

## MALTA

Malta had been on the radar for a while and ticks a lot of boxes. Quite exotic, in the Med, fabulous weather, fascinating history, wonderful seafood, lovely people. We had a bit of a window between the Marathon du Medoc and the Porto Half Marathon so we scooted off to Malta.

We have an incredibly special place in Greece where we go every year because to not go just cannot be contemplated. For me, Malta has that same feel... I could come back over and over and over as it quite simply exquisite.

I had been forewarned by a friend that it takes forever to drive anywhere as there are so many roundabouts. You had to be there.... seriously, I have never seen so many roundabouts. Slow doesn't begin to describe it but driving around Malta was a whole lot of fun.

We will return to Malta, possibly many times... the lure is irresistible.

### MONDAY – DAY 1

An uneventful flight sees us land in Malta at 18:45. Our accommodation people have organised a taxi to meet us - a roomy Merc and we have an interesting trip into Valetta.

Our accommodation is **Tano's Guesthouse**, in the heart of Valetta and also on a very steep street (there are a lot of them!).

The driver shows us in and gives us our key, as reception closes at 7pm and we are a few minutes after. Our room is on the third floor and is very roomy, apart from the bathroom which is really pokey. €145pn.

The weather is humid with thunderstorms predicted tomorrow.



We unpack and head out for dinner. Our first choice is a small restaurant just a few blocks up. It is full and first availability is next week. Ha ha.

We walk around and come across **Ambrosia**, which looks inviting. We order and the food arrives 5min later.... far too quickly. We are still enjoying our pre-dinner beer which was a lot slower to arrive.

We have both opted for Octopus Stew with a side of veges. Really good. We have a half bottle of local Syrah which is excellent and also takes a long time to arrive. We have a pleasant evening in a lovely Restaurant.

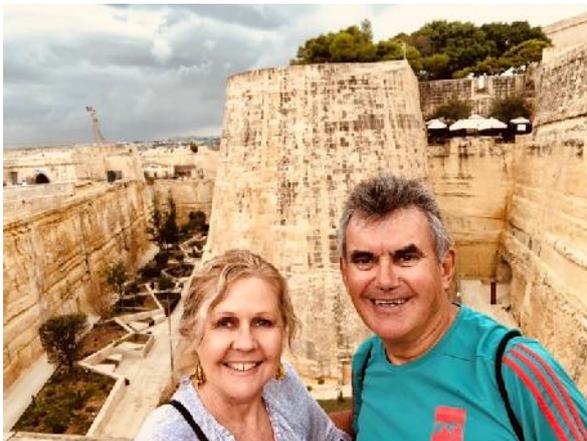


## TUESDAY – DAY 2

We have a delightful breakfast on the 4th floor terrace. Fairly basic but adequate. The day is overcast and threatening but also hot and humid.

The hotel staffer tells us we should visit the **Cathedral** which is the highlight of Valetta. We venture up a couple of blocks and hit the Main Street to find it absolutely packed with tourists. Unbelievably so. We could see a couple of cruise ships docked from our hotel and we now know where all their guests have gone. It is hideous. The queue for the Cathedral weaves down the street and we have no interest in joining it.

We walk up to the **City Gate** which is impressive with all its ruins. Into **Barraka Gardens** which is a stunning setting with great views to the **Three Cities**. There is a lift down to the ferry departure point so we take it - it's a long way down.





We catch the ferry to the **Three Cities** and immediate calm. The cruisers don't stray far from the nose bag and this side of the harbour has a whole different (quieter) feel to it. The rain is annoyingly persistent but certainly not enough to deter us. This is a charming place with some beautiful architecture and lovely alleyways.



We stop and get off our feet at **Centre** where we enjoy a Diavola pizza and a half pint of the local brew Ciska, which is excellent! We are up a lovely alleyway under a big umbrella, to fend off the rain.



After our relax we jump on the Happy Train which tours around the three cities - **Vittoriosa, Cospicua, Kalkara**. Seems like a good option given the rain and minutes after we depart it belts down. The train is an enjoyable trip, around 30mins and we are back by the harbour.

The ferry is due to depart at 3pm and we have 6mins to make it to the other side of the harbour. It becomes clear we will miss by a couple of minutes. Except the ferry stays where it is and we end up making it!

