.

The purpose of the visit (3 days) was to get a feel for the Qbajjar Battery and make recommendations for the way it could be used in the future as a cultural heritage site. With this in mind, the research trip included seeing recent conservation projects and other sites currently managed by DLH to see what they normally do, the displays, how they staff them, raise money for them and to meet some of the wardens, volunteers, key DLH Council members, a conservation architect and the Cultural Heritage Minister for Malta.



Sites visited include the Red Tower, the White Tower, Dwerja Tower, Isopu Tower, Ggantija Temples, the Cittadella, Garden of Rest, Victory Church and Qbajjar Battery.



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Brief history

For centuries, the islands of Malta and Gozo have been central in the struggle for power and control in the Mediterranean – from the Romans to the Knights of St John and Napoleon to World War 2. The earliest fortification on Gozo was in 2500 BC at Ggantija Temples.

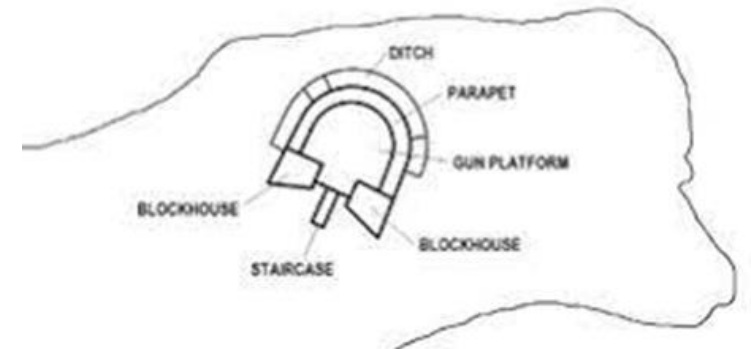
Qolla I-Bajda Battery (aka Qbajjar Battery) was built by the Order of St John in 1716 on the spur of land between the bays of Xwejni and Qjabbar. It was named after the nearby hillock known as Qolla I-Bajda (the white hill) and was designed by military engineers Jacques de Camus d'Arginy and Bernard de Fontet.

Initially Qbajjar Battery was armed with 6 guns, but in 1770, its armament consisted of 4 6-pounder guns. The battery is the only surviving part of a chain of fortifications that defended Marsalforn and nearby bays from Ottoman or Barbary attacks.

The battery was abandoned in the 19th century but was again used as an observation post (No. 5) during World War 2. The Battery now stands empty, but its most recent use was commercial as the Rook night club. The battery is still known locally as The Rook.

