

Greening Gozo

Traditional sun-and-sea tourism has been floundering in Gozo, Malta's sister island. But the island is now finding an alternative in rural and adventure tourism.

Victor Paul Borg reports



All photographs: Victor Paul Borg



Previous page: Ta Pinu Basilica in western Gozo; **Left:** traditional Gozitan pizzas or *ftiras*; **Above:** a farmer takes one of his sheep back to the farm after a day in the fields in Ramla Valley

When Victor Galea set up the Ager Foundation to introduce rural tourism in Gozo, he thought it would take many years before growth gained a momentum of its own. But in the first year, he had 400 customers, and by the second, he was overwhelmed. 'I can't find enough participating farmers to satisfy the current demand,' Galea says. 'Many farmers are sceptical or reluctant to offer the service; others don't have the right aptitude – so now I receive emails from potential customers and it's a headache to find them a farm. It has got so bad that I'm trying to lower the profile of Ager.'

Galea, an educational designer and politician with Alternattiva Demokratika, Malta's green party, runs the foundation as a non-profit entity that promotes agri-tourism as an alternative to destructive coastal tourism that will help to preserve Gozo's rural culture and landscape. The time is ripe: classic Mediterranean sun-and-sea tourism has been faltering in Gozo,

Malta's sister island, with tourist numbers falling steadily throughout much of the past decade. Tourists have also been increasingly shunning the island's two seaside resorts – consisting of boxy, soulless, 1970s-style apartment blocks – in favour of lodging in converted farmhouses or townhouses in the hinterland. These developments have hit hotels hard, leading to the closure of two major establishments in Gozo.

'Today's tourists don't want to sit in a five-star hotel and sip a drink,' Galea says. 'They want active or adventure holidays. And luckily for us, Gozo still has the farming or rural infrastructure, so we can easily make the switch to rural tourism.'

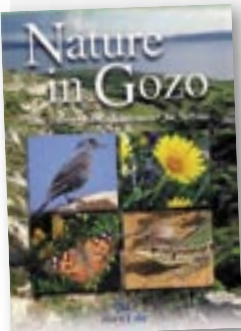
Gozo, indeed, remains rooted in its rural ethos. The populace – conservative, insular and quaint – wake up with the roosters and go to sleep early, and many continue to grow their own vegetables in small allotments in

their free time. There's no large-scale commercial farming on the island; the landscape is a patchwork of terraced fields, hedged by prickly pear and other trees, spreading out over the hilly terrain. Fields are interspersed by natural habitats: meadow, maquis (plant communities made up of small trees and large shrubs that thrive at the bases of inland cliffs), garrigue (rocky habitat that harbours hardy shrubs), and water courses (which support rare endemic species such as the Maltese freshwater crab). Gozo's nature is, in fact, surprisingly rich for a small island whose land has been cultivated for thousands of years.

FLOURISHING FOOD

Now, the rural traditions, which seemed moribund a decade ago, are being rejuvenated by a new interest in locally grown foodstuffs by both tourists and locals. Making one's own

Nature island



Nature in Gozo, a guidebook to wildlife on the island published last October, is selling better than the authors imagined. 'We have been surprised by the sales,' says Joe Sultana, one of the authors and a veteran ornithologist.

The guidebook features a selection of 161 plants and 122 animals, and its aim, Sultana says, is to 'increase the appreciation of Gozo's nature at a time when there are serious environmental threats.'

The 'serious threats' he alludes to include hunters, who have taken to planting fast-growing eucalyptus trees – an aggressive species alien to the island – to lure birds to their land. But a bigger threat is development: Gozo has become a hot destination for rich European retirees. And the Gozo Tourism Association – which

is dominated by big business interests – continues to hanker for large projects such as a golf course, a yacht marina, villa complexes and an airport.

The good news is that public opinion is against developments in untouched areas. When a permit for 24 villas near the coast was granted last year, the public outcry was so huge that the government quietly acknowledged an irregularity in the application and revoked the permit. Now, the *Nature in Gozo* guidebook will arm the inhabitants with more reasons to oppose further developments. Browsing through the book, it becomes evident that many species in Gozo – including a high percentage of endemic species – are found in circumscribed microhabitats, and could easily be wiped out.

olive oil has become a fad, and tens of thousands of olive trees have been planted in recent years. New cottage agri-industries are producing bottled Mediterranean foodstuffs – olives, olive oil, Gozo pickled cheese, sun-dried tomatoes, jams, herbal elixirs and so on – and restaurants are embracing these products and local ingredients in a bid to offer a taste of Gozo.

