

Guide to

Malta, Gozo and Comino

**Fun for all -
Plenty to keep
divers and
non-divers
happy**

MALTA
– Wreck haven
of the Med

10 things you **MUST**
do in the Maltese
Archipelago

PLUS EXPLORE AND PLUNGE INTO 7,000 YEARS OF HISTORY

From the editor



The Maltese archipelago has long been a firm favourite with British divers, and for good reason – it is just over a two-and-a-half hour flight from the UK, the water is warm and clear, the climate is hot and sunny, and the locals drive on the left. Combine this with accommodation to suit all budgets, myriad variety of restaurants and bars, not to mention a rich history and plenty of land-based attractions for non-divers and ‘dry days’, and it is easy to see why so many people flock to this part of the Mediterranean on a regular basis.

Malta is blessed with some natural underwater topography that amazes divers, such as the Arch at Cirkewwa and the Caves at Ghar Lapsi. However, it is the wreck diving which has put the Maltese Islands on the map. Malta boasts dozens of shipwrecks, both artificial reefs and ‘genuine’ historic wartime disasters or maritime mishaps, in depths ranging from just a few metres to 100m plus, a haven for technical divers. Wrecks such as the Um El Faroud, Rozi, Imperial Eagle, P29, HMS Maori and HMS Stubborn grace the pages of many a logbook.

Nearby Gozo doesn’t boast quite so many shipwrecks, though it does have a few, including the Cominoland and the Karwela, but it is the natural underwater attractions which bring divers to this little island. The Blue Hole and the Inland Sea are two of the most-famous sites, but there are plenty of lesser-known caves, swim-throughs and caverns which will enrapture even the most-jaded veteran diver. Tiny Comino can’t compete with its near-neighbours for shipwrecks, though it has got the newly scuttled P31 Patrol Boat (sister ship to the P29), but it has some superb shallow lagoons ideal for beginners, and some interesting caverns and caves for the more-experienced to explore.

This multitude of dive sites are well-matched by a vast array of land-based attractions, from quaint villages, historical cities and ancient monuments to watersports, rock climbing, cycling and other outdoor activities, making the Maltese archipelago the ideal venue for a family holiday, a romantic getaway for couples, or an action-packed group trip.

Mark

**Mark Evans,
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The ‘Silent City’ of Mdina

Photographs courtesy of the Malta Tourist Authority and Stuart Philpott

TOP TEN THINGS YOU MUST DO...

- 1 Explore the World Heritage City of Valetta. The unmissable highlight of the capital is the majestic St John’s Co-Cathedral, which houses Caravaggio’s Beheading of St John.
- 2 Dive the Um El Faroud, an artificial reef which has been broken in two by winter storms and is now one of the most-popular wreck dives on Malta. An abundance of marine life can be seen around the wreck. This dive is suitable for all levels of diver.
- 3 Visit Sweethaven Village, also known as Popeye Village, and explore the film set of Robin Williams’ live-action movie from 1980 based on the antics of popular cartoon character Popeye.
- 4 Explore the island of Gozo, which is home to the 5,500-year-old Ggantija Temples, which are the world’s oldest free-standing structures, pre-dating the Pyramids of Egypt and Stonehenge. Gozo also boasts the Azure Window, a spectacular landmark at

- Dwerja which is a favourite with photographers. Then there is the Baroque Cathedral, a masterpiece designed by Lorenzo Gafa, the Maltese architect who was responsible for the magnificent Cathedral of Mdina.
- 5 Visit a church – with some 365 churches throughout the islands, you are spoilt for choice. Highly recommended is the Mosta church, famous for its large dome (the third largest in Europe).
- 6 Step back in history and venture into the streets of the ‘Silent City’ of Mdina, Malta’s medieval capital city, which can trace its origin and history back more than 4,000 years.
- 7 Snorkel, swim or paddle in Comino’s Blue Lagoon, which with its crystal-clear blue waters provides one of the most-spectacular sights in the Maltese archipelago.
- 8 Buy a souvenir featuring the Eight-Pointed Maltese Cross, which still symbolises both the Beatitudes and the Eight Obligations of the

Knights of St. John - live in truth, have faith, repent of sins, give proof of humility, love justice, be merciful, be sincere and whole-hearted and endure persecution.

9 Take a boat trip to the Blue Grotto, which is reached from Wied iz-Zurrieq. This natural picturesque grotto and its neighbouring system of caverns mirror the brilliant phosphorescent colours of the underwater flora.

10 Experience the traditional Maltese way of life by getting away from the tourist hotspots and exploring the fishing village of Marsaxlokk. This is also the perfect opportunity to sample some of the islands’ typical food.