Back in Valetta we explore the city. The Cathedral queue is less but still long. We walk around the city – what a beautiful and interesting place. As the rain comes down we venture down an entry to our left, into the most magnificent church.





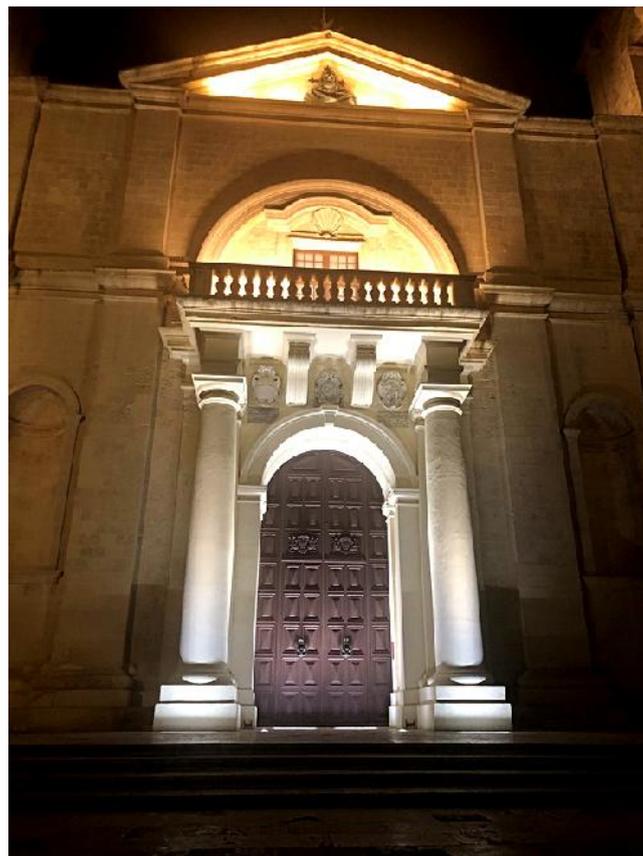
The rain gets heavy and we decide we will return to our room to relax.

I research a place that looks good for dinner and we go to **Il Ristorante Italiano**. The hostess is from Milano and is very friendly. We both have Tuna Carpaccio for entree and it is fresh and fabulous. We have a bottle of Vermentino, which our host recommends (I later find the bottle is worth about \$7 AUD) which goes down well.



I have grilled seafood and Dave has grilled fish, both of which are again really fresh. We sit and watch the world go by. We are up a side street so things are reasonably quiet but enough traffic to give it some atmosphere.

We stroll around town – it is entrancing with all the beautifully lit up buildings.



### **WEDNESDAY – DAY 3**

Clear sky today. Yippee! As I gaze out the window a monster cruise ship comes into the harbour, then does a reverse manoeuvre to dock. Black crap belching from its funnels.

Brekkie is again enjoyable and the verandah setting is copping full sun and quite hot. We pack and our hostess calls us a Maltese Uber to go to the airport. We are collecting a rental to continue our exploration of Malta.

Our taxi driver is a nice guy - from The Czech Republic, has worked for Celebrity Cruises and in the hotel industry.

We collect our rental vehicle from Budget and we're off to **Mellieha**. About half way there Miss google sends us off to the right on what is little more than a cow trail. I get out and walk further down. It's not car material - maybe a 4WD but the risk of not coming out the other side is too great so we turn around. At which time my mapping drops out.



We get to **Mellieha** which is a really pretty place but I have no idea how to get to our accommodation. Dave spies a Starbucks so we have an Iced Latte with a side of internet access and find our way again.

We are staying at **Tieqa Hamra Charming House** and our host Tony is there to greet us. €97pn. We dump and run as our room is not yet available and we plan to spend the afternoon at the beach. Tony recommends the 'middle beach' rather than Golden Bay.

We make our way to the beach, about a 12min drive and it is stunningly beautiful. We follow the path down to **Signita Miracle Beach** which is busy but not overly so. We hire two sun beds (€8 each) and settle in. The water is crystal clear and around 24 degrees. We read, swim and enjoy a beer later in the day. A perfect way to spend the afternoon.



Back to our accommodation and Tony shows us to our room. Thankfully he has delivered our luggage as there is no lift and a spiral staircase to manage. Our room is huge with a bathroom to match. The windows are open and a lovely breeze is coming through. This is gorgeous!

