

The Bolting Policy of the Maltese Islands

The present is a revision of the bolting policy as established in 2005 and published in Malta Rock Climbing – the Comprehensive Guide in 2007

Preamble

Since 2005, the Maltese climbing community has chosen to foster the development of both the traditional climbing ethic and the sport climbing ethic on the Maltese Islands, each with equal importance.

Sport climbing is important to the development of climbing in Malta for three reasons:

- it allows new climbers to start the sport and develop their skills in increased safety
- it encourages experienced climbers to push their limits and improve their technique for their personal development within the sport and for personal satisfaction
- it encourages overseas visitors who only know this type of climbing to come to Malta and sample what our cliffs have to offer, and thereby make a contribution to the local climbing community through sharing of knowledge and experience

Trad (traditional) climbing is important to Malta for four reasons:

- to preserve and respect the historical development of rock climbing in Malta before the year 2000
- to allow new and experienced rock climbers to learn the special skills and mindset required in order to successfully climb with leader placed protection, a useful asset to have when climbing overseas
- to afford climbers the experience of ascending classic rock climbs, established as trad climbs over many decades since the 1940s, and new routes that are still being discovered and led as trad today
- to offer visiting climbers a unique experience of a place where both sport and trad climbing can be enjoyed by climbers of all skill levels in the same destination

Since the days in 2005 when the bolting policy for Malta was established by the MRCC and the guidebook authors, and endorsed by the authorities, a number of developments have taken place:

- The MRCC successfully lobbied the Malta Tourism Authority (MTA) to obtain funding to purchase the equipment with which to implement the policy, creating the **MTA-MRCC Bolting Project** which started in 2006 and has been renewed and expanded every year since
- a large number of sport routes have been equipped and LOs (lower offs) installed on both trad and sport routes

- **Malta Rock Climbing – the Comprehensive Guide** was published in 2007 and is sold internationally
- the MTA, assisted by the MRCC, has elicited a number of articles about Maltese climbing in overseas climbing magazines
- many websites have come online providing information about rock climbing in Malta
- the number of local climbing clubs has increased to three and all have become very active, with the consequent rise in awareness of the sport in Malta.

As a direct result of all these initiatives, climbing in Malta has risen in popularity exponentially. The climbing community is at least 5 times what it was at the start of the **MTA-MRCC Bolting Project** and visitors for rock climbing have increased by a factor of 50. This increase puts great pressure at the most popular climbing crags in terms of environmental impact and user experience (footpath erosion; rock becoming polished; increased danger of accidents; noise disturbance; rubbish at the crag; congestion on the most popular routes).

The increase in activity has taken place almost exclusively at the sport climbing venues. There has been no perceptible increase in pressure on trad routes, if anything it has dwindled. The sport routes on the other hand are being used far more than trad routes and since there are fewer sport routes, the impact is that much greater.

As a consequence of this increased pressure on the sport climbing crags, it has become necessary to:

- increase the number of sport climbs on the islands
- increase the locations where sport climbs can be found to spread users out geographically
- provide sport climbs in the entire grade range of difficulty, from easy to very hard
- provide enough sport climbs that can be climbed in all seasons, summer and winter in shade, sun or rain according to the season.

In order to achieve this, the bolting principles need to be updated. Instead of wilderness-only crags and sport-only crags, we need to add a new type of crag which will allow the existence of both sport and trad routes in the same location: mixed crags. These newly defined locations will be what are presently the most popular and accessible climbing areas as these are the easiest to access and best adapted to take numbers of climbers.

The Principle of Climbing as an inclusive sport

Given the new reality of Maltese climbing: increased participation and the increased popularity of sport climbing, the bolting programme for the Maltese Islands should aim to eventually provide a roughly equal number of sport climbs and trad climbs, both single and multi-pitch, right across the grade range. In order for the Maltese climbing infrastructure to be inclusive, it is clear that traditional as well as sport climbs should be provided that range in grade from the easiest to the most difficult climbs. Only in this way can the sport in its two versions be accessible to all participants.

Both types of climbs should be available that can be climbed throughout the year. Climbing is best practised in the sun in winter and the shade in summer. Some Malta crags are more usable in the winter (south facing, protected from prevailing winds and the rain) while others are more usable in the summer (shady for a good part of the day). Sport and trad climbs in all grades should be made available on a number of crags in order to minimise seasonality for everyone wanting to enjoy climbing in Malta.

Crag Definitions and Features

Wilderness Crags

At wilderness crags, no bolting is allowed. Routes are trad and should remain so, and any new climbs must be done trad or not at all.

At these crags, on those routes where it is very difficult to set top anchors or abseil points, bolted ones are allowed. This should not become universal as otherwise the skill of anchoring using only natural gear will be lost to the local community.

Routes of all grades should be provided at wilderness crags.

Sport Crags

At sport crags, the majority of climbs should be bolted routes equipped to the highest standards of safety, with adequate intermediate bolts without ever having to supplement protection with leader placed gear and including a bolted LO at the top of each route. Abseil points should be installed where needed for access or descent and access should be arranged to remove serious danger to climbers, wherever possible. Some trad climbs may be left at these crags especially where they are of particular quality and/or have heritage value.

Routes of all grades should be provided at sport crags, from easy to extreme.

Mixed Crags

In order to achieve the principle of universal inclusion and minimise seasonality, it will be necessary that most of the popular climbing areas are designated as Mixed Crags. This will allow the existence of sport routes alongside trad routes in the same area. In this way, in any one climbing session, participants can choose to do either or both types of climbing. Enough of both types of climbs across the grade range are needed to achieve this.