Snorkelling is a popular pastime in the Maltese islands

The impressive dome of the Mosta church - the third largest in Europe



Deck gun on the
Polynesien

DIVING IN MALTA

Malta is undoubtedly the shipwreck capital of the Mediterranean, boasting a whole host of sunken metal, including some huge artificial reefs

Malta was quick to realise the value of artificial reefs, both as an attraction for divers and also as a habitat for marine life, and one of the first wrecks sunk was the tugboat Rozi, which sits some 135 metres off Marfa Point, more commonly known to divers as Cirkewwa, at the north of the island. Resting perfectly upright in 36m, fully intact apart from engines and prop, this little 40-metre tug is one of the most-photographed wrecks on Malta – because of its compact size, it is possible to get the entire wreck into shot. It is surrounded by sea bream, rainbow wrasse and cardinalfish, and its decks are covered in scorpionfish. Newly scuttled nearby is the Patrol Boat P29, which is starting to gain in popularity as it attracts more marine life. Sitting shallower than the Rozi, the P29 is easy to explore and makes a great first wreck dive. Many of the wrecks in Malta are accessible

from the shore, but the Imperial Eagle can only be reached by boat. The Imperial Eagle was one of the ferryboats connecting Malta and Gozo before it became an artificial reef, it now lies on a sandy bottom at a depth of 42m some 300 metres northeast of Qawra Point. Close by is a statue of Jesus Christ. This 13-tonne statue was reallocated here in May 2000. It was originally sunk near St Paul's Islands and blessed by Pope John Paul II in 1990 to protect the fishermen of Malta. The X-127 Water Lighter, aka the Carolita Barge, is at Manoel Island in Marsamxett Harbour. To reach the wreck, divers swim in a south-westerly direction at any depth between 10-15m. The seabed around the wreck is muddy and scattered with objects such as hospital beds, wheelchairs and other objects thrown into the sea during and after the war. The torpedo damage at the stern of the vessel is quite extensive. Throughout the dive, octopus, small grouper and thousands of

damsel fish can be encountered. However, the jewel in the crown of the artificial reef programme has to be the 115-metre, 10,000-tonne oil tanker Um el Faroud. The vessel has a tragic history - a terrible explosion on board killed nine Maltese dockyard workers, and for three years the stricken ship lay in the harbour of Valletta. In 1998 it was granted a new lease of life as an artificial reef, and now lies on the sandy seabed southwest of Wied iz-Zurrieq. The port side is usually teeming with large schools of sea bream, parrotfish and silversides, a massive shoal of barracuda patrol the waters above the wreck, and occasionally it is visited by amberjack and tuna. The top of the bridge comes to within 18m, and the main deck is at 25m, making it the perfect depth for divers. Penetration throughout the superstructure is possible, but only for appropriately trained, experienced divers.



The P29 lies
near the Rozi



The statue of
Christ



Not all the shipwrecks were sunk specifically for divers. In the backwaters of St Elmo's Bay, at a depth of just 18m, you can find the remains of HMS Maori.

This destroyer was launched in 1937, and saw considerable action in the Mediterranean, the Norwegian campaign, with Atlantic convoys and in the North Sea. On 12 February 1942, it was moored at the entrance to Dockyard Creek when it received a direct hit in her engine room. She was eventually set down in St Elmo's Bay, where her guns and other sections of her superstructure were removed, however part of the raised bridge is still there. Divers can enter the remains quite easily, with exits through large holes in the starboard side. Although silted up, there are plenty of different types of fish and other creatures in among the wreckage, which is covered with greenweed and tube worms.

Another historical wreck is the Bleinheim Bomber, which lies in 42m off Xorb il-Ghagin. This light World War Two bomber crash-landed in the sea, but amazingly, the

engines and wings are intact. The foresection of the fuselage smashed off on landing, and now lies several metres in front of the main part of the wreckage. An unusual wreck dive for experienced divers.

So, Malta is a wreck diver's paradise, but let's not forget its natural attractions. At Cirkewwa in the north of the island, for example, there is an impressive drop-off from 8m to 30 metres, and the area also boasts a picturesque arch and a number of caves.



Cirkewwa

On the southern coast you have Ghar Lapsi, which offers easy access into a shallow system of underwater caves, which are well lit by beams of sunlight from the numerous entry/exit points. Beyond the caves are a series of parallel reefs and depressions that are home to a variety of marine life.

At the tip of the Delimara Peninsula past Marsaxlokk is Delimara Point, a small square rock which indicates the dive site. Best reached by boat, this underwater reef commences at 9m and drop gradually down to 12m, where it turns into a vertical cliff plummeting down to 25m. There is also a cave and a vertical tunnel back up to the top of the reef. The bottom is littered with large boulders, which are home to grouper, and beyond, on the open sand, stingrays are often seen.

