

Zeitgeist
Your Subscription
Bookshelf

A Journey Beneath Paris
The Salton Sea
The Wine Harvest
Eclipsed
Mauritius

On The Coldest Day
Chernobyl, Ukraine
New Mexico, USA
Tanzanian Adventure
Madeira, Portugal

Celebrating Totem Poles
Bonjour, Martinique!
Tikal, Guatemala
Krakow, Poland
Across Russia by Train

Operation Sunshine
Sofia, Bulgaria
Women in Black
Budapest, Hungary
Malacca, Malaysia

Paris
Sydney
Beijing

About
Dedication
Subscribe
Contribute
Contact



A herd of Gozo goats is not an uncommon sight. Gbejniet is a traditional cheese made in Gozo of goat or sheep's milk. Photos © Meg Pier.

Time Travelling in Gozo

"If you do any digging in the Maltese islands, you're bound to find something—it's all just one big museum," said my guide, Amy Pace of Sliema. "When the streets of M'dina were being repaved about four years ago, they discovered they had hit a buried column of an old Roman temple."

Indeed, the list of artifacts found in this archipelago could be longer than the Dead Sea Scrolls, and the variety of cultures that have called the island home perhaps considered more diverse than membership in the European Union. This island nation lays claim to a treasure trove of history and mystery, swashbuckling and secrecy.

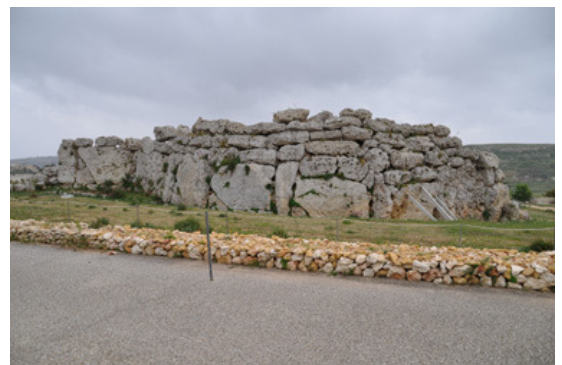
Malta's sister island of Gozo, just a speck in the Mediterranean at a mere 9.5 miles long by four wide, lays claim to a pretty big boast in the annals of archaeology. Its home to Ggantija, one of the oldest free-standing structures in the world, built in 3600 B.C., pre-dating the pyramids by nearly 1,000 years.

The largest megalithic complex in the Maltese islands, Ggantija stands on the southeast slope of Xagħra hill, overlooking Ramla valley, southern Gozo, and beyond to Malta, five miles away. The site is composed of two temples spanning over 40 meters, and enclosed by a single huge outer wall, which reaches six meters in height. The gigantic dimensions of the megaliths used to build the temples fired local legend that the structures were built by giants, thus, the name they still enjoy today.

An armchair archeologist and History Channel buff, I had been drawn to this tiny archipelago in part because it is home to more than 30 examples of civilization's most ancient architecture. Nonetheless, I was puzzled that the earliest



The Gozo hilltop of Ta Cenc is the site of ancient dolmens and affords a vista across a valley to the Citadella.



The temples of Ggantija are believed to be among Malta's oldest, dating to the period 3600 to 3000 B.C.



megalithic building could be traced here, to this tiny group of islands, rather than the continents of Europe or Africa.

"There is one school of thought that as islanders, the people were more introverted, and, as a result, began to get more original," said Reuben Grima, Heritage Malta's Senior Curator for Prehistoric Sites. "There is another alternative theory that societies that were in frequent communication with others sought ways, possibly such as temple-building, to strengthen their own local identity, to ritualize their kinship."

"Creating structures such as Ggantija indicate that how the society was organizing itself changed dramatically," he continued. "As an agricultural society is established, the people are more invested in a place than they would have been as hunters. That shift in sustenance creates a very different sense of place, and perhaps the beginning of a local identity."

After hurtling through a millennium in the span of a few miles on winding roads, Amy and I found ourselves at the crossroads of Ta Cenc, our quest for Bronze Age relics rewarded with a sign pointing ahead to "Dolmens," under which was noted "Private Property". I was reminded of the *Wizard of Oz's* scarecrow at the fork in the Yellow Brick Road, his arms crossed and simultaneously pointing Dorothy in opposite directions. After only modest debate, we decided the dolmens wouldn't be advertised if there wasn't an invitation to take a look, albeit with respect.

We slowly lurched forward on a rutted road, with farmland on our right, and a rocky field to our left, our eyes scanning for large stones that appeared to be strategically placed, versus scattered by nature. Suddenly I saw the iconic structure of two upright stones, and one across the top of them. I cried out, the car was shifted into park and we jumped out, leaving the doors wide open as we made our way toward the dolmens.

