

Vestiges of invasions and views of the sea

History and tourism collide in Malta

By Otto Pohl

The sun was hot as I lay poolside. I had just finished the Malta triathlon, with a friend, and he was asleep next to his girlfriend one lounge chair over. My legs hurt. I nursed my gin and tonic and it nursed me.

Around us was evidence of invasion. Armies from almost all regional powers that ever flourished near the Mediterranean besieged Malta at some point, including the Phoenicians, Romans, Byzantines, Islamic armies and the French. These days, it is battalions of tourists. We were surrounded by flabby tourists showing too much flesh. I looked up at the blue sky and concentrated on my drink.

We had decided to add a few days on to our trip after the triathlon, and, like our recovering legs, Malta kept getting better. Once we were able to move from our lounge chairs at our hotel in the package-tour town of Bugibba, we decamped to a wonderful little hotel, the Juliani, which opened this year in St. Julian's, a lively town close to Valletta. The stylish lobby leads to cozy rooms, and when the staff turns down the bed they leave delicious little almond cookies on the bedstand. There is a pool on the roof that has a great view of the Spinola Bay.

Colorful fishing boats fill the harbor, and the bay is ringed with outdoor cafés and restaurants. Menus feature fresh fish and the Italian and North African culinary influences make the most of it.

Malta joined the European Union in May. Any country in Europe with reliably warm and sunny weather is worth a closer look, and Malta, as one of the southernmost countries in the European Union, certainly fits the bill. It is made up of three small inhabited islands in the middle of the Mediterranean, between Sicily and the North African coast. It is also a tiny and crowded nation, with 400,000 people on 316 square kilometers, or 122 square miles.

We rented a car and plunged into Maltese traffic. The island is spidered

with narrow roads, and on hills and exit ramps around Valletta many of them are hemmed in by shoulder-high walls. It makes you feel like an unwitting participant in a motorized luge competition, but a car is vital for exploring the best parts of the island.

Malta has the oldest freestanding man-made structures in the world — by a long shot. At Tarxien, Ggantija, Xaghra, temple structures date back as far as 3600 B.C. To put that in perspective, the pyramids of Egypt were built around 2500 B.C., and Stonehenge dates to roughly 2000 B.C. I stood within the simple, weathered stone walls and contemplated how different the world was when they were built, two million sunrises ago. At Hagar Qim, I watched the sun set behind the enormous boulders that archaeologists believe were built in accordance with the solar solstices.

How the ancient architects moved the 20-ton boulders into place remains a mystery, but they had no shortage of building material. Rock is ubiquitous and the native beige stone is used for almost everything, including houses, roads and fences. It lends Maltese towns a wonderful air of weathered permanence.

The most impressive display of rocks are the ones hewn by nature. One day we took a ferry to Gozo, a small island north of Malta, and drove along its coastline. At Dwejra, waves crashed against vertical cliffs. Off to my right, an enormous stone arch jutted into the water. Crabs skittered sideways on rock shelves just above the water line. I put on my goggles and jumped into the warm water. I hung beneath the surface and watched fish swim by, silvered by sunlight. Underwater caves receded into darkness. Nearby, scuba divers descended into an underwater feature known as the blue hole. It drops 25 meters, or 82 feet, along sheer walls, and connects to the sea through an underwater arch created through millennia of ocean tides.

The sea has shaped more than just the Maltese coastline. Foreign navies have invaded the island for thousands of years, and the people and culture of Malta have been shaped by the failed at-



Views of Malta, old and new: Spinola Bay

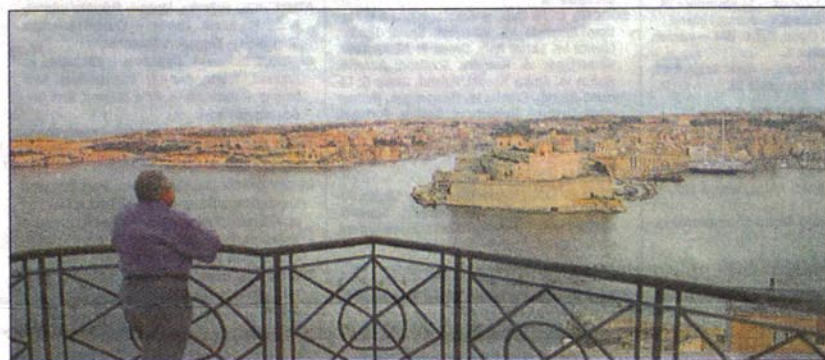
tacks as much as it has by those that were successful. The most famous defense of the island was in 1565, when the Ottoman empire invaded. At one point, hoping to intimidate the locals, the Turks killed captured prisoners, nailed their decapitated bodies to makeshift crucifixes and sent them across the bay on rafts. The locals, unimpressed, killed Turkish prisoners of war and used their heads as cannonballs to fire back.

The locals won. It remains a heroic victory for the Maltese, and they later named the country's capital after their leader, Jean Parisot de la Valette.

This often violent history has left impressive traces across the country. The port areas of Valletta are steep with defensive walls, and fortresses and barricades dot the island. In Victoria, the main city on Gozo, steep walls flank the fortress at the center of the city. Walking through the narrow, rock-cobbled streets makes for a great afternoon, but the defensive posture that the locals had to maintain is vivid at every turn.

As we lifted into the sky, I watched the crevassed western coastline, with its high vertical cliffs, appear to float on the sea like a stenciled jigsaw-puzzle piece. Just a tiny piece in a large mosaic and an even larger ocean, I realized, as Malta disappeared and an expanse of sea filled my view.

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Photographs by Otto Pohl/International Herald Tribune

een from the Juliani Hotel, above; the ancient ruins at Tarxien, below, and the Grand Harbour in Valletta, far left.

