

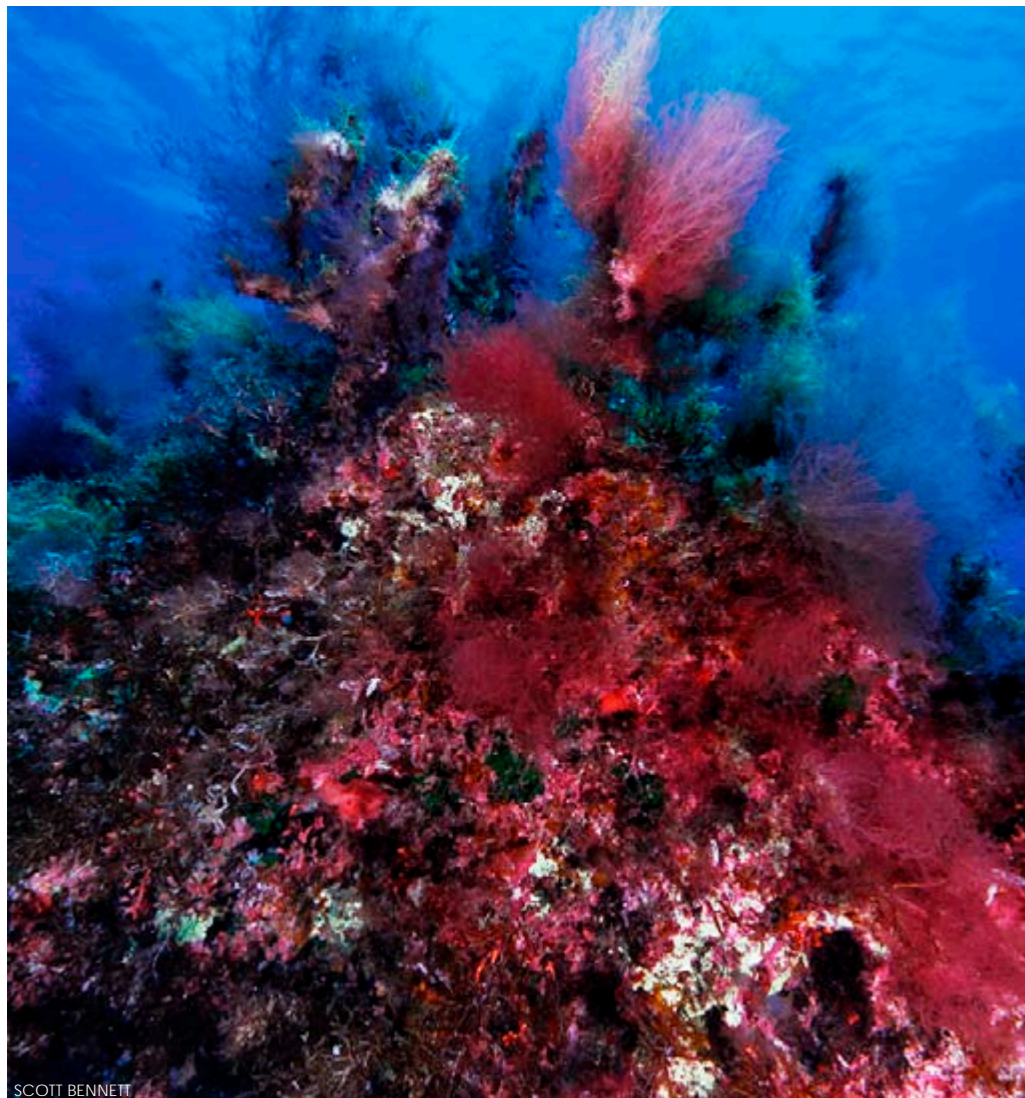


Malta's **GOZO Island**

— *Ancient Oasis of the Mediterranean*

Text by Scott Bennett. Photos by
Scott Bennett, Peter Symes & Gunild Symes

"Somehow, I can't imagine lawnmowers being a high selling item here," was one of my first thoughts while traversing the Maltese countryside. Dry and stark, the rocky landscape couldn't be more different than the soft green of Denmark we had left behind a mere four hours earlier. However, it was instantly appealing and quite unlike anything I had seen before. In every direction, the sense of history was palpable. Age-old walls of stone criss-crossed the hills while the limestone buildings appeared to meld with the landscape instead of being separate from it. The rays of the setting sun burnished the entire scene radiant orange, creating a timeless scene like something out of North Africa or the Middle East. I immediately knew a remarkable week was in store. And there was going to be diving, too!



SCOTT BENNETT



SCOTT BENNETT



SCOTT BENNETT

CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: The Azure Window is Gozo's most photographed natural attraction; A five-spotted wrasse peers from an eelgrass cluster in Xlendi Bay; Comino Island's colourful reef. PREVIOUS PAGE: Underwater photographer at a richly decorated wall of the dive site, Inland Sea

To be honest, Malta as a holiday destination, let alone a diving one, had never even crossed my mind. However, when X-RAY MAG's very own Peter and Gunild Symes announced a weeklong dive trip and asked me along, I was immediately intrigued. Having never visited Europe outside of the United Kingdom and eager to experience something new, I agreed in a heartbeat. Besides, who in their right mind could refuse the Mediterranean? In the end, Malta proved to be one of the

most pleasant and unexpected travel experiences that I've ever had.

Comprised of the primary islands of Malta, Gozo and Comino, the Maltese Archipelago is located in the Mediterranean 93km south of Sicily and 288km north of Africa. Occupying a strategic position on the trading route between Europe and Africa. Malta has been conquered and occupied by numerous civilizations during its 7,000-year history, from Bronze Age Neolithic peoples



SCOTT BENNETT

CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Panoramic view of Xlendi Bay from the St. Patrick's Hotel's rooftop patio; Xlendi Bay's scenic walkway at sunset; Happy cappuccino and biscotti at the Xlendi Bay promenade



GUNILD SYMES

us to one of the furthest outposts of the European Union. My guidebook certainly wasn't kidding; Malta *is* small. While descending for the final approach, I could easily discern the entire archipelago from my window without even craning my neck.

From the airport, it was then an hour transfer by road to the ferry terminal at Cirkkenwa where we boarded an inter-island ferry to Gozo. Our home for the week was the St. Patrick's Hotel, located in the small resort town of Xlendi. By the time we checked in and had a change of clothes, it was already 9:30pm. I initially thought we were out of luck dinner-wise, but this was Europe. Unlike at home in Toronto, dinner hours hold no bounds and all the restaurants were open. Not surprisingly, Maltese cuisine has a definite Italian influence, a result of its close proximity to Sicily. After a delectable meal of seafood marinara and Gozo wine, the 'Med' had officially won me over!

Still on Canadian time, I arose early the next morning and went up to the hotel's rooftop patio to get my bearings. The view was spectacular!

Occupying a magnificent position at the end of a long, narrow bay hemmed in by imposing limestone cliffs, Xlendi passed the Three Bears test: not too big, not too small. Just right!

After breakfast and a much-needed jolt of cappuccino, we headed over to the St. Andrews Dive Centre to sort out our gear. The shop was already a hive of activity, with a multitude of people readying themselves for the morning dive. On hand to meet us was manager Mark Busuttil, who quickly gave us the rundown on our week's activities. As we had arrived so late the previous evening, none of our camera gear was ready, so we opted out of the morning dive. I think Mark was somewhat relieved!

