

Medieval landmarks
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Sunday Travel

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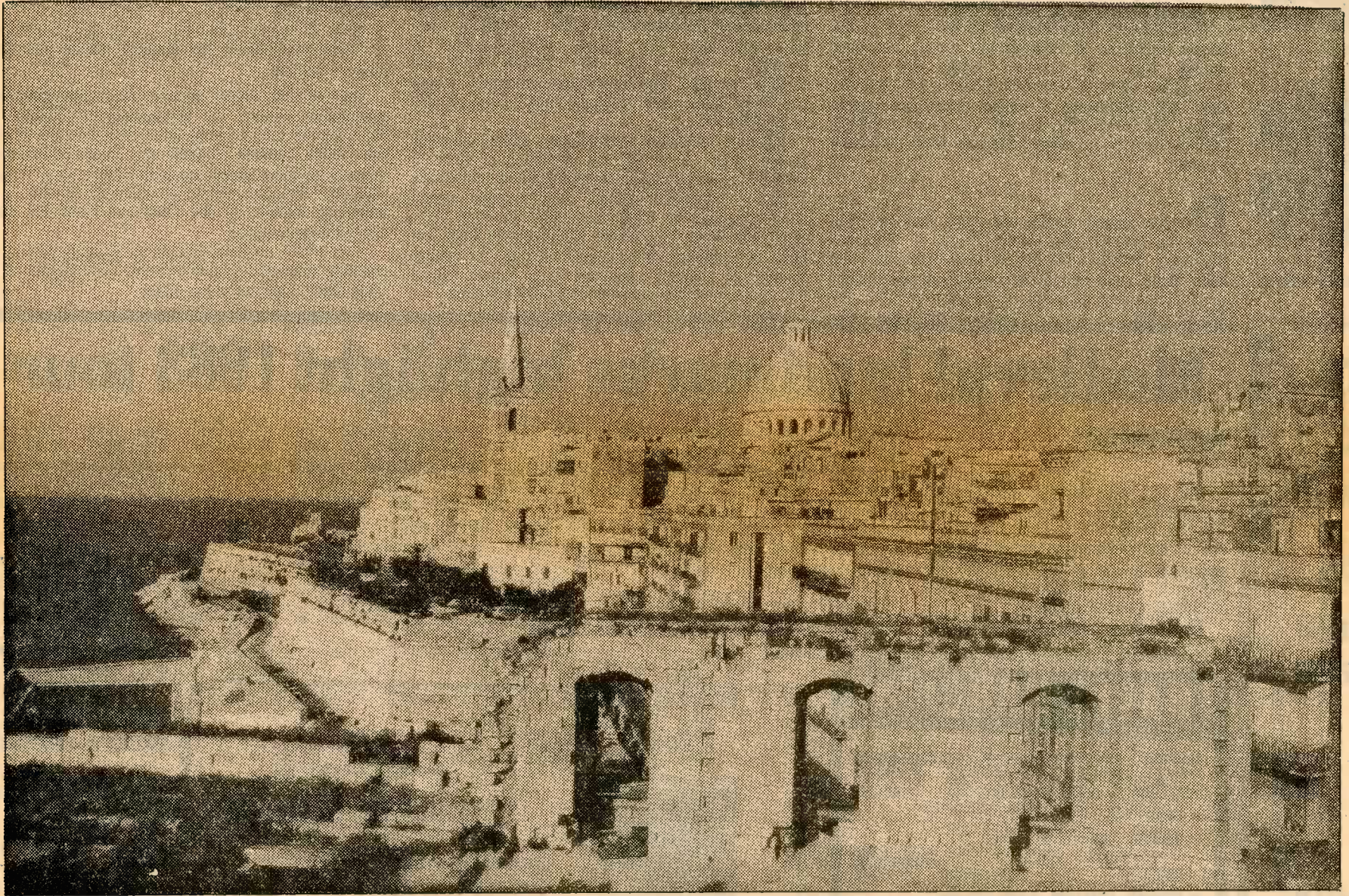


