

MALTA: GEORGE CROSS ISLAND

During the Second World War the people of Malta withstood the full fury of the Axis for three years

LOCATED IN the Mediterranean between Europe, Africa and the Middle East, Malta has always held a strategic position. Over the centuries it has been fought over by successive civilisations, including the Carthaginians, Romans, Arabs and French. But it was during the Second World War, as the Axis and Allied powers fought for dominance of the entire Mediterranean theatre, that the island was at the centre of its fiercest fight for survival since the Turkish siege of 1565.

Malta's position as a British territory close to Axis shipping lanes made it a perfect base for attacking enemy supply lines. German and Italian forces were determined to neutralise this

threat and so launched a fierce attack on Malta. They effectively placed the island under siege between 1940 and 1942, while launching nearly 3,500 bombing raids.

Despite scant resources, the Maltese stood firm. At the start of the onslaught, Malta's air defences consisted of little more than a trio of obsolete Gloucester biplanes, known as Faith, Hope and Charity. The next three years were a constant struggle for the Allies, both to keep the islanders supplied, and build up their military capacity. Eventually, rolling Allied victories in North Africa began to limit Axis forces' ability to maintain the siege, and the last bombing raid was in July 1943.

The bravery of the islanders in resisting the Axis for so long led King George VI to award the George Cross collectively: "to bear witness to a heroism and devotion that will long be famous in history". An image of the medal now appears in the upper hoist corner of the Maltese flag as a permanent reminder of their courage and sacrifice.

FACTFILE

Travel: The Maltese islands are only three hours away from the UK, with flights leaving from most UK airports throughout the year. Air Malta www.airmalta.com and British Airways www.ba.com offer regular services as do Ryanair www.ryanair.com and Easyjet www.easyjet.com

Contact: The Malta Tourist Office can provide information on the islands and their history. Please call 020 8877 6990 or visit www.visitmalta.com/bbchistory

Suggested reading:

Malta: Blitzed But Not Beaten by Philip Vella (Progress Press, 1991);

The Kappillan of Malta by Nicholas Monsarrat (Phoenix, 2001)



MALTA AT WAR: REMEMBERING THE ISLANDS' MILITARY PAST

↓ The Grand Harbour

Malta's impressive Grand Harbour has been used as a port since Phoenician times. Despite heavy bombing in the war, much of interest remains for the visitor, including Fort Ricasoli, the Valletta Waterfront, Fort St Angelo and the Siege Bell, which tolls each day in memory of the war dead.



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↓ The Malta at War Museum

Based in a rehabilitated underground air raid shelter at Couvre Porte Gate in Vittoriosa this atmospheric museum gives visitors a taste of what life was like for Maltese citizens in the dark days of the war. There is a wealth of period memorabilia, as well as a documentary film about the siege.



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↓ The 100-Ton Gun at Fort Rinella

Built by the British between 1878 and 1886 to house a massive gun – the largest in the world at the time – Fort Rinella was designed to counter the Italian navy. Still on show, the barrel of this massive artillery piece is ten metres long. During the war the fort was used as an observation post.



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↑ The Aviation Museum

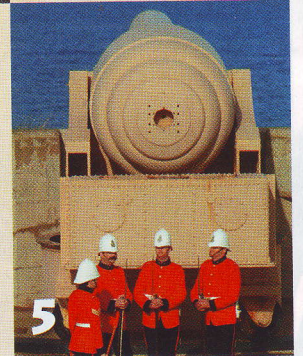
Located in three hangers in the old RAF Ta' Qali Aerodrome, the Aviation Museum is the perfect venue to explore the vital role air forces played in the battle for Malta. As well as Hawker Hurricane and Spitfire aircraft, there are instruments, weapons, uniforms and other fascinating exhibits.



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↑ The Upper Barrakka Gardens and the Saluting Battery

Every day Malta remembers the sacrifice of islanders with the firing of the noonday gun. The perfect place to watch this is the Upper Barrakka Gardens, but for a small fee you can go onto the gun platform itself.



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