

Malta

By Jaime Cobas

Malta is a small island just below Sicily, ironically it is the largest of an archipelago that consists of 13 islands, of which only three are inhabited and one is just a rock in the ocean. It is at the crossroads of the Mediterranean Sea, and has played a historical crucial role because of its location; centrally located and prized as a stopping point of the Silk Road and of the African/European voyages. It is known for its two walled fortress cities M'dina and Valetta, and welcoming fishing villages and sheltering coves.

Many now recognize it as the background of several TV series and movie sets, but its history predates the Egyptian. Malta and Gozo, its tiny sister island, have awesome pre-historic sites, erected by sophisticated temple builders, featuring enormous stones and an underground necropolis, the Hypogeum, a 5000 year old burial ground carved, and smoothed without metal tools, that imitates the architecture of the above ground temples. (The History Channel attributes these feats to extra-terrestrials, but most locals debunk those theories)

The archipelago predates the Great Egyptian Pyramids and Stonehenge by 500 years and has merited UNESCO World Heritage Status. Malta has been the site of two famous sieges, critical to the future of Europe, in 1565, when the Ottoman Turks overtook the island, and during World War II when both Hitler and Mussolini tried to overtake it. It was also a stopping point for the pilgrims to the Holy Land, protected by the Knights of St. John, who reigned from 1530 to 1798. These Knights of Malta, built the Co-Cathedral in the walled city of Valetta, a Baroque display of opulence and rich materials and statuary, who also established a hospital for the pilgrims and the wounded and an Armory and became the standard bearers in the Christian fight against Islam.

They were followed, briefly, by Napoleon and, later, the British, all have left a rich legacy in the language, the cuisine and customs. Today, at noon, every day, a Band of the Royal Marines parades down the main street of Valetta, to the delight of all, tourists and residents. It is very enjoyable to window shop, escorted by these merry-makers.

The Isle of Malta is small, just 13 miles wide and 9 miles deep, thus it is easily manageable, accessible (cars, buses and taxis) and many of the places you want to visit are within walking distance. It is arid, said to have 300 days of sunshine yearly; and, most of all, tourist friendly. You can stop any one to ask for directions, and they will be most helpful; I even had someone stop, whip out his cellphone and Google Map the place I was seeking.

The most popular locations to stay are Sliema, St. Julian's and Paceville (pronounced *Pachéville*). Sliema is a ritzy residential neighborhood, quiet, chock full of cozy places to dine, very accessible to the Valetta ferries, and with many shopping venues, from a Marks and Spencer store, Vodafone, HBSC bank, the small Plaza Shopping Center, even Burger King and Pizza Hut.

St. Julian's is at one end of Sliema, where the bigger hotel complexes reign, ("Le Meridien" presides and the Portomaso/ Hilton complex is another favorite). Next is Paceville, full of bars, pubs, fast food outlets and noisy crowds of youngsters, many below the legal drinking age. I was warned, "You don't want to go there". To each, his own, I hear that they may be rowdy, but not aggressive, "It's the Hormones".

The walled city of Valetta is the present capital, and the most important place to visit, or to stay. In 2018 it will be celebrated as a European Capital of Culture. It is a 5 minute ferry ride from Sliema, that runs every 30 minutes. (2.8 euros for Adult round trip (about US\$4.00) and only .90 euros for Seniors).

In Valetta, one arrives at the bottom level of an embankment and walks up a very steep slope following signage leading to the City Center and the City Gates, (towards the new Renzo Piano Municipal Building and the Republic Street, that is the spine of the city, its main shopping avenue that is merely a 20 minute walk from one end to the other.

By the time we finished photographing and admiring the City Gate area with its moat, 55 feet deep and 240 feet wide, and the new City Gates, which, in stark contrast to the ancient walls, are marked by a pair of vertical steel plates, 75 feet high, at each side, to mark an entrance, welcoming visitors, a gesture that “does not shut them out”, as a door would.

Immediately, to the right is Piano’s the new Parliament House, inaugurated in 2015; a very modern building that integrates into the existing architecture by using the local stone cut in the module of the surrounding structures. Composed as two monumental blocks that hover over the plaza, supported by square pillars as a way to open up the space. It’s façade is cut-out in places to provide sunshade to glass windows and to animate its surface.