Tony recommends **Rebekah's** for dinner and has booked a table for us. It is a short walk to the beautiful limestone building and we are offered a table in the internal courtyard. Perfecto!

There is only one other couple in the small area, also perfecto.

When the menus were presented, I got a rush of blood, thinking I'd discovered Roger Federer's secret Maltese restaurant. Then I realised it was just a similar logo.



I have Zucchini Flowers for entree - they are served with fresh anchovies and guacamole. Dave has Pasta with Rabbit Ragout (local speciality) which he says is great.

For Main I have Langoustine Ravioli in Seafood Bisque - the ravioli is fresh the bisque enjoyable. Dave has a tuna steak and reports it is also good. We enjoy a bottle of local white wine which is a great match with the food.

A lovely evening.

#### **THURSDAY – DAY 4**

Up and off to **Gozo**. We enjoy breakfast and chat with Tony. He is a great guy, interesting and has a finger in a few pies. The stay has been delightful and too short.

It is a straightforward drive to the ferry departure point at **Cirkewwa**. We line up in a queue of cars and sit for 45mins or so before boarding. On board we go up top and enjoy the trip to Gozo, which only takes 15mins or so.



The approach to **Ghajnsielem** is scenic - a hard and dry terrain, built of limestone and has a VERY HOT look about it.

We drive up through **Victoria** where the traffic is slow. Victoria is a lovely town with plenty of activity. We take a right to **Marsalforn** and arrive very soon after.



Marsalforn is small and it's easy to find our accommodation, Maria Giovanni. €70pn. We unload and wait in the lobby with our hostess' father who is a pleasant gent. A quick look up our side alley presents a spectacular view of the waterfront, with restaurants lining the promenade.



Our hostess, Sonia, arrives and we check in. Our room is large with a pokey bathroom. We have a little verandah up the side alley looking at the flats across the road.

We dump and run to enjoy a walk along the waterfront. It is gorgeous - downside is the beach is rocky. A few rocks don't stop the sun worshippers though and lounges abound.

We decide to sit and have lunch and a beer at **Odyssey** on the water. I have Stuffed Calamari in a tomato, garlic and olive sauce - fantastic but huge (if that's a complaint!). Dave has a Marinara Pizza and it is "OK."

We decide it's time to find a beach - Ramla Bay is close by so we head there. The beach is reasonable busy, as all beaches seem to be in Malta. We score a couple of lounges and head beachwards. We squeeze in and take our place amongst the sun worshippers.



The water is inviting but the approach not so. It is rocky all the way out. I decide to go belly down when the water is up to my knees and it works a treat as I slide out over the rocks. I return around and Dave is still pondering his entry. The water temperature is perfect and we float around for ages to cool off. The water is very salty and floating is easy.

We retire to the beach to read. Just before 6pm we are told to vacate as they are packing up the lounges and umbrellas. Boo hoo. We reluctantly wander off home.

After freshening up we take walk along the waterfront in search of a light dinner. We walk around the restaurants that line the promenade and come to **Offers**, perched out on the rocks with a gorgeous view back over town.

The service is pleasant and we are brought some nibbles - anti pasti and bits. We don't nibble much as were not that hungry.



I order a Gozo Cheese Salad and Dave has Prawn & Octopus salad. Mine has a lot of rocket, some tomatoes and plenty of cheese. There is a hard cheese, like a feta, which is too salty and there is no way I can eat it all. There is a second soft cheese, the consistency of junket, and a few balls of a mozzarella style cheese. Dave's salad is warm seafood with greens. We enjoy a bottle of Vermentino, which continues to be good.

Service drops off when they realise we're done. Eventually we get a bill and a Limoncello. We walk home and the sea front is bustling with people.

## FRIDAY – DAY 5

Brekkie is lovely and dad is a good host.

We head out early to get to the port and take a boat to the **Blue Lagoon**. Parking is at full capacity so we end up in town and walk down a steep hill to the port. Clearly the walk back will be tougher!

There are plenty of boats and we get on the first one. The cost is €20 return for both of us. The boat takes about a dozen people and we are off about 15mins after we get there, at 9am.

We arrive at the lagoon to find deck chairs on every available piece of sand, rock, path. We are early so grab a couple of chairs on the beach, under umbrellas. There are only about a dozen chairs on this small patch of sand and we pay €20 for half a day (€30 for the full day). Previously we've paid €6-8 per chair but this is clearly 'premium.' We reckon we'll be done by lunch time due to the crowds.