At a mixed crag, the best traditionally protected routes will be preserved as trad on condition that they:

- have good, solid rock throughout
- have sufficient protection along the route to allow a relatively safe ascent commensurate with the grade of difficulty
- are a pleasant lead, providing a good experience to the leader (e.g. worthy of a 2-3 star rating)

Any new trad routes established at these crags will also be preserved, based on their having the above three characteristics, should the first ascensionist wish for them to be left as trad. The crags should however first also provide a good mix of both types of route in all grades of difficulty.

At a mixed crag a good number of routes may have bolted LOs to facilitate easy anchorage and descent.

New Crags

The climbing ethic for newly discovered crags is at the discretion of the people developing the crag. However, where routes are going to be left trad, the three principles of solid rock, good protection and pleasant climbing should be respected by the developers for the good of the climbing community.

Who may Bolt, How and When

Any bolting should be done in close consultation with the **MTA-MRCC Bolting Team** as the authority entrusted with developing Malta's rock climbing infrastructure. It is important for this to happen to avoid a situation where renegade bolting occurs, as has happened in the past. No chopping of bolts is allowed and visiting climbers wishing to put in new sport routes must first obtain clearance from the **MTA-MRCC Bolting Team**.

Any bolting activity that follows the present guidelines may request help from the **MTA-MRCC Bolting Project** in providing anchors and equipment for the task. This cannot be guaranteed as the project has set targets which must first be met from the available resources.

Hardware & Installation Considerations

Due to the fact that Malta is so small, most of the climbing areas are close to the sea and that Maltese rock abounds in salts, the climbing routes may be considered as all being in a marine environment. Therefore, any fixed gear used must take this into consideration. Bolts should always be of marine grade 316 stainless steel on sea cliffs and at least 304 stainless steel anywhere inland. When routes are close to the sea, resin bolts (glue in anchors) are preferable to expansion bolts due to the high corrosion factor. Expansion bolts are highly susceptible to stress corrosion cracking in a marine environment. Only competent and experienced climbers should bolt, and only in consultation with the **MTA-MRCC Bolting Team** and in line with the present bolting policy and any subsequent revisions.

If in situ slings need to be used in threads in trad routes, the ideal material to use is ultra violet resistant dyneema cord, which can be purchased at local sailing shops.

Pitons and pegs are not allowed as they damage the rock.

Policy area by area

The policies and considerations outlined above, on which a decision to bolt or not bolt a crag or route are based, lead to defining areas as one or other of these crag types. Here follows an overview of the presently existing crags and how they have been interpreted within these guidelines:

Wilderness/Traditional Climbing Crags

- Wied Faham to Ta' Boys Buttress; Gharghur Buttress to Hangover Area (Vic Lines)
- White Walls; Chapel Buttress (Wied il-Ghasel)
- Il-Mara
- Bassasa Crags
- Continuation Wall
- It-Tirxija Walls
- Blue Wall (Blue Grotto Promontory)
- Hamrija Tower Crags (except il-Mitqub)
- Glass Wall (Fomm ir-Rih)
- Ta' Cenc
- Phoenicia Area (Dwejra Bay)
- Comino

Bolted/sport Climbing Crags

- The Wave (Vic Lines)
- Wied Babu East
- Red Wall (Blue Grotto Promontory)
- Il-Mitqub (Hamrija Tower Crags)
- Hard Man Cave; Ghar Lapsi Sea Slabs (Ghar Lapsi)
- Spezz Wall; Trozz Walls (Fomm ir-Rih)
- Fawwara Cave
- Migra l-Ferha
- RdumRxawn (Xemxija Bay)
- Madonna Buttress (Mellieha Crags)
- Marfa Ridge Cave
- Flakeout Walls; The Nose; Dream Walls; Champagne Walls; Moby Dick Walls; Italian Walls (Mgarr ix-Xini)
- Ic-Cnus Slabs
- Munxar Valley
- Ghajn Abdul
- Outside Walls (except for Old McDonald); Four Boulder Slab (Dwejra)
- Tower of Power; Blata ta' Xalati (NE Gozo)

Mixed/sport and traditional climbing Crags

- Crazy Horse Cave; Crucifix Cave; Blind Cave; Garbage Wall (Vic Lines)
- Wied il-Ghasel (except for White Walls and Chapel Buttress)
- Wied Qirda
- Ghar Hasan
- Thaiwand Walls (Continuation Wall Area)
- Wied Babu West & Seaside
- Wall of Wonders (Blue Grotto Promontory)
- Ghar Lapsi (except for Hard Man cave and Ghar Lapsi Sea Slabs)
- Xaqqa Valley
- Xaqqa Sea Cliffs
- Migra l-Ferha to Blata Steps Crags (except Migra l-Ferha)
- Fomm ir-Rih (except Glass Wall)
- Argentier
- Mellieha Crags (except Madonna Buttress)

- Mgarr ix-Xini (except Flakeout Walls; The Nose; Dream Walls; Champagne Walls; Moby Dick Walls; Italian Walls)
- Xlendi Bay
- Dwejra Crag (except Outside Walls; Four Boulder Slab)
- NW Gozo
- NE Gozo (except Tower of Power; Blata ta' Xalati)

Any comments and opinions are welcome. The bolting policy of the Maltese islands is being regularly reviewed and updated in the light of developments affecting the state of rock climbing in Malta.