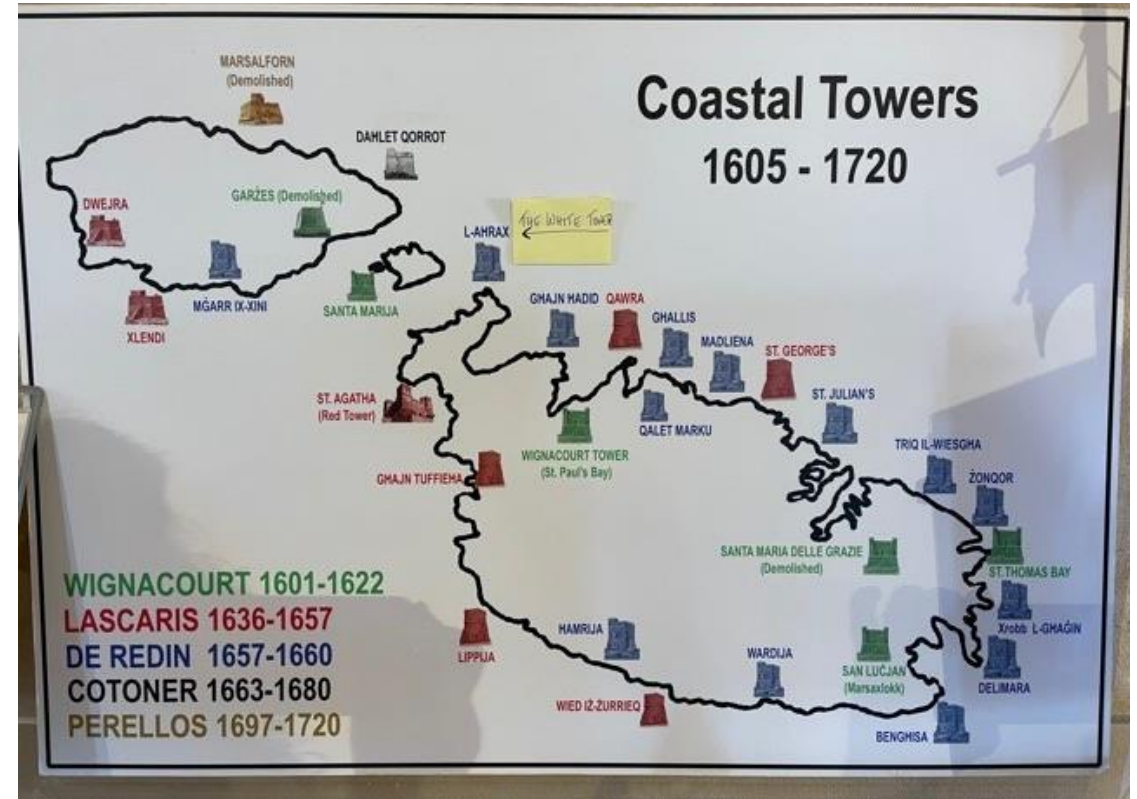


QOLLA L-BAJDA BATTERY



Qbajjar Battery with modern extensions in red







Current condition of Qbajjar Battery interior
Photographs by Emma Thomas

Challenges and opportunities facing Qbajjar Battery

Challenges

- Guardianship agreement with the Government still needs to be secured
- There have been considerable illegal interventions made to the original battery, resulting in significant conservation need
- The structure has suffered from neglect, vandalism and coastal erosion
- Large scale funding and resources will be required to secure its long term future
- The battery needs to have its own identity and operate sustainably
- Different winter and summer audiences
- The number of volunteers needs increasing, particularly through local connections
- The site is attracting campers

Opportunities

- Strong and interesting history
- Location (more accessible than others, close to local town, parking nearby, salt flats, on the coast, views to Mt Etna on a clear day)
- Local and tourist audiences – appeal for tourists and close to local towns
- Potential to be the first wheelchair accessible battery
- Growing cultural landscape in Gozo
- Well known (in part due to living memories of the Rook nightclub)
- Skills, expertise, passion of volunteers
- Track record of the National Trust of Malta
- Income generation possibilities

Spirit of Place

- What is the essence or character of Qbajjar battery that makes it so unique? What is the central narrative that needs to come alive? How do people connect with the place?

Qbajjar Battery is a survivor with a history of defence and fortifications - constructed by the Knights of St John, used as a lookout during World War 2 and it has endured all the changes made to it over the years (both man-made and natural).

It's location on the promontory and views out to sea are what has made it a good observation post over the years, playing an important part in the history of Gozo and Malta and the struggles for power and control in the Mediterranean.

- The Spirit of Place needs to be identified and articulated clearly and then fed in to all future developments from planning, design, conservation and construction through to programming, income generation and visitor experience.
- Is there an opportunity for a contemporary observation post – views out to sea, sunrise and the marine conservation area.



Location

Qbajjar Battery is close to Qbajjar and Xwejini Bay beaches and just a 10-minute walk from Marsalforn Bay – a popular resort with tourists and Gozitan and Maltese families, particularly in the summer months. There is access by public transport and by car and on foot.

The area is good for swimming, snorkelling, diving, kayaking and boat trips. There are restaurants, bars, self-catering apartments and hotels nearby.

The battery is located at one end of the popular Qbajjar salt flats and on the edge of a marine conservation area.

Qbajjar salt flats by Emma Thomas



- Could the local salt flats also come under the Guardianship and be made to work again – an opportunity for tourists to harvest their own salt and to work with locals already harvesting the salt flats along this stretch of coast.
- Play on the idea of an observation post with a live web cam, telescopes and opportunities for photographers.

Current perceptions (trip advisor)

"This place could be lovely, unfortunately it's not properly maintained. The location is beautiful and it's a good starting or finishing point for the visit to the salt pans so it's still worth visiting."

"Such a shame that it has been the subject of vandalism."

