

Islands of Malta alter course but remain the same

By EDWARD PLACIDI

Malta is changing the course of its history.

Almost as far back as recorded events go, its inhabitants had 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 — transforming their tiny southern Mediterranean nation from fortress to vacation islands.

Malta has become the destination 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 fabulous beaches and off-the-rocks swimming spots, sailing, scuba diving, golf, tennis and other sports.

In 1977 more tourists visited the trio of islands — the 95-square-mile Malta, the main island with 300,000 people, 26-square-mile Gozo with 25,000 people, and one-square-mile Comino with only 19 residents — than inhabit them.

Malta's capital Valletta is the first stop following a sailing from Sicily, and it was, as one immigration official described it, "a city built by gentlemen for gentlemen."

St. John's Co-Cathedral in Valletta is paved with 400 marble-mosaic grave slabs of the Knights of St. John of Jerusalem, a Hospitaller order of noblemen from various European nations, who built in in 1565. An adjoining museum is filled with precious objects of the order and works by Caravaggio and Flemish tapestries, and the Knights' armory contains what is probably one of the world's best collection of medieval armor.

Valletta was once completely enclosed by massive high walls, and most of them still stand today. It was laid out in a grid pattern on a narrow hilly peninsula flanked on both sides by extensive deep-water harbors — an impregnable fortress commanding the high ground and harbors.

While there are statues to patron saints on almost every corner, Malta's British

legacy is apparent throughout the city. The signs and facades of many shops belong in 19th-century England, pubs are everywhere, bobbies patrol streets, and ale and tea are available everywhere. Most everyone speaks English as well as Maltese (an Arabic dialect with an Italian overlay).

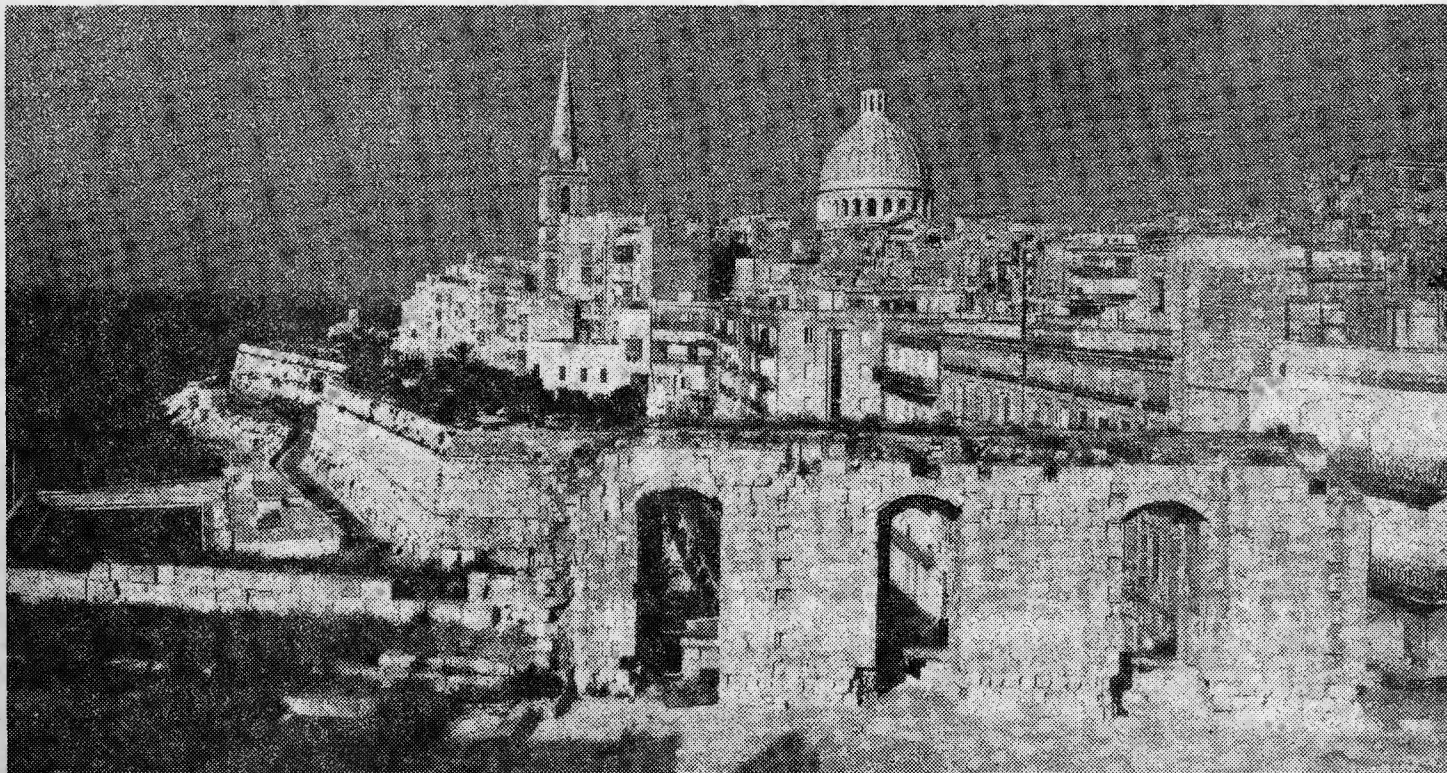
It's gone a little too far, however, because few restaurants offer Maltese dishes (most have continental cuisine), and those that do usually only "Timpani," macaroni baked in a pastry shell with eggs, liver and onions, or "Lampuki," a tasty local fish fried and then baked in a pastry shell with onions, parsley, tomatoes and cauliflower. They have not, however, abandoned "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 green and white buses that travel to every corner of Malta and Gozo, run frequently, literally cost pennies, and you can reach any destination in under an hour. The short distances make biking and hiking anywhere possible. Inexpensive car rental agencies are in every city. You can take leisurely jaunts through city and countryside on four-seater horse-drawn carriages or cruise the coast to fishing villages, coves and grottos on brightly colored "dgajjes," similar to Venetian gondolas.

