

Transcript of Podcast 070: Malta

{Intro:

RICHARD: So yeh, a lot of nice things about Malta. More positives than ... negatives, I mean everywhere's got something, there's no one perfect place on the planet but Malta's done a lot very well, and they do very well as people, considering the bumpy roads and crazy pavements and windy Mediterranean sea. Other than that I love it, it's been great.

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{intro music - jaunty, bouncy}

{Intro standard announcement:

Hello. Thank you for tuning in. You're listening to Travel Tales From Beyond The Brochure, a podcast looking at unfamiliar places across the world, and aspects of travelling you may never have thought of. I'm your host, The Barefoot Backpacker, a middle-aged Enby with a passion for offbeat travel, history, culture, and the 'why's behind travel itself. So join me as we venture ... beyond the brochure.}

{Music fades. Podcast begins}

Hello :)

I missed a podcast episode. I had plans to record a quick one about something inconsequential, but it didn't happen, because I was busy in Malta. Obviously we're going to talk more about my Malta adventures later, but suffice to say I'm now one podcast and one week off schedule. How am I going to ever get a decent listenership if I can't do the basics.

Something something "Or Learn Parkour".

Anyway. Housekeeping update. Apart from the obvious. My leg is ... it still aches and and I'm still not going to run on it for a while, but I did stretch its capabilities in Malta and while it wasn't entirely a success and I was still walking very slowly compared to normal - Laura was quicker than me; this never happens. She never stopped to let me catch up though. I wasn't *that* much slower - I was at least manageably mobile, and without my stick too. This is because I figured there was no way I could get the stick through airport security. Unlike fake silicone breasts. So it was the first time since early February that I was walking without any support, but equally I knew that I was probably capable of it, even if it was a bit of a risk.

It's just frustrating because I'm a very outdoorsy sort of person. At least it happened in Winter/Spring, when the weather wasn't conducive to a decent walk anyway. And I was pushing it anyway - the weekend before my Malta trip I took an amble around the exciting town of Coatbridge, in North Lanarkshire, and visited the history museum there, which was very interesting and quite thorough - it's quite a gem of a find in an area otherwise bereft of tourism excitement. Even Drumpellier Country Park is basically just a lake. The Coatbridge area is famous for iron and steel production, and was quite the industrial heartland of Scotland's Central Belt. I mean, it clearly isn't now, but that's no different from places like Kirkby-in-Ashfield. Which doesn't have a large local history museum. Maybe it should. Though I've no idea where they'd put it. And someone'd probably burn it down.

By the time you listen to this pod I'll be away again, in Cyprus and Italy. The former is for an exciting and completely off-brand trip that will be the subject of its own podcast before the end of May, the latter is just because the former is only a four day trip and Milan was a conveniently timed and costed destination from Stansted Airport on Thursday morning. Both are with Laura, obviously, because like I travel anywhere without her these days.

This week however I had notification my flight back to Scotland from Milan on the following Monday had been cancelled for what were described as 'operational reasons'. A Travel Twitter friend said a flight with a different airline about the same time outbound from Edinburgh had been cancelled this week too so I guess

Edinburgh Airport is planning to having trouble on 8th May. Anyway, I've rebooked (no fee) for the following day as all the other options to other airports would have either flown at inconvenient times or required expensive onward travel in the UK. Glasgow's costly enough to get to as it is without an extra overnight stop in Nottingham or Newcastle.

One final piece of housekeeping to note: back in January I was interviewed for another podcast - Ruth Millington's 'Extreme Holidays Podcast', which, as the name suggest, covers people who take trips or have adventures that are ... slightly beyond a week in Benidorm. People she's interviewed have included someone who took a motorbike trip in Mozambique, and someone else who had to flee Thailand because they'd delved too deep into backpacker deaths that some people would rather she hadn't.

In the face of that, talking about my hike across Great Britain feels almost mild in comparison, although certainly one might feel hiking 57 days across pretty much an entire country with a backpack, a lot of couscous, and as little footwear as I could get away with, might feel extreme to some.

Anyway, go have a listen. Deets in the shownotes.

But now, to Malta.

