

GO GOZO: divers inside the Blue Hole at Gozo



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GREAT SHORE DIVES IN MALTA & GOZO

Shore diving is an easy, cheap and convenient option when abroad, offering you the freedom and flexibility to dive where and when you want – and Malta is one destination that’s particularly suited to it. We sent **Jo Mattock** to the Maltese archipelago to check out the top ten options. Photographs by **Tamsin Eyles** >>

AS WELL as being only a three-hour flight from the UK, the Republic of Malta is supremely convenient for diving, as many of the best sites are accessible from the shore. In fact, as the island of Malta is smaller than the Isle of Wight, it can be quicker to arrive at a dive site by road than by boat. Meanwhile, Malta's sister island of Gozo is small enough to get from one side to the other in less than half an hour – including the all-important stop to pick up snacks.

Shore diving can offer flexibility and independence for groups and experienced divers. An advantage of islands the size of Malta is that whatever the wind direction, you can make your way to the leeward side of the island to get in the water. Very rarely are all diving options completely blown out, and shore diving can be done all year round.

We took a back-to-basics tour of the Maltese islands, kitting up in car parks and in the back of Transit vans, and have put together some of the best underwater sites that can be visited without a boat.

Car parks are generally close to the entry point, although there are some steep walks that can be pretty tough in full kit. That said, our photographer was carrying an old ankle injury but still managed the climbs down to the water and back. Facilities vary: at sites popular with tourists, such as Dwejra and Wied iz-Zurrieq, there are toilets, cafés and ice-cream vans; at quieter sites such as Reqqa Point on the north coast of Gozo, you'll find only rocks.

Dive centres can take you on guided shore dives, or will arrange accommodation, transport, air fills and kit hire and give you information on dive sites so you can go and dive at your own pace. One thing to note when shore diving is not to leave valuables in your vehicle: break-ins are not unknown, especially at the quieter sites.

Malta and Gozo are big on scenery, with many wrecks purposely sunk for divers and natural caves, tunnels and swim-throughs to explore. The deep azure colour of the water combined with excellent visibility make this a real draw for divers. You find yourself looking out from caves, tunnels or wrecks in wonder at the rich blue – it's one of the best things about diving Malta.

Considering that the Mediterranean is notorious for its declining habitats, and that Malta is known more for its scenery than for fish, there was much more marine life than I had expected. I spotted octopus and cuttlefish on several dives, and plenty of colourful corals, anemones and tube worms on the reefs. We saw John Dory in Gozo and even asked our guides to help us track down the famously elusive seahorses.



MALTA

1 P29, Cirkewwa
Originally an East German minesweeper named the Boltenhagen, the P29 is the wreck of a patrol boat and was purpose-sunk for divers in 2007. It's one of Malta's newest wrecks: it's almost entirely intact but hasn't had long to establish itself as a reef. As such, it's a bit like swimming around a boat that happens to be underwater as opposed to a shipwreck.

The entry point for the dive is a ramp from the car park to the sea, where steps are cut into the rock and a handrail leads into a small, shallow cove. From the shore, we swam on the surface to a small buoy, which marks the stern of the wreck, and then descended. The 53m-long wreck sits upright on sand at 35m, with the deck at about 30m. Moving towards the bow, the superstructure offers a couple of swim-

throughs – look out for the toilet on the starboard side. There were also groupers on the wreck that were particularly camera-friendly.

2 Rozi, Cirkewwa
The Rozi was a tugboat that was sunk as a diving tourist attraction in 1992. It has had more time to establish itself than the P29 and consequently has more life on it, and it holds a special place in the hearts of the dive guides here.

On the way to the Rozi from the entry point (a giant stride from a jetty), you can pass a large anchor, standing proud of the sea bed. Surrounded by sand and covered in seaweeds, it's very picturesque. On the return journey, you can also visit an arch and a cave in the reef.

Seeing all these sites on one dive is a bit of a whirlwind tour, so consider splitting your dive into two. Getting out of the water here is slightly harder, with a climb up a ladder; you can de-kit in the water if climbing it is a problem.