Diving

When I discovered we would only be doing two dives a day, I was initially disappointed. However, Gozo soon proved to be a dive destination unlike any I'd experienced before; part of the adventure was just getting to the dive sites! While a number of

the island's 54 sites can be reached by boat, the majority are shore dives accessible by road. With up to ten divers or more per trip requiring several vehicles for transport, some serious co-ordination is required. Fortunately, the island's compact size ensures dive sites are never more than a 20-minute drive or boat ride away.

As the effects of recent unsettled weather were still hampering conditions, Mark decided our afternoon dive would be at neighbouring Comino Island. Piling into Mark's car, we then headed to the marina at Mgarr Harbour, our arrival point by ferry the previous evening. Here, we boarded a speedboat for the short trip over to



PETER SYMES



SCOTT BENNETT

to the Phoenicians, Arabs, Turks, French and British. Brimming with history, the islands showcase an eclectic fusion of cultural, culinary and linguistic elements to create a distinctive character all its own.

From Copenhagen, a leisurely three and a half hour flight delivered

Malta's Gozo

CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT: Reef scene at Comino Island; Dino (inset), our affable dive guide; Comino Island's Blue Lagoon is a favourite destination for day-trippers; Eager for a handout, swarms of fish engulf divers outside the Comino Caves; A mosaic of pastel-hued algae at Comino Island; The network of caves at Comino Island make for a fascinating dive. All images this page by Scott Bennett



entered a large cave at 16m and ascended a chimney through the limestone plateau. Fortunately, the

prospects dicey, but we loaded our gear in a battered land rover, which soon proved to be the Maltese equivalent of the Energizer Bunny.

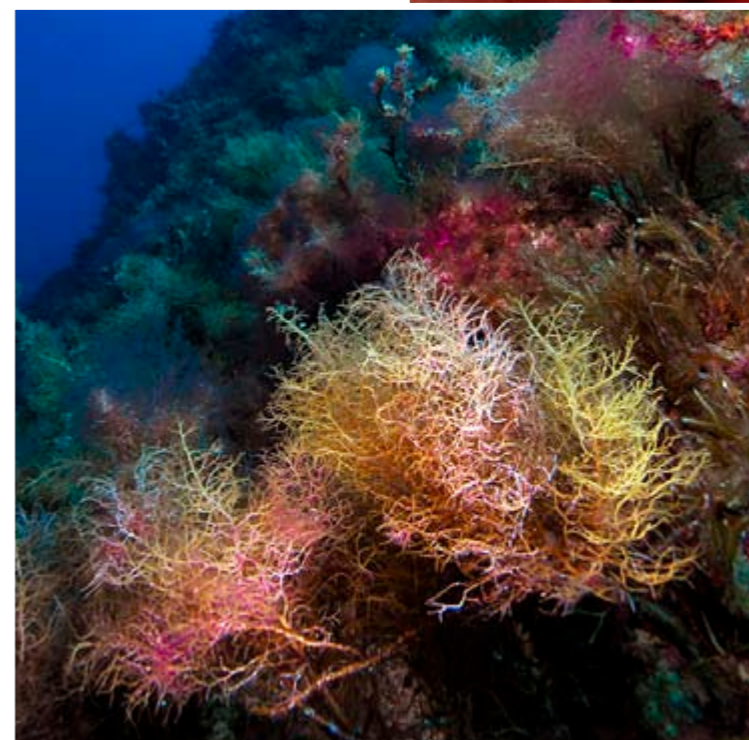
tunnel was wide enough for divers to maneuver without touching the sides. I was already eager for more!

Back in Xlendi, we met up had a pre-sunset walk down the narrow path leading to the old watchtower guarding the bay's entrance. The light was superb, with a multitude of photo ops at each and every turn. We didn't make it all the way to the tower, but the sunset was truly spectacular, igniting the clouds and rugged cliffs with glorious colour.

The following morning at the dive centre, Mark introduced us introduced Dino, who was to be our guide and driver for the remainder of the week. An affable Chilean boasting a broad smile and flowing silvery hair, he suggested the Blue Hole for day's first dive site. Menacing overcast skies made

(L-Irqieqa), situated off the island's southwest corner. From the anchor

point, we descended to a low rocky shelf at 6m. Happily, my 2mm suit was more than comfortable in the 25-degree water. I was immediately struck by the reef's appearance, which was quite different than anything I'd seen in the tropics. Stubby corals and lush green vegetation carpeted the slopes, resembling grassy terrestrial hills. Mirroring the rugged coastline above, a series of imposing boulders have created a network of huge caverns and swim throughs made for a contorted albeit fascinating dive. Near the end, we



Dwejra Point

Situated on Dwejra Point a 15-minute drive from Xlendi, Gozo's most popular dive site features a circular formation of limestone creating a large, clear rock pool. Dominating the proceedings is the Azure Window, a colossal natural arch that is one of Malta's most photographed natural attractions.

Upon arrival, we immediately headed over to a vantage point to judge the situation. Alas, the Blue Hole looked like a jacuzzi, with relentless waves spilling



Comino. By the time everyone was geared up and aboard, I could see why there were only two dives a day.

Wedged between Malta and Gozo, tiny Comino Island boasts a permanent population of four. Ringed by cliffs, it is home to the dazzling Blue Lagoon, where a combination of powder-white sand and clear water combines to give the appearance of an immense swimming pool.

Lantern Point

Our destination was Lantern Point





PETER SYMES



SCOTT BENNETT



PETER SYMES

A delicate flabellina nudibranch (left) provides a splash of colour at the Karwela wreck; Beaded fireworms are routinely encountered at Gozo dive sites (above); A tiny cuttlefish (right)

over the narrow isthmus of rock separating it from the adjacent ocean. A few hardy Russian divers braved the churning waters, while a nearby fisherman sat oblivious to the entire scenario. As we had cameras, Dino recommended giving it a miss. Disappointed, we hopped aboard the land rover and returned to Xlendi. Back in town, we discovered conditions were rough pretty much everywhere, so we decided on the sheltered waters of Xlendi Bay.