"After visiting the Salt pans we noticed this. Fascinated by all things old & military. Apparently was once converted to a nightclub some scallywags have knocked a hole in the wall couldn't resist the urge to enter Ooh Err missus." Greeted by magnificent desolation. Would make a lovely fixer upper. The views would be stunning ! ENTER AT YOUR OWN RISK !"

"Sadly neglected - Qolla I-Bajda Battery is located in a beautiful position overlooking the Mediterranean."

"I visited while walking toward the salt pans."

"Close to the Xwejni salt pans."

"Near the battery there are salt pans."

"After visiting Xwejni Salt Pans and Xwejni Bay we paid a visit to Il-Qolla I-Bajda Battery."

"It was rented out to a private company who converted it into a disco in the 1980s, with modifications made to the structure to accommodate its new function. The disco eventually closed and the building fell into decline, while an ongoing legal battle since the mid 2000s continues over the structure, it seems to be falling further into decay. When we visited there was rubbish around the site, it seems such a shame to have something of historic significance deteriorate."

Potential audiences

There are potential tourist and local audiences already nearby to draw upon. Tourists travel to Gozo and visit the nearby salt flats and Marsalforn Bay, amongst other places. According to the National Statistics Office, 396,251 inbound and domestic tourists visited Gozo in 2019. There is an opportunity to add to the offer locally as well as to attract new audiences.

Whilst the summer months are likely to be the busiest, there is the potential to attract and connect with local audiences, places and organisations.

To keep audiences returning and interested in Qbajjar battery, there needs to be a changing, developing offer and strong local connections.

Qbajjar Battery by Emma Thomas



Consider how best to connect locally and who potential partners could be. Extended opening hours in the summer and reduced opening in the winter months. Could some of the facilities be used by local groups during the winter months to encourage regular use?

Physical access



Whilst the battery should be restored as far as possible to its original structure to retain its integrity, there could be an argument to use some of the alterations to improve physical access. For example, an opening has already been made at ground level and the original battery floor has been demolished and replaced with concrete.

In light of this, is there a possibility to create a sympathetic level entrance on the ground floor with platform lift to the upper level. This would make Qbajjar Battery the only physically accessible battery on Gozo and Malta.

The drama of the shorter, steeper stairs with the drawbridge to the original entrance should still be retained, with an additional level entrance underneath.

