

Escape to GOZO

It's less well known and much more quiet than neighbouring Malta, but YVONNE GORDON is won over by Gozo's Mediterranean magic

Diver's paradise: The Azure Window on Gozo and (inset below) a cobbled street in Victoria, the island's capital

GOZO ON FILM

You can watch an exclusive video of this vibrant island at independent.ie/travel today. Log on to see Jason Kennedy's film of the hiking, biking and mouthwatering landscapes that have made the island one of the Med's top movie locations.

kayaking from Qbajjar Bay at Marsalforn in the north of the island. Here, a warm, shallow bay leads out to a rocky coastline full of caves and indents. Above this, flat limestone plateaus are home to vast salt pans, from where sea salt has been harvested by the same family for generations. Emmanuel Clini and his daughter Josephine spend months tending the salt-pans and collecting salt, which is sold on to local businesses.

Salt-panning is not the only tradition still thriving on the island. Wander around the small streets of a town or village and you might find anything from wine, honey or cheese-making to an ironmonger or a cobbler.

Over in the old citadel (fortress) of Victoria, farmer

Rikardu Zammit gets up early every day to prepare the typical Gbejniet cheese for his restaurant, Ta' Rikardu (4 Triq il-Fosos, Cittadella, Victoria).

"Everything starts at the farm," he tells me. "We have 200 sheep and goats. We start early, sometimes at 3am, because of the heat."

When I return to the farmhouse one evening, there are three women sitting outside their houses, enjoying the sun, while further along in another doorway, a woman sits knitting a scarf. I hear horse whinnies coming from behind one of the houses and I meet Charlie, a farmer who has some goats in a pen in the centre of the square and turns out to own the horse, Delilah, that I've heard passing my window in the mornings.

It's another glimpse of an authentic island life, where people sit in doorways and chat about the day, rather than posting social media updates, and where horses' hooves are a regular sound.

Gozo moves at a relaxed pace. A visit to the island is a great reminder to slow down, to appreciate the surroundings, and rather than rushing around, to set your internal clock to Gozo time...



GETTING THERE

The Gozo Channel ferry from Malta takes around 25 minutes and costs €4.65 per walk-on passenger, (gozochannel.com). Ryanair (ryanair.com) flies from Dublin to Malta five times weekly, fares start from €42.99 one way (from €80.99 in May and June). For more info, see visitgozo.com or islandofgozo.org.



WHERE TO STAY

A week at Il-Marhab farmhouse, which sleeps up to nine, costs from €998 to €1,798, depending on the season. For this and other farmhouses, see firstgozo.com. The 5-star hotel Ta' Cenc (tacenhotel.com) is set on a nature reserve and rooms have little gardens. Standard doubles start at €168 per night.

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Clip clop, clip clop. The horses' hooves echo along the laneway under my window. As the sound fades, I can hear a donkey braying, dogs barking and, in the distance, what sounds like goats bleating. It's a dawn chorus — but one in which animals rather than birds are singing about the start of a new day.

It's early morning on the island of Gozo, the second-largest island in the Maltese archipelago in the Mediterranean Sea.

As the air heats up, I bring my breakfast outside to the terrace of the 17th-century farmhouse, taking in the surroundings. Prickly pear trees hang over the small pool, surrounded by walls of the same golden limestone that lines the village streets. Sitting here, I can hear church bells pealing in the distance, but no traffic.

Gozo is smaller and quieter than neighbouring Malta. Just four miles separates the two, but Gozo doesn't have motorways or even an airport. It does have hotels, holiday apartments and beaches — if that's what you're after — but on a much smaller scale than Malta. I've skipped

those, instead choosing to stay at a more rural farmhouse in the village of Xewkija, discovering the island and its traditions at a more relaxed pace.

Dropping into the bakery to stock up for the day, I line up with the locals as the bakers weave around us with full trays of *ftira* (traditional pizza-like bread, topped with vegetables and potatoes) and *qassatat* (small pies filled with peas or cheese), to load into the wood-fired oven. There are no shop counters here — you just pick your bread or *ftiras* straight from the cooling racks.

For sightseeing, the Azure Window at Dwejra is one of Gozo's most outstanding natural features. A massive natural limestone rock arch, it gets its name from the clear blue Mediterranean Sea beneath it. Dwejra is also home to Qawra, or the Inland Sea, a sea-water lagoon with a tunnel leading to the open sea, and the Blue Hole, a popular diving spot. The Azure Window has also been used as a location for films such as *Clash Of The Titans*, *The Count Of Monte Cristo* and appeared in Season 1 of the HBO TV series *Game Of Thrones*.

This year, Gozo will have another big screen moment with the release of Angelina Jolie's film *By The Sea*. The film was set in Mgarr ix-Xini Bay and last summer Jolie, Brad Pitt and their family took up residence in a farmhouse nearby for the three months of filming. They were often spotted around the island.

With its tiny beach, the rocky cove at Mgarr ix-Xini is a peaceful spot, but Gozo has many unique coves and bays. Ramla Bay, to the north of the island, has an expanse of dark red sands. At San Blas Bay a steep, almost vertical path winds down the hill, past olive trees, pomegranate and fruit trees, to a more secluded golden sandy beach with a tiny cafe.

On the other side of the island is the lively Xlendi Bay. Set in a long, rocky inlet with cliffs on one side and hotels overlooking the water on the other, the seafront is lined with cafes and restaurants. Colourful fishing boats bob up and down in the bay while swimmers old and young edge down steps along the walls into the warm clear water. One of the most enjoyable afternoons was spent

3 must-dos...



GGANTIJA TEMPLES

WHERE: This complex of temples dates back to around 3,500BC and is one of the oldest free-standing structures in the world, with parts of the walls and altars still intact. There is an excellent museum in the visitors centre, with ancient artefacts that were discovered on site.



GO DIVING

The clear, warm blue waters and endless list of dive sites to choose from make Gozo a diver's paradise. The island's limestone creates some dramatic underwater scenery, rock formations and caves. Marine life is plentiful, and there are plenty of artificial reefs and wrecks for boat dives.



THE CITADEL, VICTORIA

Wander around the tiny stone streets of the fortified Citadel, the old capital of Gozo, for island views and an insight into what life was like for locals taking refuge during invasions. Inside the walls you'll find museums of nature, folklore and archaeology, as well as a cathedral and an old prison.