

# Malta: Fortress in the Sun

*Located 58 Miles South of Sicily,  
This Island Mite is a Microcosm of Mediterranean History.*

BY EDWARD IGINIO PLACIDI

THE MALTESE Islands are changing the course of their history.

Almost as far back as recorded events go, Malta's numerous occupiers—including Phoenicians, Carthaginians, Romans, Arabs, and Sicilians—have used the islands as a bastion for their conquests. But since independence from the British in 1964, the Maltese have forged ahead with conquests of their own.

The islands have become the destination for an ever-increasing number of travelers seeking moderate prices, hospitable people, an archaeological treasure chest, a wealth of history and art, a unique mix of East and West, and a warm, comfortable climate in which to

enjoy dozens of fabulous beaches and off-the-rocks swimming spots. Sailing, scuba diving, snorkeling, golf, tennis, and other sports abound.

Malta's immediate topographical impression is that of a desert country of the Arab world floating in the Mediterranean 58 miles south of Sicily. The panorama sometimes even resembles photographs of lunar landscapes, but the apparently stark ambience is misleading at first glance, and the islands beckon a closer look.

The Malta Archipelago consists of the 95-square-mile main island (Malta proper), 26-square-mile Gozo, and 1-square-mile Comino. Altogether, the

islands are peopled by 344,000 Maltese—while tourists last year numbered 350,000, up from 20,000 in 1960.

The Maltese have been so successful in transforming their tiny southern Mediterranean nation from its historic role as a fortress to that of vacation islands that a Chinese delegation arrived in May 1978 to study Maltese know-how in order to aid them in developing their own enormous tourist-drawing potential.

After a five-hour sail from Siracusa, Sicily, aboard the *Malta Express*, I came to balmy Valletta, Malta's capital, described to me by a policeman as "a city built by gentlemen for gentlemen."



*Views of Malta from afar are often dominated by a hilly sea of limestone, a desert of beige broken on the horizon by domes and bell towers. Malta has over 350 churches, including two with the third and fourth largest unsupported domes in the world.*

It is the city of the Knights of St. John of Jerusalem, a Hospitaller order of noblemen from various European countries to which Malta was ceded by Emperor Charles V in 1530. Their heroic repulsion of 40,000 Turks sent to destroy them by Sultan Suleiman in 1565 brought glory to Malta and their order, and today it is still a subject of great pride for the Maltese.

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 Parisot de La Vallette launched a successful counteroffensive, beheading Turkish prisoners and using their heads for cannonballs. Following the siege, the Knights built their new capital and named it for their Grand Master.

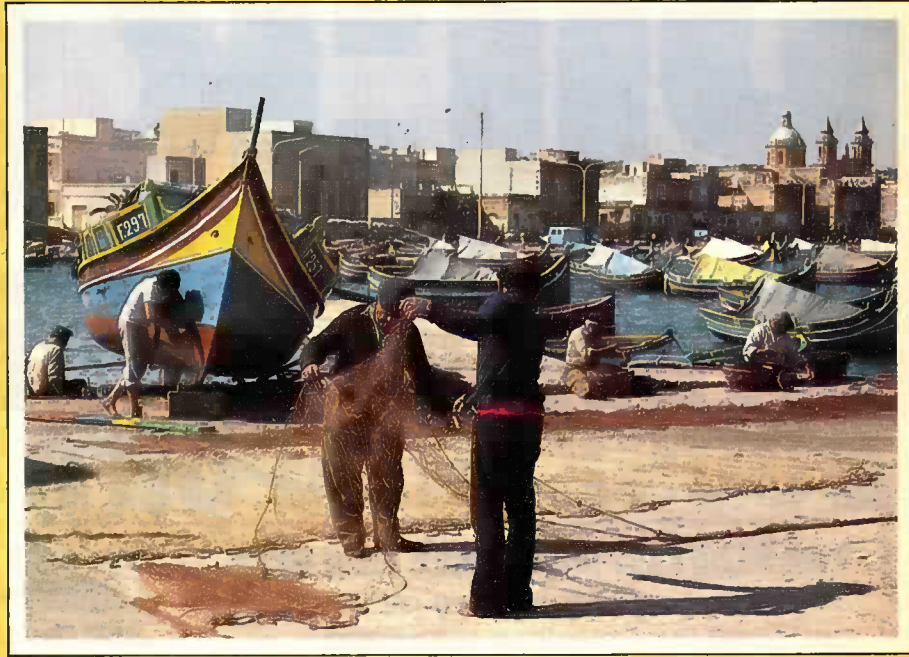
St. John's Co-Cathedral in Valletta is paved with 400 marble-mosaic grave slabs of the Knights. The adjoining museum is filled with silver objects and other possessions of the Knights and the order, as well as with Flemish tapestries and works by Caravaggio. Across from the cathedral is the Grand Master's Palace, now the seat of the government, and the Knights' armory, containing what is probably the world's best collection of medieval armor.

