

MALTA 2009

By: DERICK McGROARTY

Derick McGroarty views Malta`s many attractions



Balconies Mdina

Malta, 17 miles long and 9 miles wide is the largest of a three island archipelago. There is an efficient, cheap local bus system which radiates out of Valletta to all parts of the island. Car hire is straight forward, Taxis are available, make sure you agree a fare at the start of a journey. The concierge at your hotel can

give much local information, provide bus numbers and arrange taxis. Double deck open top buses operate hop -on hop-off systems for a fixed daily rate. Useful for an overview of the island and an opportunity to take pictures such as the attractive Church of Our Lady at Mellieha.

Malta has a rich and cultural heritage. From Neolithic times it has alternated between Arabic and Western cultures. Conquered and colonised by Phoenicians, Carthaginians, Byzantines, Romans, etc, the Arab period 870 – 1090 A.D. left less trace than some but still shows influence on agriculture and place names. It was seemingly a period of prosperity when Muslims were tolerant rulers allowing peaceful co-existence with Christians. Following defeat by the Turks

and evacuation from Rhodes, "The Order of St. John" made a "temporary" home in Malta but ruled for 268 years building forts and coastal defences giving great protection and stability to the population, notably withstanding the Great Siege by Turkey in 1565. The Knights were finally ousted by Napoleon in 1798 and after a short period of French rule Admiral Nelson acquired control for Britain from 1800 until Malta became independent in 1964. It is presently a republic and a



Grand Master's Reception Room

Church of Our Lady Mellieha



member of the European Union. I enjoyed the capital Valletta, an attractive city worth more than one visit. Created over 400 years ago it is packed with diverse architecture, many churches, shops, cafes and in pride of place St. John's Cathedral standing high above the rest. Inside the breathtaking interior you can view the large Caravaggio's painting portraying the Beheading of John the Baptist. The inlaid marble floor consists of a collection of tombstones

with imaginative use of symbols and heraldry. Several reveal the individual stories of important Knights. The splendid gardens at Baraccas give great views of the city and harbour where there is mid day gun firing ceremony. Malta's seat of power since its foundation in 1571, the Grand Masters Palace demonstrates the wealth and order of the Knights, and is now Malta's Parliament. Five rooms and the Armoury are open to the public. In the corridor leading to the rooms, the standing suits of

armour displayed the timeless stature of these long ago Grand Masters. Of several stately homes occupied by distinguished families, the Pallazzo Parisio has a lived in atmosphere, with fine furniture and paintings and a garden. A particular interest is that Napoleon stayed there during his brief visit to Malta.

An episode of world history in 1565 which shaped Malta is brought to life in a 45 minute walk-through experience "The Great Siege of Malta" with audio

and visual effects to back up 20 tableaux. I especially liked the balanced points of view of both eastern and western cultures. You are aboard an Ottoman galleon watching firing cannons and next in a fortification seeing the effect of the damage. Not surprising when you see the enormous cannon balls. Another excellent AV, presented in many languages via audio headsets is located in a mediaeval building overlooking the harbour. "Malta Experience" brings the history of Malta to life on a 10 metre



Harbour 2

Dolphin Mediterraneo Marine Park



panoramic screen, Both are worth a visit.

The attractive fortifications of the harbour have, with some modification, stood the test of time. The best way to view the Grand Harbour is by boat. If time permits, I recommend a full day package "Above and Below" with "Captain Morgan's Cruises" which includes transfers and lunch. An interesting commentary with choice of languages helps appreciation of the views of both harbours. A magnificent, photogenic, sight.

After lunch a trip in a glass bottom boat enables viewing beneath the water in a selected bay. Plenty of plant life, some fish and to my delight jelly fish pulsating past my window. I did not see an octopus although I am assured they are seen at certain times of the year. A comfortable alternative to diving, but for those who enjoy that ultimate experience scuba diving can be arranged in the crystal clear waters. Captain |Morgan offers a range of other cruises and jeep safaris of both Malta

and Gozo. All day packages to suit everyone include "Fun Days", "Sunset Dinner Cruise" etc. (tel. 356 2346 3333)

