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Tiny treasures

Malta and Gozo pack in much to delight the visitor

BY FIONA MACLEOD

SKIMMING ACROSS THE azure waters of the Mediterranean Sea, Gozo seems the perfect spot to forget a troubled heart. Yet this small island, nestled next to its larger neighbour Malta, has a history fraught with battles fought over the desire to possess the rocky, sun-bleached shores.

That overwhelming passion may have sprung from an appreciation of the island's strategic position, but these



days, despite the formidable aspect presented by the many fortifications created to protect the islands' inhabitants, modern visitors attest to a more peaceful love.

Gozo may not spring to mind when considering a glamorous holiday location but those who adore this part of the world return time and again.

It is really a place for the sea lover rather than the sun seeker, for although there are beaches, they are few and far between. However, natural harbours and inlets, perfect for boats, are dotted around the coastline.

Historic vessels in these natural harbours bristled with fire power, on occasion weighed down with gold and religious treasures looted from the many churches erected by a devout Catholic population, but today's sea-borne visitors have more gentle intentions. Chelsea owner Roman Abramovich's elephantine yacht was berthed in Malta during our visit.

Many of the Maltese fortifications are attributable to the Knights of St John – a Catholic aristocratic society of monks who were presented with Malta in 1530 by the Holy Roman Emperor on their expulsion from Rhodes. They fought battles and won a lengthy siege against the might of an enormous Turkish invading force which only conceded when they vastly overestimated the size of a relief fleet, come to the aid of the beleaguered island's inhabitants.

Although the knights have now contracted to a smaller charitable Rome-based peaceful organisation, their presence is felt everywhere on these islands, from the gift shops selling models and mementoes of men in armour and on horseback, to the impressive monoliths that housed knights from various European states in Valletta city in Malta.

As recently as the Second World War, the islands were regarded as a key strategic point. Fixed in the cross-hairs

of the luftwaffe, they were among the most bombed areas in Europe, prompting King George VI to award the entire population of the islands the George Cross for bravery.

Unsurprisingly, boat is a key mode of transport for residents of the Maltese archipelago and taking a traditional luzzu boat across the bay at sunset to dine at a harbour-side restaurant is the perfect appetiser. Our oarsman proudly boasts his vessel is more than a century old. He admits replacement parts, but these mean little as the decorative eye on the bow, to ward off evil spirits, is original.

Travelling between Malta and Gozo is not only simple but a pure pleasure. A seaplane trip will cost you about €40 with the added benefit of knowing that you only pay for the ferry on the way to Gozo, providing you with free passage to return via the large modern and fully equipped vessel. Both journeys will take about 20 minutes, although the plane offers the advantage of taking off directly from Valletta's harbour, offering awe-inspiring views of this medieval city.

As these islands are still devoutly Catholic, the religious visitor can revel in 365 churches between the islands, one for every day of the year, and none, it seems, is in the least bit of danger of being converted into a Wetherspoons. The giant church of St John the Baptist, in Xewkija, on Gozo, started in 1952 and finished in 1971, can be seen from almost anywhere on the island, its dome and bell tower emerging from among the flat-roofed buildings like an alien spaceship.

Mass is conducted several times during Sunday mornings and most shops close, though cafes and bars remain open for locals to enjoy a coffee and a honey ring – a local and delicious speciality of round pastry stuffed with honey and figs.

Even on a dull day, Gozo seems to

radiate in sunshine, thanks to the sandy golden stone which proliferates on both islands, which centuries of builders have used.

Experts believe the far smaller Gozo, just 14.5km by 6.4km, was inhabited much earlier than its larger counterpart Malta. The largest free-standing human constructions exist here. The Ggantija Temples would seem remarkable if they had been built by the Romans, but that they were created in 3500 BC, intact save for a roof, makes the time that has passed since almost incomprehensible in its vastness.

These islands have among the densest populations in the world. Between them they are home to around 400,000 people, a figure which expands dramatically with tourists, although you can pass through several attractive villages without seeing a soul.

Many Maltese have holiday homes on Gozo and overseas visitors can rent accommodation by the week. The "farmhouses" for let in these small communities usually come with a private courtyard and substantial swimming pool. If you take this option, renting a car will probably be necessary, although characteristic yellow buses cover most of the island.

