

Small but perfectly formed: boats bob at anchor in the harbour at Marsaxlokk in the south of Malta

ANCIENT AND MODERN

Entry to the EU is bringing change to Malta, but its long history is still prominent - from prehistoric temples to British red post boxes. **Barbie Nadeau** reports. Photography by **Tony French**

Malta's narrow, stone-lined roads sprawl through the tiny island like blood vessels. One lane at times, they are lined with dilapidated farms, small towns and sprawling seaside resorts. At first glance, this 27km-by-15km island might appear to be just a blip of rock in the Mediterranean catering mostly to British tourists looking for guaranteed sun and spoken English.

Malta, however, is a decisively curious place. The extensive history of the archipelago - the nearby islands Gozo and Comino are part of Malta too - has left mysterious medieval towns, Roman catacombs and 23 sites with ruins from varying centuries before and after the birth of Christ.

Within this wealth of historical sites are some that are exceptional: the megalithic il-Ggantija temple, believed to be the oldest free-standing structure in the world; the Hagar Qim temple, whence the National Museum of Archaeology's two 'fat lady' statues came; the Neolithic Hal Saflieni Hypogeum, an ancient crypt dating to around 3600BC where nearly 7,000 people are buried. The Hypogeum's snake pit was probably used for collecting reptiles used in burial rituals and in its Oracle Room a man's voice sends out a ringing echo, but, mysteriously, a woman's voice has no echo at all. The famous 'sleeping lady' statue found here is on display with Hagar Qim's own two curvaceous females. ➤





An elderly couple strolls along a quiet street in Marsaxlokk (left); antique Leyland buses still do sterling service (right); St Paul's cathedral in Mdina dates back to 1702 (below right)



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Since joining the European Union in 2004, Malta has enjoyed a renaissance on many levels. Tourism has nearly doubled since then, and there have been an increase in investments across many sectors. But it has also been subject to one of the greatest disadvantages of EU membership. As one of Europe's southernmost borders, it has seen a doubling in the number of illegal immigrants from regions such as north Africa in the past three years.

The death rate of those trying to reach the island is also causing concern and Malta has been accused of using aggressive measures to stop boats from reaching the island, since once an immigrant reaches land, he or she becomes a ward of that state.

Malta has argued that because of its small size, it cannot handle a similar influx to that of nearby Italy. But European commissioner for justice, freedom and security Franco Frattini, whose remit includes migration issues, has warned the island in strong terms that it must improve its treatment of illegal immigrants. 'The obligation to save lives at sea comes from international tradition that no country has ever violated ►

Professor Anthony Bonanno, head of classics and archeology at the University of Malta, believes that while the Maltese government has tried hard to protect its treasures, it is time to encourage the rest of the world to notice them too. 'As far as protection in the past is concerned, I think the authorities did what they could given the restricted resources,' he says. 'Those responsible are now taking more interest in our archaeological sites and, finally, so is the rest of the world.'

Beyond the temples, Malta's long history is evident through traces left by its many past rulers, from the colonising Phoenicians to the Romans – who used it as a stepping-stone

between Europe and Africa. Even Maltese, the national language, is a Semitic speech originating from a dialect used on the island during Arab rule from 870 to 1091. Today, Maltese is the only Arabic language written using the Roman alphabet.

But Malta's most recent rulers were perhaps the most influential. The island became part of the British Empire in 1814, with the British making use of its harbours when the Suez Canal opened in 1869. Famously, it also held out against all odds during World War II, with the Maltese being awarded the George Cross for their efforts. But, while Malta gained its independence in 1964, becoming a republic within the Commonwealth, it still

retains much British influence – from driving on the left to red post boxes. English is taught in schools, Gozo's capital city Rabat is known as Victoria and there is a Marks & Spencer in Sliema. Despite these influences, the Maltese are quick to point out that their homeland is no longer a British colony.

Chris Fenech, the UK and Ireland director of the Malta Tourism Authority, says Malta is now seeking to identify itself and increase appreciation of its charms.