Parliament Building, by Renzo Piano, Valetta

Detail of façade with cut-outs in the modular stone

Next to it, in the remains of the original Opera House, Piano has created an open-air arena, where the seating area floats above the ruins of the original structure which was destroyed in 1942 during a German air raid; it is now a popular venue for concerts.

Continuing along Republic Street, past the National Museum of Archeology, that houses the many important finds, including the “ Fat Ladies” of Malta, prehistoric figurines, pottery, jewelry and other treasures dating to the Bronze Age. We find, a few steps away, St. John’s Co-Cathedral, Malta’s most impressive church; the place where the Knights would meet.

The outside it is in stark contrast to its Baroque splendor, Its plan is simple, a wide, central nave with 12 apses, 8 of which are the Chapels dedicated to the various *langues* (divisions based on nationality). The floor is a patchwork of colored marbles, identifying individual tombs of church dignitaries and prominent citizens. (Stiletto heels are prohibited to protect its surfaces). The Nave is long and every single surface is encrusted with ornamentation and gilding. The individual chapels are also heavily decorated, with statuary and paintings added. Since the knight’s recruits came from Europe’s most noble families, they competed to lavishly embellish their individual chapels so as to give credence to their religious fervor.

The church also features Caravaggio’s largest and only signed painting, “Beheading of St. John”, in the Oratory, and a smaller work, “St. Jerome” (who translated the Bible from Hebrew into Latin). These two art treasures are world known. (*St. John’s Co-Cathedral, St. John’s Sq. 6 euros for adults, 4.6 for seniors and 3.5 for students*) includes an individual audio guide that is an invaluable help and easy to manage. Mon.to Fri 9:30- 4:3



Apse of Co- Cathedral of St. John in Valetta



Main Altar of Co- Cathedral

Upon exiting the Cathedral, make a brief stop at the Piazza Regina in front of the National Library, (“Bibliotheca”), for some refreshments under the sun shaded outdoor “Caffé Cordina”, for some pastries, Italian style coffee or *gelateria* (ice creams) .You may try the famous *pastizzi* (cheese cakes) or *kannoli talirkotta*, (sweet ricotta stuffed cakes).

Next is the “Grand Master’s Palace and Armory”, (10 euros for adults, 7 for seniors and students; plus an audio guide, highly recommended) Entrance is through a peaceful courtyard, with a fountain, overlooked by a clock turret, dating from 1745.

The State Rooms are grandiose, with tapestries, a throne room, etc. with interesting paintings and objects, but the “piece de resistance” is the Armory; two large rooms that contain a collection of over 5,000 suits of armor and weaponry ever displayed. One of the two spaces is dedicated to armors, featuring the fabulous black and gold engraved suit for a Grand Master and a fancy 16th century breastplate simulating a buttoned waistcoat. The other room features an array of weapons, huge cannons, spears, swords, muskets and crossbows, flint rocket launchers and engraved powder flasks; all a favorite of youngsters.

That was enough for one day, but we saw the need to make another visit because of the wealth of things to see , and to shop.

For dinner, the hotel booked us at “Barracuda”, at the northeast point of Sliema, where it melds with St. Julian’s; overlooking the bays of Balluta and Spinola; it is set in an elegant ,18th

century seaside villa that won a design award for the elegant way its remodeling accommodates modern interventions within its spacious rooms.

We were seated on a covered terrace with a spectacular view of the bay, full of bobbing boats and a panorama of lights from the hotels on the opposite side. We opted for a five course-tasting menu of 70 euros per person, as selected by the chef. Starting with Blue Fin tuna tartare on Dijon mustard sauce, on a bed of seaweed; then three plump pan-seared Scottish scallops, in a truffled veluté sauce, sprinkled with truffle caviar. Followed by a substantial plate of linguine tossed with snails, garlic and chili in a cream sauce, with a touch of sherry. Then an oven baked deboned quail with a quail egg on a bed of vegetables with a teriyaki sauce. For dessert, a creamy “crème brulee”. It was delicious, but service was slooow and took 2 1/2 hours, plus ½ an hour more for a taxi to arrive.