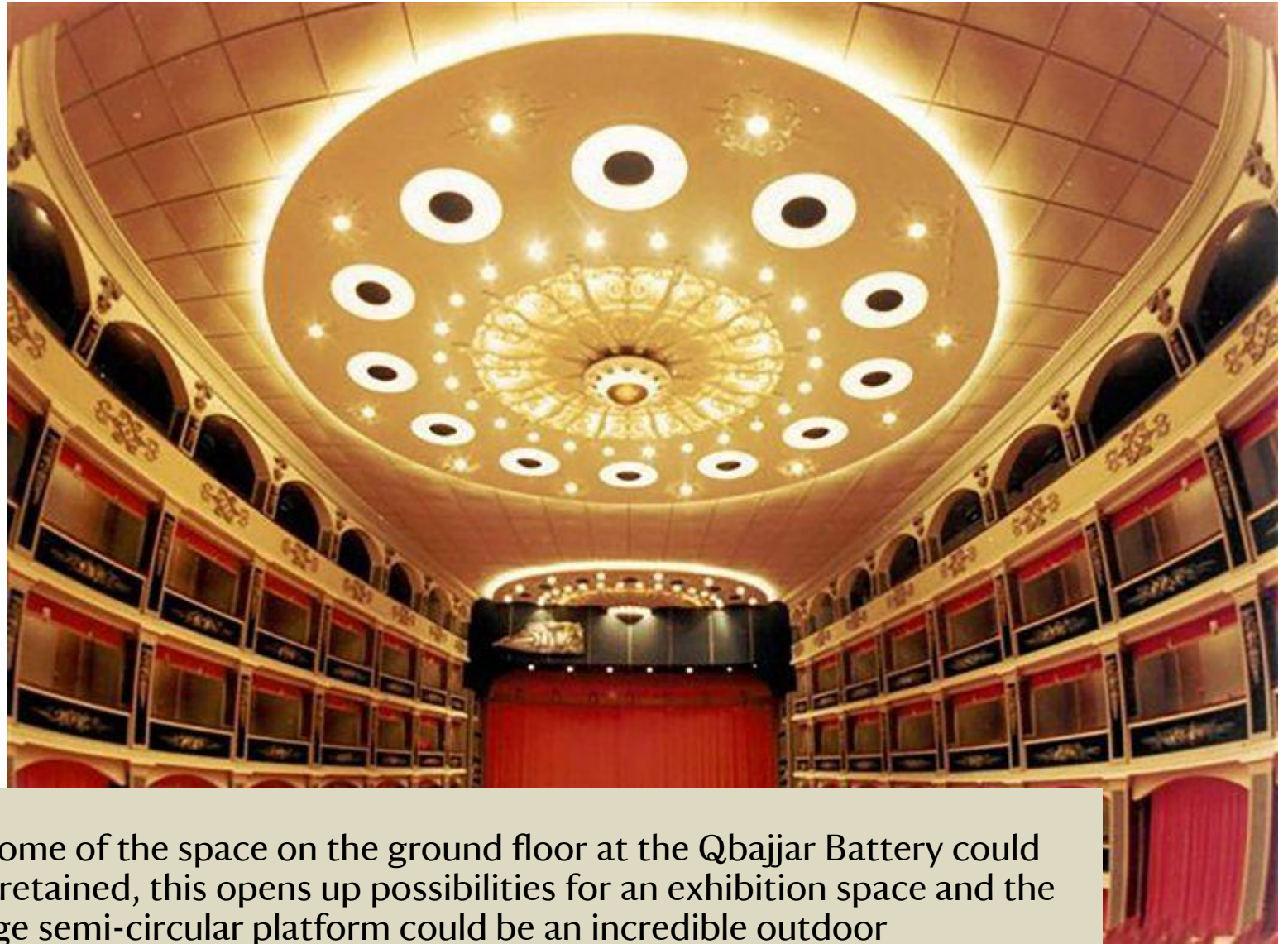


Cultural landscape

In addition to the carnival and festivals, there is a growing arts community on Gozo, with theatres such as the Astra Theatre and Teatru tal-Oprain in Victoria offering high end productions, working with international and local singers, musicians, dancers and actors.

There is a new generation of contemporary Maltese artists and galleries emerging in Malta and Gozo. The Tempra Museum for Contemporary Art, amongst others, could offer interesting partnership opportunities.

The University of Malta offers courses in music, performing arts, fashion, fine art.



If some of the space on the ground floor at the Qbajjar Battery could be retained, this opens up possibilities for an exhibition space and the large semi-circular platform could be an incredible outdoor performing area. There is currently no outdoor performance venue like this in Gozo.

Volunteers

The majority of work carried out by the National Trust of Malta is by volunteers; from welcoming and guiding visitors to managing sites and putting in place future plans for conservation and land management.

The volunteers are passionate, knowledgeable and skilled but there is a need to grow the number of volunteers particularly Gozitans and younger volunteers. With improved access, focus on programming and close proximity to local towns, there may be a greater opportunity at Qbajjar Battery to grow the number of volunteers.

Volunteer guide at the Red Tower by Emma Thomas



- Opportunity to involve young volunteers
- Work in partnership with other places, organisations and groups to increase capacity
- Share the enthusiasm and knowledge of volunteers with visitors more widely e.g. short films
- Creating an office for DLH in one of the 2 blockhouses could help with the need for staffing on site

Initial concept ideas

The stunning location, potential tourist and local audiences as well as the growing cultural landscape, partnership opportunities and gaps in the market, make this an incredible location for a cultural heritage organisation that is:

- **A place to find out more about Qbajjar Battery and its history**, particularly the Knights of St John and World War 2. The history should be told through the restoration and conservation of the architecture (let it speak for itself) and creative interpretation. For example, could the gun platform be fully restored with cannons? Bring to life different stories through the enthusiasm and knowledge of volunteers and specialists – in person and on film. A programme of site specific art installations- performance, photography, music and theatre could be commissioned and exhibited regularly to keep visitors returning and to help build a community. (Keep interpretation boards to a minimum so that visitors can enjoy the architecture and views and to maintain the flexibility of the site).
- **Connect with other batteries\ towers** and build on their use to warn people. You could have some fun finding a way to **let people know when Qbajjar Battery is open and\ or when a significant event is happening** e.g. through lighting, a giant light beam, fireworks, flame, cannon fire or raising a flag (see slide 21 for inspiration).
- A venue to **host ambitious small/medium scale outdoor cultural events and programming**, working in partnership with others. The large gun platform could act as the stage, with the audience facing the sea. Although larger in scale, inspiration can be taken from other places internationally including Minnack Theatre (Porthcurno, England), Dalhalla (Sweden) and Ephesus (Turkey).
- A **contemporary observation post**, making the most of the views out to sea and of the salt flats, sunrise and the marine conservation area. You can even see Mount Etna on a clear day! Play on the idea of an observation post with a live web cam, telescopes and opportunities for photographers.