{section separation jingle}

I went to Malta for two reasons, related by time. On the one hand, Laura wanted to get away for the Easter Weekend, because she believed it would be infinitely better than staying at home, and she'd never been to Malta. The jury's still out for her on whether that was A Good Decision, and is one of the reasons she isn't going to be heard in this podcast episode. The other reason was that it turns out the weekend after Easter, Malta was going to be the venue for one of the Traverse organisation conferences. Y'all'd've heard of them by now; they're the people who ran the conference and beer trip I went to in Czechia last year, and then the Creator Awards I turn up to and never win anything at. Anyway, this time was an event they call KeyFrame; it's a series of workshops dedicated more towards video creation rather than generic blogging content. And why would I go to a video creation workshop given I'm very much a podcaster first and blogger second? Well, I'm slowly developing my video content, in fact; it's been something my VA has been very keen that I work on. And we felt that it would a great place to go in order to get to hints, tips, and knowledge from people who do it far more than I do.

Indeed I've gotten several takeouts from the conference. One was 'I don't use music nearly enough'. I'd always taken the view that everyday life doesn't have music, so why should video recording everyday life. Of course, most people have at least some music in their head at relev'nt times, plus it gives a sense of mood and vibe. And a video without music is, yeh, it's kinda boring. That I also only have one piece of music I ever use, which as you all well know, it's quite a bouncy, jaunty, piece, doesn't help.

One of the sessions at the workshop was on 'presenting to camera'. I've always been quite bad at this, mainly because I like to have everything scripted. I have a tendency to flubber after three sentences if I have to rely on my own brain to make the script on-the-fly. That said, I'm actually okay in situations where I'm chatting, like with the interview I had with Ruth on her podcast, it's just where it's just me. Being a mostly solo traveller (not that you'd believe it given my recent and upcoming trips) just means it is usually just me and solo video is an awkward amount of hassle and admin setup, as well as relying on me being fluent and fluid with my delivery. And while the workshop (led by someone who's been a presenter on BBC Sport) didn't give quick solutions, it did give a lot of pointers to gradually improve. Most of it is confidence, and practice, predictably yet annoyingly enough. And to that end I'm starting to do daily YouTube Shorts vlogs, many of which are me talking directly to camera. Apparently you can see some improvement already.

The other main takeout is many of my ideas for videos have been, while well-conceived, badly executed. It's little stylistic improvements - more stylish filming in the first place, more use of transitions, a few tips on video quality, and more variety of shots. Everyone loves a good pan-to-landscape, but there's so much more that can be done. It's not going to help past adventures, but for example my ongoing series of 'everywhere is interesting' videos can be very much improved-upon.

The conference wasn't just workshops though; this being Traverse they had a whole host of other events and

trips planned in. On the Friday I was on a tour around Malta called 'Grapes and Gastronomy', mainly because of the choice of six trips, four required far too much adrenaline and/or water, and the fifth involved a trip to Gozo, where I'd just have spent two days so it seemed weird to have gone back. But I'll talk more about Gozo later.

The name of the trip was slightly misleading; the majority of it was spent eating cheese, in one form or another. From ricotta pastizzi to local cheese at a honey producer (and yes, we did spend a good twenty minutes in full space-suit gear standing next to a beehive and not getting stung, tho they did have to fudge my sandals with bin-bags), then a whole cheese-and-charcuterie lunch at a vineyard before making our own Ftira, not pizza, though it looks like pizza and makes like pizza and cooks like pizza and eats like pizza. There'll be a full section on food and drink later, suffice to say Maltese food is pretty darned good, tho less so when I make it.

I went on two of the evening 'dos'; the first on the opening Friday at Sangita beach bar which was a lovely location by the beach at the bottom of a cliff, aside from the five thousand steps it took to get there (and back, in the dark), and the fact that, as you'll hear more about later too, it would have been better in the summer. We got given a free gift of a blanket, but only as we left, when it would have been more useful to have them as we arrived. The other was on the Sunday, the closing night at a small but funky bar called The Thirsty Barber, which was opposite a place offering 72 shots of alcohol for around €24. Listener, we did not. Because we would have died.

Throughout the conference, by the way, including the evening events, I was dressing and presenting definitely more on the femme side of non-binary, which caused several comments. All of which were 'I love the dress', or similar vibes. One of the tips given in the 'presenting in front of camera' workshop was 'wear comfortable clothing'; he's right - if you feel comfortable in yourself it'll show on-screen, so it definitely helps to know how and what I look and feel comfortable in. And comments like that definitely help.