On the premises, to one side, is another local favorite, “Piccolo Padre” a family friendly pizzeria with crunchy and tasty pies, and savory desserts. (*Barracuda, 194 Main St, S. Julian’s, T. 2133 1817*)

On another night, the concierge, recommended “Ta’ Kris”, a quaint restaurant, for hearty, traditional food. Getting there is quite an experience; it is located in a narrow alley, off a pedestrian street in a one of the main shopping areas, “next to Pizza Hut”. Housed in a former bakery, with high ceilings, decorated with baking implements it is family run with friendly service. Since we were forewarned that servings are “generous”, we shared everything; starting with Lampuki, “Malta’s favorite fish”- (a dorado or mahi-mahi), two slabs of perfectly cooked fish arrived, flaky, with a crisp skin, also half a rabbit, cooked in a fragrant red wine sauce with baked vegetables and potatoes. Delicious. Also available, *bragjoli* (beef olives), *harufil-forn* (lamb roast) and date cakes. (*Ta’ Kris”, 80 Fawwara Lane, Sliema, t. 356 21337367*)

On Sundays Malta is “dead” nothing opens; it is family and church day. (We were told 80% of the population is Catholic), therefore we did as many do, we went to Marsaxlokk, a fishing village, that is a 20 minutes car ride to the south. We booked a car service, Prestige Cabs Malta, for a round trip ride (56 euros). We were told to arrive early to catch the fishermen offering their wares, so we left at 9AM.



Sunday Market in Marsaxlokk. Boats feature the “Eye of Osiris”

The name is derived from *marsa sirocco* (southeasterly bay), pronounced *marsa-schlock*. It is a colorful experience, on one side, the multihued offerings, on the other the fishermen's boats mostly in bright blue, featuring the "Eye of Osiris". (Eyes painted on each side of the bow, honoring the Egyptian god of fertility and the dead, thus to ward off any evil out at sea).

It was a pleasant Sunday drive, not much traffic, but, upon arrival the place was packed to the gills; it is more than a fish market, it is a combination flea market, with fresh vegetables, fruits and honey stands, plus clothing, plus electronics, plus handcrafted souvenirs, all under the cover of market umbrellas that provide a shaded pedestrian path snaking along the harbor; it took us two hours to navigate, looking, stopping and purchasing items. Don't bother asking for prices; almost everything offered is "5 euros"

The town is home to about 70% of the Maltese fishing fleet, and is renowned for its top-notch seafood restaurants. It also features the "Church of Our Lady of the Rosary of Pompeii" which dominates the main square. Cross-shaped, they were officiating mass when we visited, but it is charming with some art works where the main statuary group is made of papier maché, in Italy.

It was built on the land donated by a Marchioness, who also contributed a substantial sum of money, after she was "miraculously saved from a terrible storm at sea".

It was noon, by then so we went to "Tartarum", which guide books say is "one of the more upmarket options", renown for its swordfish Carpaccio, and its "shellfish royale"- (a feast of mussels, razor shells, clams, prawns and langoustines").

We started with Salmon Tataki, a slab of salmon with its center almost rare, and a "black ink crisp" atop, with cucumber relish and sesame seeds, that was "finger licking good", followed by "Black Tortellini of local prawns and crab, fermented honey velouté and Kale Oil", which was marvel of flavors. (*Tartarum, Marssaxlokk, t. 2165 8089*)



Salmon Tataki at "Tartarum".

The next day we went to M'dina (originally Medina- "walled city") Pronounced "Im Dina", is a walled medieval town that rises about 500 feet above sea level, it was the original capital of Malta. Inside it is mainly old *palazzos* (private houses) and religious buildings, with a population of about 400. It is a labyrinth of angled narrow streets, so as to protect them from invaders. Originally walled in by the Turks, but when the Knights of St. John arrived, in 1530, they were a sea based force, and preferred the Grand Harbor and Valetta as their base so M'dina became the Citta Vecchia (the old city) places"; the Gates, the Cathedral and the Palazzo Falcon, plus the Ta ' Qali Arts center, just outside the city.