If a less self-reliant option is required the five-star Kempinski spa hotel in St Lawrenz has three outdoor pools, one indoor, one of the largest Ayurvedic spas in Europe and idyllic views over the terraces – farmland, and the inevitable church.

Despite the charm of the inland landscape, the sea has a powerful hold over all in Gozo and diving is so popular here that there are at least three dive schools in the charming Xlendi Bay, which nestles in a cleft in the cliffs offering a sheltered cove for learning the underwater sport. A ship was deliberately wrecked at the mouth of the cove to offer a greater challenge for scuba students.

For those who prefer not to submerge themselves, there is a speed boat

trip on the other side of the island. You'll go around the tiny island of Comineto, which breaks up the 8km passage between Gozo and Malta, and see numerous caves and clear turquoise waters which allow you to marvel at the jelly fish below.

Rabat, as Gozo's capital, Victoria, is more commonly known, offers gift shops, cafes and a market in the main square selling mostly clothing, hats and sunglasses, with one stall offering football strips of almost every premiership team, reflecting a love of both English and Italian football.

Tour the narrow streets with painted balconies providing shade from the unremitting sun; dry, dusty lanes and potted plants adorning every door step. Windows are shadowed by the intricate lace the island is renowned for and you'll find these charming lanes twist and turn every few hundred paces. Designed to halt the progress of bows and arrows, the streets are deliberately narrow to enable three soldiers standing shoulder to shoulder to repel any invaders.

Our guide assures us you can never go hungry in these islands and while the restaurants are not adventurous, they have no need to be, with access to the finest, freshest ingredients. Many grow their own vegetables – asparagus is a proud speciality – in gardens out the back, source their own olive oil from nearby farms, and cook fish freshly caught from the sea that morning.

Rabbit is a perennial favourite, though it often has to be imported these days to satisfy local tastes, as is bragioli (beef olive) and pasta through the Italian influence. As expected for an island, the fish is outstanding and usually well cooked.

Check out the Il-Kartell Restaurant in Marsalforn in particular for truly superb sea food and waiting staff and chefs who are modest experts in producing and advising on excellent

meals. A delicious platter of seafood antipasti offered perhaps the best mussels and calamari I have ever tasted, all served under medieval arches of the indigenous sandy coloured globigerina limestone with views over the marina.

The Il-Tmun restaurant in Rabat serves the most succulent and tangy swordfish dish, and while Tatitas in San Lawrenz is not quite as expert, the effort the staff make in ensuring you are enjoying the vegetables freshly plucked from the earth is touching. The stylish soft white linen and sleek steel décor also marks it out as a destination to remember.

Fuelled with fresh fish, dipping under the turquoise liquid of the Mediterranean Sea, with dreams of knights, sun soaked stones and the chimes of church bells reverberating across the water, any troubles of the heart can do no more than sink away deep under the cool salt water and disappear. **SM**

A ship was deliberately wrecked for scuba students

FACTFILE MALTA AND GOZO

HOW TO GET THERE

- Daily easyJet flights (www.easyjet.com) from Gatwick or twice weekly from Newcastle, to **Malta**, from £29.99 and £26.99 respectively one-way including taxes.
- Return flights to Heathrow from Edinburgh or Glasgow start from £92, both with British Airways (0844 493 0787, www.ba.com).

WHERE TO STAY

- Hotel Kempinski San Lawrenz in Gozo. www.kempinski-gozo.com
Prices from €110 (£95) per room including breakfast.

AND THERE'S MORE

- Gozo Prestige Holidays (www.gozoprestigeholidays.com) has cottages to rent in peak season



from €115 (£100) for two people per night for a two-bed property up to €245 (£213) for a six-bed house.

- Rooms at **Hotel Phoenicia Malta** (www.phoeniciamalta.com) from €135 (£117) excluding breakfast.
- Scotsman Reader **Holidays** offer an eight-day trip to **Malta** and Gozo for £709 per person. Tel: 0131-620 8400.

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Ramla Bay, one of Gozo's few beaches, main; the spa at the Kempinski hotel, above; the Ggantija Temples, top left

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