Ta' Mena Estate, Gozo's first agri-tourism enterprise, is flourishing with a mixture of vines, olive trees, orchards and plots of mixed vegetables spread over 25 hectares. Animals – including rabbits, chicken, sheep, pigs and cows – will be bred to make it a complete farm where tourists, as well as local inhabitants, can get their hands dirty and learn about farming. 'Last summer, we started doing cookery courses,' says Anna Refalo, administrator at Ta' Mena. 'We're also doing traditional lunches for groups of tourists who would be touring Gozo, and soon we'll be able to receive tourists to work on the farm for as long as they desire.'

While Ta' Mena was set up as a tourist-oriented agri-tourism outfit, Ager is more focused on fostering new business opportunities for extant full-time farmers and fishermen, whose numbers are dwindling. Ager's customers simply help out in the daily chores at the sheep farm or in the fields, or go out fishing with a fisherman on his boat using traditional traps and nets. And in Ager's cookery courses, traditional dishes are prepared at the host's house and eaten with the host family. Sometimes, dishes are cooked at the local bakery, a practice that was common up to a generation ago.

Tourists seem to crave a taste of Gozo's traditional cuisine, and Martin Portelli is now also offering peasants' grub in his new restaurant. 'You won't find cream, butter and bacon in my kitchen,' he says. 'But you will find olive oil made from my own olive trees.'

The restaurant, Il-Wileg, is set in the living room of Portelli's farmhouse. It's a small, intimate space with plain tables and chairs, bare old limestone walls, and artsy touches in the hand-painted plates and table mats knitted from coloured cloth. The kitchen is open, the service affable and the food hearty and uncomplicated. Favourite dishes include rabbit pie; calamari stuffed with rice, capers, prawns and herbs; steamed layers of beef, onion and potatoes; or courgette sautéed with garlic, half-dried sheep's cheese, tomatoes and parsley. 'I used to have some of those dishes at my grandma's,' Portelli says.

The food is so rustic that you wonder why anyone would want to pay money for it, but Il-Wileg has proven to be a winning concept. Portelli has demonstrated that it's possible to have a restaurant in an anonymous street in a town in the hinterland that draws more diners than most restaurants in the seaside resorts.

And that's the clearest signal yet of the potential prosperousness of a tourism model built on the island's inherent strengths: its quaint and tranquil character, its rural landscapes and amenable weather, and its inland towns, which are full of wonderful baroque churches and charming townhouses. A further boon is that cultural and green tourism are at their best in the mild winters, traditionally the off season for tourism.

TAKE A HIKE

'I get a lot of enquiries about hiking, and tour operators are approaching me to develop hikes specifically for them,' says Xavier Hancock, the Welshman behind Gozo Adventures, which he set up in 2003. 'One of our main activities now is long-distance swimming for people training to swim the English Channel. They come in winter to acclimatise to the cold sea – this year, I'm booked solid with swimmers for 20 weeks.'

Hancock's new adventure guidebook features scuba diving, rock climbing, biking, hiking and deep-water soloing – a form of

free climbing that takes place on cliffs looming out of the sea (three quarters of Gozo's coast is girdled by sea cliffs). Now, he's writing a second guidebook solely dedicated to deep-water soloing. 'We have already developed 50 sports-climbing routes and identified 200 deep-water soloing routes,' Hancock says. 'The plan now is to consolidate the business and, eventually, open an adventure centre where we will offer courses in adventure sports at all levels.'

Galea, on the other hand, is busy helping farmers to become agri-tourism operators. 'The perception that farming is low-paid menial work is so entrenched that many farmers are sceptical when I tell them that people want to pay them to work at their farm,' Galea explains. 'This week, I had a couple ask me to find them a farm where they can work for two months, and it has been a struggle to find them placements. So I'm planning to introduce courses for farmers in agri-tourism; these would serve to raise the profile of farming and fishing, and show the farmers that agri-tourism is something they can do.'



Co-ordinates | Malta and Gozo



When to go

The best times to visit Malta and Gozo are spring and autumn, when temperatures are pleasant, the beaches are relatively uncrowded and accommodation is cheaper and easier to find. Summers can be quite hot (daytime temperatures can top 40°C) and busy, while winters can be wet.

How to get there

Several airlines have regular flights to Malta's international airport, which is located five kilometres southeast of the Maltese capital, Valletta, between the towns of Luqa and Gudja. Prices for a one-way ticket with British Airways start at around £60. Flight time from London is three and a quarter hours. A regular ferry service links Cirkewwa on Malta and Mgarr on Gozo, taking about 20 minutes each way.

Further information

British citizens travelling on a valid passport with an onward ticket don't need a visa if visiting Malta for less than three months.

There are no specific health risks attached to travel to Malta, and water and food are safe for consumption.

For further details about travelling to Malta, visit www.visitmalta.com.