As an aside, I realised there's very few Gen-X non-binary travel bloggers. It's a niche, for sure, but one I seem to be comfortably in.

One other point to mention; my podcast is called "Travel Tales From Beyond The Brochure", and given that not only was the Traverse KeyFrame workshop here, but also the British Guild of Travel Writers had their AGM in Malta earlier this year, *and* I've noticed on Travel Social Media that Malta's also been a destination recently for Travel Bloggers to be sent on Press Trips, mostly by Jet2 Holidays, one might raise an eyebrow at my choice of destination topic here. But let's be honest, I'd been meaning to blog about Malta off the back of my previous trip in 2017 (and indeed I did microblog a lot at the time on Instagram), I just ... it's taken me this long, and another trip, to get me in the right frame to get round to it.

At some point I need to finish my blog about Middlesbrough and Saltburn. That's only been in the works in 2013.

{section separation jingle}

Malta is the smallest country in the EU, with a population of around 520,000. This makes it smaller than Glasgow or Sheffield; it's almost exactly the same population as Bradford. And at 316km² compared with 366km², Bradford is also bigger in area (for Brits, it's just larger in area than Milton Keynes). It's made up of several islands, although only the largest three (Malta, Gozo, and Comino) are inhabited. And Comino only just counts - it lies between the two main islands, is 3.5km² in area, and has a population of two. You can take day trips there from Gozo, which I wanted to do but I didn't feel my leg was quite up to a load of rough hiking.

Anyway, as I said, I'd been to the country before, back in January 2017. I spent a week there, staying in an AirBnB in Hab-Zabbar on the eastern side of the island. It was a trip I took largely to clear my mind and relax after some fundamental changes back where I was working at the time, which I have to say worked really well. I didn't push myself to see everything, I just let myself see how I felt and took trips accordingly. This time I had three nights in a hostel in the lively area of Sliema, two nights in the quiet Gozo village of Qala, then five nights in a weird hotel-but-it-felt-like-a-hostel a mile or so north of Sliema, but still far enough away to be quiet and residential.

As such, I didn't really have expectations of the country. Laura had high expectations of it being an exciting new

country with charms and scenery. Laura is, as noted, not on this pod. Someone who is on this pod is Steph, who blogs at A Nomad's Passport, and she told me her expectations before coming here.

{STEPH: Honestly I had no expectations when it comes to Malta as a country, aside from the fact it's supposed to have some amazing scuba dives, but that's something I have yet to do because the water temperature is much much colder than I expected, and there is no way I'm going into the water when it's still 15°C so, fingers crossed it's going to heat up before the end of the month because otherwise I'll be an ice cube in Malta. So have fun with Maltese ice-cube Stephanie, wonderful.

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Someone else I spoke with while at the conference was Richard, who, while not a travel blogger per se (he's engaged to one though, Nele the Navigatio), did host two workshops on audio production - he's a musician and audio technician by trade. He told me something about Malta he wasn't expecting.

{RICHARD: Also, it's all UK plugs! What's going on in Malta with UK plugs? Everyone talks English here very well, and everything is a UK plug. I never thought I would ever see a UK plug outside of England, and this place is just ... I brought my adaptor to the convention and I'm just looking at the plugs and I thought 'this can't, this can't be right!'. The first time I saw them was in the hotel room, and cos it was a fancy hotel I thought 'ooh they really think about the foreign travellers here', and then I came into the convention room and it was all UK plugs, and it was extremely confusing actually. But very good, because it means I didn't need to bring my adapter everywhere, so that's interesting.

But there's a lot of English history here I think as well. And that's reflected in those kinds of things we see here today, which is very interesting.

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And we'll hear why that is in a few short moments. By the way, you'll be hearing from both Steph and Richard a bit more later. I'd planned to have recorded more interviews while I was there, but ... I didn't.

{section separation jingle}

So let's start with a little history. Malta has been inhabited for several millennia, and it shows. But let's go straight to a philosophical question. If something is touted as an ancient monument, how much of it has to be original, and how much of it can be a restoration?

I noticed this a lot more here in Malta than anywhere else; I don't know if that's because other places just don't tell you, or if other places don't restore at all and just leave you with piles of stones, or because the Maltese Heritage authorities actively promote restoration rather than showing stuff 'as is'.