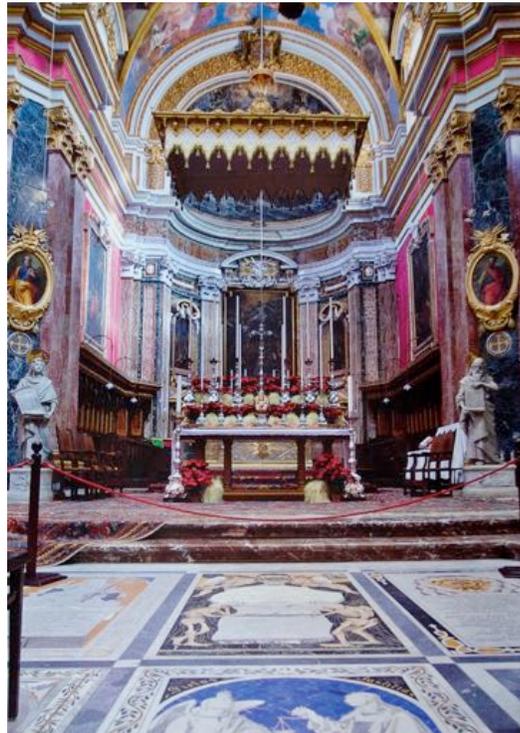
The Main Gate is impressive, where the present doors date to the Knight's era, with statues of three Maltese saints- St. Paul, St. Plubius and St. Agatha, plus coats of arms and inscriptions. A bridge crosses an impressive deep and wide moat. For the gruesome the Dungeon Museum awaits, just inside, to the right. It is an exhibition of Maltese horror and graphically disturbing scenes depicting methods of torture, executions, dismemberments, the plague, the Inquisition, all accompanied by screams, sobbing and audiovisual effects.

A more pleasant welcome is the courtyard of the Vilhena Magisterial Palace, just glimpsed from the outside, because the Cathedral beckons, ahead, and the tourist groups are already crowding the narrow streets.

St. Paul's Cathedral located in front of Pjazza San Pawl was Malta's Cathedral, completely rebuilt in 1702 after the 1693 earthquake had reduced it to rubble. Its façade is tri-partite, influenced by Francesco Borromini. Featuring twin bell towers with two clock faces, one tells the time, the other, the date. Its dome, visible across the region, sits atop the transept of its cruciform plan. The floor is a mosaic of polychrome marble tombs and memorials that are more visible than the ones in Valetta. The interior is very impressive and the side altars are richly adorned; do not miss the Chapel of the Blessed Sacrament, nor the 16th century carved door that was originally the main entrance or the marble Baptismal font.



St. Paul's Cathedral, M'dina,



Main Altar. Colored marble memorials on floor

One exits through a side door, where, across a small square, is the Museum (entry is included in the cathedral ticket). It contains collections of statuary and liturgical implements, in silver, adorned with semiprecious stones, also tapestries, woodcuts by Albert Dürer, engravings by Rembrandt, stamp and coin collections, medieval manuscripts, even some fine examples of armors and swords. (*St. Paul's Square, entry to Cathedral and Museum, 5 euros for adults, 3.5 for children and seniors, open Mon.to Sat. 9³⁰ – 17:00 PM*)

The Palazzo Falson is at the end of Villegaignon Street, at the opposite end of the Main Gate. It is also known as the "Norman House" (for the Romanesque arched windows, framed by Gothic arches in its façade). It is the second oldest building in M'dina; housing 45 private collections of its last owner, a soldier, shipping magnate, philanthropist and bon-vivant, Olof Frederick Golicher (1889-1962). He was very concerned with the cultural heritage of the

Maltese Islands and a discerning collector. In 2001 the Maltese Heritage Foundation declared it "one of the finest cultural attractions on the island".