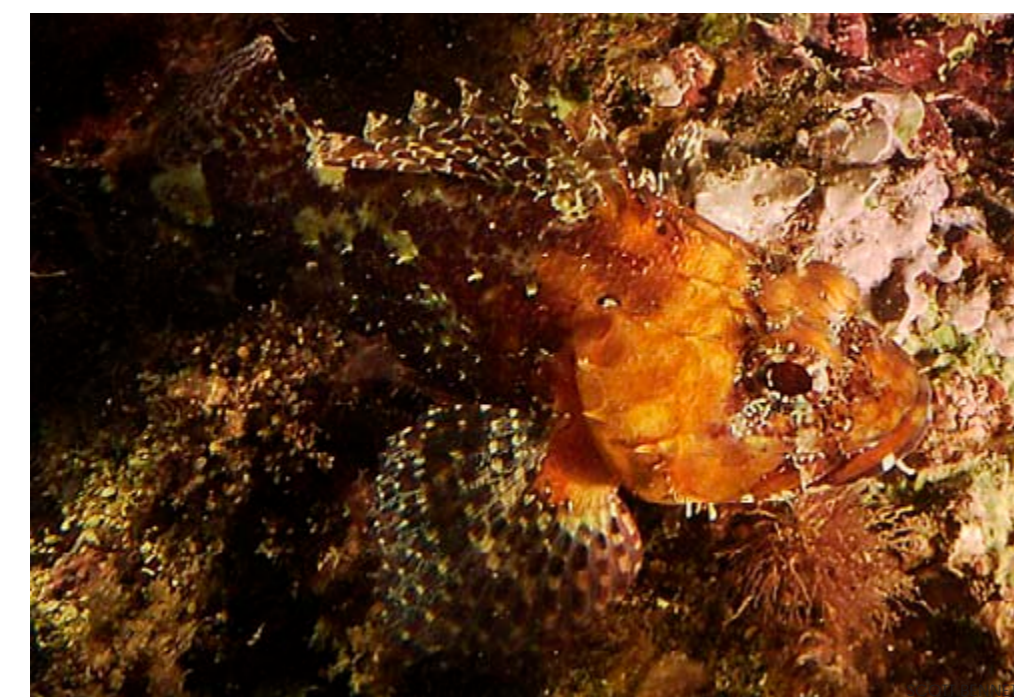
Xlendi Bay

After gearing up, we walked along the promenade to our entry point, a small ladder bolted to the rock face. Although the surface was calm, the visibility was limited to only a few metres. I was already kicking myself that I had brought wideangle instead of macro. Despite losing Dino for a short time, we managed to stick together as we kept

our eyes peeled for critters. We managed to locate some interesting scorpionfish, including a particularly photogenic orange specimen. Curse you, wideangle lens! However, the reef's most conspicuous residents were beaded fireworms. Boasting slate blue bodies accented by a multitude of puffy white hairs, some specimens were nearly a third of a metre in length.

Back at the dive centre, Mark told of one hapless Swedish diver who was so captivated by the 'pretty worms' that he placed one on his forearm for a photo. The following day it had ballooned to Popeye the Sailor proportions and required serious medical attention. So remember folks, look but don't touch!

Glancing at my watch, I discovered there was only a half hour before the next dive. I hurried over to a nearby sandwich shop to buy us some lunch. Still clad in my dripping wetsuit, no one even batted an eye.



SCOTT BENNETT

Accessing the Blue Hole requires an arduous trek over slippery jagged rocks (above) A scorpionfish rests underneath a large boulder near Xlendi Bay (far left)



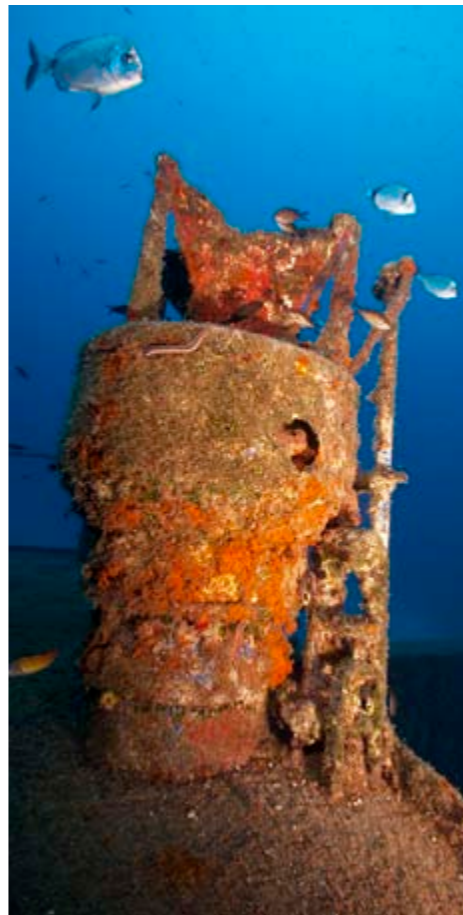
silver



cinema of dreams



www.seacam.com



THIS PAGE: Resting on the sandy bottom near the Cirkkenwa ferry terminal, the Rozi is a magnet for fish and divers alike. All images this page by Scott Bennett

Rose Wreck

After inhaling our curry wraps, we were back in the land rover heading for Mgarr harbour. This time our destination was the Rose Wreck across the channel just off Malta. I couldn't help but notice how much faster the speedboat was than the ferry. Situated near the Cirkkenwa ferry terminal, the wreck is a tugboat sunk in



Malta's Gozo

1992 as an attraction for tourists on submarine tours. Although the tours have long-ceased, it is now a popular dive site.

Entering the water via giant stride, I was instantly struck by the visibility. Easily 30+ m, it was a world away from the murky waters of Xlendi Bay, with vivid blue water right out of the tropics. Sitting upright on a broad expanse of sand at 30m, it had already been colonized by colourful marine growth. A magnet for fish including chromis, bream and sand smelt, the vessel was quite photogenic,

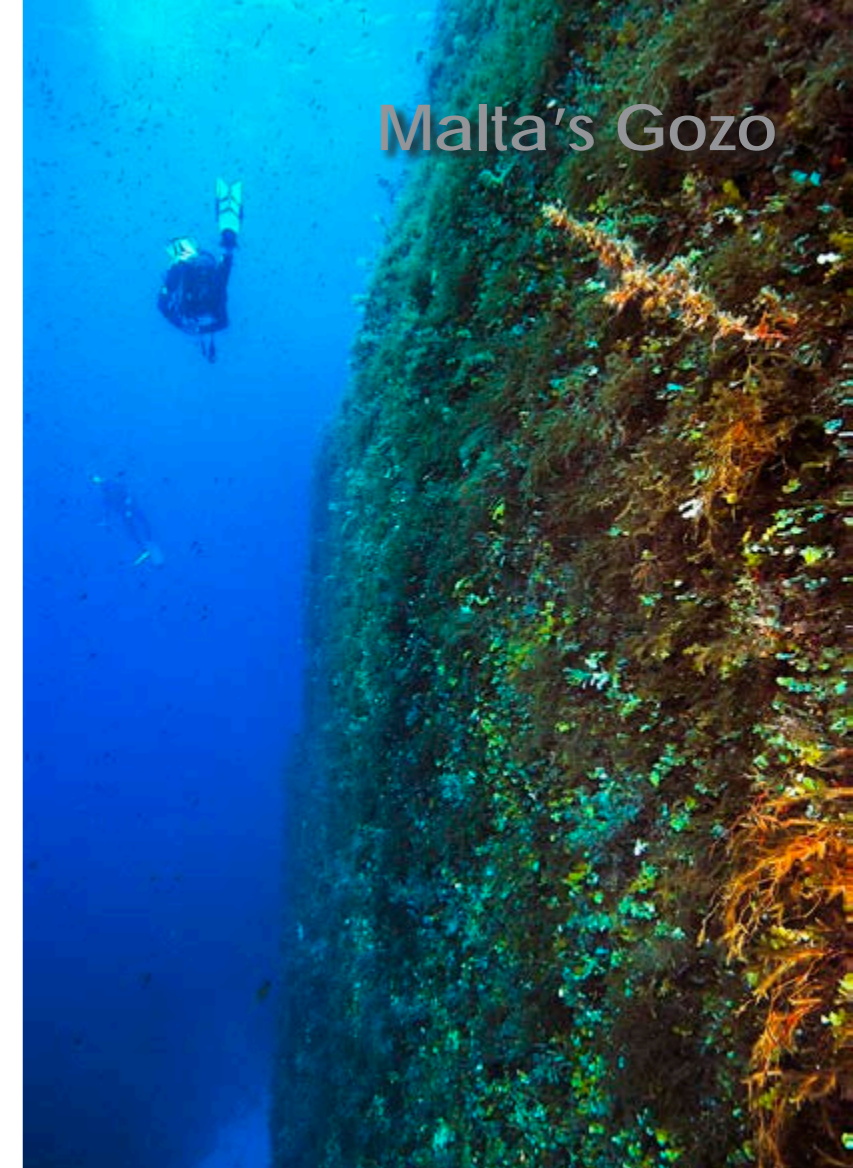
and I could have easily spent an additional half hour photographing. However, my computer had other ideas and we soon had to ascend to shallower water. Enroute to our safety stop, we passed through a sizeable underwater arch. As impressive as it was, I would later discover it to be the smaller sibling of a much larger relative. Back on the boat, Dino nonchalantly informed us the visibility was merely average that day, as it sometimes extends to up to 50m.