Hagar Qim is a site on the South Coast of Malta Island and it's touted as being amongst the oldest free-standing structures in the world. Dating from around 3400 BC (for comparison, even the earliest Egyptian pyramids are estimated to be around 1000 years younger), it's believed to be a temple of some kind - just down the hill are three more structures of the same period (Mnajdra) which have been precisely aligned so that on both Solstices and both Equinoxes, light shines through the main portal to specific places within the temple complex. In Hagar Qim, many objects were found that suggested religious, or at least ritualistic, use but no burials were found. In fact, very little is known about the people who built these structures at all; who they were, where they came from, nor where they went.

Now, both these sites are described as having been 'restored'. This suggests to me that more has been done to them than just digging out the ruins and displaying what's left. Obviously there's not been any desire to physically reconstruct the entire temple, but one can't help but wonder how much of it you're looking at is ancient, and how much of it was constructed in the last 50 years. But since the reconstructions are, as much as possible, done with the same stone and in the same manner as the original, does it really matter anyway? Both sites have also been protected from the elements by a large tent that does, from a distance, make it look like an alien spacecraft.

Either way, it's quite impressive!

Hagar Qim is probably not the oldest site in Malta. It would be hard to judge what is, especially given across all the islands there is evidence of habitation and worship from similar periods - indeed Hagar Qim and five other sites of a similar vintage are grouped together as a World Heritage Site by UNESCO. One of these five is 'Ġgantija', and it's the originally-inscribed UNESCO site of the group. It's believed to be not just older even than Hagar Qim, but indeed touted as being the second oldest religious structure in the world, after Göbekli Tepe in Turkey. We're talking about 3600 BC here, so, contemporaneous with, of all places, the Knap of Howar in Orkney.

Ġgantija is on the island of Gozo, in the town of Xagħra. The site itself consists of the (substantial) ruins of two temple complexes, with stone walls several metres high. Walking through them makes the design feel a little like a main passageway with smaller corridors crossing, each of which ends quickly in a kind of circular room.

It's located on the main plateau in the east-centre of the island, and as such commands good views across most of the island, making it an easy place to spot and be spotted from. Apart from the temples themselves there's a small museum with videos and displays of some of the objects that have been found here, including what remains of a large statue of a woman which seems to have been cast down from the rooftop at some point. A deliberate act of destruction in the dying days of the settlement, or an act of accidental carelessness caused by putting it too near the edge. Who can say?

One question the site does ask is the obvious 'but how was it built?', given the lack of easy transportation, the size of Gozo, and its location on a high point. One giveaway has been the discovery of a series of stone balls which are displayed in the museum and suggest some kind of ball-bearing mechanism of movement. Categorically not aliens. That said, its name comes from the folk belief that the site was built by a mythological giantess, so your mileage may vary.

Speaking of Gozo ... the main attraction on the island is the Citadella, in the central city of Victoria. Indeed it's very much the centrepiece of Gozo, and all roads from across the island pretty much go there, and all the buses start from here - if you're going to explore Gozo it would take a lot of effort to not pass through Victoria.

But the Citadella. Originally Roman (though the site itself was occupied long before that), the fortress really came into its own from the 1200s. During this period it served as an administrative, a defensive, and a residential base, being the highest and most defensible point on the island. This didn't stop it falling victim to attacks; the most notable of these came in 1551 when the Ottomans invaded and captured it, and hauling away the vast majority of the population as slaves (it is said that only 500 people escaped, doing so by scaling down the side of the battlements away from the battle). When the walls were rebuilt in later years, it became law that everyone who lived on the island had to spend the night within its walls during the summer months (when calmer weather on the sea made it more likely that another invasion would occur). It was only when this restriction was lifted (1637) that other parts of Gozo grew in size and the power of the Citadella began to wane.

Much of the complex is in surprisingly good condition, although it is still 'used', after a fashion. Gozo's main cathedral lies inside, as do a number of small museums. The British used part of it to store grain and water, while during WW2, parts of the old silos plus some newly-dug rooms were used (unofficially, it must be said) as air-raid shelters, though as it turned out, relatively few bombs fell on Gozo compared with Malta Island.

