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Malta's magic for all generations

TO SAY my knowledge of Malta was limited before this four-day trip is an understatement.

My only reference to the country goes back to watching the Eurovision song contest and the words "These are the votes of the Maltese jury." So with such a limited starting point I was keen to fill in the gaps of my knowledge.

The Saga hotel, Coastline, where we were staying, was comfortable and well-equipped with the more mature holidaymaker in mind and attention to detail is one of the group's strengths.

There was plenty of activities on site including movie nights and quizzes, as well as a gym and pool. Not being over 50 myself I was checking the whole experience out with my parents (over 60s) in mind. However it was soon obvious the island itself has plenty to suit all ages.

Valletta the capital is beautiful and great for shopping, sightseeing and generally taking in the pretty impressive architecture.

For Malta-ignorants like me a good place to start would be The Malta Experience in Mediterranean Street. It shows a short-ish clip about the history of the island – from the mysteries of the Stone Age temples to the coming of the Romans and the rule of the exotic-sounding knights – almost magical early beginnings. And in the Second World War the island was very heavily bombed leading to the people collectively being awarded the George Cross.

After this promising start I felt ready

— By **Rebecca Jones** —

to see more. Fascinating sites included plenty of flower stalls, a stand for horse drawn taxis and the attractive waterfront.

A trip to the ancient city of Mdina very much kept the magical feeling alive. Cars are banned from this truly spectacular place. Only a few hundred people live here. This is maybe because the houses are so big only the very rich can afford them!

Wandering around is truly breathtaking, absorbing a sense of history, privilege and splendour. I was almost looking over my shoulder for a knight to come past on horseback.

Celebrations

Very fittingly the only type of transport inside the city's walls, was the now familiar, horse-drawn taxis. The stand-out building here is the cathedral which has surfaces encrusted with gold.

Valletta comes alive at the end of February for carnival time – which is one of the oldest celebrations in Europe. I was very much looking forward to seeing the city take on a different feel – and it didn't disappoint.

The place was heaving with people who in most cases were sporting some kind of costume. There was no definite theme except maybe flamboyance which is some cases bordered on – almost amusingly for me – a Eurovision song contest-style feel.

The floats were striking, bright and almost outrageous in their boldness with almost every colour clash imaginable. Some of our party said they were tacky.

Maybe, but they were also very ingenious as the creations were not simply packed on a lorry the whole structure moved around with people dancing on part of it, on little ledges or poised on the end, or high in the air.

Another perhaps little known fact about Malta is the quality of the food.

The joke became that every meal we had was better than the last. The best I would say was the Mdina Restaurant, helped even more by its fantastic setting.

Tempting treats include an amazing array of fish, including barracuda, which are normally displayed for you to pick what you would like, as well as the local delicacy octopus which I tried and found to be delicious.

Other Malta delights include Kinnie a kind of fizzy bitter orange drink and pastry snack, pastizzi, which comes with fillings such as ricotta cheese and spinach.

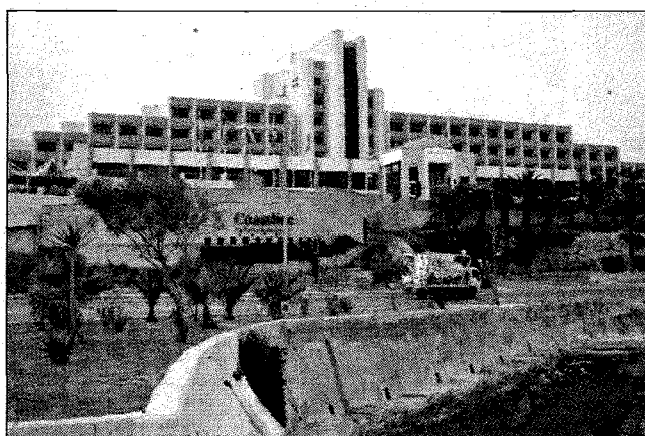
Perhaps our most authentic view of Maltese life came from visiting the market at the small fishing village of Marsaloxx which sold fish, clothes, vegetables and, bizarrely, caged birds.