The next morning, we decided to give the





CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: A juvenile Portuguese man-o-war stands out from the vivid blue waters of Crocodile Rock; Divers congregate at the Inland Sea's entry point; The sheer drop offs of Crocodile Rock cascade to the depths below; The reef top at Crocodile Rock. All images this page by Scott Bennett



entering, we were greeted with an amazing sight. Dwarfed by the sheer immensity of the tunnel, a procession of divers passed, silhouetted by a narrow ribbon of blue leading to the exit beyond. At a depth of 18m, there was certainly no danger of colliding with anyone in here.

Continuing onwards, we entered the open ocean, with visibility easily reaching 30m. To the right and left, vertical fissures scarred the cliff face, while lush green growth and sponges shrouded the walls. During calm conditions, it's possible to

swim all the way to the Blue Hole.

Back in Xlendi, we were happy to discover the speedboat anchored near the dive shop. With 90 minutes to spare before our next dive, we had time for a leisurely lunch.

Grabbing our housings, we wandered over to the promenade and procured our usual seats at the St. Patrick's outdoor patio. Another day, another sumptuous pasta dish. The hardest part was fighting off the temptation of a glass of wine.

does resemble a crocodile's head! From the anchor point on the reef top, we descended to a rock platform at 7m. Following the reef to the rock's southern edge revealed a sheer-sided natural amphitheatre plummeting to the depths. We also had company; swimming in the blue was an impressive school of Mediterranean barracuda. Unfazed by our presence, they tolerated a close approach, allowing for endless photo opportunities. Continuing our circumnavigation, the vertiginous walls coupled with the 30m + visibility made for a truly spectacular dive. Immense undersea formations towered above distant divers as sea bream; rainbow wrasse and parrotfish flitted past. Enroute, we chanced across a diminutive jellyfish, pulsating white against the vivid blue. We later discovered it to be a juvenile Portuguese man-o-war, making me grateful I didn't get too close.

Blue Hole another try. Unfortunately, conditions remained maddeningly uncooperative, so Dino suggested the nearby Inland Sea.

Inland Sea

Created millions of years ago when an immense limestone cavern collapsed, the shallow lagoon is linked to the sea via a 100m long tunnel through a nearby cliff. After gearing up by the land rover,

we strolled over to the jetty, which was already chock-a-block with divers. Sliding into waist-deep water, Dino remarked that it was to be the easiest of the week's shore dives, a comment that bore decidedly ominous overtones.

Finning to the entrance, an immediate descent proved necessary to avoid the relentless stream of tour boat traffic. Upon



Crocodile Rock

After lunch, it was a full boat as we headed for Crocodile Rock, positioned offshore near Dwejra Point and the rather unglamorously named Fungus Rock. Passing alongside the towering limestone cliffs, the sea route was decidedly more scenic, not to mention expeditious!

We soon discovered it wasn't one of those fancifully named locations where one has to strain their imagination. It REALLY



SCOTT BENNETT

Victoria

For a change of pace, we all decided to head into Victoria for the evening. Gozo's principal town, it was originally known as Rabat before being renamed in 1897 to commemorate Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee. However, many locals still refer to it by its old name, which translates as "superb" in Arabic and archaic Maltese. Even with the main road linking Xlendi and Victoria closed due to resurfacing, the detour took all of 12 minutes to get to the bus terminal near the main square. Getting around was quite simple, as all signs were in English.

The town's dominating feature is Il Kastell (The Citadel), dramatically positioned on a hill overlooking the town. Before heading up to we made quick stop to photograph St. Francis Church located on the Pjazza San Franġisk. Dedicated in 1906, the church was stunning, bathed in the warm glow of the late afternoon sun. Despite being armed with a guidebook and map, it didn't take long for us to get pleasantly lost amidst the tangle of narrow streets. At every step, honey-coloured houses adorned with an intriguing medley of ornate covered balconies beckoned for photos. Maltese houses all have names, ranging from the traditional (Maria), to

the somewhat non-traditional (Hakuna Matata).

After a few more wrong turns, we finally discovered the road ascending the hill to the citadel's entrance. Compact and picturesque, it was originally constructed by the Arabs and hosts a cathedral and several museums. Just within the main gate lay the 17th-century baroque Cathedral of the Assumption whose imposing façade was infuriatingly obscured with scaffolding. It is famous for the remarkable trompe l'oeil painting on its ceiling, which depicts the interior of a dome that was never built due to a lack of funds. A walk around the bastions offered stunning panoramas of the entire island, with the Mediterranean visible in each direction.

With feet and cameras exhausted, we decided to stay for dinner before heading back to Xlendi. There was no shortage of restaurants and we soon settled on It-Tokk (Meeting Place), overlooking Victoria's main square, the Pjazza Indipendenza. From our table on the second story outdoor patio, we were spoiled with stunning views of the now-floodlit citadel. I couldn't resist getting out my camera for one last photo.



GUNILD SYMES



PETER SYMES

CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT: Victoria's dramatic citadel of Il Kastell as seen from the road to Xlendi Bay; A typical narrow winding walkway found in the quaint inner streets of Victoria; St. Francis Church in Victoria; Homes are given names such as Maria, the patron saint chosen for this abode; Il Kastell's ramparts command spectacular views of the Gozo countryside; Mopeds are common in the quiet narrow alleys of the town



GUNILD SYMES



GUNILD SYMES



PETER SYMES

Third time's the charm

With our remaining diving days limited, we set out once again the next morning to try our luck at the Blue Hole. Arriving early to beat the morning rush, the third time proved a charm, as sea conditions were perfect. However, just getting to

the pool proved to be an adventure. After traversing a flat shelf of rock and descending some metal stairs, the going got rougher. Clambering over a multitude of wet, jagged rocks through a cleft in the limestone, I didn't wish to contemplate the results of a misplaced

foot. Finally reaching the pool, we descended 8m to an archway mirroring the Azure Window above. The actual size was difficult to comprehend until a group of divers passed directly beneath it. The scale was simply jaw dropping. Dino then



led us to a massive undersea cave. Entering the interior, we descended to 21m, where our torches startled a pair of hefty groupers resting on the flat, sandy bottom. Annoyed by the intrusion, they made a hasty retreat to the safety of the dark interior. Our 50-minute dive simply wasn't long enough.