The lagoon is impossibly clear and a magical green/blue colour. We swim around and enjoy the rocky scenery that surrounds us.

As the morning wears on boat after boat after boat pulls in and drops off more tourists. From the water they are like a line of ants crawling up the hill in search of a spare piece of ground to sit on.

Our patch of beach is invaded by people who take every available piece of sand and place their towel down. By midday we are well and truly over the crowds. We go for a walk up the hill to take in the view from above (stunning!) and then get the next boat out.

Such a pretty place but really ruined by the sheer volume of people. And boats. And water sports.

We traipse up the hill to our car which is now like a Kia oven. The Kia is a real piece of crap car - only 40,000km and absolutely trashed.

We take off in search of a new beach, to the west of the island. The drive is fascinating, through deserted looking towns and barren landscapes. I see a sign to a hand-made glass shop and direct Dave to do a u-bolt. What follows is a beautiful glass bowl – memories!



We continue our drive, in search of our western beach, which turns out to be a rocky outcrop from which you need to negotiate your way down the cliff, in order to get to the jump off point. We decide that, in spite of the searing heat, we don't need to negotiate the rocks and we will head for home.

There is also an 'inland lake' here which is a pool of water about 100m from the ocean. You can have a boat ride around it - given the lake is all of about 50m from one side to the other we give that a miss too.



We find a new route home and come in from the north of the island. We discover yet another gorgeous, but rocky looking beach and decide this will do us. **Xwenji Beach.**

There are no chairs left and beach guy tells us he has another couple waiting. All good. He also mentions that there have been a few stingers around if we are planning to swim.

We head back up to the cafe and grab a couple of beers. The area is covered and there is a nice breeze, so we pull out our books and settle in. Perfecto.



Eventually we drive home after another super day out.

We venture down to the waterfront to a restaurant that has some lovely fresh fish on display. (Don't you hate it when you forget to record the name of the restaurant!).

We have a seafood platter to begin with - Piled high with mussels, prawns and ocky. The mussels are fantastic- done Menuiere style. Great starter.



We chose a fresh snapper from the display, which they bake in salt. It comes to the table and the waitress peels back the skin and serves the fish. It is so moist and one of the best fish I have ever eaten. Again, we enjoy a lovely Vermentino.

We are right on the water's edge and watch some divers fossick around not far away. They look like big underwater fireflies as they go about with their bright torches.



We enjoy the evening, our last in Marsalforn. This is a gorgeous place and one we would readily come back to.

## **SATURDAY – DAY 6**

We enjoy another lovely brekkie. This time we have a hot option - bacon, tomato and eggs (for Dave). We leave around 9am and head once more for the ferry terminal.

We are straight up and onto the first boat with little delay. Once back on the mainland it is only a short distance to our next stop but the traffic moves very slowly in Malta, so it could take a while. Dave has noticed an orange warning light on the dash. Hope the crap Kia makes the distance!

We have another interesting drive through quaint towns and we arrive in **Marsaxlokk** around midday. We are staying at **Dun Gorg** - a new building, only open 3mths ago.

We have a park across the road and lug our ports in. We are greeted by Andrew, whom I've been dealing with, and he is a very pleasant and welcoming host.

He shows us to room 31 on the 3rd floor and it is beautiful. Huge room, spacious bathroom and a small verandah from where we can see the bay, which is only a block away. Fabulous. Andrew informs us the bottle of wine is complimentary - nice touch. All for €100pn.

Andrew tells us the Fish Festival is on tonight and tomorrow there are fish markets plus the 'usual' type markets on a weekend.

We leave our gear and go for a walk along the waterfront. There are market stalls and restaurants all the way along. It is such a pretty place.



We decide we will have a stop and a small lunch. We take a seat at **Il-Bukket** which is quite popular. The choice was made pretty much on the basis of the grilled Prawns with Pernod and garlic which I thought we could share. Dave has spotted some ocky though and orders accordingly. We grab a couple of beers as well. It is welcome relief from a hot day.

My six big prawns come out and are great. Dave's ocky is ok. The food just keeps coming out - chips, potatoes, salad and a bowl of steamed veges. Way too much and most of which we leave. Not happy with the wastage but I'd be less happy eating all that food!