An audio guide is included in the entrance fee, which explains the various objects. The collections encompass a vast array of silver, furniture, jewelry, Oriental rugs, armors and a 4,500-book library. The paintings collections include works by Van Dyck, Poussin and Murillo, plus several Goya and Durer engravings. He was also an artist and some of his works are on view, as also some photographs of masked balls he attended. (*Villegaignon St, Open 10-5PM Tue-Sun, 10 euros for adults, 5 for seniors and students*)

At the end of the visit make a stop at the nearby Ta' Qali Crafts Village, housed in a former British RAF air base during World War II. The Arts and Craft workshops are housed in old Nissen huts. You can watch glassblowers at work, and shop for gold or silver filigree, visit studios where leather, ceramics, Maltese lace and ornamental glass are produced, it is the best place to stock up for souvenirs at lower prices than in the main cities. We scooped quite a haul in "Anthony's Filigree" (*Hut #1. t.21415331*)

The richness and variety of experiences in Valletta merit at least one more visit; this time we planned to go shopping, and to wander and wonder along the side streets. First stop was the Castille Square, with a grand view of the harbor, the Auberge de Castille, home of the Spanish and Portuguese Knights, The Sock Market Building, and the Upper Barracca Gardens, an arcaded botanical garden that is sited in Valetta's highest point. It offers stunning panoramic views of the harbor and the Three Cities, just beyond. (They were once the dockyards and are now becoming residential areas with a thriving marina and waterfront restaurants and cafes)

The gardens offer shaded places to linger, wander and enjoy the views, fanned by pleasant breezes. At sunrise, noon and sunset, the cannons of the Saluting Batteries are fired, adding a sonic aura to the life of the city. The noon barrage signals the start of the musical parade down Republic Street of the Royal Marine Band. A wonderful treat is taking an elevator that brings you down to sea level, a 180-foot trip, in 25 seconds. There, you will find the cruise terminal, and ferry transport to the Three Cities. It is free for the descent, but it costs 1 euro for the trip up. (You are welcome to go up the stairs for free).

Then spend the rest of the day exploring the diversity of shops and other sights of Valetta which is a rich, visual experience, plus it offers many delightful places to just sit and enjoy a snack or a meal.

That night we dined at the rooftop restaurant of the Palace Hotel, "TemptAsian", located on the 9th floor, it offers spectacular views of the city, the harbor and the Mediterranean. We also were lucky, it was a Saturday night, and one could enjoy the spectacular fireworks displays of two competing cities that were celebrating their "festas" (Patron Saint festivities that entail food vendors, music and a religious ceremony where the heavy Patron Saint is paraded, supported by devout parishioners, the whole city is decorated with colorful sculptures and the streets are festooned with lights. It is quite an eventful spectacle that lasts the weekend))

Therefore, the dining experience was a feast of sensations, the two churches next door chiming every 15 minutes, the fireworks exploding in the horizon and, following a few discrete seconds, their explosive BOOMS!

The menu is "Fusion Cuisine", we tried a variety of flavors: Philadelphia Maki (Smoked Salmon, Avocado and Cream Cheese), Ika Calamari, Beef Tepenyaki (Perfectly cooked Filet of Beef, Shitake Mushrooms, Spring Onions and Garlic), (*The Palace Hotel, Sliema, High St. t. 2133 3444, open daily from 7 PM, avoid Sundays when the service and the kitchen is "off"*)

For our last day in Malta, the hotel's outstanding concierge, Thomas, scored an impossible coup. We wanted to visit the recently restored Hal Saflieni Hypogeum, an underground prehistoric cemetery that is considered "one of the most extraordinary archeological sites in

the world". Tickets are scarce, for conservation reasons, only 80 persons are allowed daily and they only admit 10 persons per hour, which are booked months in advance. However there is a chance for last minute cancelations. In Gozo, the hotel tried to get tickets and there were none. Thomas found a person who would stand in line at 8:00 AM, in Valetta's Museum of Fine Arts, for the 9:30 opening, and to try to score tickets for the next day. (You have to pay in advance, provide a passport number, and are warned to arrive ahead of time, because the hourly tours are guided and restricted.) Well they did it, and we had tickets for Sunday's last tour, at 4 PM. Thomas also booked round trip transportation from the hotel to Paola. (23 euros each way).

It was worth the cost and the trip to Malta. The necropolis is controlled by "Heritage Malta" and is a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The site is around 5,000 years old, an awe-inspiring experience, amazingly preserved. It comprises a labyrinth of chambers, on three different levels, cut from the rock, the upper level is the oldest, dating to 3,600 BC, apparently it was a cave that was enlarged. The Middle level, is the most important, dating to about 3,000 BC, where the most accomplished stone carving and painted ochre patterns are found. Also where the two most important events occur at this level: the Oracle Chamber and the Main Chamber.