Valletta was enclosed in massive high walls, most of which still remain, and was laid out in a grid pattern on a narrow, hilly peninsula flanked on both sides by extensive deep-water harbors, each broken up by jutting fingers of land. It was an impregnable fortress commanding the high ground and the harbors.

As they approach the harbors, the streets convert to steps, and, as is typical of Maltese towns, windows are encased in balconies of wood. There are also saints on every corner—life-size statues of religious figures watch over passersby from their niches on the corners of buildings.

Republic Street divides Valletta in lengthwise halves and is closed to automobiles. This is where you'll encounter today's European Malta face to face. It is the main shopping street and meeting place of the islands, luring uncountable thousands during the traditional five-to-nine evening promenade hours—especially on Saturday and Sunday when young men and women come to search for prospective marriage partners.

Malta's British legacy is most apparent in Valletta. The signs and facades of many shops belong in 19th-century



Fishermen wind up their day at Marsaxlokk. The brightly painted boats in the background are called luzzus, and bear the symbol of the eye of Osiris on their prows.

England, and there are pubs everywhere. Throughout the islands, bobbies patrol the streets, ale and tea are favorite beverages, driving is on the left, and most cars are British. All kinds of British goods are available in the shops, everyone speaks English as well as Maltese (an Arabic dialect with an Italian overlay), and the cuisine is English and Continental.

Few restaurants offer Maltese dishes and even then usually only *timpani* (macaroni baked in a pastry shell with eggs, liver, and onions) or *lampuki* (a tasty local fried fish baked in a pastry shell with onions, parsley, tomatoes, and cauliflower). As the proprietor of the Traffic Light Pub in Valletta put it to me, "the only place you are going to get real Maltese food anymore is in private homes... and not in many of them."

However, they have not abandoned their favorite (and sold-everywhere) snacks, the *pastizzi*—thin-doughed pastries stuffed with ricotta cheese or a mixture of meat, onions, and peas.

Malta has been described as "a living microcosm of Mediterranean history" because the islands are strewn with the remains of prehistoric cave dwellings, temples and tombs, Roman baths, villas and catacombs, medieval towers, citadels and bastions, Renaissance fortifications and palaces. And getting around is easy.

Malta has a fleet of freshly painted green and white buses that frequently travel to every corner of Malta and

Gozo. They literally cost pennies to ride and you can reach any destination in under an hour. The short distances make biking and hiking anywhere possible, but reasonably priced car rental agencies are in every city. You can also take leisurely jaunts through city and countryside on four-seater horse-drawn carriages, or cruise the coasts on brightly colored *dgajjes* which are similar to Venetian gondolas.

Malta's "Sister Island," Gozo, can only be reached by the ferry *Calypso-land* that sails back and forth each day across the Comino Channel between Cirkewwa, Malta, and Mgarr, Gozo. All arrivals and departures are linked with bus connections.

During the summer months, boats depart daily for tiny Comino from Sliema, Bugibba, and Marfa, Malta, and from Mgarr, Gozo.

Gozo has its Inland Sea, a large, natural pool fed by the sea through navigable tunnels in the high cliffs that hang over it. Local fishermen will take visitors on short trips through the tunnels in *dgajjes*, but only on calm days. On the other side of the cliffs, several minutes across fossil-studded rocks, is the Azure Window, a massive rock rectangle jutting out into the water forming a window to the sea and rocky coast beyond.