WINDOW SEAT: DIVE's reporter Jo (right) on the wreck of the P29 with dive guide Lee Martin [main photograph]; entering the water at Cirkewwa for a dive on the Rozi wreck [above right]; a cuttlefish on a reef near the Um El Faroud wreck [right]; divers above the midsection of the Um El Faroud [below]



3 Um El Faroud, Wied iz-Zurrieq

At 110m long, the Um El Faroud is on a much grander scale than the previous two wrecks. It's 30m deep, and you need two dives here to do it justice: one to take in the bow, which is a long swim but worth it to see the ship rising out of the sand; the other to see the stern and the propeller.

On the deck at around 25m, there are staircases, winding gear at the bow, and swim-throughs along gangways. The container ship was sunk in 1998, and is now split down the middle. The funnel remains – we saw barracuda circling it – but some of the bridge structure was broken off in a storm last winter.

The wreck is a ten-minute swim from the shore, and there were strong currents on one of the days we dived here. The entry point is a jetty in an inlet, which is used as a harbour by boats visiting the Blue Grotto, so beware of traffic. The steps into the water are currently being rebuilt, but the work is due to finish soon. >>





4 HMS Maori, Marsamxett Harbour, Valletta

A Tribal-class destroyer, the HMS Maori was hit by a bomb in 1942 while in the Grand Harbour. The wreck interfered with shipping, so it had to be moved and scuttled at its present site. Only the front half of the ship survived the move, and today the wreck is broken up and half-buried in sand. You can swim through it, but local guides say it's deteriorating more each year and might not be safe for long.

Protected on several sides by harbour walls, the site was diveable even in quite strong winds. The entry is right below the car park, and you walk into the water along gently sloping rock. It's slippery, but there are handrails to keep you steady. The visibility isn't as good as at other sites, but it does have lots of life; we saw a couple of moray eels swimming around. With a maximum depth of around 14m, it's a good second dive.

5 Ghar Lapsi

There's a very pretty bay at Ghar Lapsi, three miles north of Wied iz-Zurrieq, which is popular with swimmers and is this dive's entry point. Once underwater, you leave the bay through a tunnel to the open sea, which is wide but quite shallow. Light streams into the tunnel from three exits, but it's no place for the claustrophobic as your tummy and your tank can be touching the rock at the same time.

The rest of the dive takes in shallow reefs, areas of seagrass and sand, and a second swim-through cave with a maximum depth of about 20m. There are a lot of steps from the car park down to the sea at this site. They're shallow, though, and it's an easy entry to the water. >>



POINT OF VIEW: the view from inside the cavern at Ghar Lapsi [this photograph]; Jo photographs a fireworm on the wreck of HMS Maori [above]; a moray eel on the Maori [above left]

GOZO

6 Blue Hole and Azure Window, Dwejra

This is one of the most popular dives in Gozo, and is a topside tourist attraction as well. Above the water, the Azure Window is natural arch in the cliff, around 20m high. You begin the dive in the Blue Hole, on the opposite side of a bay to the window. It's a long walk to the water from the car park but there are steps. The Blue Hole is completely surrounded by rock and is linked to the sea by an underwater arch. It's only 1.5m deep here, and protected from swells.

Leaving the Blue Hole, we swam across the boulder-strewn bay to the Azure Window, which extends 15m below the water. The change in light as we went from sunlight to shade under the arch was especially dramatic. Once through the arch, we turned left along the back of a reef wall, which drops down to 60m, and went back across the bay to another reef. A fissure in the reef forms a chimney at about 15m. Swimming up, it brings you onto the top of the reef at about 6m. You finish the dive back in the Blue Hole, which has a cave in the back from where you can really appreciate the colour of the water.



LIGHT FANTASTIC: Jo (left) with dive guide Dave Curphey inside the Blue Hole [main photograph]; a scorpionfish at Xwejni Bay [1]; the entry point at Billingham Cave [2]; jellyfish [3]; a John Dory in the tunnel at Dwejra [4]; a ringneck blenny [5]



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7 Inland Sea, Dwejra

The Inland Sea is a shallow cove that is connected to the open sea by an 80m natural tunnel. This tunnel is also used by tour boats, so divers need to be careful of these when diving here.

After an easy entry into the Inland Sea, walking in along a slipway, you swim to the mouth of the tunnel, where the water is only a few metres deep. Divers stay to the left side of the entry to the tunnel, close to the bottom, and boats stay on the right. In the tunnel, the bottom gradually drops to 25m at the far end. There's not a huge variety of life here, but we were lucky enough to see a John Dory. The best part of the dive was the view of the open sea down the tunnel; the black walls frame a long, narrow strip of deep-blue water, and the effect is rather eerie.

