

Citadel tunnel

Labyrinthine Defences

VICTOR PAUL BORG visits the newly opened tourist attraction within the Citadel in the capital, Rabat.

At the old castle in Gozo there is a curious structure that is appended to the main line of the fortifications. You cannot see it from within the Citadel itself unless you know where to look: it is hidden deliberately and can only be reached via a secret tunnel that bores through solid rock – yet it holds within it a newly-opened tripartite tourist attraction that is one of the most unique on the islands.

“Visitors have a wonderful impression of the site, and the silos in particular,” reveals Giovanni Zammit, executive secretary of Wirt Ghawdex,

the heritage organisation that is entrusted with managing the site.

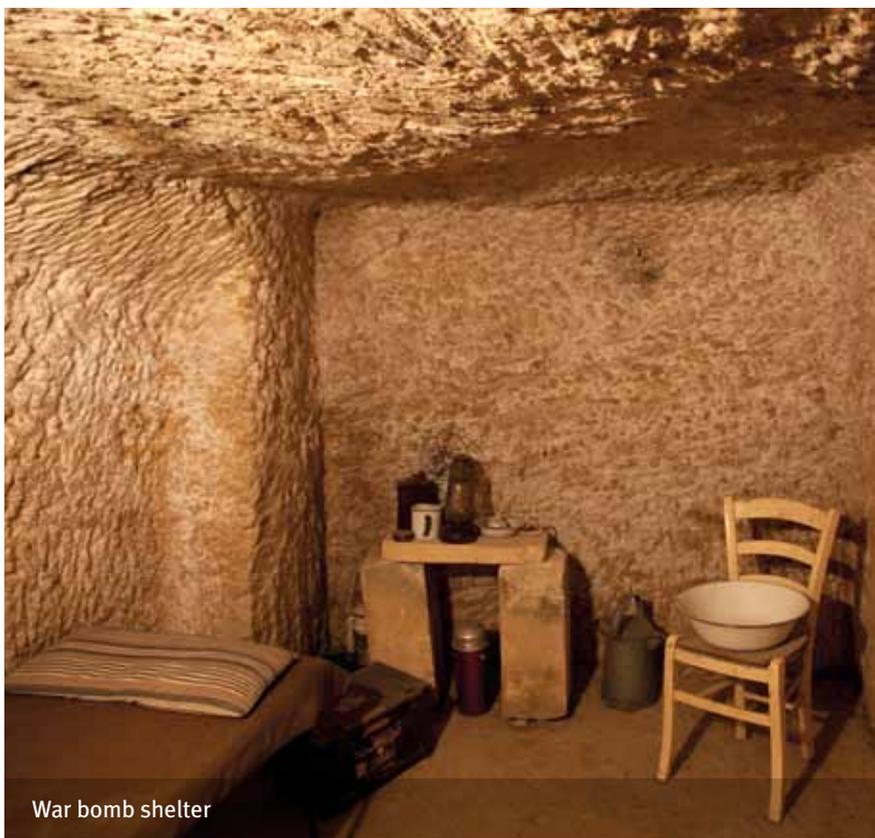
The silos that Giovanni speaks about were originally used to store grain and water: there were dozens of them, gouged into the bedrock underneath the streets of the Citadel, able to sustain the populace for months on end in the event of a military siege on the Citadel. The ones that are now open to the public continued to function as water reservoirs until around ten years ago, supplying tap water to the inhabitants of Rabat, the town adjoining the Citadel. “This

comes as a surprise to the local inhabitants,” Giovanni shares. “People who live in the vicinity say they never knew that these silos existed.”

Underground chambers in other fortified medieval towns exist, but the ones at the Citadel are the only ones that are open to the public. The most striking feature of the three attractions on-site is the gun battery. There are only two such batteries on the islands – the second one is appended to the Mdina fortifications – and these batteries are one of the strangest examples of medieval military



Citadel cannon



War bomb shelter

architecture in Malta. The battery is not a bastion or a demi-bastion (which are triangular forward cannon platforms jutting out of the fortifications), just a misshaped gun position appended to the main line of the fortifications. The concept is simple enough: it functions as an advanced artillery position or turret whose guns can hit formations of troops and cannons that gather at the base of the fortifications to launch an assault. These sort of batteries lack the sophistication of a bastion: a bastion is designed to withstand sustained firepower, but the battery at the Citadel – as well as its counterpart in Mdina

(which is not open to the public) – would only at best, delay a formidable enemy. That is why it is reachable via a secret tunnel, hence allowing the defenders easy retreat, and any attackers that capture the battery would still have to breach the main fortifications.

The battery at the Citadel, as well as the rest of the fortifications, were erected at the beginning of the 17th century, according to a design by the military engineer Giovanni Rinaldini. The Citadel had existed for a long time before then, but the walls were breached by an Ottoman raid in 1555.

The redesign, drawn up in 1599, was intended to bolster the defences.

In recent decades, the tunnel leading to the battery was shuttered off, and the structures within – the sentry post and the gunpowder magazine particularly – had begun to crumble. Then, in 1994 the government restored the site, and has now handed it to Wirt Ghawdex, run by volunteers. “We have a regular stream of volunteers, ranging from students to expatriates,” Giovanni says. “It is thanks to the volunteers that we are able to open the site for free.”

Upgrade works are in the offing. ➤



Gunpowder magazine

Once funds become available – largely through donations and corporate sponsorships – the lighting system will be upgraded, interpretation panels will be set up, and the gunpowder magazine will be refurbished. The latter is a room that formerly served as an ammunition store; now it has been partially recreated, with wooden barrels (which formerly held gunpowder) heaped in a triangle and cannon balls piled in a pyramid form.

Yet the site also incorporates a third attraction: five air raid bomb shelters, small as cells, were pickaxed into the bedrock. These were dug as private shelters, where the occupiers covered during the aerial bombing blitz in World War II. One belonged to George Cassar, who was stationed in the Citadel as an officer in the Royal Air Force Observer Corps. Perhaps it was thanks to his position that he could get away with digging a shelter

in a sensitive site: the shelters are dug under the silos that back then served as water reservoirs. And this made the shelters a hazard – if the water reservoirs burst, they would have inundated parts of Rabat – and led the government’s architect to renounce the shelters, yet the inhabitants still stayed put.

Wirt Ghawdex has kitted out one of the rooms with period paraphernalia: wooden chair, metal bed, wind-proof kerosene lamp, pans for washing, pots and kettle, and so on. Stepping in the shelter is like snooping into people’s private dwellings, and the rest of the site also has similar levels of intimacy – it is a site within a larger site (the Citadel).

Standing at the battery, you feel as if you are levitating high over Rabat. You also get an entirely different perspective of the elaborate defence arrangements at this point in the walls. The military structures here densely overlap: the battery at the lowest level, the demi-bastion at the second level up, the main wall rising further overhead and finally the cavalier looming at the top – a layered series of fortifications that make this, the most intricate part of the Citadel’s architectural military heritage. ☺

Because the site is opened by volunteers, opening times change from time to time: before you visit, check www.wirtghawdex.com for up-to-date opening times.