

# TRAVEL

## MALTA

# Sun-drenched islands with an English accent

BY GIDEON SCHNEIDER

**I** MUST be a nightmare trying to dust in here, I heard someone say as I gawped at the intricate stone-carved walls of St John's Co Cathedral. The exterior may look more like an old army barracks than a house of worship, but inside it is breathtaking. You don't need to be Sister Wendy to appreciate Baroque artist Mattia Preti's gilded carvings of foliage and flowers that stretch up to the vaulted ceilings, where painted cherubs flit between scenes from the life of John the Baptist.

I stepped out of the cathedral, on to the honey-coloured limestone streets of Valletta, Malta's bustling capital. The high street is lined with coffee shops, traditional Maltese establishments and usual suspects such as international fashion brands like Zara and Mango.

I only had to look down any one of the alleys shooting off from the high street to see the brilliant blue of the Mediterranean framed by the city walls on the horizon. I would have stopped for a cheese filled *pastizzi* (a local boreka-like speciality) but since I was trying to cram a whole country in to one weekend, there simply wasn't the time. OK, just the one then.

I carried on down the high street and came across the ruins of the opera house. It was destroyed during the Second World War when the island fought off occupation by the Germans and Italians, and was collectively awarded the George Cross for its heroism. History, both modern and ancient, was confronting me at every step, with WW2 bullet holes lodged in the walls of Baroque palaces.

A short walk from the opera house led me to the Upper Barracca Gar-

dens where I meandered past various statues and a bronze bust of Winston Churchill, before making my way along

the pistachio-tree-lined path to the observation promenade. This offers a panoramic view across the translucent waters of the Grand Harbour, to the trio of historic fortified towns of Vittoriosa, Cospicua and Senglea known as the Three Cities.

They were built around the 12th-century CE and were once the headquarters of the Knights of Malta. The scene of golden stone buildings, limpid sea and gondolas looked like a Canaletto painting come to life.

I took a gondola across the harbour to the Vittoriosa Waterfront and lunched at the Don Bero restaurant. Between forkfuls of locally caught tuna carpaccio, so thin it melted on the tongue, and sips of Maltese wine, I gazed out over the moored yachts and worked

## TRAVEL FACTS

► Air Malta ([www.airmalta.com](http://www.airmalta.com); 0906 103 0012) has daily flights from Gatwick and Heathrow and regular flights from regional airports from £99 return. Rooms at **Corinthia San George Hotel** ([www.corinthiahotels.com](http://www.corinthiahotels.com)) with breakfast from 130€ (£114), superior doubles at **Kempinski San Lawrenz Hotel** ([www.kempinski-goza.com](http://www.kempinski-goza.com)) with breakfast from 110€ (£97). Further information at: [www.visitmalta.com](http://www.visitmalta.com)

on my tan. That evening I checked in to the five-star Corinthia Hotel in St George's Bay where my room looked out over the hotel's cascading pools,

with the lights of the casino and the Mediterranean in the distance.

Our tour guide, Vince, drove us the short distance to Malta's original capital city, Mdina, where in the Middle Ages a third of the population was Jewish. It is easy to see why it has been classified as a UNESCO heritage site, with its mixture of private chapels, palazzos and cathedrals lining the narrow alleys.

Every building is covered in golden limestone, like Jerusalem's Old City. Vince pointed out St Paul's Monastery, inhabited by 10 nuns who, for years, did not ever leave. But according to Vince, standards have slipped and nowadays they allow themselves the occasional excursion – to vote or for medical checkups.

Next morning I boarded a ferry for the 20-minute trip to the island of Gozo, which, with Comino comprise the main Maltese islands. After checking my bags at the excellent, five-star Kempinski Hotel, I was driven by Vince to the town centre.

"This is the most traffic you'll ever see on the island," Vince told me, as three cars and a scooter tooted by. We crossed the narrow road to the Rabat market square where, in the shadow of a war memorial, sellers tried to flog clothes that – judging by their cut – had been hanging there since the 1970s. Too modern, perhaps, for the elderly men and women who hobbled between them, more eager to impart gossip than hand over any money.

Grocery shops across from the market stocked jars of prickly-pear jam and misshapen but superb tasting oranges and tomatoes. As I peeled another orange, a street cleaner with a grin white enough to excite an ivory hunter, approached and greeted me in perfect English – a friendly, English-speaking populace are among the reasons we Brits keep returning to Malta.

From the market square I climbed the limestone-paved road to the Gran Castello Citadel, the old capital of Gozo.

## JEWISH MALTA

- The first Jews on Malta are believed to have been the ocean-going tribes of Asher and Zevulun.
- In the Middle Ages, a third of the population of the capital was Jewish
- Famous Jewish visitors include St Paul who brought Christianity to the Island, and Avraham Ben Shmuel Abulafia, the renowned kabbalist.
- Jews were expelled from Malta and their property confiscated in 1492. In 1798 Jews were again entitled to live as free men, following the



introduction of Napoleonic law.

● The current community of around 140 Jews are served by a synagogue on St Ursula Street, Valletta, where bi-monthly Shabbat and festival services are held (00356 676926).

Here, the ruins of buildings destroyed in the earthquake of 1693 sit alongside attractive restaurants and private residences. From the top of the battlements, the rooftops of old and new Gozo dot the lush green plains below. Domed churches, like scaled down versions of St Paul's Cathedral, tower above the sky line, while the Mediterranean shimmers in the distance.

Every town on these islands of deeply religious people has at least one of these cathedral-like churches, all equally ornate. But it is not surprising there are so many in a country where 65 to 80 per cent of inhabitants attend one of the 500 active churches every Sunday.

For lunch, chef George Spiteri prepared me a meal of pumpkin soup, ravioli stuffed with sheep's cheese and artichoke hearts stuffed with tuna, all accompanied by excellent local wines. Loosening my belt, I managed to make room for a dessert – two Maltese favourites: *imquaret* (fried, date-filled pastries) and *qaghaq tal-ghasel* (baked pastry rings stuffed with dates and molasses).

"Our food, like our language, has many influences; Mediterranean, Italian and North African, to name a few," George explained. He runs three restaurants on the island and is beginning to gain respect outside Malta.

After lunch, I drove past lush countryside of vineyards and farms, to see some of the sites Gozo is famous for, including the Ggantija Temples (which may or may not have been actual temples) and said to be the oldest free-standing structures in the world, pre-dating Stonehenge by a millennium.

Chasing the setting sun, I drove to the coast to watch the waves breaking against the walls of the Azure Window, a natural rock arch 20 metres high. A minute's walk away, the Inland Sea, a bathing pool surrounded by high, sheer cliffs, was the perfect setting for the final moments of a too-brief trip.



A Valletta street, built of limestone

Source: Jewish Chronicle {Main}  
Edition:  
Country: UK  
Date: Friday 29, May 2009  
Page: 41,42,43  
Area: 851 sq. cm  
Circulation: ABC 32121 Weekly  
BRAD info: page rate £5,040.00, scc rate £25.20  
Phone: 020 7415 1500  
Keyword: Malta

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## MALTA



The Blue Lagoon on the Maltese island of Comino which, with Gozo, comprise the main Maltese islands

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Quay to relaxation: the picturesque harbourside in a fishing village on the south-east of Malta