

Marshmalika Area

Once a pleasant, peaceful region near the northern shores of the Bay of Aqesh, on the edge of the largely desert plains and dry uplands of Banjar, its character has been changed irrevocably in recent times by the mysterious invaders who have devastated the land, and especially the settlements. The population has been slaughtered with extreme brutality, and there are no living folk around here now. Even the invaders venture back to this area rarely, and never for long. Marshmalika gained this unenviably fearful reputation as it was the first place to be attacked when the invaders arrived, something the rank-and-file invaders now mutter increasingly to have been a serious mistake, as the land has not forgotten and will not let them forget either, it seems. Consequently, the original plan, to build their main new control centre at Marshmalika was swiftly abandoned. Instead, that has been established as an increasingly heavily fortified place on the next peninsula southwest around the coast, some 50 miles (80 kilometres) away from the mouth of the Kalabanjar River.

Scorpions and poisonous snakes are now to be found in profusion at and near all the old, sacked, settlements, and other once-frequented places such as the mapped Broken Bridge, creatures that once were rare. In addition, there are visible ghosts that manifest around all such places, which can appear by night or day, and in numbers that seem to be constantly increasing, apparently drawing on the local dead of the region from ages long past, as well as more recently. These spirits have proven impossible to exorcise or banish. Typically, they simply stand in groups that grow in number, stand and silently stare unblinkingly at any living folk, a crowd whose unnerving appearance grows the longer anyone stays and tries to face them. A very tiny number of these ghosts are able to act with the powers common to some forms of spectral undead, for all the vast majority are not undead at all, simply ghostly manifestations.

The settled population of Banjar hereabouts was never large, and the settlements were widely scattered, with nomadic herders roaming the landscape elsewhere. Situated in Nibirum's tropics, around 25 degrees South latitude, conditions local to this map are commonly hot and dry, with what crop agriculture was once practised here often reliant on irrigation works that required regular maintenance. With the population gone, the land has become unproductive, another source of dismay for the invaders, along with the supposed shortsightedness of their leaders.

Labelled Locations

Aqesh Road: A dirt trail, paved sometimes still nearer the former settlements, this mostly follows the western side of the Kalabanjar River from Marshmalika all the way to Sussara (detailed by a separate Atlas map) in the midst of the Banjar Mountains near the River's headwaters, almost 300 miles away (500 km).

Bay of Aqesh: The sliver shown on the map is just the northernmost tip of the Bay, greatest of the sea inlets in Banjar. The open sea is some 250 miles (400 km) southwest from this coast.

Broken Bridge: Once, a beautifully elegant stone bridge crossed the lower Kalabanjar a little south of its confluence with the Shaia River, with settlements on both banks alongside it. During the recent wars, its central span was completely broken by magic in a failed attempt to stop or delay the invaders. It has though made the Bridge useless ever since.

Burnt Village: No one is left to remember its name, though it once thrived in support of travellers passing along the Aqesh Road by the Kalabanjar Bridge beside it. Every building has been burnt out, and charred bones of its former inhabitants can be seen in places sometimes, in houses and streets. The ghosts here usually seem as if lit by flickering flames, while the poison of the scorpions and snakes encountered nearby is said to have an especially fiery potency.

Coast Road: Although only its western stretch is labelled as such on the map for clarity, this dirt road extends both east and west from Marshmalika and the former Kalabanjar Bridge crossing over huge distances further around the shores of the Bay of Aqesh.

Crater Plain: Features in the terrain north and east of Marshmalika show conflicts with the invaders were not confined to the settlements locally. In the desert plain some 10 miles (16 km) northeast of Marshmalika is a vast, recent, explosive crater, an enormous, raw sinkhole in the landscape. Partly buried by debris, dust and sand that has drifted-in since, fragments of humanoid skeletons can be seen scattered all around the crater, with scraps of armour, weapons and other gear. Oddly, no ghosts, snakes or scorpions are to be encountered in its vicinity.

Crowfields: North of the Kalabajar-Shaia confluence, the plains clearly saw more terrible events in the early stages of the war against the invaders. A series of vicious battles raged here and over the Smoking Plain a few miles northwest. Over the ground on these Crowfields are scattered skeletons and bony fragments, with pieces of armour, weapons and clothing rags, partly buried among the shifting dust and sand. At least a dozen large tumuli can be seen, raised over the invaders' dead, while the strewn skeletons are the remains of the local forces, left to rot. Black carrion birds continue to congregate boldly over this plain, still finding plenty of sustenance from time to time, including where the soil has slipped on a few of the tumuli, revealing part of their contents. Scorpions, snakes and the silent ghostly hordes will be encountered here as well.

Firewords Hill: In the low hills north of the Crowfields battle-plain are several caves at this spot, one of which contains some very ancient, luminous, oracular engravings over its walls. Another cave close-by shows signs of former habitation, for all there is no one there now. The caves were once home to a small band of priests who looked after, and interpreted, the luminous writings for querents. Whether they were driven-off, killed, or saw what was coming and left on their own, cannot be determined. Only someone with real skill could try to interpret the ever-changing glowing writings in the priests' absence.

