

Go slow

Escape the crowds and head to Gozo

With the increasing distractions of 24/7 technology, more and more people are looking to escape from it all and really get back to basics. It seems Malta's sister island Gozo is the perfect place to do that. So switch off your Blackberry, log off from Facebook and pack your bags - Gozo is waiting.

I HATE TO use a cliché but it really is the undiscovered gem of the Mediterranean." Anyone who has worked in the travel industry for any length of time will know that the phrase "undiscovered gem" is often used to describe destinations that are anything but "undiscovered".

However, in this instance, the cliché could not be more fitting.

The particular jewel in question is Gozo and John Fallon, managing director of Vintage Travel, found himself relying on the rather commonplace saying when I asked him to explain why he had decided to add the island, just 20 minutes from Malta, to the operator's 2009 programme.

"Although there are pockets of tourist development, the island is a stranger to mass tourism, giving it that real get-away-from-it-all feel," he said.

"As well as being popular with divers and walking enthusiasts, the island is also carving out a reputation as a food lovers' paradise with some of the restaurants serving up the type of food you would expect to find in an upmarket London eatery without the high prices," he added.

The operator only decided to feature the island in February and is hoping to really promote it in 2010. However, it seems Vintage Travel is not the only company with its eye on Gozo.

Step back in time

Hoseasons managing director Jane Sheppard said demand for the island is holding up with bookings bucking the general downward trend.

Sheppard believes Gozo's popularity lies in the feeling it is like stepping back a few hundred years. "It is completely the opposite to

Malta, very agricultural and hardly built up at all.

"The majority of buildings are in traditional style and nearly all tourist accommodation is either in renovated traditional farmhouses or newly built farmhouses in the original stone style.

"The roads are relatively traffic free and the beaches are quiet, although they do tend to get busier during weekends when local Maltese come over from the mainland," she said.

"There are a few resorts, such as Xlendi, which offer restaurants and bars and also water sports – the scuba diving on Gozo is excellent with facilities for learners and advanced divers. The capital Victoria also has some shops and some excellent restaurants and a daily market, as well as a fabulous cathedral.

"Everyone I know who's stayed there has said it's just like travelling back in time, but with modern comforts.

"For activities, apart from water sports, Gozo is also great for walkers – it's not too mountainous or steep and has a number of manageable circular walks," Sheppard added.

Cosmopolitan appeal

Cosmos' Celia Gorman echoed Sheppard's comments about the growing interest in Gozo for 2009. Gorman, product and commercial manager for Cosmos Villas with Pools, put the island's new-found success down to the fact it offers something a little different from the other destinations that Cosmos features.

"The small island is a more laid-back, relaxing holiday than Spain for example. Arriving in Malta and being transferred to Gozo by boat and having the car delivered to you makes for a very stress-free start to a holiday.

"Having been inhabited by so many different civilisations and nationalities over the years also gives it a very cosmopolitan feel where restaurants and the cuisine is concerned with a whole fantastic mix of Italian, Eastern Mediterranean and Northern African dishes to choose from," Gorman added.

Kirker Holidays has also seen a significant increase in bookings to Gozo in recent years. Commercial and product director Andrew Layard said: "We have particularly seen a rise in demand for Gozo from



people who appreciate the excellent spa facilities offered by the island's hotels, and bookings are currently up 50% on single and two-centre itineraries that combine the charms of Gozo with neighbouring [Malta](#)."

Belleair Holidays chief executive officer Martin Zahara said the percentage of repeat visitors to Gozo is very high. "The quality of product being offered on the island is good, the service is great, the people are very friendly and the atmosphere is amazing, which is why so many people want to keep going back."

Get active

Gozo, it seems, also has a lot to offer clients who want to be active on their holidays. Headwater offers independent cycling and walking holidays to the lesser-known mountainous regions of the island.

Managing director Catherine Crone: "Little known, and often ignored by tourists, Gozo is a mixture of the exotic and the reassuringly familiar: palm trees, Arabic-style honey-coloured stone houses, lemon groves and the ubiquitous prickly pear all contrasting wonderfully with the red GPO phone boxes and little Dixon of Dock Green police stations.

"Headwater has a couple of excellent holidays in our programme in Gozo, with

hotel-to-hotel independent cycling and walking holidays on offer. Bookings remain steady year on year for Gozo travellers".

The island also offers a lot for families. Aside from the villa products that cater for children, The Adventure Company is also featuring an Active in the Med family holiday to Gozo with two tours departing in the summer. Diving around Gozo is popular due to the abundance of easy-to-access sites. Kirk Green, director of diving holiday specialist Aquatours, said the diving in Gozo is better than [Malta](#) because of the abundance of marine life, great visibility. "The lee shore winds also make it possible to dive virtually all the time.

"There is also a purposefully sunk ferry boat that suits divers of all abilities. There is plenty for divers to see so they will never be bored.

"The islands are really accessible for weekend dives as a result of the number of daily flights to the island. Clients can fly out on Friday, squeeze in two diving days on Saturday and Sunday and spend Monday

sightseeing before flying back to the UK on Monday night." Green added that due to all these factors, the Maltese islands are experiencing a revival as people look to the Med for an alternative to the Red Sea.

Aisle be back

Divers are not the only ones looking for alternatives to the more mainstream options. Planet Holidays has introduced Gozo to its weddings programme for 2009. The operator is offering civil ceremonies at the Ta'Frenc restaurant on the island with a choice of converted farmhouses available for honeymoons. Ta'Frenc restaurant Managing director Mathilde Robert said: "Having started weddings to Cyprus nearly 20 years ago, I felt that Gozo has plenty of charm to offer couples. The Ta'Frenc is a gourmet lovers' paradise. We hope to increase sales for weddings to Gozo and rely on the support we are receiving from the trade."

So with all this new-found popularity, will Gozo remain the Med's undiscovered gem for much longer? ■

Six things you must do in Gozo

Must eat at

Il-Kartell restaurant, Marsalforn is an excellent fish restaurant on the island with fresh and varying fish every day, wonderful staff and great local wines.

Must relax at

The Kempinski San Lawrenz Hotel spa is by far the most luxurious and relaxing spa on Gozo with its very own Ayurvedic treatment centre.

Must visit:

Gozo's little capital - Victoria (locally known as Rabat) for its winding little streets, cute cafes, lovely little market and laid-back atmosphere

Must go

Diving - the diving around Gozo is some of the most spectacular in the Mediterranean.

Must shop at

Ta'Dbiegi Crafts Centre - a cluster of artisan workshops selling everything from candles, ceramics, lace, leatherwork, brassware and blown glass. The quality tends to be excellent.

Must try:

Savina food products - absolutely delicious spreads, pickles, jams etc - all from local produce and made by hand. For more details, go to www.savina.com



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