



MALTA!

MEDITERRANEAN MAGIC

Story and photographs 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—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.

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.

Last year, more tourists visited the islands—ninety-five-square-mile Malta, the main island with about 300,000 people, twenty-six-square-mile Gozo with 25,000 people, and one-square-mile Comino with only nineteen residents—than inhabit them. They hosted over 350,000 tourists, up from 20,000 in 1960.

The Maltese have been so successful inside two decades in transforming their tiny southern Mediterranean nation from

its historical role as a fortress to vacation islands, that a Chinese delegation arrived in May to study Maltese know-how 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 an immigration policeman as "a city built by gentlemen for gentlemen."

It is the city of the Knights of St. John of Jerusalem, a Hospitaller order of noblemen from various European countries and to whom 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 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 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 Cathedral in Valletta is paved

with four hundred 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 works by Caravaggio and Flemish tapestries. 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 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—lifesize statues of religious figures watch over passersby from their niches on the corners of buildings.

Dividing Valletta in lengthwise halves and closed to automobiles, Republic Street 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





Homer's enchanted isles . . .

during the traditional five-to-nine evening promenade hours, especially on Saturday and Sunday when young men and women—walking arm-in-arm in groups—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 nineteenth-century England and pubs are everywhere. But 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 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. 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 travel to every corner of Malta and Gozo and run frequently. 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. Reasonably priced 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 coasts to fishing villages, coves and grottos—such as the Blue Grotto which mirrors dazzling phosphorescent colors from underwater flora—on the brightly colored *dgajjes*, which are similar to Venetian gondolas.

Malta's "Sister Island," Gozo, can only be reached by the ferry, the *Calypsoland*, 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 Mgarr, Gozo.

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 services 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. Each village has a patron saint and the Maltese are fervently Catholic—who they honor in annual festivities in costume with bands, dancing, feasting, street decorations, fireworks and processions.

Malta's immediate topographical impression is that of a desert country of the Arab world, yet floating in the Mediterranean fifty-eight miles south of Sicily. The panorama can sometimes resemble photographs of lunar landscapes, but the apparently stark ambience is misleading at first



a sunbaked, rocky retreat . . .

glance and the islands deserve a closer look.

Little vegetation, especially on Comino and Malta, covers the rocky low hills of rock-wall-enclosed terraced fields or the well-indented coastline of numerous small bays and coves set in among sheer cliffs.

The shallow soil and layers of limestone underneath are beige, and beige pervades. Most buildings—the architecture everywhere is Arabic—and walls around the fields are constructed of limestone blocks and rocks, respectively. Views from afar are often dominated by a hilly sea of limestone, a desert of beige, but broken on every horizon by spires, domes and bell-towers—the Maltese have erected over 350 churches, including St. John's at Xewkija (in the tongue-twisting Maltese language, "x" is pronounced "sh") and St. Mary's at Mosta with the third- and fourth-largest unsupported domes in the world.

Yet look inside the walls and intense greens, browns and yellows of crops and fruit trees leap out at you. Entering village or city, you discover that pastels color doors, window frames and wooden balconies. Multi-colored 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.

Nature has 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 where the harbor is jammed with brightly painted high-prowed *luzzus*, all bearing the symbol of the eye of Osiris. Dom Mintoff, Malta's prime minister, lives above St. Peter's Pool, his paradise-like retreat from the affairs of government, and swims there daily the year round.

And 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, or skin dive on your own. 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 twenty 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 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 roof tops 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
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Hour after hour, Ms. Henderson wondered what was in the chest. The crown jewels? A tiger? A member of the prime minister's harem? Her curiosity intensified as the guard requested piles of dry ice. Finally she broke down and approached the guard, begging to be told the contents. Wordlessly he opened the lid. Inside, kept at the proper temperature by the dry ice, was a shah's ransom in Iranian gold caviar. Hef may not be that far out, but he definitely has some valuable goodies stashed in the dream palace he paid 1.2 million for. An alcove between the living-room and library conceals a hidden oak panel activated by touch, that will swing open to reveal a wooden, circular stairwell going down, down, down to a concealed "spirits" cellar, a 20's ruse to keep away the feds. The second step is wired. If any of the 10 full-time butlers, 6 cooks or 4 "bottle washers" tried to steal Hef's Lafites an alarm would sound both in the master bedroom and kitchen.

