

## The simple charm of island life

Little sister of Malta, the tiny island of Gozo is a picturesque place measuring just 14km long by 7km wide but it's definitely a case of small but perfectly formed as Sally-ann Bloomer discovered on a recent visit there.

The expression small things come in beautiful packages could have been coined for Gozo. With the tiny population's main source of income coming from agriculture and tourism there is a real incentive to ensure this exclusive destination is not over-commercialised.

Flights go directly into Malta and regular ferries transport visitors on the 30-minute journey to Gozo's newly modernised harbour port Mgarr. Accommodation on the island is spread around the 14 tiny villages, the most densely populated being Marsalforn, Ramla, which has the island's largest beach, and the pretty Xlendi.

We'd chosen a real get-away-from-it all break at a converted farmhouse villa in the inland village of Ghasri – pronounced Asri, meaning 'to squeeze for the oil', in recognition of the village's part in the olive oil industry.

One of 26 farmhouses converted into holiday lets by Gozo Farmhouses, Razzett Palma was a traditional-styled villa with thick limestone walls, stone floors and its own swimming pool - a tad too cool to spend very long in this early in the season but no doubt providing welcome relief from the mid-summer sun for those visiting later in the year.

Although the island is only minuscule, hiring a car is advisable, particularly in the more remote villages like ours, which was a hilly mile away from the nearest supermarket. Luckily the locals are friendly and helpful and the taxi driver delivering us to our villa suggested a quick pit stop en route to collect some essentials, our first taster of Gozo wine and their traditional cheese.

Unfortunately we'd forgotten to buy a map but an early morning stroll on our first morning took us directly into Ghasri Valley, a popular and most stunning looking dive site for divers of all levels. A little east of this,



along the northern coastline, we also discovered the salt pans, created by a wealthy watchmaker a little high on the cliffs where the seawater was unable to reach. Their position rendered them useless but the pans remain a curious attraction for tourists.

Wandering back to our villa, our senses were assaulted by the delicious aromas wafting off the abundant flora which lines the bumpy and pot-holed tracks which the Gozitans call roads. One of the benefits of an early season visit is surely that the fields are at their most lush at this time of year - helped too by the fact the island has just had its wettest winter in many years.

A trip to the capital of Victoria, approached by winding and breathtakingly narrow streets (driving here is not for the faint-hearted) and we discover a large supermarket to stock our fridge for the week and a roadside fruit and veg market selling seasonal local produce, including artichokes, lemons and the sweetest of tomatoes.

Culturally the island seems closest to its nearest neighbour Italy – Sicily is just 55 miles away – although historically it has been linked to seemingly almost every country, with the Phoenicians, the Turks, the Romans and the Brits all wanting to stake its claim on her during her 7,000-year history. Aside from the Arabic sounding place names, the links with Italy are most apparent, the local cuisine featuring lots of pasta dishes, although the speciality is a rabbit stew, the rabbit lightly fried in garlic and wine. Apparently the best rabbit stew is the one your mother makes, but failing that, the chef at Zafiro in Xlendi rustles up a mean version as an occasional special, the sauce mopped up with delicious local bread. The food ranges from tasty rustic dishes to fine, European style dining and certainly the meal we enjoyed in La Stanza in Victoria was as good as anything I've eaten at home.

For a small island, there are lots of places of interest to visit and although many of the visitors drop by from Malta just for the day, there is plenty to occupy the most fervent sightseer for a week.

The most famous of these are the 5,000-year-old megalithic temples known as Ggantija. There's a small admission charge to see these but the

views, including that of the local racecourse where trotting races were taking place when we visited, are worth it alone. The Citadel in Victoria was originally a Phoenician settlement and bathed in sunlight, it remains an imposing building overlooking the town. The Azure Window on the west coast is possibly the island's most photographed attraction and another favourite spot for diving and every village has a church to visit.

We loved the seaside villages of Xlendi, a colourful little creek with plenty of restaurants. The guide book says it's a welcome retreat from the bustling crowds you find in Marsalforn, but we were early enough not to struggle finding a restaurant table to enjoy a plate of locally caught

fish and a glass of reasonably priced and surprisingly pleasant rose wine.