8 Billinghamurst Cave and Reqqa Point, north coast

It's a fairly difficult entry and exit for this dive, which starts at Billinghamurst Cave. A steep slope of solid rock with no steps or handrails leads to a narrow ledge a couple of metres above the sea. There's no space in which to put on your fins, so you have to keep hold of them and leap into the water. There's no exit point here either, and I'd only jump in on a calm day. You descend right in front of the cavern, which is large and easy to explore. It's possible to go through a tunnel to a second, smaller cave, and a permanent rope leads into it.

Leaving Billinghamurst Cave, you turn east along a reef wall, which bottoms out at 60–70m, and come to Reqqa Point. This reef runs northwards and out to sea, and is a 15-minute swim from the cave. It's bursting with life: a lattice of corals with tubeworms, scorpionfish, and anemones hiding in the gaps. Clouds of damselfish hug the reef, and parrotfish and wrasse are plentiful too. We rounded Reqqa Point, swam to a bay and exited the water by pulling ourselves up a rope. This isn't the easiest dive for entries and exits, but it's well worth the effort.

9 Xwejni Bay, north coast

This site is close to Reqqa Point, but offers a very different dive. Xwejni Bay is shallow and popular with local dive centres taking trainees on their first dives. If you enter the water here and swim west, following a shallow reef for 15 minutes, you reach a site where currents and stones have carved out bowls and tunnels in the rock of the sea bed. At a

couple of metres deep (and only 10m below the surface), these shallow tunnels are large enough for a diver to swim through. It's a bit like an underwater playground or maze – just watch out for the sea urchins. A good second dive, Xwejni Bay is great fun, and you get plenty of bottom time.

10 Mgarr ix-Xini

On our final dive, we were on a mission to find a seahorse. After some big scenic dives, this was an opportunity to find some critters and see what macro life Gozo had to offer. Despite some naysayers in the pub the evening before, we still hoped to see one, and after 20 minutes of patient searching in the seagrass, we did. A long, shallow inlet, Mgarr ix-Xini proved to be a good dive for wildlife. Octopus, cuttlefish and plenty of flatfish were all spotted on a single dive. Although there are a couple of caves here, they're small fry compared to Gozo's other sites. >>



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NEED TO KNOW

GETTING THERE

Air Malta offers direct flights to Malta from several UK airports. The baggage allowance is 20kg for checked-in bags and 8kg for hand luggage. You can buy 'Sports Baggage' vouchers before you travel from www.airmalta.com – these cost €15 per person per flight and allow you 32kg of baggage.

Gozo is a 20-minute ferry ride from the port of Cirkewwa in the north of Malta. Ferries run every 45 minutes during the day in the summer. For timetables, visit www.gozochannel.com.

CLIMATE

Malta has a typical Mediterranean climate, with hot, dry summers and mild winters. Temperatures average 26°C in the peak summer months but drop to 12°C during winter. You'll get 12 hours of sunshine each day in summer, with half this number in winter.

EQUIPMENT

In winter, with water temperatures around 18°C and colder at depth, you'll need a 7mm suit or a drysuit. In the summer and autumn, shallow water is around 25°C (but again, colder at depth), so a 5mm or less should be warm enough.

Take a torch for peering into wrecks, caves, nooks and crannies. There can be a few jellyfish around, so you might want to wear dive gloves, even if the water is warm.

TOPSIDE ATTRACTIONS

Malta is the largest island in the archipelago and attracts more visitors to its many tourist attractions. More rural, Gozo has a quieter, more relaxed atmosphere.

There are plenty of historic sites on the islands. The prehistoric temples at Ggantija on Gozo are older than Egypt's pyramids, and on Malta, the fortified medieval city of Mdina has a cathedral, museum and spectacular views from its hilltop position. Malta's capital city, Valletta, has museums and art galleries as well as the



THANKS TO...

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Grand Master's Palace (the Maltese parliament) and the St John's Co-Cathedral, which houses a painting by Caravaggio.

There are day trips by boat to the island of Comino, between Gozo and Malta. Other sports on the islands include climbing and caving, and Malta's beaches are a big draw for visitors. ■



SEA VIEW: the coastal town of Marsalforn on Gozo