Fog Bay: Easternmost of the three named inlets along the northern shore of the mapped segment of the Bay of Aqesh, this one is subject to more or less perpetual fogs and mists, thanks to a series of submerged cold-water seeps feeding into the sea offshore. Moisture drifting onshore from these created ideal conditions for the Old forest to thrive, to the benefit of the settlement by the mouth of the intermittent Gaba Wadi. Landings on the coast here need good local knowledge to prevent foundering on fog-shrouded obstacles in the water.

Gaba Wadi: An intermittent stream running through the Old forest from off the eastern map edge. At its mouth on the Bay of Aqesh in fog Bay, was a small settlement, now in ruins. Its name means "forest Stream".

Giant flowers: One rare reminder of the beauties and wonders once found in the region, a bend in the upper Shaia River, near where it becomes intermittent as the Shaia Wadi, still harbours an area where gigantic desert flowers bloom from time to time, especially after a rare rainstorm or flash flood along the Wadi. Following such an event, this area can become like an almost impassable forest of heavily-perfumed, colourful growths, which also attract giant insects to feed on them, some of which hatch-out from long-buried eggs and cocoons when conditions are perfect for such flowering.

Kalabajar River: The "Heart of Banjar" River that flows from the midst of the Banjar Mountains hundreds of miles/kilometres to reach the sea here. It is navigable by riverine craft for most of its length up to Sussara, and even seagoing vessels can dock in it near its mouth by Marshmalika. It is tidal upstream to roughly Broken Bridge for much of the year.

Old forest: Once a thriving coastal woodland, fed by the regular moisture drifting ashore as fogs and mists from fog Bay, it is now a wreck. There are many dead, sometimes burnt, trees, with signs of battle, including scattered skeletons and lost war gear. It is clear there has been a significant amount of remarkably crude and wasteful fairly recent tree-felling and woodworking as well. Some living trees and smaller plants survive, and mistiness clings across the whole area, sometimes to the point of dimming the Sun, or hiding it altogether. It often feels oddly gloomy even in brighter sunshine here.

Old Ziggurat: Out on the plains west of Marshmalika, and south of the Kalabajar and Aqesh Road, an ancient, stepped, stone, artificial hill defies or ignores the invaders, a relic from a far earlier epoch. No one has visited it more than briefly in long ages.

Queen's Cove: The bay into which the Kalabajar disgorges by Marshmalika (whose name also means "Queen's Cove"). Quite who the Queen was, was no longer recalled even before the settlement was destroyed.

Razed Mansion: Burnt-out as thoroughly as the former Village on the east bank of the Kalabajar at the Broken Bridge river crossing, this once-impressive, extensive Mansion is merely another substantial ruin now, not far from the western end of the old Bridge, where the Aqesh and Coast Roads meet. Ghosts, scorpions and snakes are the only inhabitants since its destruction.

Ruined Hamlet: Set near the coast in the midst of the Old forest, by the mouth of Gaba Wadi on fog Bay, this small settlement became merely another casualty in the war with the invaders, part of the general

devastation wreaked on the forest itself. Rarely noticed in the forest until close-by, ghosts, scorpions and snakes will always be encountered at the Hamlet.

Ruins of Marshmalika: The area's only small town, its ruins are detailed by a separate Atlas map. As noted earlier, its name means "Queen's Cove".

Salt Marsh: On the west bank of the Kalabanjar near its mouth, and along the adjoining coast, is this area of coastal lagoons and salty marshland that even managed to defeat the invaders' attempts to harm it. The dead trees in it were long-standing residents which simply died naturally of old age, not anything accomplished more deliberately. There is further deterrence from its many biting insects, and occasional larger predators.

Shaia River and Wadi: The main Kalabanjar tributary on this map, it rises as a couple of smaller intermittent streams off the northeastern corner. Its name means "Barley River".

Shipwreck Cove: Broadest of the three coastal bays along the northern Bay of Aqesh here, there are dangers lurking beneath the waves, including a very strong tidal race, and a number of barely-submerged rocky obstacles, one of which is the upper part of a large, natural rock arch on the seabed. There are numerous shipwrecks on the bottom here as a result (including a couple of recent invading vessels), and considerable local knowledge would be required to navigate it safely.

Smoking Plain: Northwest of the Crowfields battlefield, this is another such site, closer to the low hills in which is firewords Hill. Smoky haze and fumes still linger here magically, no matter what the weather, and there are numbers of skeletons and lost war-gear scattered across it. Oddly though, these all appear to be those of the invaders. There are also no ghosts here, while scorpions and snakes are no more common than elsewhere ordinarily in the region's deserts.

Stone folk: On the plain a little north of the Old forest are numbers of petrified humanoid local warriors, some with armour, weapons and clothing scraps on or near them, all posed as if in combat. Many have started to weather and crumble, with just a few intact enough perhaps to survive magical restoration. There are no ghosts nearby.