Arriving shortly after breakfast, our footsteps were the first on the deep red sand at Ramla Bay and despite the welcome sunshine, the only other people bothering us on this day were a group of German botanists studying the wildlife among the dunes.

There are two smaller beaches and in summer I'm sure sun worshippers will be clamouring for towel space on these. The steep trek down to San Blas Bay on the north side of the island is well worth it, with the amazing views and crashing waves – even more so in summer when a barbecue 'restaurant' sets up in the flimsy wooden shack there.

The beach at Hondoq is perhaps even smaller but more accessible and a beach bar had reopened for the season on the very day we visited. Attracted by the stunning blue sea, we arranged a speed boat trip across to the neighbouring third island of Comino for the following day, with promises that we'd swim in the dazzling waters of the Blue Lagoon but even us Brits couldn't be tempted overboard. The boat ride was thrilling enough though and we enjoyed a couple of hours soaking up the sun's rays on Comino as several other boats disembarked their own passengers to take in the beauty of this one square mile isle.

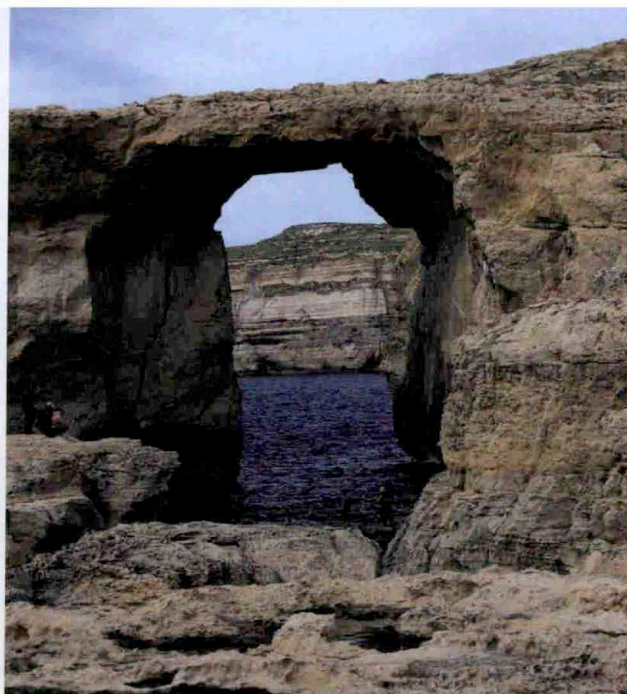
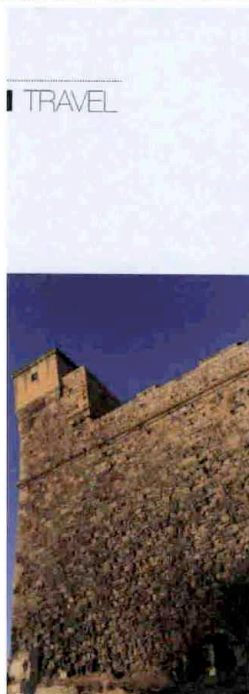
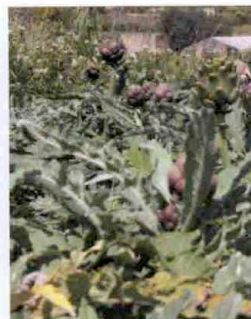
For those looking for streets full of bars, souvenir shops and lively nightlife, Gozo is not the place but for anyone who enjoys the simple things in life – beautiful scenery, a gentle pace of life and the chance to recharge the batteries – it has an undeniable charm. □



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### Fact file

Sally-ann travelled to Gozo with leading villa and farmhouse holiday provider Bowhills. A one-week holiday staying at Razzett Palma, which sleeps four people and has a private swimming pool, costs from £449. Bowhills offers over 600 properties across France, Spain (including Balearics and Canaries), Portugal, Malta and Gozo, Cyprus and Turkey, in coastal, island, countryside and village settings. From cosy cottages and gites to spacious family farmhouses, chateaux for larger groups, romantic holidays for couples, luxury apartments in glamorous resorts, there is something to suit everyone.

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