Comino Caves

The afternoon saw a repeat visit to Comino. At the north side of the island Comino Caves consists of a large system of caves and tunnels extending in excess of 30m through the limestone headland. With a maximum depth of 11m and no noticeable current, the dive was quite leisurely. It also proved to be the week's 'fishiest' site with legions of saddled bream, two-banded bream and damselfish approaching divers for a handout. Entering a large cave entrance, torch beams revealed walls shrouded with a mosaic of pastel-hued sponges, corals and algae. A number of the passages were a bit on the tight side, but we all managed to squeeze through without any difficulty. However, a few errant fins resulted in a snowstorm of

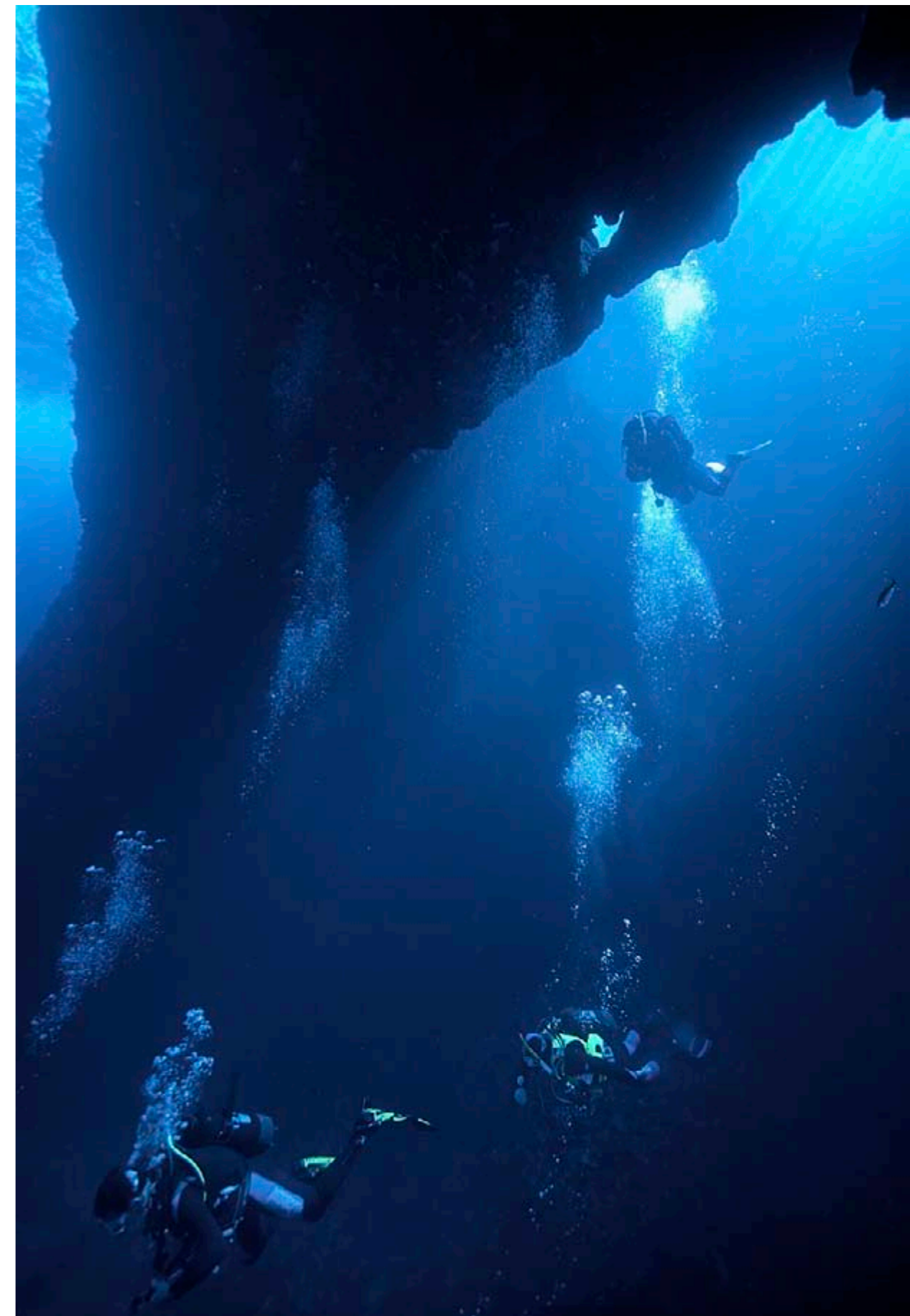


fragmented algae.

After the dive, Mark dropped us off for a shore excursion. The beach was quite possibly the smallest I have ever seen. Crammed full of sunburned holidaymakers in beach chairs, I was reminded of an overcrowded penguin rookery. Wading through throngs of tourists, we followed a trail along the rocky hillside. The air was

LEFT TO RIGHT: Cave entrance on Comino Island; Mediterranean barracuda cruise the blue at Crocodile Rock; The Blue Hole's incredible undersea arch towers over passing divers. All images this page by Scott Bennett

Malta's Gozo



NEOL fourth element EQUIPMENT FOR ADVENTURE

FOURTH ELEMENT TEAM DIVER: Scott Bennett
in The Lagoon June 2010
www.neol.com

PROTEUS





PETER SYMES



GUNILD SYMES



Malta's Gozo

GUNILD SYMES

redolent with a familiar aroma that I later discovered to be wild thyme. A high vantage point offered a spectacular panorama of the entire lagoon and tiny Cominotto Island, with the northern coast of Malta visible in the distance. Dominating the horizon was the Comino tower, a fortress erected by the Knights of St. John in the 17th century as part of an early warning system to protect the area from marauding corsairs, pirates and Turks. It obviously had no effect on ice cream trucks,

which had somehow colonized the car-free island.

Topside excursions

The next day, we decided to take a break from diving to experience some of Gozo's land-based attractions. Our first stop was the extraordinary temple complex of Ggantija situated outside the village of Xaghra.

Ggantija

Translated as "Giant's Grotto",

Ggantija's two temples are the largest and most complete of Malta's megalithic shrines. One of them, estimated to have been constructed between 3600 and 3000 BC, is the oldest stone structure in the world, predating the Great Pyramids of Egypt by hundreds of years. According to legend, the temple walls were built in one day and one night by a female giant named Sunsuna, who accomplished the feat while nursing a baby.

A place of pilgrimage for Malta's ancient inhabitants, archaeologists believe the temples were dedicated to the Great Earth Mother, a goddess of fertility. Characterized by round, curved architecture, the two shrines suggest the body of the Earth Mother, with broad hips and full breasts. It is still a mystery as to how the island's ancient inhabitants were able to hoist such massive stones, with some weighing in at more than 1000kg.

Salt Pans

Afterwards, we headed to the island's north coast towards the resort town of Marsalforn. Along the way, we stopped at an overlook to admire picturesque Ramla Bay with its sandy beach, a rarity on Gozo's

rugged coastline. Just outside of town along Xwieni Bay, the peculiar natural formation of Il-Qolla l-Bajda (white hill) overlooked a man-made one; an intricate patchwork of salt pans hewn into the rugged coastline.