Hef loves toys and gadgets. The play-

room for Arthur Letts' stepchildren—located in a little stone cottage amongst the trees—is now a playroom for adults—an electronic paradise of pinball, pool, racing cars and rocket launchers. Hef enjoys the Evel Kneivel pinball game—he can rack up a score of 91,000 on one ball alone. But his prize toy—an 1890 Aeolian Automatic Pipe Organ—he keeps in the estate's living-room. Hef whiles away the hours listening to such chestnuts as *Love's Old Sweet Song* activated by antique player rolls. Mellow? Well, the reclusive Hef of the Chicago Penthouse days (who you may remember learned of that town's riots during a rare foray outside the bowels of his womb empire—when he was clubbed by a cop) seems to have been opened up by the natural California lifestyle.

Says Ron Dirsmith, "When I first came out here from Chicago, I couldn't believe it was the Hef I knew. It really shocked me to see him so turned on by nature."

"I feel very different here," admits Hef himself. "This is without question the best and happiest period of my life . . . And I think it's reflected in my relationships with people too. I think that I'm a nicer human being, if you will. My priorities are different today than they were

ten or fifteen years ago. I enjoyed life very much ten or fifteen years ago, but I'm enjoying life even more today.

"People are surprised when they meet me for the first time. They expect a different kind of man because of the preconceived notions of what the head of *Playboy* is all about. They have a difficult time understanding *Playboy* conceptually, and my success and celebrity that goes with it. That isn't so easy for people to deal with because it comes so close to our prejudices and fantasies. The two great guilts of America are sex and money. The notion that America is very materialistic on the one hand is true. But it is absolutely true that there are tremendous guilts related to it. We've learned how to acquire things, but not to enjoy them."

Hef's friend, social critic pundit M. F. Lerner—a frequent visitor to the Playboy Mansion West—amplifies. "You have to first look at what was happening before Hefner started *Playboy*. We were drenched with McCarthyism plus a backlash of American puritanism. Hefner, like Freud, served as a "guilt killer" for Americans, and perhaps for much of the western world."

"*Playboy*," Hef sums up, "really attempted to put back into our Puritan culture the play and pleasure part of life and to suggest that working hard all our lives was not an end in itself—one should be able to enjoy life as well."

Hugh Hefner, erotic being and total personality, has definitely got the house in which to do it.

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panoramas dotted with hamlet-like villages that are encircled by cultivated rectangular plots.

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



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There are over 100 hotels on the islands and most are 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 best of resort amenities at almost bargain prices and many have their own private beaches. Among the best deluxe hotels are the Corinthia Palace and the Dragonara, complete with the islands' only casino.

Hotels are classified in seven categories ranging from deluxe to fourth-class, and then there are first- and second-class guest houses. 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, III, IV) thereafter, the average price drop is \$3. The cheapest accommodation is about \$3.50 per person with breakfast in a second-class guest house.

Also, with an ongoing construction boom, more and more furnished apartments and villas are available every year on short holiday leases on Malta and Gozo.

But if you want to escape from it all, teeny Comino is the place. It's a sun-baked rocky retreat midway between Malta and Gozo. There are no cars, no villages, quiet paths to wander down, skin diving in the crystal-clear waters of the Blue Lagoon, swimming and sailing at Santa Maria and San Niklaw Bays, and only the Comino Hotel.

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 60 A.D. and is called the father of the islands because he converted the people to Christianity, wrote, "The inhabitants showed us no small courtesy."

The legends are not dead, and, in fact, one night I was the unsuspecting victim of hospitality and custom. When a Maltese enters a pub and runs into a friend, he buys him (and whoever he is with) a drink.

I had struck up a conversation with a Maltese in a pub when a friend of his entered, joined us, and, of course, immediately ordered us drinks. As the evening progressed, it seemed that each time someone stepped into the pub the bartender was lining up fresh drinks . . . drinks I wasn't allowed to refuse without offending my new friends. Such was the hospitality Ulysses must have known. ■

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