

Travel

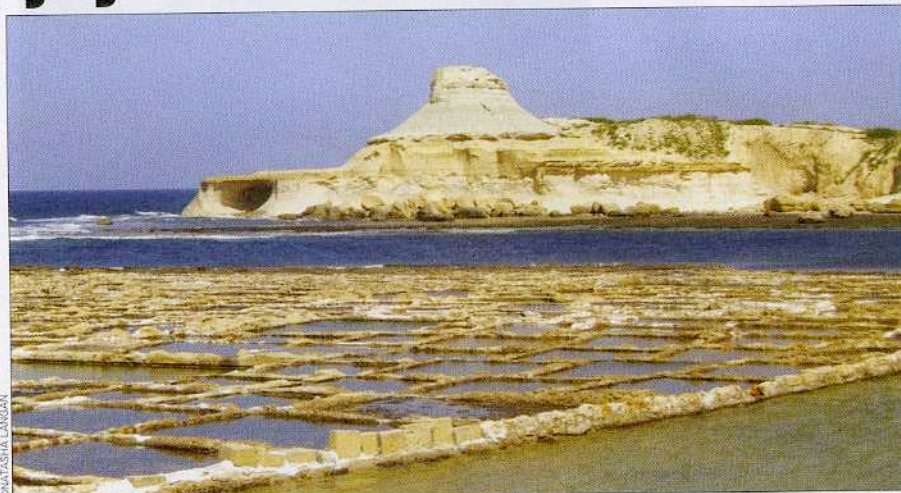
Gozo: Malta's joyful smaller sister

By Natasha Langan

For such a tiny place, Gozo, Malta's smaller sister island, has plenty to see. Just a 20-minute hop from Malta, it is believed to be the oldest inhabited island in the world. And at just eight miles by five, it's easy to explore once you step off the ferry or seaplane. Today the island is largely a peaceful, sleepy place, with a permanent population of around 40,000. But take a hire car and a quick tour will reveal lots of evidence of Gozo's colourful history and joyful present (Gozo means 'joy' in Maltese). Its strategic position in the centre of the Mediterranean has seen it occupied by everyone from the Arabs to the Normans, as the medieval sea defences and walled city testify. But before any invaders arrived, it was home to an ancient farming community who built the Ggantija Temple, a structure that predates the Pyramids by 1,000 years.

Inland, you'll find fertile valleys, carpeted with oleanders, vines and prickly pears, and dotted with sandstone villages, each with its own large church; the Rotunda in the village of Xewkija, for example, has one of the largest domes in Europe and can be seen from most of the island. Come summer, the towns and villages of Gozo liven up as each one throws its own Catholic festival, with marching bands, dancing and fireworks and, in the case of Gozo's capital, Victoria, the feast of Santa Maria on 15 August, which puts on a bareback horse race through the town.

But the main attraction is the rocky coastline, with its crystal-clear seas,



The Qbajjar Salt Pans, Gozo: in use since Roman times for harvesting salt

which make Gozo a popular destination for scuba divers. The inland sea, really a secluded pool that connects to the sea via a natural tunnel, stands next to the Azure Window, an impressive natural arch standing 20 metres high. The nearby island of Comino is perhaps even better for water sports – its blue lagoon is a popular swimming spot and easy to get to by boat. Along the coast you'll also find the Qbajjar Salt Pans, which have been used since Roman times for harvesting sea salt.

Gozo's colourful history is reflected in its food. Fish, rabbit and local goats' cheeses are the mainstays, all of which feature in a variety of dishes from the ricotta cheese 'pastizzi' pastries to rabbit stews. A particularly good restaurant to try is Il Kartell Restaurant in Marsalforn, which will only set you back about €30 a head, including wine.

In fact, staying in Malta and Gozo offers real value for money all round – a glass of beer will cost around €1.50 and a coffee 80 cents. Even with the current terrible exchange rate, you can really enjoy yourself for very little.

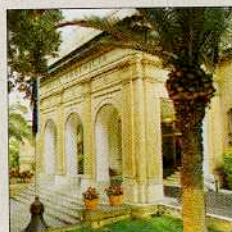
Most visitors to Gozo head straight back to Malta (which is recommended if you're after a lively night life – head to St Julian's Bay for the fashionable bars and clubs). But if you want to stay the night, there are a number of decent options (see below), from comfortable stone farmhouses to the luxurious five-star Kempinski San Lawrenz hotel with its outstanding Ayurvedic spa.

Easyjet flies to Malta regularly from various UK airports (www.easyjet.com). You can catch the ferry to Gozo (€4.65, Gozochannel.com) or catch the seaplane (€44 one way, Harbourairmalta.com).

The best places to stay on Malta and Gozo

Hotel Phoenicia Malta

Costs from €135, excl breakfast, and €150 incl breakfast per room. Contact: Phoeniciamalta.com.



Gozo Prestige Holidays

Villas from €100 for two people per night. Contact: 00 356 21 559 496; Gozoprestigeholidays.com.



Hotel Kempinski San Lawrenz

Costs from €110 per room, including breakfast. Contact: Kempinski-gozo.com.

