

June 2015

Dear Friends and Family,

With all of my travel, I had never visited a single island in the Mediterranean, right in my backyard. Until now. Earlier this month I spent a week in Malta, an island country lying south of Sicily. Ironically it is almost exactly the same size as Pohnpei where I lived when I was Country Director of Peace Corps Micronesia. However, instead of consisting primarily of an extinct volcano covered by jungle with a population of 30,000 people, Malta has a highly varied terrain that supports vineyards, citrus and olive orchards and a population of 400,000 including its two satellite islands of Gozo and Comino. It is an independent country in the EU using the Euro currency.

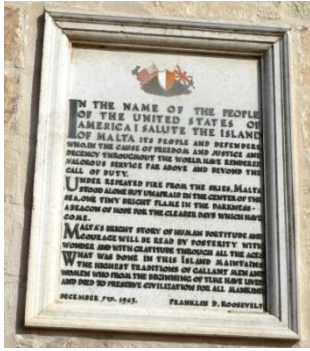
It is both the smallest country in size and population in the EU (just behind Luxembourg) and the most densely populated. Its history and therefore antiquities are rich, having hosted every major Mediterranean power from the Phoenicians to Egyptians, to Greeks and Romans. However it was the Arabs who were present from 850 to 1127 who left behind their language. North African Arabic forms the basis of Maltese language, with a lot of Italian thrown in, which was fun for me! Although English is also an official language, it is spoken primarily with foreigners. Valletta is the capital and a delightful hilly small town undergoing serious renovation of its historic center.



The British were also here (from 1800 to 1964) and left behind their phone booths and three pronged electrical outlets. Malta played a very strategic role in WWII and was the first place re-conquered by the Allies in 1943. Many memorials attest to the heroic role of the Maltese people.



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The earliest settlers arrived about 5000 BC and by 3600 BC they were creating unique megalithic temples, today believed to be the oldest free-standing stone edifices in the world. We visited two of them, Hagar Qim

and Mnajdra on Malta.



These temple remains are sheltered to protect them from the elements like some of the rock-hewn churches in Ethiopia. They are built of the local limestone and had been buried for thousands of years prior to their excavation in 1839-40, since which time the harsh environmental conditions have caused rapid deterioration.

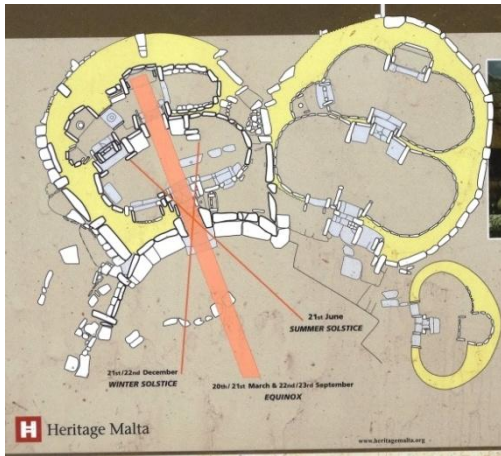


One room of Hagar Qim seemed to have been designed as a picture window overlooking Filfla

Island.



The main axis of Mnajdra temple is aligned with the rising sun of the equinoxes (20/21 March and 22/23 September) and during the solstices (21 June and 21/22 December) the sun rises in line with the corners of the door jambs so only a narrow beam of light enters the temple.



Mnajdra is built of hard limestone on the exterior, but a softer limestone on the interior which permitted carved decoration.

Malta is a Roman Catholic country. There are magnificent churches everywhere. One situation I had not come across before exists – there are two cathedrals (which is supposed to be where the Bishop is based). They are the Cathedral St Paul at Mdina/Rbat



and a co-cathedral St Jean in Valletta. Both have beautifully ornate Baroque interiors and St Paul is actually newer, 17th C versus 1573 due to the prior structure having been destroyed by an earthquake in 1693. St Jean's Co-Cathedral contains Caravaggio's magnificent 1607 work Beheading of St John. Also, seemingly, more gold per surface square foot than Versailles. Something I had never seen before is that the marble floors of both cathedrals are elaborate

inlaid multicolored marble slabs commemorating individual clergy and Maltese Knights.



There are religious symbols on buildings everywhere you walk.



One of Malta's claims to fame are the Knights of Malta (formerly known as the Knights of St. John) who began in the 11th century in Jerusalem as a medical corps. Over time they became Christian crusaders based in Rhodes, then ultimately in 1530 Emperor Charles V gave them Malta as their home. The order was international with eight different national branches, each of which has beautiful chapels within the Co-Cathedral as well as their own buildings in Valletta. They ruled Malta until 1798 when the French under Napoleon Bonaparte took control, only to be ousted two years later by the British. Their emblem is a white cross (known as the Maltese cross) on a red ground.

When Malta achieved independence from Britain in 1964 the country became an independent Republic but remains a member within the (British) Commonwealth of Nations. It joined the EU

in 2004 and the Eurozone in 2008. Don't plan to visit between November 27 and 29 this year as they will be hosting the biannual meeting of the Commonwealth Heads of Government (CHOG)!

The food is of excellent quality – a lot of fish of course – more gravies than one thinks of in a Mediterranean cuisine - and the portions are huge. We happily drank only local wines.

