



Irish Tatler

Thursday, 1 October 2009

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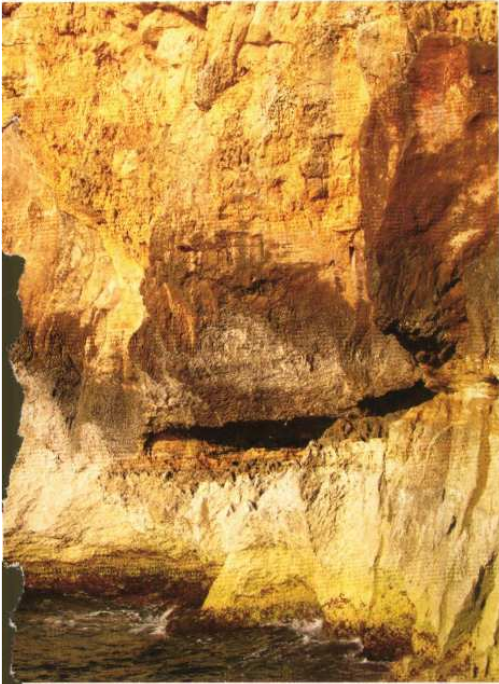
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travelfeature



In search of
switchoff, Elaine
Prendeville found
a whole lot more
in [Malta](#)





It's not often that a holiday feels like one. For all the talk of lazing about on sandy beaches, having tanned cabana boys attend to your every whim, the truth is that working out how to holiday is half the battle. Finding yourself in a foreign clime is not as easy as it looks, you see. There's the Ryanair baggage allowance thing, first off. On this holiday I packed enough to last me four days – not even a week. What DO people do when they go for a fortnight? Start customising their three paltry Penneys garments by day seven? (a wrap dress that double as a headscarf/ parasol, erm, shoes....). But I am hardly the first to carp on about this one. Next! There's the transfer, where the advertised twenty minute pleasant drive through lush countryside transmogrifies into a hot, sticky and slightly intimidating (why is everybody drunk already?!) hour courtesy of a hot, sticky and slightly intimidating bus driver. And I mean bus. Not luxury coach. Bus.

Check in desk interrogation. Lifts that can't – or don't want to – work. Room that, although quite lovely, seems to be buzzing, and not in a rooftop-pool-party kind of way. Room service that requires one hour for delivery of a bag of peanuts, or, and this seems to happen to me a lot, never delivers at all. Ten euro minimum for said nuts. Outside the hotel, prepare for any one of the following: angry locals, shouting locals, lascivious locals. Expensive cabs, expensive beaches, expensive sandwiches. Beautiful women with impossibly toned bodies. This last one is guaranteed. And then there's the fact that although you've overpacked

(Ryanair, I defy you), you still look epitome of that tourist that got the angry, shouting and lascivious locals that way in the first place.

I don't mind all of this, really I don't. If I'm on a voyage of personal discovery I welcome the odd bump in the highway. But, if I take one week to relax and feel good in a place that isn't my bed, from this day forth I'm going to Malta.

The charm of Malta is immediate. Plane window pane fills with a ruffled sandpaper landscape, its azure blue surrounds ready to be leapt into. The airport at Luqa is compact, airy, efficient. The transfer to any of your chosen adventures, be they in the capitol Valletta, neighbouring bay of St Julians, or the quaint fishing village (the kind that made people start defining fishing villages as quaint) of Marsaxlokk is speedy – the island is just 316 square kilometres, after all. On the archipelago also lies Comino and Gozo, each making for an unforgettable day trip (sailing under craggy arches in a pure white boat feels very Dolce & Gabbana ad campaign, even if you are wearing a straw visor found in Penneys).

We stayed in Valletta for the first three nights, bedding down at the landmark Hotel Phoenicia. Built in 1939, this five star has the air of regal about it, standing proudly as it does a minute's walk from the walls of Valletta proper. Here, staff are excellent, food delicious (the Phoenix restaurant terrace demands a three hour dinner evening meal); the rooms tastefully modern while reassuringly elegant. The Hotel Phoenicia got class, as do its residents, but not, and here's the key point, to the extent of stuffiness.

"the charm of Malta is immediate"



travelfeature

Wandering around in flip flops and messy hair is allowed, and the fact that the Phoenicia is Irish-owned, part of a consortium that counts native favourites Wineport Lodge, Lisfoughrey Lodge and the Ice House in its number, adds another hint of the familiar.

Not that the Maltese need lessons in the art of hospitality. Tourism is the number one money spinner of the island, and the 404,000 inhabitants are very, very good at making you feel welcome. Everyone from the fishermen steering traditional boats (dhaghosa) to the waiter serving watermelon (just when you want it most) at the Hotel Phoenicia pool seem ready to detail the story of their republic. They are proud, and with good reason.

In Valletta, culture is at a premium. The old town is flanked by a cavernous dam, the largest of its kind in Europe. Inside the city walls lies The Grand Master's (that's Maltese for Taoiseach), the War Museum and St John's Cathedral, where shoulders must be deferentially covered and Caravaggio's masterpiece The Beheading of St John the Baptist comes as a startling visual treat. Outside it's hushed stillness lies radial side streets, narrow and steep, every one with what seems like a thousand steps leading down to the bay's edge. Shops mix from the European to the uniquely Maltese, with jewellery, lace and chocolate cake each meriting further investigation. With regards to nightlife, Valletta isn't big on it. There is the suggestion of small bars where you can enjoy kinnie, an addictive non-alcoholic drink both bracing and refreshing, but it really is just a suggestion. On the waterfront, a short stroll from the Hotel Phoenicia is a strip of bars, some of which serve drinks in bowl-like glasses at reasonable prices (€2 for a large glass of local wine. Yes, €2).