Produced only during the summer months, sea salt production has a long tradition in Gozo. The first step is the easy part, with rough weather flooding the pans with seawater. Once sizzled dry by the sun, the residual salt crystals are then harvested utilizing backbreaking manual labour carried out in the scorching heat.

Ta'Mena

The morning's most pleasant surprise was a visit to the Ta' Mena Estate. Situated in the Marsalforn Valley between Victoria and Marsalforn Bay, Ta' Mena is Gozo's first agritourism development. Upon arrival, we met owner Joseph Spiteri who showed us around the property. The estate includes a fruit garden, olive grove with about 1,500 olive trees, over ten hectares of vineyards and a state of the art winery. The diverse assortment of produce ranges from Mediterranean herbs such as thyme and rosemary to olives, lemons, oranges, pomegranates, strawber-



PETER SYMES

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Gozo's ancient temple complex of Ggantija predates the Great Pyramids of Egypt by hundreds of years; Olive trees; An intricate patchwork of salt pans is hewn into the rugged coastline near the resort town of Marsalforn; Ramla Bay features an expansive sandy beach, a rarity on Gozo's rugged coastline



GUNILD SYMES



SCOTT BENNETT

ries, tomatoes and watermelons.

Joe explained that the property was unique in Gozo, offering accommodation for those wanting to take part in agricultural experiences such as fruit picking, grape and olive harvesting, winemaking and olive-oil pressing. Just procuring the land has been a major undertaking, with ownership of the surrounding countryside being passed down by a number of families through many generations. With the advent of immigration, purchasing up the property has required a

worldwide search that took a number of years to complete.

After our tour, we all sat down to a delicious buffet-style lunch prepared by Joe's wife and daughter, with the majority of the ingredients

coming right from the property. Especially delectable was an appetizer of fresh bread called hobz slathered with sun-dried tomato paste and a drizzle of olive oil. Much thicker than the usual tomato paste with a more intense flavour, I never would have imagined it as spread for bread. I was so smitten that I purchased a hefty jar to bring home.

Along with more standard Maltese fare such as salami, salad and eggplant, the most unusual dish was salad of mint, watermelon and gbejniet, unpasteurized goat's milk cheese flavoured with salt and crushed black

peppercorns. I never imagined such disparate ingredients would meld so superbly!

Afterwards, Joe also showed us the proper (and highly complex) procedure to peel and open a pomegranate. If a test had been required afterwards, I would have no doubt failed miserably.

During the meal, we had the opportunity to sample a splendid selection of Gozo wine including red, white and rose. We even sampled one of Joe's specialties, liquor prepared from the fruit of the prickly pear cactus. The latter proved especially dangerous, and we were all grateful our tour was finished after lunch. It was hard to believe we could fit so much into half a day.



SCOTT BENNETT

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: The vineyards at Ta'Mena Estate; The owner, Joe Spiteri, demonstrates how to peel a pomegranate (inset); Delicious Ta'Mena lunch with fresh produce; Olives and olive oil of Ta'Mena



SCOTT BENNETT

POWERED BY
DUAL ALGORITHM

PELAGIC Z+ PELAGIC DSAT

Véo

Three dive computers - Unlimited possibilities

OCEANIC
INNOVATION FIRST
www.OceanicWorldwide.com



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Despite being sunk only recently, growth has already started to colonize the vessel; Dive guide Dino poses in the wheelhouse of the Karwela; Peter photographs a flabellina nudibranch perched on a mast; Resting at 35m, the Karwela is a former passenger ferry sunk to create an artificial reef. All image this page by Scott Bennett

headed down a bone-jarring track that would have mortally wounded the suspension of an average vehicle. The views were dramatic, offering uninterrupted views of farmland sloping to the rugged shoreline below. Our land rover took it all in stride and Dino expertly delivered us to the parking lot without incident.

lying upside down between 35 and 40m. "They're all heading there just because it's deeper," mused Dino. To avoid the impending undersea bottleneck, he suggested the nearby *MV Karwela* instead. We certainly started the day with a healthy dose of exercise, as it was a bit of a hike to the entry point. After descending steps hewn into the rock, we traversed a series of rock slabs that fortunately lacked the Blue Hole's jagged entry. As we were going to gear up at the water's edge, several trips were necessary to haul everything

down. By this point, the Germans were already enroute to the *Xlendi* so we headed straight for the *Karwela*. Within five minutes of descending the slope, the vessel's dim silhouette broke through the gloom. The *Karwela* is a 50m long passenger ferry sunk in 2006 to create an artificial reef. Not quite as deep as the *Xlendi*,

she rests upright a depth of 35m. Although barren in the growth department, it was nonetheless a fascinating dive. It's also possible to enter the wheelhouse, which

Dino did to pose for a photo. Peter also discovered the week's first nudibranch, a beautiful pink flabellina (which I unfortunately missed). Due to the depth, I hung

More diving

For our final day of diving, Dino recommended another wreck dive. We then loaded our gear in the land rover for one final time and set out. Turning off the immaculate main round, we

MV Xlendi & MV Karwela
We arrived to discover a sizeable contingent of Germans already gearing up. Their destination turned out to be the *MV Xlendi* a purposely-sunk passenger ferry



PETER SYMES



GUNILD SYMES

Steeped in history, the intricate tangle of Mdina's streets is a pleasure to explore (left); The Strand at Silema (above) provides fantastic sunset views of neighbouring Valletta



GUNILD SYMES

With Mdina's citadel a popular film location, costumed extras are a common sight

around the upper portions of the deck towards the bow. I later discovered that we missed a unique sight; an old VW Beetle had later been sunk on the vessel's rear deck.

With the spectre of deco looming, we reluctantly ascended the nearby slope to shallower waters. Healthy meadows of eelgrass hosted abundant populations of fish. On the seabed, small ridges of overhanging rock proved to be a popular hangout for an array of critters, including red scorpionfish, flatworms, octopus and even a tiny cuttlefish.

Malta

After a wonderful six days of diving, it was finally it was time to bid Gozo adieu. After catching the ferry back to the main island, we immediately headed to our overnight accommodation, the San Antonio Hotel and Spa in St. Paul's Bay. After Gozo's sleepy environs, the bustling resort atmosphere of St. Paul's was like Miami Beach. After a quick check-in

and cappuccino (yes, ANOTHER one), we set out on our afternoon tour of Malta.

Mdina

Our first stop was the city of Mdina, a UNESCO world heritage site a fifteen-minute drive from the hotel. Occupying a commanding position atop a rocky promontory, the fortified bastions of medieval Mdina loom high above the azure Mediterranean.

Derived from the Arabic word 'Medina', the city's present name comes from the Saracens who arrived around 870 AD. Christened the "Silent City" by residents and visitors alike, the narrow streets are mercifully off limits to cars. Entering the old city walls was like stepping into a time capsule, its enchanting labyrinth of meandering laneways crammed with churches, palaces and stately houses. Rounding a corner, I was startled by the appearance of an assembly of

men clad in medieval garb. The illusion was quickly shattered; not only were they wearing wraps but one fellow was eating one. I then discerned a series of snaking cables leading to a nearby film crew.