Valletta is a fortified peninsula with harbors on two sides and then the Mediterranean at its front door. Additionally the neighboring towns also sit on fingers jutting into the harbors creating lots of water frontage and varied vistas. So we almost always had water views with lots of boating activity, commercial as well as pleasure. One morning at breakfast I could see



five masts above the Malta Stock Exchange building next to our hotel. I was very excited because the only 5-masted cruise ship I know is Club Med 2. It turns out it wasn't her but her predecessor, Club Med 1, now owned by Windstar Cruise lines and rechristened Wind Surf. Ironically Mein Schiff 3 has

Valletta as her home port and she spent a couple of days tied up below our hotel. I saw her when she visited Agadir every week this past winter!



One day there was a wedding reception in the garden of the Lascaris War Rooms below the beautiful Upper Barrakka Garden also next to the hotel. As the groom was a military man we got to see and hear the cannons fired, a five cannon salute plus two with white doves. I love the sculpture Les Gavroches by Maltese sculptor Antonio Sciortino which is in the garden. The statue represents three poor street children who roamed the streets of Paris during the tumultuous days of the 1848 revolution, inspired from the novel Les Miserables, by Victor Hugo.



We visited Rabat/Mdina which reminded me a bit of Old Town St. Tropez. Mdina is a fine example of a still-inhabited medieval walled city and Rabat is its “suburb”. It is also very steep so fortunately the exercise balanced out the large food intake and I managed not to gain any weight.



Another day trip was to Marsaxlokk, a fishing village famous for its Sunday market of fresh fish and vegetables patronized by the local population.



Although it is a very industrial city now, the traditional fishing fleet is still active. The boats have an eye on the bows said to be from Phoenician times for good luck. The fish was super

and we had one of our best meals of the whole trip at Terrone.



Originally we planned to spend two nights in Gozo, but once we realized how reliable and easy to use the bus system was (and how short the distances between places) we decided to make a day trip out of it. By the way, a seven day unlimited bus pass on Malta costs Euros 6,50. En route we passed many excellent beaches, then on the short ferry ride passed Comino island,



known for its blue grotto. The cruise ship Albatros which had been docked below our hotel the day before was now anchored off Gozo. We passed an old watch tower which are found all over the ancient world and were used for signaling.

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Our major attraction to Gozo was the town of Victoria (also known as Rabat) with its ramparts and cathedral, created by the same architect as Cathedral St Paul in Mdina, although this one's dome was never built and is replicated in a trompe l'oeil substitute. St Paul is on the left, Gozo on the right below.



The 17thC walls are undergoing major restoration, but fortunately you could still visit the church



and walk the ramparts.

The views were dramatic.

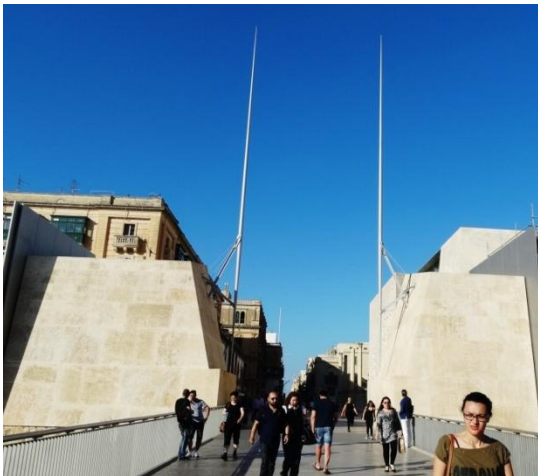
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The town was made of small streets and another sculpture outside the bus station captured my attention.



In Valletta the project of new city gates and Parliament by Italian architect Renzo Piano has caused controversy. The gates are very plain (I at first didn't realize that they were the gates), supposedly similar to the ancient ones. You approach by crossing the former moat on a



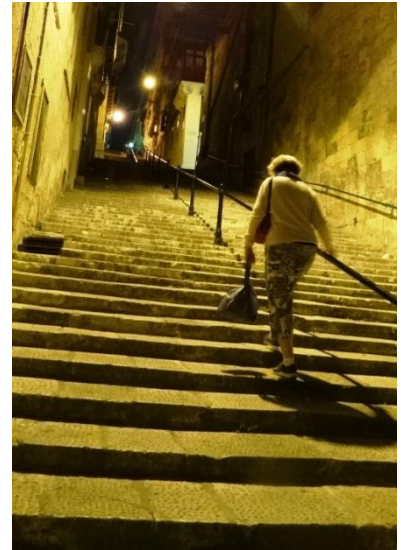
pedestrian bridge. Adjacent is the new Parliament house, with a very creative and ecological



stone design. The Opera was bombed during WWII and the remaining columns have been preserved with an open air theater installed within the space. The project includes rehabilitation of all the public plazas up to the Malta Stock Exchange building.

Originally established in 1566, Valletta's grid street plan was considered revolutionary. The straight streets follow the natural terrain within the walls. As a result, many are steep

and often have picturesquely shallow steps that were created to allow men wearing weighty armor to ascend or descend with less difficulty.



Its most distinctive architectural feature is the enclosed balconies on many of the buildings. I appreciated the fact that not every building has been restored, so there is a mix of perfect to dilapidated.

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The next stop on our Mediterranean island tour will be a taste of Sicily.