

TONY KELLY rediscovers the island of Malta on a journey of discovery more than 30 years after his first visit.

“echoes of Malta’s past”

Can you remember your first foreign holiday? For many of us, it is a rite of passage, like your first day at school or first kiss. I was 13 years old when I went on a summer holiday to Malta with my father and stepmother. The year was 1975 and the former British colony had just become a republic, though I don’t think I realised it at the time.

It is hard now to imagine how exciting it was getting on a plane for the first time and getting off at the airport into a balmy Mediterranean breeze at a place where the sky was blue, the sea was warm and you could have chips for dinner every night. So when I got the chance to return to Malta recently, I couldn’t resist going back to see how the island – and I – had changed.

More than 30 years on, Malta is a member of the European Union and shiny new euro coins are in everyone’s pockets following its introduction in January. But would it still be the island I remembered so fondly, with a strong sense of nostalgia and British red postboxes on every corner?

It didn’t take long for the memories to come flooding back. I remember my father drawing up a detailed plan for our holiday, and dragging us around so many baroque churches that after a while they all looked the same to a teenager. I remember travelling across the island to a village festa (a religious festival held to mark the patron saint’s feast day), leaving the sunroof of our hire car open and returning to find it full of confetti, which then got in our clothes for the rest of the trip. And I am never allowed to forget the day that I stumbled through a cave in the dark, wondering why everyone else could see where they were going. I had just been given my first pair of sunglasses and nobody told me you were supposed to take them off when you were inside.



Ornate balconies and flower baskets look down on the streets of Malta’s capital Valletta.

“On a stroll along Republic Street it was a pleasure to discover old-world florists, tobacconists, jewellers and sweet shops surviving into the 21st century”

We stayed in an apartment in the back streets of Sliema and each evening my sister and I would be sent across the road to buy fish and chips from the local takeaway. It never really occurred to me that there was such a thing as Maltese cuisine.

TODAY'S FLAVOURS These days, sampling the local food is an essential ingredient of my travels so on my first evening in Malta I headed for Razzett L-Antik (The Old Farmhouse), an 18th-century grain mill in the bakers' village of Qormi, which has recently been converted into a cookery school and restaurant specialising in traditional Maltese dishes.

I began with a spread of antipasti – Maltese sausages, Gozo goat's cheese with pepper, broad bean paste with crushed garlic and olive oil, all served with delicious crusty hobz bread. Next came rabbit in garlic and red wine, accompanied by spicy roast potatoes with fennel. Dessert was a selection of pastries including almond nougat and date slices that revealed a Middle Eastern influence. Situated between Italy and North Africa at the centre of the Mediterranean, Maltese cuisine is a reflection of its geographical position.

I wandered the steep, narrow streets of Sliema searching for the apartment we stayed in, admiring the 19th-century houses with their overhanging, glassed-in balconies and ceramic plaques depicting Catholic saints. Down on the Strand, the seafront promenade, the karozi (horse-drawn carriage drivers) were touting for business and people were sitting in the sunshine enjoying the views of Valletta across the bay.

A small ferry chugged back and forth from Sliema to Valletta. Built in the 16th century by the Knights of St John as a bulwark against the Ottoman Turks, the Maltese capital still has the feel of a fortress town, with bastions and forts rising out of the sea walls. I half expected to find a bland modern city of burger bars and high-street fashion chains, so on a stroll along Republic Street it was a pleasure to discover old-world florists, tobacconists, jewellers and sweet shops surviving into the 21st century. I sipped hot chocolate in Caffè Cordina, an elegant pastry shop with a spiral staircase and art nouveau mirrors, which is housed in the former Grand Hotel. And I noted with delight that the red postboxes were still there.

VINTAGE MEMORIES One thing I had forgotten from my previous visit was the fleet of vintage orange and yellow British Leyland buses – or perhaps they just didn't look out of place in 1975. Today, they resemble exhibits from a transport museum but they still provide a cheap and efficient service. The buses are lovingly maintained by their drivers who pamper them like precious children and polish them each day.

I took bus 65 across the island from Sliema to Mdina, passing olive groves, vineyards and the huge dome of the church at

Mosta, the third biggest church dome in the world after St Peter's in Rome and Hagia Sophia in Istanbul. Mdina is gorgeous, the historic capital of Malta, and now an open-air museum city with churches and palaces hidden behind its medieval walls. Sunlight throws shadows on the golden stone and as you walk down the narrow, traffic-free streets you can almost hear the echoes of Malta's past. Somehow I don't think I appreciated all this when I was 13 years old.

Instead I remember swimming in the sea, and watching the waiters perform tricks with fizzy drink bottles by pouring four glasses at a time with one hand. My nostalgic journey continued as I took the bus from Mdina down to St Peter's Bay, a beach resort town overlooking the north coast. The smell of fresh bread tempted me into a bakery where I bought an entire hobz loaf and ate it by the sea washed down with a can of Kinnie, a popular Maltese soft drink flavoured with bitter oranges and aromatic herbs. Something else I don't remember trying in 1975.



