

# The Isle of Zaraq

This small island lies roughly 620 kilometres (385 miles) off the northwestern coast of Errynor in Alarius. It is the narrow tip of a vast conical column of volcanic rock that begins on the seabed some 560 metres (1,840 feet) below sea level. It is approximately 5¼ km (3¼ miles) in its longest, NNE-SSW, dimension, and is surrounded by a number of islets, along with numerous unmarked, submerged, jagged rocks, especially off its eastern shores.

The surface of all the isles illustrated is rocky and rugged, although the higher peaks shown (in the central and southern parts of the main island) rise only 60 m or so (200 ft) above the sea. Anywhere within the marked grey peaks may produce volcanic activity at times, mostly smokes and fumes, with some minor lava flows, only occasionally unleashing a more destructive outpouring of molten rock. The latter is most likely close to the central NNE-SSW-trending line of the chief upland range on the main island, as this lies over a particularly thin region of crustal rock. In time, the eastern islands will be joined to the main island by newly-formed rocks.

Zaraq, its surrounding islets and the adjoining seas are shaken by minor earthquakes quite frequently. It is rare to go more than a few days here with none at all.

Some vegetation thrives on the land despite these difficulties, including tough, spiky, coarse grasses beginning a little inland of the rocky coasts, and dense, shrubby bushes, chiefly in the shelter of higher ground, away from the prevailing, salty, westerly winds. None of these bushes grows to much above 4 m (13 ft) tall. Most tend to be thorny and are clustered closely together, making access into these low-growing forests for larger creatures painful to wholly impractical.

There are many small invertebrates here, along with substantial flocks of seabirds, notably during their spring-summer breeding season. The northern scrubby forest on the main island especially also contains many small, well-camouflaged **lizards** among its greenery. While seemingly harmless, if provoked, they have a poisonous bite. They feed chiefly upon fruits and invertebrates, though they are not averse to larger fresh meat.

Further north, southwest of Landslip Bay, the shrub cover turns to lower-growing, scattered bushes and marsh-grasses in an insect-haunted marshland surrounding Zaraq's largest freshwater source, a small lake. There are harmless fish and other freshwater creatures and plants in this, along with a number of **giant water spiders**. These lurk on, around and sometimes in the lake (trapping air to breathe in their body and leg hairs), and in the marshes south as far as the northern fringes of the scrubby forest. They can skate over the water's surface using surface tension, and will even cross Landslip Bay at times. They have a highly venomous bite, and can easily tackle creatures the size of a small human, when springing from some handily-concealed spot. Webbing in places may give their presence away to the alert.

**Landslip Bay** at the northern end of the main island is the only safe anchorage for vessels larger than a rowboat, protected from the worst tides and waves inshore elsewhere around Zaraq, and where there are no jagged underwater rocks. The surrounding shores slope

fairly gently into the water as either low rock outcrops, or shingle beaches. The best of the latter are on the Bay's northeastern shore, below the looming cliffs overlooking this side. It is these which give it its name, as fresh rockfalls occur from the cliffs with each new earth tremor, as well as less expectedly at other times (including if there is an unusually loud noise nearby, for instance).

Towards the southwestern end of the most northerly peninsula east of Landslip Bay, and overlooking the Bay's entrance, is a **ruined wooden stockade**, broken down in several places, probably by storms, within which stand a handful of badly damaged, small, single-storey, wooden huts, all roofless. Their sizes seem reasonable for typical human-sized creatures. It is possible the roofs were once only tarpaulins, as there are large local stones scattered about in places where tie-stones might have been expected in such a case. The stockade wall and each building has more local stone piled-up along the wall bases as support.

The site has been long-abandoned, with nothing left to indicate who built it, when or why. A close inspection will show some of the timber to be local wood, with more of it recovered driftwood and reused ship's timbers, though much is building timber brought from elsewhere by its likely type, probably from places in northwestern Alarius, though not Errynor. Unlucky investigators may also find some of Zaraq's poisonous lizards, be attacked by a disturbed roost of seabirds (especially in the breeding season), or a lurking giant water spider.

The streams shown on Zaraq are mostly narrow, usually swift-running ones, typical of brooks on the continental mainland. A few by the central-eastern shore have widened a couple of existing lines of rock weakness into a forked, narrow, steep-sided, miniature fjord or estuary-like tidal channel. North of this, set back from the rugged coast, but clear of the nearby shrubby woods, are the remains of a crude, now storm-battered, **deserted camp**. The attempted permanence of some surviving features of this suggests it could have been built by shipwrecked, likely human-sized, castaways, with its mixture of reused ship's timbers, driftwood and local wood, along with some metal fixings - nails and a few screws survive. The wood has been worked in places by make-do metal implements (cuts by knives and a small axe are apparent), and probably volcanic glass. A few shards of this obsidian sparkle among the camp's remains, while following one of the local streams into the hills inland will reveal several small obsidian outcrops within the streambed and neighbouring banks.

At the southern tip of Zaraq is a small, flat, wave-cut platform, separated from the main island by a low, sheer, cliff line. The platform is submerged only during the highest tides. The cliffs are about 6 m high (20 ft) at most. By their lower, eastern, end, where the cliff falls about 3 to 4 m (10 to 13 ft), is a series of crudely-cut hand- or foot-holds in the cliff-face, reaching down to the platform. Their spacing is such they would plausibly fit best to someone of dwarfish stature, although the work seems too rough for dwarven creation.

Some way north of these cliffs and platform, in a clearing in the scrubby forest, stands a **crumbling wall**. It is drystone-built, constructed from local rocks, and was once more or less semi-circular, around 60 m (200 ft) in diameter. The clearing extends about another 10 m (30 ft) beyond the structure. The wall is nearly two metres thick (about six feet), and up to 2½ m (8 ft) tall in places, though this seems somewhat lower than its intended

height. It is quite well-built, the damage likely done by storms over many years. Again, nothing left here suggests who built it, when or why, or indeed indicates if it was meant as part of a larger, perhaps fully circular, structure originally. The clearing too is mysterious, as despite having a soil layer over the rocks typical for other places in the woods close-by, nothing grows in it, or even reaches into it, despite the normal dense forest growth all around its edge. Equally, there is no sign of even a very old cut-line to show how this clearing could ever have been accessed from the surface. No residual magic can be detected about it at least.

Being located within the surface borders of the Kachayan Ellenge Province area, occasional shore-parties of Kachaya may be encountered here, chiefly near and on Star Isle off Zaraq's northwestern shore. There are high-quality obsidian outcrops along much of Star Isle's shores and in places inland there, with clear evidence these have been frequently and heavily mined. The volcanic glass can be chipped using stones into excellently sharp blades by skilful hands. The Isle's name comes from the fact sunlight glinting off the obsidian can be seen kilometres/miles out to sea.

Sea life is plentiful around Zaraq, notably among the shallows of the dangerous submerged rocks and shoals off its eastern side. Occasionally giant jellyfish can be sighted off the southern shores. These sometimes come close-in to the islands, and may rarely even beach themselves accidentally on the shoreline rocks. They more typically congregate further out to sea towards the southeast, however.

Still more rarely, on stormy nights, the wyrd magical glow of a ghost ship may be glimpsed away off towards the south-southwestern horizon from the shores or higher land that face that way. The ship generally comes no closer than *circa* 8 km (5 miles) away even so.

Occasionally, the deep-sea hag Aunty MacKassa visits Zaraq, as it falls within her area of influence (see the separate "Aunty MacKassa's Area Map" for details). It is no coincidence the humanoid settlements here are all abandoned ruins!