Photo by Edward J. Biscardi

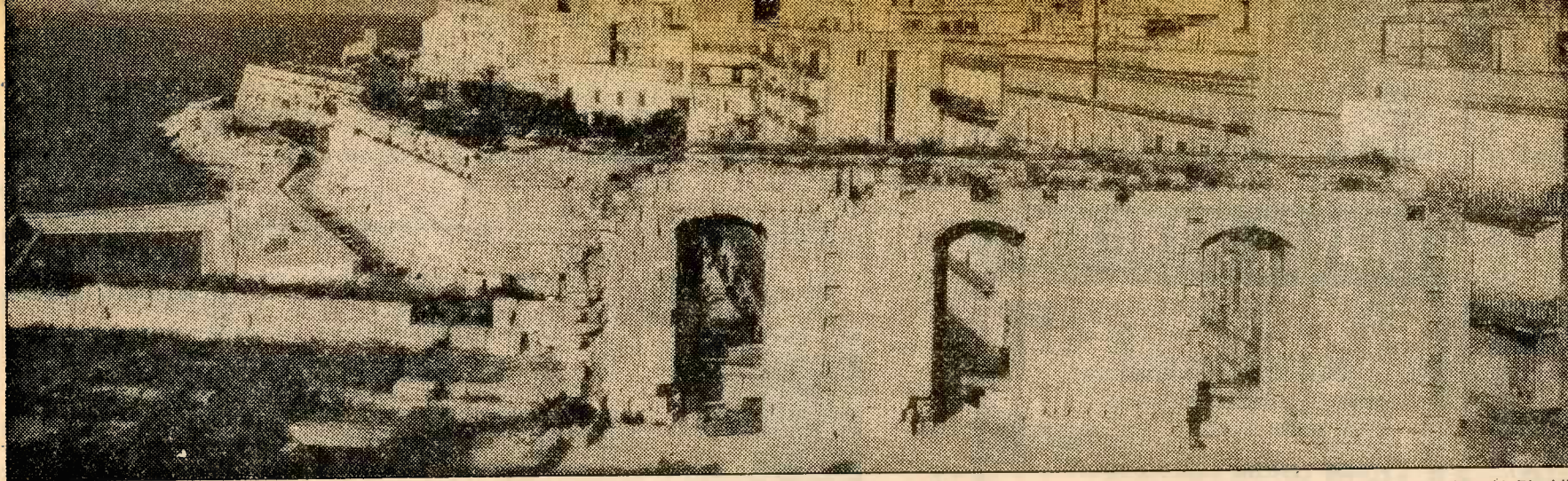


Photo by Edward I. Placidi

Valletta, Malta's capital, was built by European knights in the 16th century.

Malta

Cultural crossroad of the Mediterranean

by Edward I. Placidi

Special to the Express-News

THE Maltese Islands are changing the course of their history.

Lured by the archipelago's strategic location, Malta's numerous occupiers used the islands for centuries as a bastion for their conquests. But since independence from the British, the Maltese have forged ahead with conquests of their own.

Last year the islanders hosted more than 700,000 visitors, a 3,000 percent increase since independence and more than double the number of Maltese.

The transformation from island fortress to vacation spot has been dramatic, but perhaps not surprising. This island mite is a colorful and beguiling microcosm of the Mediterranean, bringing together much of the history, cultures and natural treasures of the region in one compact destination, and at exceptional value for your money.

Sitting at the crossroads of the Mediterranean, 58 miles south of Sicily and 185 miles north of Libya, the archipelago — consisting of 95-square-mile Malta proper, 26-square-mile Gozo and one-square-mile Comino — spans a curious cultural bridge between Europe and Africa.

The architecture everywhere is Arabic, while the people are staunchly Roman Catholic and have adorned the exterior of their houses with religious busts, statues and plaques. The islanders speak both English and Maltese, an Arabic dialect with an Italian overlay. English-style bobbies patrol villages whose Maltese names are jawbreakers for Westerners to pronounce.

Restaurants serve English and Continental cuisine, plus Middle-Eastern-influenced Maltese dishes, such as "timpani," macaroni baked in a pastry shell with eggs; liver and onions; or "pastizzi," thin-doughed pastries stuffed with a mixture of meat, onions and peas.

PREHISTORIC cultures preceded the successive occupations by Mediterranean maritime powers — Phoenicians, Carthaginians, Arabs, Sicilians among many others — and today the islands are strewn with numerous ruins and monuments spanning 6,000 years. You can explore Neolithic and Megalithic temples dating from the fourth millennium, Roman baths, villas and catacombs, medieval castles and Renaissance fortifications.