Qbajjar Battery platform by Emma Thomas



Dalhalla theatre and music venue in a former Lime Quarry, Sweden,
Jonas Beach Theatre, New York, US, Ephesus, Turkey, Caesarea,
Maritima, Israel, Minnack Theatre, Porthcurno, Cornwall, UK

Yvette Mattern's Global Rainbow over Whitley Bay, Canons in Valetta that fire at regular times, Jaime Plansa's light beam at BALTIC, Maltese flag, fireworks, Alex Israel shining the bat signal over Marseille and Light beacon.



Considerations

Research other sites through the design and development phase of this conservation project and build in the basic infrastructure needed whilst maintaining flexibility. Flexibility is key to future use.

Share the process of the conservation work and transformation with others as it is happening to start building the audience and involve everyone in the changes.

Trial ideas and events as you go to learn and give people a taste of what's to come. A photographer in residence could document all the changes and get behind the scenes.

Income generation

Café - The location lends itself to a small café or kiosk with seating and sea views to operate year round and to service events. (When looking at potential locations consider all the other uses for the Battery. The danger would be in making the location itself a café, thereby competing with other businesses locally and you should be mindful of all the recent contentious history of the Battery as a restaurant / nightclub.) A small area upstairs i.e. one of the block houses, or on the ground floor could be suitable locations.

Private hire opportunities (sunrise, photography courses, receptions)

Ticketed events

Souvenirs, including salt and local produce

Qbajjar Battery by Emma Thomas



Potential Partners

Cultural venues and organisations in Gozo and Malta, including Astra Theatre and Teatru tal-Oprain and Tempra Museum for Contemporary Art
University of Malta

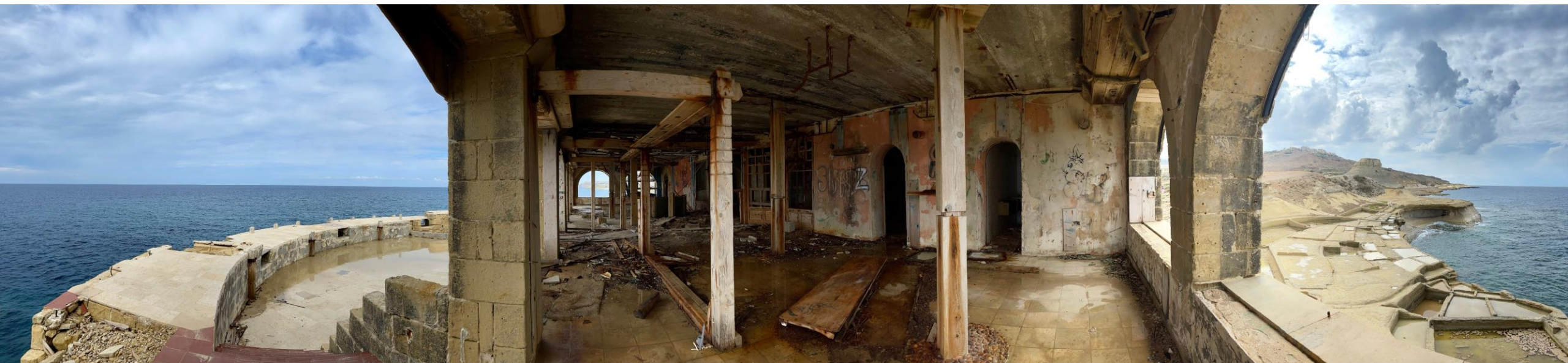
Nature and marine conservation organisations

Malta at War Museum and other military museums





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Qbajjar Battery panorama by Emma Thomas