We walk back along the water front and decide we'll take refuge in the coolness of the room for a few hours.



In the evening we walk along the waterfront to the far end. The area is alive with stalls and a big BBQ area where they will cook fish over the charcoal.



We take a seat at **Capo Mulini** – the evening is quiet, as we are early.

We aren't that hungry. I order Zuppa Cozze Di Vongole and Dave Lobster Pasta. My mussels and clam soup gets dumped on the table and the waiter is off. No spoon, nowhere to put the shells and no bread, which is a staple of every restaurant we've been to. We wave the waiter down and ask for a spoon and somewhere to put the shells - don't care about the bread.



My soup is pleasant but not great. Dave's pasta has a prawn, little lobster and a lot of stodgy pasta. The girl at the next table has the same dish and leaves most of it. Head man is quick to blame it on the fact she 'ruined it' by adding cheese. Dave leaves most of his too, sans cheese. Another pleasant Vermentino goes down.

Getting any service from them is impossible which is somewhat of a common theme.



We walk back along the waterfront, which is buzzing. We stop and watch a guy on an electro organ for ages. He is brilliant and quite a crowd is gathered around.

We pass the BBQ area and it looks fantastic. Error of judgment there and we should have chosen this place to dine. C'est la vie.



There is a chap on guitar singing and we stop for a while there as well. He is so good and it's a pleasant way to while away the time.

### **SUNDAY – DAY 7**

Brekkie is on the 4th floor terrace and is not brilliant but quite sufficient. There is a lovely lady there, possibly Andrew's mum.

We go down to the waterfront to have a look at the markets. They are solidly packed with people as we make our way along. They extend the whole way along the waterfront - HUGE! I buy a cooking spoon holder, beautifully decorated with a scene of Valetta. It will get plenty of use in my kitchen!





At the east end of the waterfront we keep walking and find the beach. It is sandy and easy to walk to, so we decide we will spend a few hours there. We will go back to the hotel, change, grab our books and return.



The traffic is horrific and the town exceptionally busy - hence, we can't be bothered driving anywhere. The restaurants are bulging with people.

We meet Andrew on the way in and have a bit of a chat. When we tell him about the amount of food involved in yesterday's lunch he tells us that the Maltese are the third fattest country in the world, behind the US and England.

We walk back to the beach and take up a spot. There are lots of tents up the back of the beach, full of families who have set up for the day. They have gas cookers, tables, chairs, tons of food, floaty devices, music devices ..... quite the day out. Malta shuts down midday Saturday and it is great to see that Sunday is a day for families.

The water is clear and calm. We are on a bay and there is a large LNG refinery to our left. To the right is a working port with accompanying visuals. We don't have the prettiest outlook but we can also see back to the waterfront in town so it's not all bad.

We spend most of the day here, until some dark clouds come over. No rain but no sun either! We go back home and do a bit of a pack for our departure tomorrow.

Late in the day we enjoy a glass of Andrew's wine on the verandah while taking in a magical Malta sunset.



We spotted a few great looking options for dinner during our walk to the beach and head left, to the quieter part of town. The area is quiet, the day trippers and weekenders have departed and many of the restaurants have pulled down the shutters.

**Terrone** is open - we passed it today and it is a charming place with only a few tables occupied. We settle in and order the Grouper which comes with a spicy sauce made of chick peas mixed with a spicy sausage - sounds great. And is! The fish is white and chunky and the sauce fantastic. We have the usual Vermentino - again good and enjoy a fabulous evening.





We also have our first dessert - Maltese lemon tart with vanilla gelato. Yummo.

We have a 4:45am departure in the morning so don't linger long time in the street tonight.

### **MONDAY – DAY 8**

We rise at 4:15am to jump in the shower. We are locked and loaded by 4:40am and we depart in crappy Kia. The airport is only 5.7km away.

We have a 6:30am LH flight to Lisbon, via Frankfurt. There is the most stunning sunrise as we take off over Malta. Thank you and farewell.

Our trip to Malta has been superb. It is a place of such natural beauty and such harsh, dry land. The beaches are great, the seafood exceptional and the people have been welcoming. It has been a relaxing week and one we have enjoyed immensely. We would come back any day but may have some other places in this part of the world to explore (like Sardinia and Corsica!).

Next stop.... Lisbon.