Marfa Point, off Marfa, is an easy dive which starts in a shallow lagoon. There is a reef which drops down to about 18m, and not far is a small cavern with a statue of the Madonna, which was placed there by a local diving club. The dive usually ends at the foot of a small arch in the reef wall.

DIVING IN MALTA

Malta also boasts several interesting casualties for World War Two, plus some fantastic natural underwater topography



The city of Valletta

DIVING IN COMINO

Tiny Comino nestles between Malta and Gozo, but it has its own identity and attractions, including the famous Blue Lagoon



Although not strictly a diving destination, Comino's fabled Blue Lagoon, a sheltered inlet of shimmering aquamarine water, is the perfect spot for some snorkelling in between dives. If you are up for a shallow dive, in deeper sections of the lagoon you can find various fish and creatures exploring the sandy bottom.

Irqieqa Point is a thin strip of land on the south western tip of Comino that features a sheer drop-off to 40m. The water is clear and the cold currents support large shoals of sardines and bogue, that are preyed upon by amberjack, dentex and, sometimes, tuna. The boulder-strewn depths reveal families of bream and brown meagre Santa Maria Caves is

an ideal second-dive location for those who have made the boat trip to Comino and want an interesting shallow location. The caves are very pretty and for the underwater photographer, the possibilities are endless. Octopus, moray eels, small grouper and countless small fish make this a relaxing dive. Lantern Point is a boat dive and starts from a shallow rocky shelf at 6m, where the boat usually anchors. In this area divers will find the entrance to a 'chimney', an almost-vertical tunnel, that drops down to 16m. The tunnel is wide enough for divers to manoeuvre without touching the sides, which is good, because they are generally smothered with fireworms. Outside the tunnel and slightly to the right, divers can enjoy a maze of swim-throughs

underneath the massive rock, where starfish can be seen. Behind the large rock there are boulders, giving way to a gentle slope at about 50m. Nooks and crannies close to the seabed are home for large grouper and the occasional dentex.

As well as these natural attractions, Comino now has its own shipwreck, in the shape of the patrol boat P31. Sunk on 24 August 2009, this Kondor-class minesweeping vessel now sits in just 20m of water, meaning the deck is at 15m – perfect for all levels of diver. Penetration is possible, and because it was thoroughly cleaned of any potential 'diver snags' before the sinking, it makes a great first wreck dive.

The Comino
Land is
great for all
levels of
diver

Divers explore inside
the Blue Hole

DIVING IN GOZO

Gozo has recently gained a couple of artificial reefs, but its real selling point is the vast array of awe-inspiring natural underwater attractions

Dwejra Point is one of the most spectacular dive sites on Gozo, with deep water (60m) and many caves and arches. The most dramatic is the 35-metre-long tunnel that opens from the Inland Sea to the open sea, where the bottom drops suddenly. The clear waters and depths can be deceptive.

The Blue Hole is close by, located in front of the Azure Window at the bottom of Dwejra Point. It is a shore dive, which is reached via a fairly difficult walk over rough coralline limestone, however steps have been carved into the rocks leading down to the Blue Hole. This is a natural rock formation carved out over the centuries by wind and waves, which goes down to a depth of 26m. The hole is about one metre above sea level and no more than ten metres wide and five metres across. However, a few metres down, this gives way to unlimited access to the sea on exiting a huge archway. A large cave can also be found at the bottom of the hole.

Also in this area is the Chimney, which is entered one diver at a time through a fissure in the almost-vertical rock. This opens up at a depth of around 8m.

Regqa Point is found at the northernmost tip

of Gozo. The beach road is rough and the entry is tricky with a strong swell, but it is a fantastic dive well worth the effort. The reef consists of a parapet at a depth of 30m and then a drop to 60m. However, there is an excellent vantage point at 15m. Here you are literally in a cloud of small fish feeding on the nutrient-rich waters. Large shoals of dentex have feeding frenzies, and grouper are large and plentiful. Billingham Cave is found to the west of Regqa Point. The top of the cave entrance is just above the surface and the bottom is at 27m. A long tunnel called The Railway Tunnel leads to another cave deep inside the rock where divers can surface. Entry is from Regqa Point. Immediately inside the cave, there are plenty of red sponges, soft corals, cardinalfish and other types of marine life. On the way back, the sight of the blue open water with the sun shining through from the outer reef is breathtaking and perfect for silhouette photographs.

Xlendi Cave is found in Xlendi Bay. It is best to swim across the bay either on the surface or underwater. The maximum depth of this dive is 12m. The cave is a bent tunnel leading from one side to another of the rock wall. At the entrance of the cave floor you can see

goatfish, damselfish and cardinalfish. The cave walls are brightly coloured, with starfish, sponges, algae and bristle worms. Further on in the tunnel there are large boulders, and it gets progressively shallower. Towards the end of the tunnel, the seabed is covered with smooth rocks and shingle.