The Oracle Chamber, with red ochre swirls adorning the ceiling, features a niche that allows low-pitched voices (mostly male) to reverberate eerily around the room. The Main Chamber, is my favorite, it is Proto-Palladian in design. A series of recesses are set in a smooth curved wall, denoting an entrance, framed by two niches. The semicircular main chamber features a portal framed by a pair of vertical megaliths with niches at each side is a precursor of a Palladian doorway. Remember that these were done by primitive men without tools. Some say this was the control center for alien spaceships. The lower, and last level, (2,400 BC) is characterized by a series of chambers that are very low and difficult to travel. This level is about 35 feet underground.

For me, this experience symbolizes all that is Malta, a respect and appreciation of the past that act as a frame and gateway to a prosperous future. It has always been and will remain a portal to many cultures and the present is joyful assimilation of the best of all worlds.



Oracle Chamber at Hal Saflieni Hypogeum,(Heritage Malta P

48 Hours in Gozo

By Jaime Cobas

The tiny isle of Gozo should be in your itinerary; it is only 9 miles by 4 miles, thus you can visit the highlights in two days, or linger for a leisurely stay in its hotels and spas. It is a rural, peaceful place; which "looks like Malta, 40 years ago". I went because the History Channel piqued my curiosity about its Neolithic temples and the connection to extra-terrestrials. Any way it is a beautiful place to visit and enjoy a sylvan vacation.

It is a 30-minute car ride from Sliema to the ferry, which departs from Cirkewwa (eastern Malta), across the Mediterranean Sea, for a 15 trip to Mgarr (pronounced Im-jar) a fishing village across the bay. It is so near, that it seems you can swim across.

The hotel in Gozo sent a car and driver to pick the luggage, and us up in Sliema, drive to the ferry and then take us directly to San Lawrenz. The ferries travel back and forth every 45 minutes and everything is very organized and runs smoothly.

The car arrives at the dock; there is a line for heavy transportation (construction trucks, supplies, etc.) and two other lines for passenger cars. After a 5-minute wait, traffic started moving and we were loaded. The driver stayed with the car and luggage, but we went topside to explore. To our surprise, you can see the entire isle of Gozo, almost an arm's length away. There is an open terrace around the boat, plus interior, air conditioned lounge with vending machines and an all purpose store at one end. Time flies, before you know it, everyone starts moving and returning to the cars; in about 5 more minutes our car was cleared to go out.

We arrived at an attractive fishing and commercial port, but aside of a stop at the tourist information office, everyone heads for the capital Victoria (originally named Rabat). We continued past it, headed to the San Lawrenz Kempinski Hotel, a 15-minute ride, because it is at the western end of the island.

Amid the arid landscape the hotel is, literally, an oasis, with lush vegetation and 5 pools. Its buildings blend in, fabricated with pale, local limestone blocks, light colored, matte wood, and simple wrought iron railings, everything "aged", so as not to stand out. However, the service is a standout.



San Lawrence Hotel, an oasis in the arid landscape

Upon arrival, before even going to our rooms, two persons were arranging for tours, restaurant reservations, and solicitous of our needs; they immediately arranged for a hotel's courtesy car to drive us the Victoria, and to pick us up two hours later.

The Citadel / Citadella/(Il- Kastell) is the fortified heart of the island, It was started in the Bronze Age, expanded by the Phoenicians, used during the Roman times, plumped up by the Aragonites, and reconstructed by the Knights of St. John. It is said it could accommodate the then entire population of Gozo, 366 families, overnight, and is now accessible via a steep ramp from the main street.

It has been well restored, with modern interventions (railings, an elevator and the New City Gates) that are well designed, and distinguish the old from the new, purposely. The Cathedral and its Museum are the most important places to visit, but there is also a Folklore Museum, the Archeological Museum, the Knights Armory and the Natural History Museum; these all are rather small and you will find them easily because the place is very compact. It is dotted with a few stores that sell local wares (linens, knitted goods and lace) plus a pleasant rooftop café for a snack or a drink.