About 20 minutes by bus from Valletta is Malta's old capital, Mdina, whose history is as old as that of the islands. From Mdina's perch on a high plateau in

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the center of the island, you can see most of Malta on a clear day and orient yourself to its topography.

Known as "The City of Silence," Mdina is an intact medieval city enclosed within high bastions built upon rocks. Quiet reigns on its narrow lanes of churches, palaces, and Norman houses with wrought-iron balconies and bronze door knockers. Malta's aristocracy retreated here when the Knights developed and fortified Valletta and her harbors. (It is Mdina's artisans that create the colorful blown-glass objects sold throughout the islands.)

Gozo, with its peaceful country lanes, tiny fishing villages, and heady wine, also has its grand see-all perch in the center of the island. The Citadel, on a high hill above the rooftops of Victoria (Gozo's capital), was a fortified refuge from marauders who often took the Gozitans as slaves. But unlike Mdina, its buildings are of unknown origin and were reduced to rubble by an earthquake.

The Citadel reveals Gozo's greener panoramas dotted with hamletlike villages that are encircled by cultivated rectangular plots.

Upon entering a village or city, you will discover that pastels color doors, window frames, and wooden balconies. Multicolored religious statues, busts, or plaques are set in the wall by the front door of every house. And you can descend the hills to the coast to find the yellow sands of Ghajn Tuffieha Bay, the ominous chalky Dingli Cliffs, the sienna beach of Gozo's Ramla Bay, or the transparent sea-green waters of St. Peter's Pool, Malta's perfect off-the-rocks swimming spot, above which Prime Minister Don Mintoff has his paradisiacal retreat from the affairs of state.

Wandering the streets of these villages you are bound to come upon elderly ladies in their doorways chatting and making Malta's renowned, but inexpensive, fine lace—the country's most important handicraft, but a dying art. The young have abandoned it for greater pecuniary rewards in factories and cities.

Upon arriving in Malta, pick up *What's On*, available at newsstands and in some hotels. It's a fortnightly pocket-size guide to the islands including bus and boat information and timetables, a list of ser-

vices you may need, a restaurant/nightclub guide, maps, general information and history, and a calendar of events.

If a village fiesta is scheduled, plan to be there. The Maltese love to party, and the numerous village fiestas are always happy occasions. In each village a patron saint (the Maltese are fervently Catholic) is honored in annual festivities in costume with bands, dancing, feasting, street decorations, fireworks, and processions.

Throughout the May to October "high season," most regular flights into Malta—through six airlines from several dozen European and North African cities—are often booked well in advance. Yet you can always hop aboard the inexpensive *Malta Express*, sailing three times weekly from Naples and stopping en route in Reggio di Calabria and two Sicilian ports, Catania and Siracusa.

There are over 100 hotels on the islands, most by the seaside and concentrated in Malta's St. Julian's Bay-Sliema and St. Paul's Bay areas. The deluxe and first-class establishments offer the gambit of resort amenities at bargain prices.

Hotels are classified in seven categories ranging from deluxe to fourth class, and then there are first- and second-class guesthouses. Deluxe doubles with breakfast average \$35 per day. The "IA" price drops to a \$30 average, the "IB" to \$25. Then with each class descension ("IIA", "IIB", "IIC", "IV") thereafter, the average price drop is \$3. The cheapest accommodation is about \$3.50 per person (breakfast included) in a second-class guesthouse.

The Maltese sense of hospitality has been extolled in numerous legends. Ulysses is said to have stopped on Gozo for a rest but could not tear himself away from the idyllic ambience, delicious food, or his hostess, the enchantress Calypso, with whom he lived for seven years in her cave above Ramla Bay. St. Paul, who reportedly was shipwrecked on Malta in A.D. 60 and is called the father of the islands because he converted the people to Christianity, wrote, "The inhabitants showed us no small courtesy."

Not all legends die: A trip to Malta may be that longed-for opportunity to lead the fabled good life. 