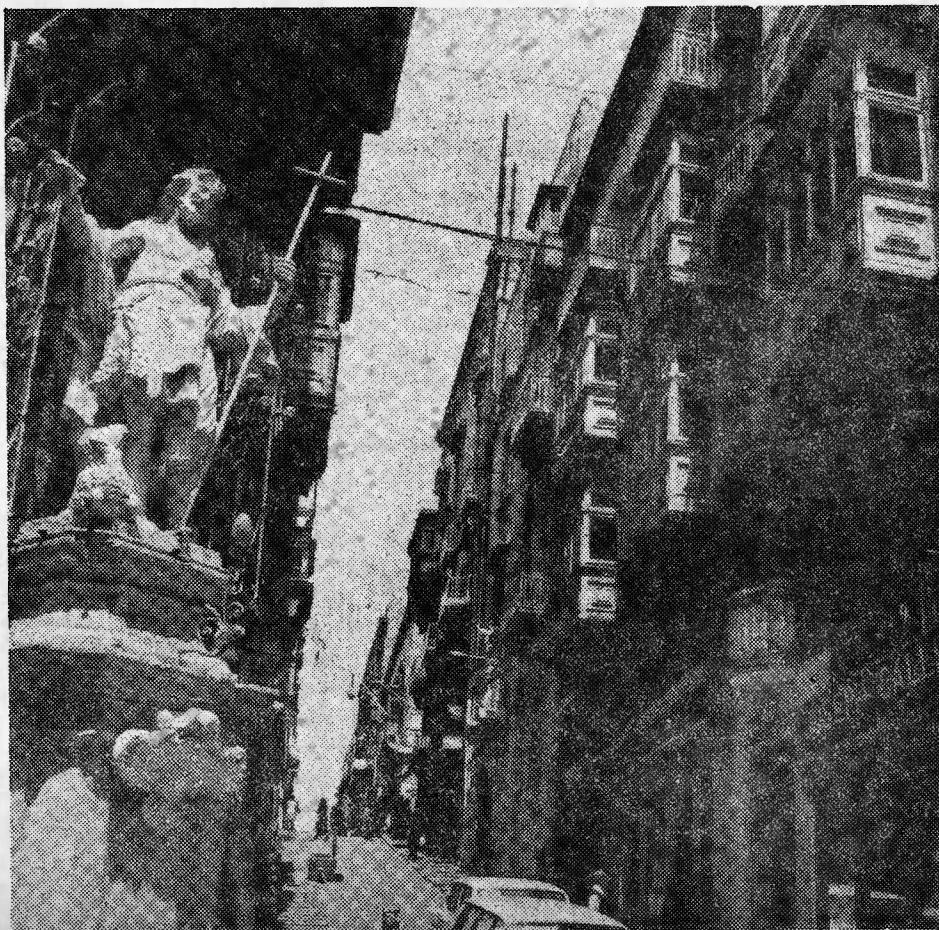
For naturalists and outdoor types, nature sculptured a large, protected, deep-water pool from the rocks and limestone in a sunken cove along the cliffs at Tumbrell Point near Marsaxlokk, Malta's most important fishing village. At that village, too, the harbor is jammed with the fisherman's brightly painted high-prowed "luzzus."

Gozo has its "Inland Sea," a large natu-



Photos by Edward Placidi

Walls of Valletta still stand in most places, and limestone buildings line the streets. Patron saint statues stand on most every corner of the city.



ral pool fed through navigable tunnels in the high cliffs that hang over it. Fisherman will take visitors through the "dgajjes," or you can skin dive on you own. On the other side of the cliffs is the "Azure Window," a massive rock rectangle jutting into the water forming a window to the sea and rocky coast beyond.

If a festival is scheduled, by all means make an effort to attend. All Maltese villages have a patron saint (the Maltese are fervently Catholic) and each honors its own with an annual festival complete with costumes, bands, dancing, feasting and street decorations.

You can find out about them in the "What's On" guides available at newsstands and some hotels.

Throughout the May to October "high season," most 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 via Reggio Calabria and two Sicilian ports, Catania and Siracusa.

Deluxe and first-class hotels offer the gambit of resort amenities at almost bargain prices.