



Go slow in Gozo

An innocence and Italian touches typify Malta's wee sister, says **Brendan O'Connor**

THE boy had gathered quite a crowd. Locals were whooping and egging him on, and then curious tourists began to gather. He was prancing and jumping around the water just in front of the small promenade of quaint little cafes and restaurants at Xlendi. We tuned in and it became apparent he had some class of a stick or bar with a hoop at the end of it. He was slapping the water with it in a way that was reminiscent of *The Simpsons* "Whacking Day" episode. And sure enough, it became apparent on closer inspection that he was wrestling not quite with a snake, but with some form of eel. After another five minutes or so of chasing it around the sea whacking at it, while frantic locals pointed out its location when it moved away from him, the boy prevailed, and lifted up the eel with the loop at the end of his implement.

He came out of the water to cheers from the locals and then stood proudly with the unassuming looking eel, while people took pictures. Welcome to Gozo.

Xlendi is about as sophisticated as it gets in Gozo, the smaller and less developed sister of Malta. The town has the vibe of a cool but unspoilt Greek seaside village, though the food is more Italianate. But still, there is an innocence about this place that will be familiar to Irish people. We walked around the cliffs down to the small, secluded and almost inaccessible bathing spot that was reserved for nuns; the most decadent treats on offer were ice creams from the gelateria, and the high point of the afternoon's excitement, as we've seen, was a kid killing an eel. Now it's

possible that I misread the whole eel situation. It could be that this was a very deadly eel that had been plaguing Xlendi for generations, crawling out of the sea at night to worry sheep and defile maidens. Maybe hundreds had tried and failed where this young fella succeeded. But I like to think that it was just what it seemed, a kid killing an eel, and that this simple triumph was enough to add spice to the afternoon in a place where they still seem to like the simple pleasures.

The Gozitans we met are fiercely proud of their little island. They were fairly suspicious of the change that the EU and the Euro is bringing, and they were wary too of what they saw as the raciness of the mainlanders. Our guide, who embodied all these Gozitans' attitudes, once characterised the difference between Gozitans and Maltese thus: She said that the Maltese were very outgoing and they liked to go to restaurants to eat and to meet friends, where the Gozitans preferred to stay at home and cook for their families. You have never seen a woman spit the word "outgoing" with such venom.

But it's easy to see why the Gozitans would wish that their little island would not go the way of Malta. There is no crime in Gozo. Family life is still paramount, and the community revolves around the local village and the church and the annual festival that each village puts on for its patron saint's feast, each village trying to outdo the others with fireworks and fiesta.

Given that this was our first holiday as a family, and given that I am at that point in dadness where I will never be allowing my nipper out, and she will never have anything to do with boys or alcohol, I

appreciated the family values of Gozo. Then again, I'm half considering setting up a local branch of the Taliban in my area, so maybe take my endorsement of any kind of values system with a pinch of salt right now.

That said, I like an island, and the slow pace of islands, and unspoilt Gozo, where we had a return to innocent times but conducted in five-star luxury, was utterly charming.

The days had a repetitive and undemanding dynamic. We'd kick off with a three-course breakfast on the terrace of the hotel. Gazing over a patchwork of farmland punctuated by the slightly mosquey-looking Catholic churches that are everywhere in Gozo, we'd have a cereal course, an omelette/egg course and then finally a dessert/muffin/sweetcake course. Then it was off to see the sights for a few hours.

There's a nice vibe about the sights too. Commercialisation is minimal and there's no pressure to buy tacky souvenirs, or anything. The Gozitans seem to like to let their sights speak for themselves — which is just as well because they are mainly sights of outstanding natural beauty or churches. Instead of being whizzed through them taking pictures, you are simply invited to look and have whatever private moments of contemplation and awe you will. Up at the cliffs that contain the stunning Azure Window rock formation, I took the baby to the nearby chapel of her namesake, where each year's newborn Gozitans are blessed. We lit a candle in this simple cliff-top chapel for her grandmother, who also shares her name. Wonderfully, while we missed the blessing there, we actually stumbled on something similar going on at the

Santwarju tal-Madonna ta'Pinu, the Knock of Gozo, so we hovered around the back of the gathering for a while in case she caught some spare grace.

The real sight here, however, was the back corridor where the walls are covered in letters of thanks for children safely delivered or healed by Madonna ta'Pinu. Next to the letters and photographs there were little items of children's clothing — tiny crutches, bandages and even body casts. It was as weird and eerie as it was holy.

Eerie too were saltflats at Marsalforn, a kind of lunar landscape that traps the sea-salt when the ocean subsides. This is where Gozitans go to have their pictures taken on their wedding day. And then it was back to the luxury of the Hotel Kempinski San Lawrenz. We ate there most evenings, due to baba, and ate the best Italian food we'd had outside Italy. On a few evenings, we ventured out to one of the seaside towns to eat fresh fish, with the water lapping right next to us. But even the five-star hotel had nice simple Gozitan pleasures too. A stroll through the gardens, the source of all the produce for the hotel, heady with rosemary and lavender, was a reliable way to get the little maggot to sleep. We usually weren't long behind her.

We all came home rested, relaxed, slowed down and having had a lovely break from consumerism and the madness of the modern world while still having enjoyed all its perks.

GETTING THERE

For more information on Malta, try the Malta Tourism Authority website, www.visitmalta.com

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The five-star Hotel Kempinski San Lawrenz, Gozo, offers spectacular pools, luxurious rooms, plus a wellness centre and spa. For details, visit www.kempinski-gozo.com. Ryanair flies direct to Malta from Dublin three times a week: Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday. For times and prices, visit www.ryanair.com



PUTTING THE MED IN MEDITATION: Brendan O'Connor, and heiress, visit the spectacular Azure Window in Gozo