Odd fact; it served as the capital of an independent Gozo state for three years during the Napoleonic War, between the French surrendering and the British taking full control. I do wonder if Gozo still feels independent - there's very little mention of Malta Island on the maps, the tourist information leaflets, the posters ...

At this point, which feels about half a section too late, I should give a brief potted history of the Maltese islands. It's largely been a tale of siege and invasion, some successful, and ownership transfer. Note that if you look at where Malta is on a map, it's basically a big rock with a perfect natural harbour right in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea. A better-located strategic point you would find it hard to improve upon.

Initially colonised by the Phoenicians, the Romans invaded and ruled for some 800 years. The Arabs took

over in 870 AD, and while they only stayed for a couple of hundred years, they left a strong mark on the culture and environment, although there's some question-marks over how many people actually lived on the islands during the first century of Arab rule.

At the end of the 11th Century, the Normans invaded - they were rather good at that sort of thing it seems - and it became a nebulous part of the Kingdom of Sicily for the next 450 years. These two invasions are why the Maltese language feels like the illegitimate child of Italian and Arabic.

In 1530, the islands were given to the the 'Order of St. John, also known as the Knights Hospitalier, who can best be described in Dungeons & Dragons terms as literal Paladins. They performed a dual role of fighting and medicine during the Crusades, before being kicked out of Rhodes by the Ottoman Empire. In fact they nearly got kicked out of Malta 35 years later, but the Ottomans couldn't quite conquer it.

They did eventually get kicked out in 1798 by the French under Napoleon, but two years later the British were 'invited' in. They stayed until independence in 1964, and explains why most people on the islands speak English, why they drive on the left, and why they use British electric sockets. My research for this pod also brings up that in the post-world war two period, serious consideration was given to integrating Malta into the UK, with three MPs in the Westminster parliament etc. This seems not to have happened because the UK government themselves went a bit cold on it, partly for financial reasons but also for a concern they may have to do the same for other colonies like Gibraltar, and they ... didn't want the admin. Relatable. World War Two was an important period for Malta, but I'll come onto that shortly.

Most of the surviving historical sites on Malta therefore tend to relate to the period of rule by the Order of St John. These include around thirteen or fourteen coastal watchtowers, mostly built on the Maltese cliffs - I passed by one known as Tal-Hamrija Tower. They were built in the late 1650s by the Knights of St John as a means of supplementing coastal defence, mainly against Ottoman assaults or related Muslim pirates.

Known as 'De Redin Towers' after the ruler at the time, the idea was to have a chain of them all around the coast, so they could signal to each other that an attack was close at hand; they were also all equipped with two small cannon. They all had the same basic design - square, two floors, and a lookout post at the top. Four men could occupy each tower at any one time but that must have made it quite cramped.

Hamrija Tower itself was the last in the chain that stretched from Gozo across the North and East coasts of Malta's main island - I don't know if that was by design, or if further towers would have been built had De Redin not died a couple of years later. One further one was built after his passing, but in Gozo and not linked by sight to any of the others.

The other notable thing about this tower is that it directly faces the island of Filfla. This is a small rocky 'blob', it's about 800m around and 60m high. Its name comes from the Arabic word for 'chilli pepper' (due to its shape) and it's one of the five or six islands that make up the archipelago of 'Malta'. It's uninhabited, and now a protected nature reserve needing a permit to land on it, although it's never seen much in the way of human activity anyway. It's believed Neolithic people felt there was something godly/spiritual about the place, while in more recent times there was a small chapel built into the rock; this was destroyed in an earthquake in 1856. In the 20th Century, the British armed forces used the island for target practice; until recently there was so much unexploded ordnance in the waters surrounding it that restrictions were put on going anywhere near it on safety grounds.

Now. Every country has an 'iconic' image that 'defines' it; a symbolic structure that's easily identifiable and represents that country in one shot. The UK, for instance, has the clock tower in the parliament building that houses Big Ben. France has the Eiffel Tower. The USA has the Statue of Liberty. Malta has Fort St Angelo, located in the harbour area just over the channel from Valletta.

It's unclear when construction first started, but its location at the end of a small peninsula jutting into a natural harbour and one of the few places on the island of Malta where ships can easily dock means it's likely some kind of structure has been there for quite a while. The fort itself is first mentioned in the early 1200s, although it became truly important once the Knights Of The Order of St John took possession of the island in 1530, and used it as effectively their 'presidential palace' and capital.