Fungus Rock is a huge rock in Dwejra Bay, on the western coast of Gozo. Access is only by boat. The average depth is of 40m. This isolated rock has a hole running through its northern part. Underwater, the scenery is as impressive as above, with vertical walls, fissures, gulleys and caverns created by boulders, which provide excellent habitat for the large grouper. Looking upwards, you can often see tuna, amberjack and barracuda. The walls of the rock are covered in algae, sea urchins, tube worms, starfish, bristleworms and sea potatoes, with their brilliant red colour.

Gozo is not without its wrecks, and in August 2006 it gained two artificial reefs, the Karwela and the Cominoland. The 48-metre Karwela and 34-metre Cominoland are both former ferries which now sit upright in more than 30m of water. Both offer opportunities for penetration, and the Karwela has a VW Beetle on the stern which is perfect for photographs!



Map courtesy of the Professional Diving Schools Association – www.pdsa.org.mt

The Dingli Cliffs are an impressive sight

Other things to do

Malta, Gozo and Comino can offer a wide variety of attractions and activities to keep you occupied when you are not diving

Malta is blessed with over 7,000 years of history, meaning the cultural attractions to visit are abundant – the megalithic temples (including Ggantija, which at 5,500 years old are the world's oldest freestanding structures), The Knights of St John's significant sites, World War Two sites and historical re-enactments are a must. Interactive walkthrough and multimedia attractions offer an overview of Malta's history in under an hour, and are a great way to learn what visitors will later be looking at.

Malta's capital, the World Heritage City Valletta, and the medieval fortified towns of Mdina (the 'Silent City') and Cittadella, Gozo, are the islands' historical highlights. Sliema, Bugibba, Qawra and St Julian's in Malta, and Marsalforn and Xlendi in Gozo, are the main resorts. They bustle with activity, and not just in summer.

Valletta is a cornucopia of European art and architecture. This city of the Knights remains virtually intact, its streets flanked by palaces and tiny, old-world shops. Across Grand Harbour lie the Three Cities of Senglea, Cospicua and Vittoriosa. Older than Valletta, they offer a fascinating insight into the islands' maritime

fortunes. The southern fishing village of Marsaxlokk and neighbouring resort town of Marsasala are also worth a visit.

Food plays an important role in Maltese life, and the local cuisine comes highly recommended, so make sure you visit the restaurants and try some native dishes while dining al fresco. You can't have food without drink, and Malta's vineyards are also worth a visit. Tour the premises and sample the delicious produce.

If you have the family in tow, there is plenty to keep the younger ones entertained. You can pay a visit to Sweethaven Village, also known as Popeye Village, and explore the set of the Robin Williams live-action movie from 1980 based on the antics of popular cartoon character Popeye. The Mediterraneo Marine Park at Bahar ic-Cahaq is a great way for all ages to learn about the marine world and its inhabitants, and nearby, the Splash and Fun Park is a monster waterpark, offering four chutes, a large whirlpool and bump-boats.

If the children love Playmobil toys, they will definitely want to visit the Playmobil Funpark in Hal Far. This is one of the company's largest manufacturing units, with the entire range of toys on display, and there is a play park as well.

Depending on when you visit, there will be a range of events occurring, so check out: www.visitmalta.com to see what coincides with your holiday.

If you want to enjoy the scenery, there is plenty to catch your eye, including the Azure Window, a spectacular landmark in Dwerja on Gozo. A giant 'doorway' in a cliff, through which you can admire the blue expanse beyond, it offers a stunning vista.

Dingli Cliffs are an impressive sight, especially if viewed from sea level on an island cruise. From the cliff tops, one of the most-striking views and sheerest drops is just west of Dingli village.

Another atmospheric view is over to the uninhabited isle of Filfla. The tiny chapel of St Mary Madgalene perched on the edge marks the highest point on the Maltese Islands, some 250 metres above sea level.



The city of Valletta

If all that sounds a bit too tame for your liking, there are plenty of outdoor sporting activities on offer, including cycling, rock climbing and paragliding. If you can't tear yourself away from the water, you can take a boat trip to the Blue Grotto, which is reached from Wied iz-Zurrieq. This natural picturesque grotto and its neighbouring system of caverns mirror the brilliant phosphorescent colours of the underwater flora. Elsewhere you can try kiteboarding, go windsurfing or sailing, try water-skiing or just head out to some quiet bay and relax in the shallows.

Enjoy dining al fresco, or sit back with a drink in a cafe and watch the world go by