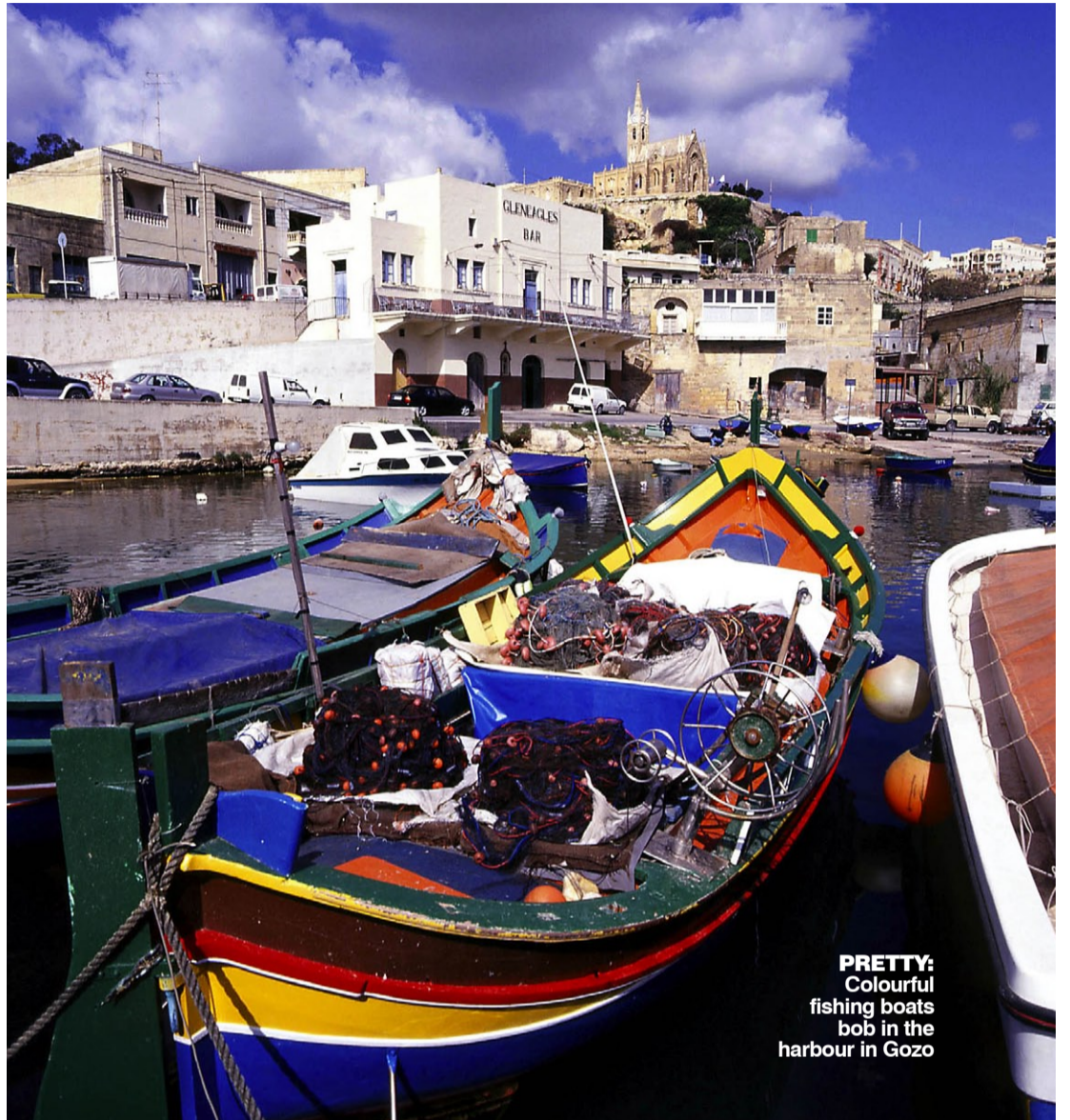


TRAVEL

Yvonne Gordon discovers a mesmerising mix of history and holiday fun on a trip to the Med

Escape to islands of Malta and Gozo for a swell time



PRETTY: Colourful fishing boats bob in the harbour in Gozo

Tiny waves lap against our little dghajsa boat as we cross the Grand Harbour. The traditional Maltese water-taxi, long and slender like a Venetian gondola, is ferrying us across the expanse of blue from the Valletta Waterfront to the three historic cities of Cospicua, Senglea and Vittoriosa on the other side of the harbour.

One of the best places to view the Grand Harbour is the Upper Barakka Gardens in the old city of Valletta. The gardens were laid out in the 1700s by the Order of the Knights of St. John, as a place of relaxation and retreat.

Valletta, Malta's capital, is flanked by two harbours, the Grand Harbour, and Marsamxett Harbour. The harbours were home to many historic sea battles, such as the battle against the Ottomans in 1565, whose 40,000 troops were no match for just a few thousand defending locals and knights.

We've taken the dghajsa from the quayside at Valletta Waterfront, where a row of warehouses built by a Grand Master of the Knights 250 years ago have been converted into restaurants and shops.

It's a lovely dining area in the evenings, and the quay also serves as a port for visiting cruise ships. Take a wander through the old streets of Valletta, built

GETTING THERE

Fly Dublin to Malta with Ryanair from €41 one way, including taxes and charges. See ryanair.com for more. A dghajsa water taxi in Valletta costs approximately €7pp. The ferry from Malta to Gozo costs

€4.65pp. Accommodation at the five-star Hotel Ta' Cenc in Gozo starts from €66.50pp per night, see tacenc.com. For more information about Malta and Gozo, see visitmalta.com.

mostly from limestone from the island, and you'll encounter the Auberge buildings such as the Auberge de Castille, a palace built in the 1570s, or the Palace Parisio, as well as churches, museums and plenty of interesting shops.

There are also a few red phone boxes and pillar boxes – indicative of Malta's past. It was part of the British Empire until 1964 and became a republic in 1974. Another legacy left by the knights is the religious headquarters in the capital, St John's Co-Cathedral, which they built between 1573 and 1577. The cathedral's luxurious baroque interior is mesmerising.

A couple of days in Valletta makes a great city break but the resorts and holiday centres just outside the city make a good base for some relaxation, nightlife, watersports and shopping. We stayed at St Julian's Bay, 6km northwest of Valetta, where Paceville is the centre of nightlife with a strip of lively bars and restaurants. Mdina, a walled town in the centre of

the island which was once its capital, is a more historic place boasting interesting medieval and baroque architecture.

We also travelled to the neighbouring island of Gozo, taking a short ferry trip from Malta. Our base on Gozo was Ta' Cenc hotel, a secluded oasis on the south side of the island.

One of Gozo's most photographed spots is the Azure Window at Dwerja, a rock formation which forms a huge arch through which the turquoise water shimmers in the sun.

Xlendi bay to the southwest of the island is a popular holiday spot, with tall cliffs and a deep bay. Xlendi is also popular for the bars and restaurants. Before leaving Gozo we also visited the Ggantija Megalithic Temples, thought to be around 5,800 years old. Whether it's the treasures and old streets of Valletta, the busy coastal resorts or the quieter pace of Gozo, this is a multi-faceted little gem in the Mediterranean.



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