Fronted by a large square, the impressive Cathedral of the Conversion of St Paul is the centrepiece of the old city. Constructed between 1697 and 1702, it replaced the original Norman church destroyed by an earthquake and is believed to occupy the site of a villa belonging to Publius, Malta's first Roman governor. While admiring some intricate balconies adorning the square's buildings, I asked our guide Vince what the local people called them. "Balconies" he quipped with an utterly deadpan expression. Old English style phone booths and mailboxes provided a charming reminder of the days of British colonial rule.

We could have spent hours exploring, but we had one final stop to make



PETER SYMES

The Cathedral of the Conversion of St Paul is the centrepiece of Mdina's old city

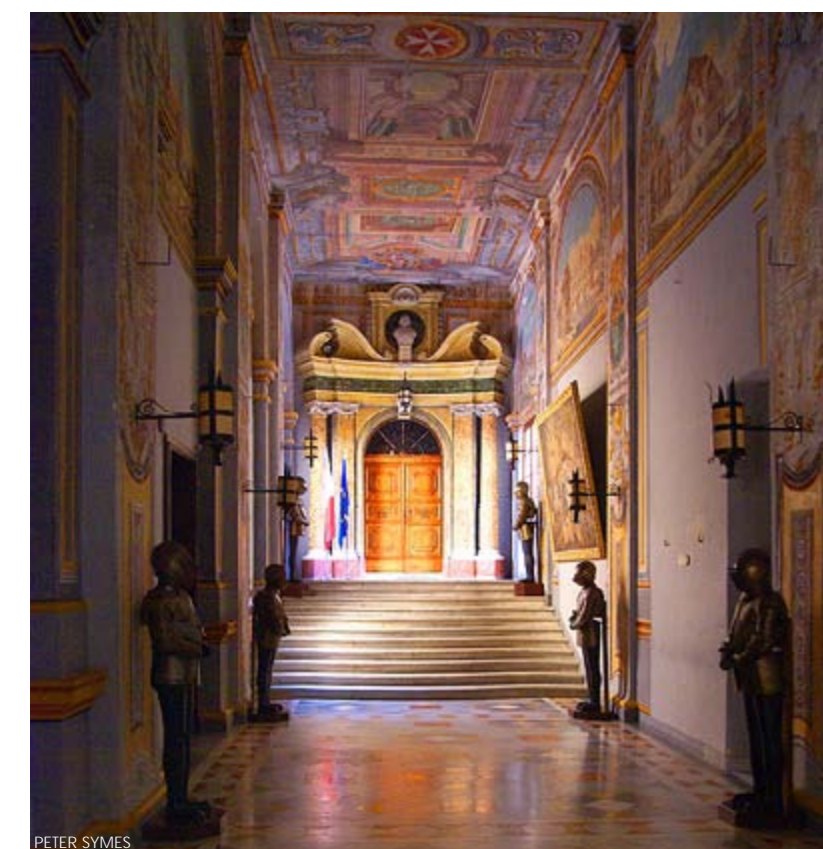


GUNILD SYMES



PETER SYMES

CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Malta's compact capitol of Valletta occupies one of the most outstanding natural sites in the Mediterranean; The stunning interior of St. Paul's Co-Cathedral is a masterwork of Baroque architecture; Interior of the Grand Master's Palace



PETER SYMES

across Marsamxett Harbour. As the light waned, the city lights transformed the historic skyline into a mesmerizing vision against the deepening indigo sky. As the last vestiges of light dissipated, cameras and photographers were exhausted!

Valletta

Our final day in Malta proved to be a whirlwind of activity, with our first stop being Valletta, the Maltese capitol. Occupying one of

the most arresting natural sites in the Mediterranean, Valletta was simply extraordinary. Perched atop the rugged Mount Sceberras peninsula separating Marsamxett and Grand Harbours, the

city was named after its founder, Jean Parisot de la Valette, Grand Master of the Order of St John. Encompassing a compact area of 600m by 1,000m with a population of 7000, the diminutive city is a cultural cocktail of European art and architecture.

Constructed by the Knights of St. John starting in 1566, the city is one of the first planned towns in Europe.

The island's principal business centre and the seat of government, its network of constricted streets boast some of Europe's finest art, churches and palaces. Upon being named a World Heritage site in 1980, UNESCO declared Valletta among the most concentrated historic areas in the world. Right away, I could see a mere morning wouldn't be nearly enough time.

Upper Barrakka Gardens

After parking the van, a short stroll brought us to the Upper Barrakka Gardens. Created in the late 16th century, the colonnaded gardens offered a welcome respite from Valletta's bustle while a viewing platform offered a stunning panorama of Valletta and the Grand Harbour. In the distance, Fort St. Elmo guarded the harbour's entrance facing Ricasoli Fort on the eastern arm of Grand Harbour. Contrasting sharply with the harbour's vibrant blue, a hodgepodge of ochre-hued buildings jostled for space along the steep hillside creating a photographer's dream. I didn't want to leave.

St. Paul's Co-Cathedral

The remainder of the morning was spent exploring Valletta's bevy of attractions.

Constructed between 1573 and 1578, St. Paul's Co-Cathedral is Malta's largest church. Framed by twin bell towers, the unadorned exterior is no preparation for the wonders that lay within. A riot of Baroque splendour, the magnificent interior was truly wondrous to behold. The Cathedral contains eight chapels, each dedicated to the patron saint of the eight langues (divisions based on nationality of the Knights). High above, every centimetre of the vaulted ceiling was covered with paintings depicting scenes from the life of St. John., while a collage of more than 300 tomb slabs in a rainbow of colours covered the floor below. Numerous side altars, columns and alcoves were emblazoned with a wealth of intricate details including the distinctive Maltese crosses, the insignia of the Knights of St. John. Gold shrouded

before dinner. Negotiating Friday afternoon rush-hour traffic, we arrived at Silema's Triq ix-Xatt (the Strand) in the nick of time to catch the setting sun gloriously illuminate the Valletta shoreline



GUNILD SYMES



GUNILD SYMES

CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT: The ruins of Hagar Qim; Colourful fishing boats called luzzu bob in Marsaxlokk's picturesque harbour; A thoroughly decadent ricotta cheese dessert; The spectacular Blue Grotto on Malta's southern coast; The distinctive 'Eyes of Osiris' adorn a fishing boat



PETER SYMES

virtually every surface, adding an opulence that bordered on sensory overload.

Grand Master's Palace

A short stroll away on Palace Square lay the Grand Master's Palace. Now hosting the President's office, it has been the seat of Maltese government since the time of the Knights. In these days of heightened safety measures, it was downright surreal wandering the superbly appointed rooms and passages with a complete absence of guards. At the parliamentary entrance, the only semblance of security was a few suits of armour. A highlight was the Council Chamber, adorned with priceless Gobelin's tapestries woven in France for Grand Master Ramón Perellos y Roccafi.

Marsaxlokk

From Valletta, a short drive brought us to the coastal village of Marsaxlokk (marsaxlokk) for lunch. Its name is derived from marsa, meaning "port" and xlokk, the Maltese name for the southeasterly Mediterranean wind known as the Sirocco. Home to 70 percent of the nation's fishing fleet, the harbour was used as an anchor-

age by the invading Turks during the Great Siege of 1565. Today, it is famous for its flotilla of double-ended fishing boats called luzzu. Boldly painted in hues of yellow, blue and red, many were ornamented with the distinctive "Eyes of Osiris" to ward off evil spirits, a design thought to date back to the ancient Phoenicians.