'We are attracting Italians who choose Malta over Sardinia or Sicily,' he says. 'We are also attracting younger visitors. We don't want to be seen as an over-sixties place.'



in such a manifest way,' Frattini said. 'You can't hide behind a type of legal-bureaucratic argument while letting people die.'

Still, the islands have also received an influx of welcome tourists thanks to the increase of low-cost carriers adding Malta to their routes. Queen Elizabeth II even spent her 60th wedding anniversary with the Duke of Edinburgh on the island last November and it has become an increasingly popular spot for European and global leaders to meet. Malta's sweeping landscape, climate and abundance of coastline have also meant the island has served as backdrop for many major movies: *The Spy Who Loved Me*, *Troy*, *Gladiator* and *Alexander* all had scenes shot here.

In the meantime, Malta's staple sites are vast. The island's best-known city is its capital, the fortified Valletta, built by the Knights of the Order of St John after they survived the Arab siege in 1565. St John's Cathedral, also built by the Knights there, has an original Caravaggio, *The Beheading of St John the Baptist* – his only signed masterpiece.

There are many other places of note across the island, such as the former capital, the medieval Mdina – known as the 'Silent City' – which commands great views of the countryside from Bastion Square. The town also has a fascinating, if macabre, torture museum, with displays of grisly goings-on throughout the ages. Then there is Mosta, whose cathedral has the third-largest unsupported dome in Europe – where time seems to stand still, but which offer visitors a glimpse of day-to-day Maltese life.

For a change of pace there are the beaches at Mellieha and Bugibba. There is also unbeatable clear water in the Blue Lagoon off Comino, but for those looking for a less crowded venue, consider taking the short ferry from Cirkewwa

HOW TO GET THERE

Air Malta operates regular flights to the island.

www.airmalta.com

WHERE TO STAY

Grand Hotel Excelsior in Valletta is a modern five-star hotel overlooking the harbour and near to many of the island's main historical sites.

www.hotelsguidemalta.com

Ancient heritage

Malta's temples are the oldest stone buildings in the world – predating the Pyramids and Stonehenge by around 1,000 years. The goddess cult which yielded the fat lady statues is also visible at the temples at Tarxien where figures up to 2.5m in height have been discovered. The temples themselves also have an hourglass figure when viewed from the air.

www.visitmalta.com

Europe's frontline

In 2003, 502 African immigrants landed on Malta. In 2006 this figure had risen to 1,780. Malta's immigration issues hit the headlines in May 2007, when 27 would-be immigrants spent three days clinging to fishing nets while Libya and Malta argued over whose responsibility they were. They were eventually rescued by the Italian navy, which was in the area searching for a boat containing 53 Eritrean immigrants, who it is believed all drowned.



on Malta to Mgarr on Gozo. The smaller island's coves offer some of the best snorkelling and scuba diving in the Mediterranean. Unfortunately, Gozo has also become a dumping ground for illegal construction waste lately thanks to the infiltration of corrupt contractors who have left large skips with debris alongside abandoned vehicles throughout the island.

Francesca Vella, a contributor to the *Malta Independent*, worries that some stretches of Gozo have been ruined forever. 'Gozo has a few power-hungry contractors who seem to do whatever they please,' she says. 'This is complemented by a sense of stagnation,



Time stands still: the back streets of Valletta have changed little since the 16th century (above). Let sleeping ladies lie: the goddess cult statue from the Hal Saflieni Hypogeum (left); a venerable Austin van on Gozo (top left)

the lack of want for change and a classic attitude of silence – which is bad news for the environment.'

Luckily, Malta's advantages far outweigh the problems that come with growth. Just gaze towards the sea from spots such as Dwejra on Gozo, a natural inlet protected by cliffs on which exotic birds nest. Nearby is the Azure Window, a 50m archway worn away by the thousands of years of waves crashing into the rock.

Across Malta it is hard to miss the impact of time, man and nature. Luckily, it is also easy to enjoy the original beauty and distinct personality that this island has managed to preserve. ■