Once you've finished on Malta there is its neighbouring island Gozo to explore – less densely populated and more green – perfect if you fancy something a bit more rural and away from it all.

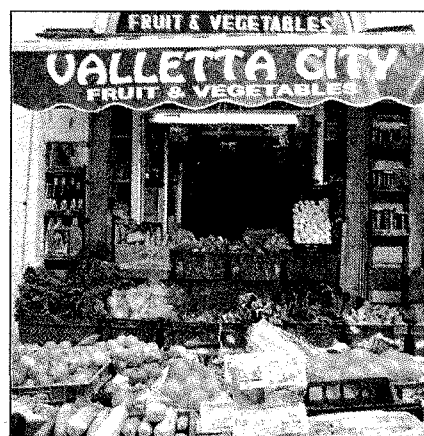
And another way to enjoy the sights of both islands is to take a helicopter tour from Malta International Airport which lasts from 20 to 45 minutes.

If there's a bad part of Malta we certainly didn't find it – a real gem of an island for all ages.

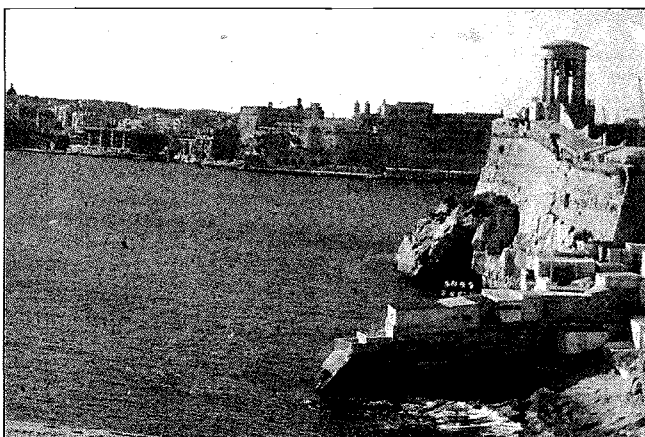




The Saga hotel Coastline offers plenty of entertainment for guests



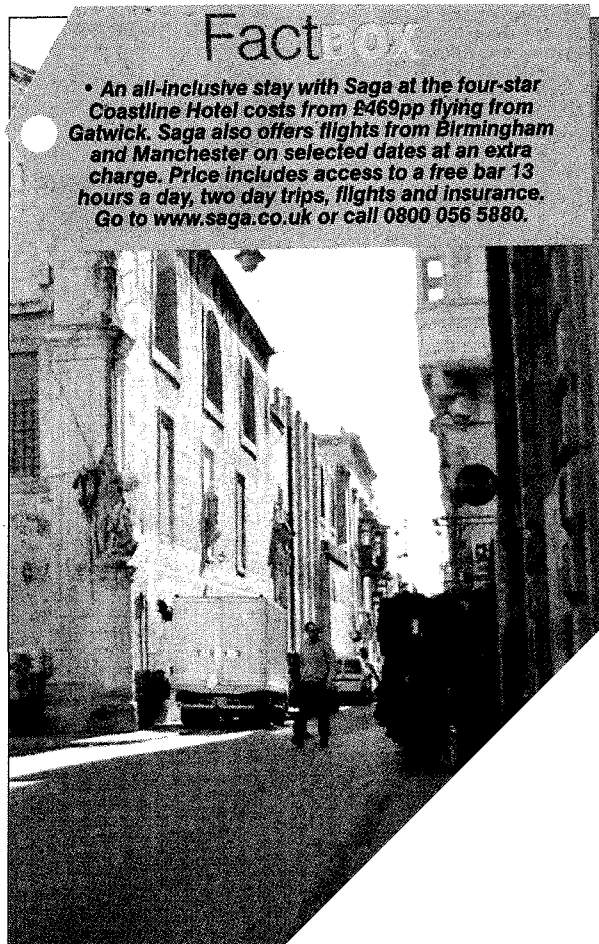
The quality and freshness of food is excellent



A view towards the port of Valletta which has a carnival in February

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