Hagar Qim & Blue Grotto

With time running out, we just had time to visit the ancient ruins of Hagar Qim and the striking natural arch of the Blue Grotto before heading to the airport to catch our flight.

It is said that the massive stones of Hagar Qim were erected around 3600 and 3200 BC, and are considered to mark one of the most ancient religious sites on Earth.

Located on the southern coast of Malta, Blue Grotto is actually a group of sea caverns in which each morning various blue colors are reflected off the waters by the sun and the phosphorescent colors of underwater flora are visible.

Despite the country's diminutive size, we barely scratched the surface of all the cultural, historical and natural sites to see,



PETER SYMES

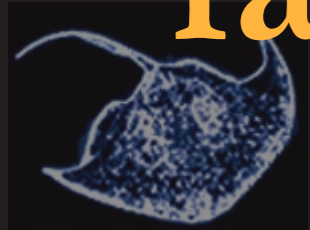
not to mention the high end shopping district in Villetta as well as the quaint street boutiques and antique shops of Victoria.

During our stay, we did a total of nine dives each offering a broad array of environments. While fish life was less than I've encountered in Asia, the spectacular undersea landscapes and tremendous visibility made for some truly enjoyable diving experiences. Along with the remarkable history, friendly people and sumptuous food, I'd go back in an instant. While small in size, Malta is big on attractions! ■



GUNILD SYMES

fact file



Malta



SOURCE: CIA.GOV WORLD FACTBOOK

History With the signing of the Treaty of Paris in 1814, Malta was formally acquired as a crown colony of the British Empire, remaining a staunch supporter of the United Kingdom through both World wars. Upon attaining independence in 1964, the nation remained in the British Commonwealth until becoming a republic a decade later. Since about the mid-1980s, the island has transformed itself into a freight transshipment point, a financial center and a tourist destination. After a narrow vote in a national referendum, Malta became an EU member in May 2004. The Euro was adopted as the national currency on 1 January 2008, with coins displaying the Maltese cross. Government: Republic. Capital: Valletta

Geography Comprised of an archipelago of five islands, Malta is situated off Southern Europe in the Mediterranean Sea between Sicily and North Africa. Of the five, only the three largest islands—Malta, Gozo and Comino—are inhabited. The tiny islets of Filfa

lines, providing excellent natural harbours. Although bounded by sea cliffs in many areas, the landscape is primarily dry, low and rocky, with no mountains present on the islands. The highest point is Ta' Zuta on the island of Malta, which rises to a height of 253m. Neighbouring Gozo is noticeably greener, with terraced hillsides and flat-topped hills. Malta and Tunisia are currently discussing the commercial exploitation of the continental shelf between their countries, particularly for oil exploration.

Climate Malta's climate is Mediterranean with mild, rainy winters and hot, dry summers.

Environmental issues Due to its compact size, Malta faces a number of serious environmental issues. Along with such world-threatening issues such as air pollution, biodiversity, ozone layer protection and climate change, other localized concerns include desertification, endangered species, hazardous wastes, marine dumping and ship pollution. In addition, limited natural fresh water resources have seen an increasing

reliance on desalination. Malta is party to agreements including Air Pollution, Biodiversity, Climate Change, Climate Change-Kyoto Protocol, Desertification, Endangered Species, Hazardous Wastes, Law of the Sea, Marine Dumping, Ozone Layer Protection, Ship Pollution, Wetlands.

Economy Malta's financial services industry has grown in recent years, escaping significant damage from the 2008-09 international financial crisis. This was largely due to the sector being centered on the indigenous real estate market and not being highly leveraged. Locally, the restricted damage from the financial crisis has been attributed to the stability of the Maltese banking sys-

RIGHT: Location of Malta on global map
BELOW: Location of Xlendi on map of Malta



tem and to its prudent risk-management practices. However, with the economy contracting by 2.2 percent in 2009, the government took steps to supply direct grants to struggling local businesses. Due to its geographic location between the EU and Africa, Malta has become an ever-increasing target for illegal immigration, which has placed a tremendous strain on the islands' political and economic resources. With limited fresh water supplies and few domestic energy sources, Malta produces only about 20 percent of its food needs. Along with natural resources including limestone and salt, the islands' range of agriculture products include potatoes, cauliflower, grapes, wheat, barley, tomatoes, citrus, cut flowers, green peppers; pork, milk, poultry and eggs. Effects of the global economic downturn, combined with elevated electricity and water prices, have dam-

aged Malta's economy, which is heavily dependent on foreign trade. Tourism is the predominant industry, supplemented by electronics, shipbuilding, construction, food and beverages, pharmaceuticals, footwear, clothing, tobacco, aviation services, financial services and information technology services. Natural resources: limestone, salt, arable land.

Currency Euros (EUR)

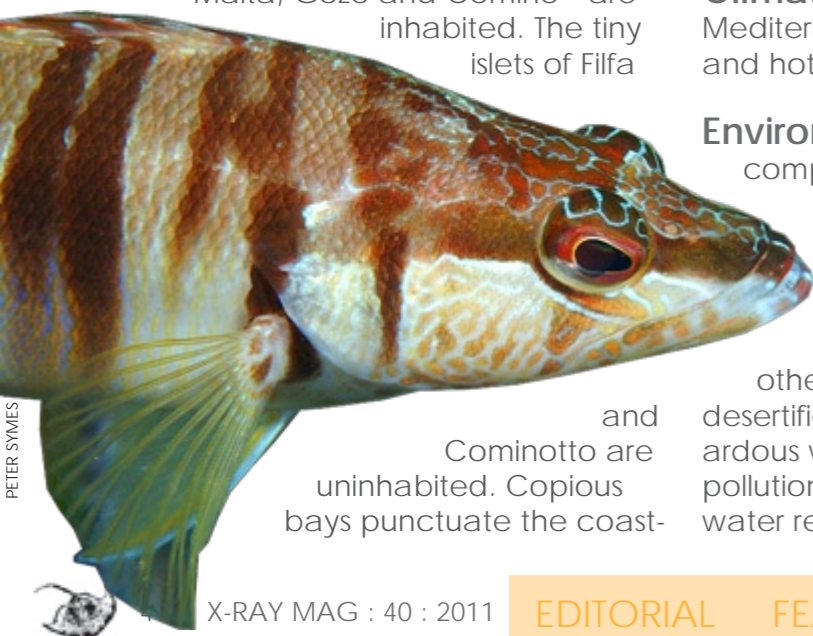
Population 7406,771 (July 2010 est.). Ethnic groups: Maltese (descendants of ancient Carthaginians and Phoenicians with Italian heritage and other Mediterranean stock). Religion: Roman Catholic 98%. Internet users: 198,800 (2008)

Language Maltese (official) 90.2%, English (official) 6%, multilingual 3%, other languages 0.8% (2005 census)

Hyperbaric Chambers Gozo General Hospital, Victoria, Gozo. Tel: (21) 561600 or (21) 562700

Mater Dei Hospital, Msida, Malta. Tel: (356) 2545 5269 or emergency 112.

Websites Malta Tourism www.visitmalta.com



and Cominotto are uninhabited. Copious bays punctuate the coast-



Tiny little cuttlefish hiding in the reef