We crossed an expanse of pockmarked stone, from which succulent plants sprouted, stepping carefully to avoid trampling their tiny flowers. Reaching the standing stones, we enjoyed the north-facing view from their perch on the high plateau. On the other side of the vast valley was another hill, capped with another larger stone structure in golden hues.

"Dolmens indicated a burial site, often placed cliff-side to provide a view and place of prominence," Clive Cortis of Malta's Museum of Archaeology later told me. "These monuments, like others on the Maltese islands, date back to the period from 2500 B.C. – 800 B. C. The dead were cremated, and the ash put in urns that were placed in the 'window' of the dolmen."

Continuing our time travel, we fast-forwarded almost another thousand years, arriving at the honey-colored hilltop monument we had seen from afar while at Ta Cenc. The Citadella is Gozo's old capital, its defensive location fortified further with massive bastions. On the exterior wall of the Citadel is a Latin inscription dated "Roman Emperor AD 138 – 161," which translated reads:

"The people of Gozo (set up this inscription by Public Subscription) in honor of Marcus Allius Rufus of the Quirine Tribe, Son of Caius, for his merits on being raised to the rank of Knight by the Divine Antonius Pius Augustus and thereby also honoring his father, Caius Vallius Postumus, Patron of the Municipium."



The largest of Ggantija's megaliths weighs about 57 tons. No wonder it's named after the "giantess" believed to have built the structure.



A statue of the Virgin Mary graces the red sands of Ramla Bay .



The crumbling medieval walls of Gozo's citadel contribute to an atmosphere of mystery and beauty .

When I marveled at the inscription date, Amy responded, "Yes it goes back that far, the Arabs were wise, they would not go against the sentiments of the people, and when erecting a new gate they fitted the Latin inscription into the side of the wall."

"Excavations inside and around the citadel have yielded various remains from different cultures, like the Phoenicians, Romans, Arabs, Medieval and 17th century Knights of St. John," said Cortis. "After the 1551 attack by the Turks on the island, in which almost the entire population was taken into slavery, the Knights refortified the city with new bastions. From then until the 17th century, a law stated that nobody could sleep outside the city walls."

While that meant as many as 5,000 once slumbered inside the Citadel's gates, residents today number far fewer. In fact, I wasn't sure if there were any residents at all calling this hilltop home when wandering its narrow, maze-like medieval alleys. Profusions of golden flowers spilled from the crumbling facades of fallen buildings, and ancient doors had keys visible in the locks.

George Refalo, a resident of nearby Rabat, said there are 11 people who still live at the Citadel—among them the "court attendant," who is mandated to live in close proximity, should the need arise to open the Court in an emergency. Such a need is admittedly few and far between, but the tradition persists. Refalo noted the attendant is also responsible for the timing of the citadel's clock, which chimes every quarter of an hour. Because it is weight-driven, it needs human intervention on a daily basis.

"One of the local habits is that the Gozitans leave the keys in the main door lock," explained Cortis. "This shows how safe our islands are, one can just turn the key and walk in, but there's another 'romantic legend' aspect. Throughout the centuries, Gozo was attacked by pirates and husbands were taken into slavery. Wives kept the key in the lock so if their husbands succeed in escaping from the pirates they could just walk into their house any day at any time, thus showing how faithful they are!"

"The keys in the door is a symbol of the peace of mind that in the old times residents used to have due to the close relationships amongst neighbors and extended families living in the vicinity," said Refalo. "But the tradition also comes from the fact that in the old times, keys not only used to be very big and bulky but very heavy too—and not easily replicated."

Our last stop in the continuum was Ramla Bay, one of the few sandy beaches on the rocky Maltese islands, and a hodge-podge of history and lore. Making our descent to its shores, we paused for what I was sure was an eons-old procession—a shepherd and his dogs herding a couple dozen goats and sheep. Grazing seems too delicate a word for the feeding frenzy that took place.

"Ramla's archaeological remains range from the Roman to the Knights' periods," said George Azzopardi of Heritage Malta. "On the Xagħra side, the remains of a villa of the Roman Imperial period were unearthed. From high places overlooking the bay, one can still see the substantial remains of an early 18th century underwater wall, built by the Knights to hinder enemy approach."

And high above the red sands of Ramla Bay is where perhaps Gozo's first tourist had an extended stay. Legend has it that Homer's hero Odysseus was held captive here for seven

30.10.2009

VIE&VOY Magazine : Time Travelling in...

years in a clifftop cave by the nymph Calypso. Despite Calypso's offer of eternal youth and Gozo's gorgeous scenery, no lock was big enough to keep Odysseus from his homeland, and his own faithful wife Penelope.

Meg Pier

www.viewfromthepier.com

© 2009 VIE&VOY Publications. All Rights Reserved. Privacy & Terms