Over the subsequent centuries, the fort has been used as a prison, an army headquarters, a naval ship (it was classified as HMS Egmont and HMS Angelo by the British Navy), an anti-aircraft station, and, in parts, a hotel. Since 2015 the bulk of it has become a tourist attraction, detailing not only the history of the fort itself, but giving an overview of the history the of invasions and defence of Malta as a whole, of which there have been a lot.

It's built on a number of levels, from the dungeons and cells at the bottom (including an oubliette), through storage silos for both foodstuff and armaments, to a small chapel, to, at the top, 'Ferramolino's Cavalier' - a raised fortified platform from where people could fire down without harming other defenders. There's also a bell here - a 17th Century replacement for one rung in celebration after the famous Siege of the Ottomans in 1565 was repelled.

It's also believed to be haunted by a 'grey lady' - the mistress of De Nava, one of the rulers in pre-Knights days - who was alleged to have been murdered either by the ruler himself or by members of his family, when they believed his wife was going to find out about his affair. Given the numbers of people who died both attacking and defending the fort, that this is the only reported ghost is somewhat surprising...

Speaking of bells ... towards the top end of Valletta is the "Siege Bell Memorial". While Wikipedia has a *disambiguation page* for the phrase "Siege of Malta", as there have been so many, this bell, erected in 1992, commemorates the one in World War II. Many museums around Valletta are either dedicated to it (eg the 'Malta at War' museum in Birgu), or talk about it in depth when discussing the wider history of Malta.

In simple terms, both sides knew Malta was a key location in the Central Mediterranean. Whoever could control the shipping lanes across the sea could control naval access to both North Africa & the Middle East - although the UK had large naval bases at Gibraltar in the west & Alexandria in the east, neutralising (or better yet conquering) Malta would mean the Italians & Germans could supply their North African units at will, out of range of the British, & thus effectively control the sea.

The 'siege' mainly involved significant numbers of fighter aircraft & bombers, performing the dual tasks of preventing Malta being re-supplied by Allied shipping, & bombing the heck out of the island to lower morale & prevent it from being used as a 'base'. Indeed, for several months in 1941 & 1942, no Allied ships even attempted to reach Malta, leading to huge shortages & rationing - baking pastries & cakes was banned" & since Malta is noted for its pastizzi, that's quite a sacrifice - & at the height of the siege, it was estimated that the average daily calorie consumption per adult was as low as 1,100 - half the recommended daily amount.

But thanks in part to dogged determination by Allied air & naval crews, coupled with British successes on land in North Africa, in mid-1942 the siege began to be broken as more and more convoys were getting through; by October, even the regular Axis bombing raids had been called off. In total, over 3,300 raids took place over the island, destroying or severely damaging about 30,000 buildings & killing 1,300 civilians. In recognition of Malta's courage during this time, King George VI presented the entire country with his new gallantry award - The George Cross - which since then has appeared on the Maltese flag.

On a different note, and just in passing, Zabbar (where I stayed in 2017) was the location of an aircrash in October 1975; an RAF Vulcan bomber blew up in mid-air and the wreckage fell on the town - some large pieces, including a fuel-filled wing fell near a school on the main street - there's a small plaque on the wall at the junction nearby. All five of the crew members died, as did one local citizen on the ground, but the death toll could have been much greater.

{section separation jingle}

So. One of the 'features' of Malta that make it unusual as far as Mediterranean islands go is the lack of beaches and places to land a boat. While this has helped to keep Malta defensible, it means it can't advertise many of the typical sun-seeking tourist attractions as the Balearics or the Greek islands.

Instead, the islands have a very different kind of scenic vibe - coastal cliffs. This makes it feel much more like the British island groups of Orkney and the Hebrides, and mean that a visit to the coast is more an opportunity to hike or birdwatch than to sunbathe. One of the best examples of this are the Dingli Cliffs. These are on the southern coast of the main island, and actually mark the highest point of the country, at 253 metres. The

landscape is quite rocky, barren, and very sheer - it's a long way down. Which didn't stop a couple of people on my trip this year from sitting on what appeared to be the edge, for the 'gram. In fairness there are spots that look more dangerous than they are, but certainly there are places nearby where one slip and it's an involuntary Twitter break.