More ancient sites beckon too: The cave and museum of Ghar Dalam is a veritable depository of fossil remains, such as dwarf elephants and hippopotami which roamed Malta 170,000 years ago, when it is theorized, the archipelago was part of Africa.

Malta's warm and comfortable climate offers temperatures averaging 75 to 85 from March until November. On Malta, you can plunge into the emerald-green waters of St. Peter's Pool, one of the Mediterranean's finest off-the-rocks swimming spots, tan

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Photo by Edward I. Placidi

The Azure Window on Gozo is a massive stone rectangle jutting out into the water

forming a window to the sea and the rocky coast beyond.

MALTA

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on the fine yellow sand of Ghajn Tuffieha Bay or boat into the brilliant phosphorescence of the Blue Grotto. Hike secluded Comino's winding footpaths of startling rocks and wild herbs or skin dive in the turquoise waters of the Blue Lagoon.

On Gozo, swim in the Island Sea, a large natural pool fed by the sea through navigable tunnels in the high cliffs — which local fishermen will take you through on brightly painted "dgajjes." On the other side of the cliffs in the Azure window, a massive stone rectangle jutting out into the water forming a window to the sea and the rocky coast beyond.

Most of the better hotels are at the resort areas of Sliema and St. Julian's Bay as well as at Ghajn Tuffieha. They provide facilities for water sports and other amenities. The posher Dragonera and Hilton hotels have private beaches. Doubles with breakfast at first-class hotels average \$35, while family-run guesthouses are as little as \$5.

THE islands are immediately adjacent to each other and are linked by frequent ferry service. Buses that cost pennies to ride travel to every corner of Malta and Gozo. But the short distances make hiking and biking everywhere possible, too.

The gateway to the country is Valletta, the capital, on Malta. Car ferries and steamers sail here from several Italian ports, and Air Malta, Alitalia and British Air provide connections from a number of European cities.

Valletta is the city of the Knights of St. John of Jerusalem, a Hospitaller order of European noblemen who brought glory to Malta and their order by repulsing 40,000 Turks in 1565. Hopelessly outnumbered in Fort St. Elmo, the Knights fought to the last man. Their corpses were nailed to wooden crosses by the Turks and floated to the last Christian stronghold, Fort St. Angelo. Grand Master Jean de La Vallette launched a successful counterattack, beheading Turkish prisoners and using their heads for cannonballs. Following

the siege, the Knights built their new capital and named it for Vallette.

Described as "a city built by gentlemen for gentlemen," Valletta was enclosed in massive high walls, most of which still remain. The imposing fortress commanded the high ground on a hilly finger of land flanked on both sides by extensive deep-water harbors, including Grand Harbor, one of the Mediterranean's finest natural harbors.

St. John's sister cathedral in Valletta is paved with 400 marble grave slabs of fallen Knights. The adjoining museum is filled with possessions of the Knights, Flemish tapestries and works by Caravaggio. Across from the cathedral is the Grand Master's palace, now the seat of government, and the Knight's armory, containing probably the world's best collection of medieval armor.

As they approach the harbors, Valletta's streets convert to steps, and windows are encased in balconies of wood. Republic Street, the main shopping street and meeting place of the islands, lures thousands during the traditional 5-9 p.m. promenade hours. There are also saints everywhere in Valletta — life-size statues of religious figures watch over passersby from their niches on the corners of buildings.

The Golden Harvest, Bologna and Lantern cafes are some of Valletta's best; for some of the best seafood on the islands try the Gillieru and Mocambu restaurants at nearby St. Paul's. Dinner at good restaurants is only \$5 to \$10 per person with heady Maltese wine.

On Malta's highest point in the very center of the island is another city enclosed in high bastions, Mdina, the ancient capital. Known as "The City of Silence," quiet reigns on its narrow lanes of churches, palaces and Norman houses with wrought-iron balconies and bronze door knockers. It is Mdina's artisans who create Malta's colorful and inexpensive blown-glass objects.

Upon arrival in Malta pick up "What's On," a useful guide to the island published fortnightly and available at newsstands and hotels. If a village festival is scheduled, plan to be there. Each village has a patron saint honored in annual festivities. Everyone dons traditional costumes, streets are decorated, bands play as processions file by, fireworks are exploded. You will swept up in dancing and feasting.