The new Gates, with etched glass panels framed in steel are a spectacular addition, they lead to a plaza from which a wide flight of stairs rises towards St. Mary's Cathedral, designed by the same architect, Lorenzo Gafá, who also did the Cathedral in M'dina. The façade is Neo-Classical with an impressive central doorway. Two bronze sculptures of Pope Pius IX and Pope John-Paul (who visited in 2006) are installed just in front, protecting and welcoming their flock.



New gates at "Citadella", Gozo



St.Mary's Cathedral, Gozo

Graceful, with well-proportioned interiors it features a main central nave with 8 side chapels. The floor is paved in marble and an array of multi-hued tombs and memorials mark the central floor space. Because of budgetary restraints, a dome could not be built, however, as one

approaches the main altar, a “dome “is glimpsed; it is a marvel of “trompe-l’oeil”, an ingenious painting in perspective , that fools-the-eye, by Pippi, of Messina. (1739)

Not to be missed is the Baptismal Font at the entrance (and its replica, sculpted from Gozo Onyx. Also the High Altar, inlaid with malachite framed with gilded metal, and the statue of Santa Marija, on a silver plinth, that is paraded by the devout on its Feast day, August 15.

The museum, has four halls and a picture gallery; it displays a silver vault with ecclesiastical items and an assortment of objects (mitres, shoes, gloves, etc.)(Cathedral and Museum, 4 euros per person, 10Am to 5 PM, Mon.to Sat)

Next day, a car and driver took us to the GgantijaTemples (pronounced Jiganteeya) The pre-historic temple site that dates to 3200 BC and is one of Malta’s oldest. The walls have some of the biggest megaliths of the region, some are 20 feet tall, and one is said to weigh 50 tons. Local lore is that they were handled by a giant woman who carried a baby in one arm and a huge stone on the other. This is 1,000 years before the Great Pyramid of Cheops, in Egypt. (I trust the “ Ancient Aliens” theory, that they were extraterrestrials; how do you explain the smooth surfaces and the vertical placing of some, by people who did not have metal tools yet?)

Any way, they are impressive and mesmerizing. They have been well preserved and restored and, again, the modern interventions are very elegant. A visitor center and museum introduces the site and relates its history; there are informative visuals and esoteric information on what they ate and died from, before leading to a raised walkway that guides the visitors, restricting wanderers or of touching the existing conditions and plants. Signage is abundant, informative and clearly labeled.



Ggantija Ancient Portal (Heritage Malta Photo)



New Portal and Signage

The South Temple and the North Temple are contained within a wall of the local, durable, coralline stone, while the interiors were built of the lighter globigerina limestone brought from a nearby quarry. Some were plastered and painted which lead to speculations that they may have had some sort of covering. They also appear to be oriented in relation to the winter solstice sunrise. (Ggantija Temples, Heritage Malta, 9 euros adults, 7 euros students and seniors, 8 to 19:00, daily)

We continued on to Dwerja, on the western coast, for a boat trip to the Inland Sea, the “ Blue Grotto” and the remains of what used to be a highly photographed “ Azure Window”. Alas, it is no longer there, last March it collapsed, but it was featured in “ Game of Thrones” and you may see it there. Anyway, the boat trip is very pleasant, full of “ Kodak Moments” (that dates me!).



Several rowboats ply the Inland Sea, a calm patch of seawater that is connected to the open sea via a Gothic Arched fissure in the rocks, about 240 feet long, where one views the blue coral in the bottom, some moss and crystal encrusted rocks, before exiting to the open sea. You see the “ Broken Window”, also a rock formation that appears to be a “ skull” (reminding us of King Kong’s “Skull Island”, also a giant alligator atop the towering cliffs that edge the coastline. From this vantage points one can observe the various strata’s of how the island was formed and as it “rose” when the seas receded. The various layers of ash and basalt are revealed and this confirms an explanation of why Gozo is fertile; the rainwater that percolates through the top layer of coralline stone is trapped by a layer of mud, creating a reservoir, to be tapped during dry spells. (All this for 4 euros per person, payable before de-boarding.)

Before returning to the hotel we visited the “Ta’ Dbiegi Crafts Village”, just outside the entrance of the San Pawl, the place for local souvenirs and crafts. The many stalls offer lace items, leather goods, mouth blown glass, gold and silver filigree and ceramics. You can talk to the artists working there and discuss their work.