On the last day of our summer holiday, my father asked my sister and I where we would like to go for a final treat. We chose St Peter's Pool, a natural swimming pool set inside a tiny creek beneath the cliffs of the Delimara peninsula. I can still remember the thrill of leaping off the rocks into the crystal-clear Mediterranean, shrieking with excitement.

I had to go back and take another look. It was a wild, windy day in January when I took a bus to the fishing village of Marsaxlokk, where pretty blue and yellow fishing boats were moored in a deceptively calm harbour. It took me about an hour to walk over the headland but eventually I found a sign leading down a narrow track to St Peter's Pool. As the wind blew and huge waves crashed against the rocks I stood there alone, gazing out to sea, thinking back to my first taste of adventure all those years ago. ■

Pictured clockwise from top left: Republic Street in Valletta; Upper Barracca Gardens in Valletta; a British-style phone box in Valletta; the Azuru Window on the island of Gozo; Neptune's statue at Grand Master's Palace, Valletta; San Anton Gardens in Attard; 'eye of protection' on a fishing boat; the harbour in Marsaxlokk.

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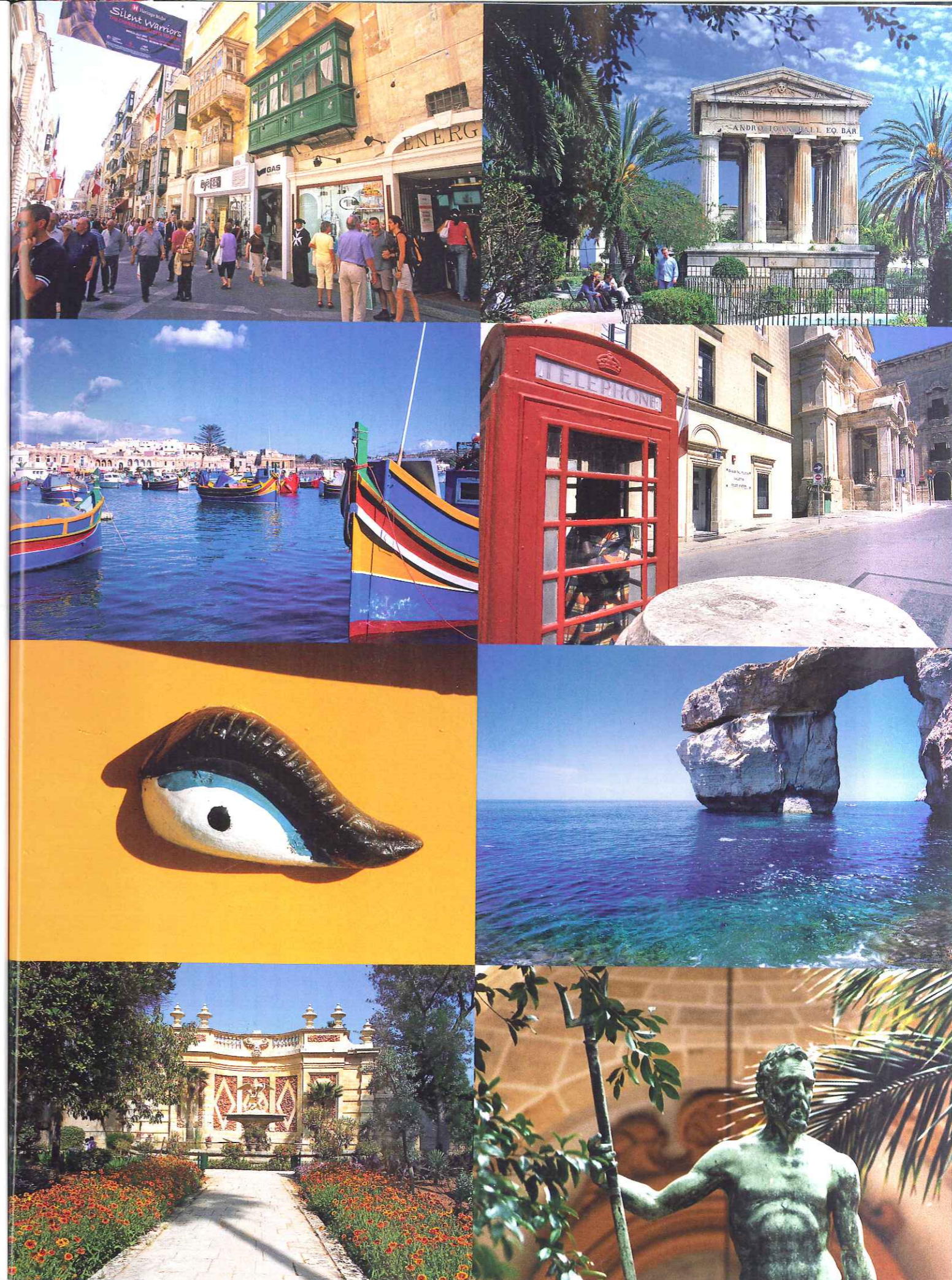
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