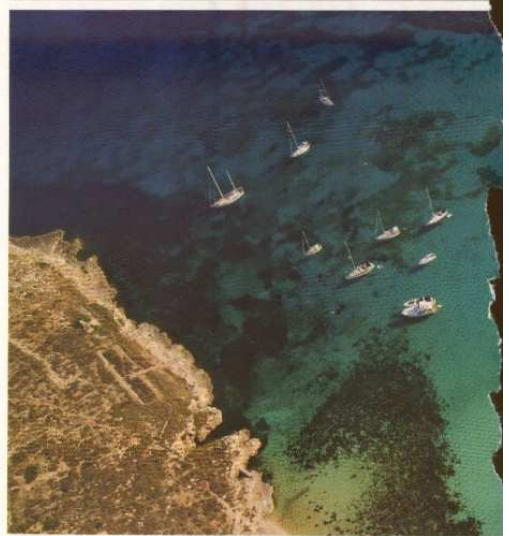
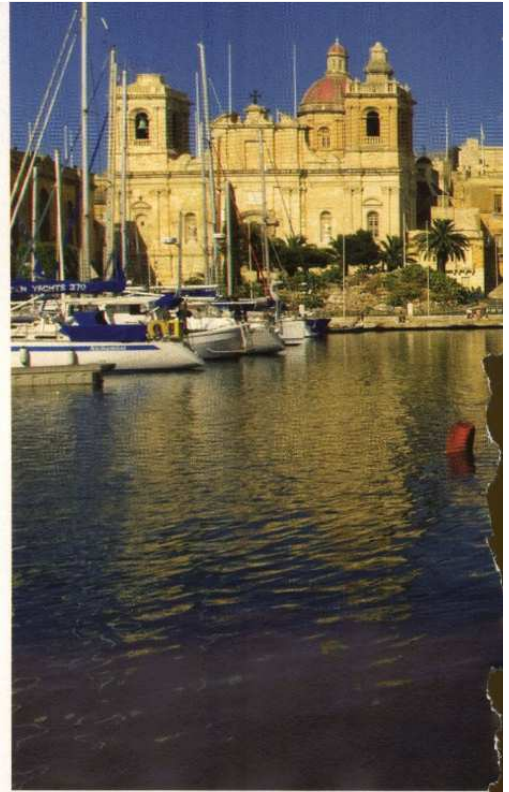
If nightlife is a necessity, there is the option to jump in a cab and ask the driver to escort you simply to "the nightlife." This, a twenty minute drive from Valletta is Paceville, and home to a long, narrow street that's bursting at the seams with cafés, bars and nightclubs. It's noisy, it's hot and everyone looks like they're having the time of their lives. Not being sixteen on and your first holiday away from mum and dad does make it rather less

exciting, but I'd recommend spending a few hours there for the spectacle of it all alone.

Five minutes from Paceville is St Julian's, a gorgeous town that retains its traditional allure while offering a host of fine restaurants and the occasional nightclub (that's strictly for grown ups). A perfect night in St Julian's involves an aperitif on the roof of Le Meridien hotel, followed by a trip to La Dolce Vita, as fans in the order of Rachel Weisz can attest. Here, the service is entertainingly mismanaged, the food is outstanding and the people-watching is the stuff of dreams. Brave types could then ascend the lift at nearby Level Twenty Two, a bar-cum-nightclub favoured by visiting yachty types. Le Meridien is the perfect base, not only for its smart service, top notch facilities and impressive spa, but also because it affords a bird's eye view of the festas the Maltese are famous for. For us, the feast of Our Lady of Mount Carmel meant three nights of fireworks, pop music (emanating, it seemed, from the Millennium Church) and all-round merriment, often resulting in hours of balcony-sitting simply to enjoy the show.

Diving into the seawater of Balluta Bay on the doorstep of our hotel was an ideal antidote to a morning after Level Twenty Two, but lazing on the rocky beach should not rule out the opportunity to travel to Gozo, Comino, or indeed to walk the eerie streets of Mdina, the ancient capital known as the 'Silent City.' Here, the island's beleaguered history is in its most condensed form, as the now uninhabited fortress tells tales of Malta's proud past, and the Knights of the Order of Malta who fought to preserve it. No trip to Mdina is complete without a visit to Fontanella's, an old-style café where the aforementioned chocolate cake makes everything seem right with the world. Return to St Julian's by bus, paying €1.16 (a nod a recent switch to euro – the roundup has yet to catch on!).

Malta depends on tourism, but, with holidaymaking on the decline, it needs all the help it can get. For ease of access, year-round sunshine, a compendium of culture and the best chocolate cake known to man, it's pretty hard to beat. ■



GETTING THERE

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LE MERIDIEN ST JULIAN'S
BALLUTA BAY
ST JULIANS
TEL: (+356) 2311 0000
STARWOODHOTELS.COM

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"diving into the seawater on the doorstep of our hotel"

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