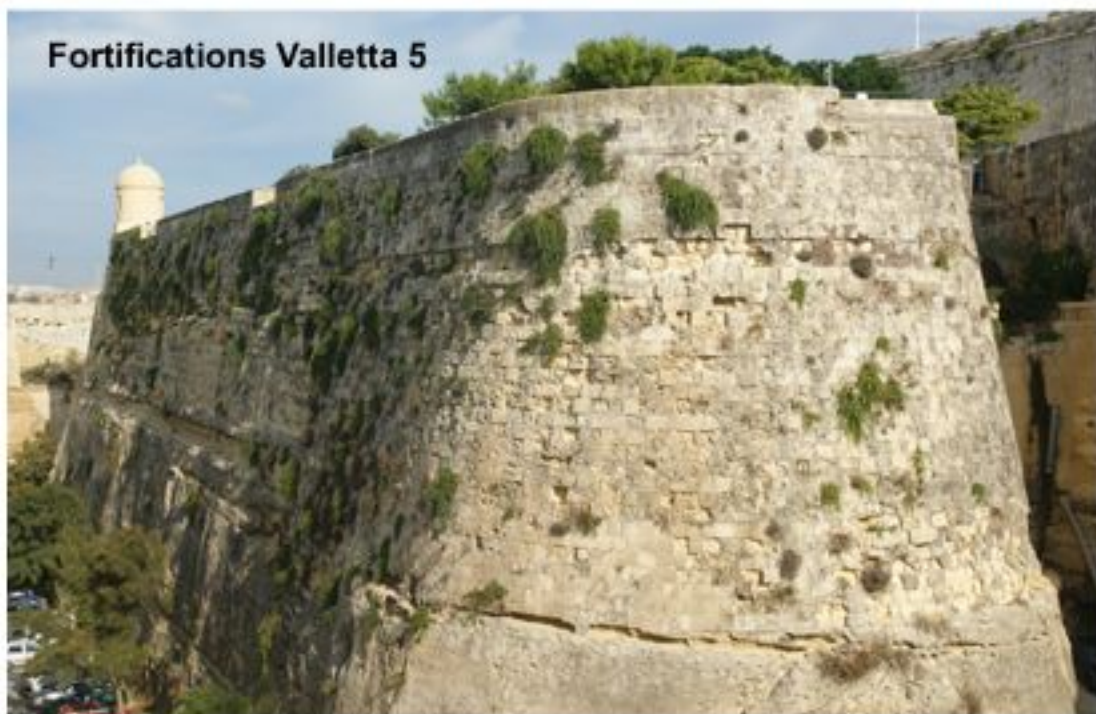
The mediaeval walled city of Mdina with a history dating back 4,000 years was the ancient capital of Malta. The absence of cars gives a serene feeling to the mix of grand pallazi, monasteries and churches. Central is the Cathedral of St. Paul, As in St. John's Cathedral, Valletta, the marble tombstones commemorate clerics. At nearby Mosta the large parish church

dating from 1833 has one of the largest unsupported domes in the world. It survived a 500lb unexploded bomb during the war which can be viewed at the entrance.

Dingli Cliffs are a natural beauty spot. Between here and the Blue Grotto are the Hagar Quim Temples (circa 3200 BC) only discovered in 1839 and now a world heritage site.

For a relaxed day, especially with children, the Mediterraneo Marine Park has plenty of aquatic activities including three

Fortifications Valletta 5



Heraldry Mdina Gate-1



one hourly staged arena shows with parrots, sea lions and dolphins twice daily. It is even possible to swim (for an additional fee) with the delightful dolphins. I enjoyed the day, admiring the intelligence and training of these beautiful creatures.

Mdina Glass sold all over the island is exported to many countries. The factory is a few miles from Mdina and is one of the stops on the open top bus. The authentic factory production can be watched and the show

room has an extensive display with many discounted prices. For anyone interested in glass it is well worth a visit. Allow at least 45 minutes.

Gozo, a 20 minutes ferry trip from the north of Malta is a short calm sea trip through clear waters, passing sparsely populated Comino. It is greener and quieter. A day trip by coach covers the interesting parts. Natural wonders include the Azure Window, a rock rising out of the sea. The capital Victoria (also know as Rabat), a walled

city on a hill has winding streets leading to the Basilica St. George. Covered in Marble it has a gilded canopy over the altar. Although I did not go there this time I look forward to doing so during my next visit.

Specialising in Malta for 35 years, Tour Operator Belleair, offers attractive packages using schedule services of Air Malta. A Business Class upgrade is an available option. My flights were comfortable and on time for the three hour flight from London. Transfers are included. All

customers receive a guide book and entry ticket to a place of interest, (Tel. 44 (0) 845 365 3400 for a brochure). A local representative is available to give advice and arrange excursions from any of the hotels.

There is a wide range of hotels on offer in the Belleair brochure including a number of 5 star hotels. In Valletta is the Phoenicia, but my own preference was the InterContinental Hotel at St.Julians, 5 miles from the

Grand Harbour





capital in a popular tourist swimming pool overlooking St. development of top hotels with a Georges Bay. My room on the long seaside promenade, 13TH floor had every comfort, a shopping malls and plenty of large bathroom with separate cafes and restaurants. This de walk in shower and bath, and a luxe hotel has spacious public furnished balcony with a rooms, a choice of restaurants, panoramic view. high standards of service, a Malta, although small, offers nearby private beach and a holidays to suit all ages.

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Malta Tourist Office

www.visitmalta.com

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InterContinental Hotel

www.intercontinental.com

The Malta Experience

www.themaltaexperience.com

Palazzo Parisio

www.palazzoparisio.com

Mediterraneo

Marine Park

www.mediterraneo.com.mt

Grand Master's Palace