That night, on the eve of our departure, we dined at “Ta’ Frenc “ (pronounced Ta French) an award winning restaurant which many praise for the “ best fine- dining anywhere in the Maltese islands”. It is located in a 14th century farmhouse that grows and cultivates most of the ingredients used in the kitchen. It has an ample, but cozy main dining area, where the tables are spaced quite apart. Catering many weddings and feasts, it was used in the Angelina Jolie movie “ By the Sea”.

It was a feast to remember. We started with a glass of Prosecco, while perusing the menus. The 3 course Market Menu, offered Filets of line caught local fish, with mild garlic and chili sauce, red pepper dressing and a petit salad, or Truffle scented risotto with melted casutin (a Piedmontese cheese) and seared foie gras, which added a tasteful buttery flavor. Also, 24 hour cooked pork belly, with apple puree, cannelli beans, herb crumble and rosemary jus, or pasta filled with goat cheese, spinach pesto, walnut crumble and Pecorino shavings. For dessert, a Cheese platter and a Hot Soufflé. When summoned, the car service returned to take us back to the hotel. (*Ta’ Frenc, Marsalforn, Victoria Road, t. 21553888*)

The return trip to Malta was smooth and a repeat, in reverse, of the arriv

(All photos, unless otherwise indicated, by Jaime Cobas)

IF YOU GO

Malta

- The Palace Hotel – High Street, Sliema. thepalace@axhotelsmalta.com
Contacts: Astrid/ Front Desk, Thomas/ Concierge
- Valetta Ferry Every 30 Minutes www.valettaferryservices.com
- Vodafone/ Malta Airport or Bisazza St. /Sliema www.vodafone.com.mt/
- Scotts Supermarket Amery St. / Sliema .Groceries, Water, Liquor, Sundries, Sandwiches, etc.
- Barracuda 194 Main St. St. Julian's, www.barracudarestaurant.com t. 2133 1817
Elegant dining, award winning cuisine
- Ta' Kris 80 Fawwara Lane, Sliema www.takrisrestaurant.com t. 356 21337367
Traditional Maltese Cuisine
- Anciova 154 The Strand Gzira, Sliema www.anciovarestaurant@virgilio.it
Typical Sicilian fare and Seafood specialties
- Caffé Cordina 244 Republic Street, Valetta www.affecordina.com t. 2123 4385
Italian style coffee bar, with ice creams and pastries.
- Charles Grech Bistro 59 Sir Adrian Dingli St., Sliema t. 2132 0926 bistro@charlesgrech
Fine dining, pricey.
- Little Argentina 210 Tower Road, Sliema t. 9904 2444
Good steaks, good service, good prices, informal dining
- Tartarum Xatt is-Sajjieda, Marsaxlokk www.tartarum.com t. 2165 8089
Fine seafood, creatively prepared and presented, a Sunday must!
- TemtAsian The Palace Hotel, 9th floor, Sliema
Fusion of Oriental and Eastern cuisines; panoramic views of the city
- Prestige Cabs Malta Car and private tour services www.prestigecabsmalta.com
Anywhere, any time, prompt, and just a phone call away.
- Ta' Qali Crafts Village Buggiba, M'dina for Crafts and Souveneirs
- Anthony's Filigree Ta'Qali, Hut #1 t. 2141 5331 info@supergoldjewellers.com
A whole array of crafts, filigree, glass, enamelware, etc. Good prices.
- Go Bananas Republic St, Valetta t. 2733 7944
A warehouse of souvenirs, all prices; best custom made tee shirts.
- Mdina Glass Merchant St. Valetta t. 2122 6488
For last minute purchases, that you missed in M'dina
- Ronnie's Instant Digital Printing, 65 Tower Road, Sliema t. 2133 2468

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- San Lawrenz Kempinski Hotel, Rokon St. t. 2211 0000 www.kempinski.com/gozo
An exclusive oasis for relaxation and sports. Exemplary restaurants.
- Ta' Frenc Victoria Road, off Marsalforn, t. 2155 3888 www.tafrencrestaurant.com
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- Frank's Garage Ta'Cenc St. Sannat, t. 2155 6814 www.franksgarageltd.com
24 hour taxi service, ferry transfer , tours