There's a couple of notable spots on or near the cliffs that don't involve near-death experiences. One is a small chapel that's been there since the mid-1600s. This is the church of St Mary Magdalen, a small and plain stone structure with one room. It stands on a raised stone patio area and seems to lack much in the way of windows. Despite its location on the cliffs is still used for services, especially on her feast day (22 July, or nearest Sunday). The other is the very distinctive golf-ball shape of a radar station. This was the site of the first radar station on Malta, installed in 1939 in preparation for World War Two. The current structure is much more modern and serves as the primary air traffic control unit for the whole of the Maltese airspace.

The nature of the cliffy coastline means there are some spots best explored by boat. One example is the 'Blue Grotto', in the far SW of Malta's main island. In the height of summer, boatloads of tourists come here to sail through and between the coves, to marvel at the scenery, and to experience the light bouncing off the caves and turning the water so many different shades of blue (hence its name). There's also apparently phosphorescent algae and plant life here.

Another similar spot is Dwejra Bay, on Gozo. This is one of those places that sound really cheesy and touristy, and you go there half-expecting it to be 'a bit naff'. Sometimes you're right, but at other times, the world surprises even me.

Dwejra Bay lies pretty much literally at the end of the road, but it's worth the journey to get there. Apart from being a wonderful place to some cliff-top hiking, there is also a top diving spot called the 'Inland Sea', a small lagoon hidden on the landward side of some steep rockfaces with a narrow gap through the rock connecting it to the Mediterranean. It's possible also to take a small boat through the gap to see the seaward side of the cliffs, including some moss-laden caves. There's also the Fungus Rock - a large rock covered in a kind of fowl-smelling plant or moss that was used as a medicine (and to relieve impotence!) by the Knights of St John - and a watchtower nearby.

This is also the spot where the famous Azure Window once stood. This was a natural archway in the rock, made from limestone, through which you could see the blue of the sky and the sea beyond (it was less interesting from the seaward side!). That it was limestone meant its erosion made it look really cool, but also that it had a limited lifespan; indeed while I saw it on my trip in January 2017 and figured it only had years (rather than centuries) left, it actually collapsed mere months after my visit. Which is impressive given even on my trip there were people walking on top of it. Despite signs telling them not to do that.

On the north side of Gozo is the village of Marsalforn. This is one of those fishing villages that explodes in summer, as the Maltese themselves use it as one of their seaside resorts of choice. One of the most notable things about the town though are the salt pans. These line the coast on either side of the town, though they're quite more extensive to the west. It's a way to extract salt from the sea, and it's a really simple process. Essentially, in the rocky shore, many shallow 'beds' have been carved into the rock. They're mostly rectangular, and separated by a narrow ridge approximately the width of a foot. You can amble between them, but just take care. In a large high-tide, the area is flooded with sea water. Because they're defined, when the tide recedes, the beds remain filled with seawater, which then evaporates in the sun, leaving just the salt residue. This salt is then collected and used/sold as appropriate. What it means is that walking along the seafront allows you to see the square-ish forms in the rock, and sometimes they vibrate in different colours to the rock itself, depending on sunlight angle and salt content.

Now, I said earlier that Malta, being cliffy, isn't noted for its beaches. There are a couple of places though where the land slopes naturally enough to allow a significant beach to form and be easily accessible - there are very small beaches around the country, even in Marsalforn and Sliema, but they're honestly not worth the effort to visit. At Ramal Beach, just to the east of Marsalforn, though there's a much larger beach that's formed and provides ample space to rest, play volleyball, walk along to see some old ruined buildings, or swim. Not that I'd suggest that at certain times; on my visit the far end of the beach was littered with jellyfish. Obviously I took foot-selfies with them. Equally obviously I didn't touch them.

Another beach is in the north-west of the main island, at Sangita. It's a sweeping bay hidden behind some large dunes, so it's quite secluded. There's also a decent beach bar here that feels like it's one of those Caribbean-esque wooden structures, and is a great place to sit and sip cocktails while watching the sun set. Or would be in summer. As you heard earlier, this is where we had the Friday evening night out at the conference, and its location at the bottom of a huge cliff, next to the sea, meant it felt the full force of the coastal breezes. There were quite a few people on the beach just below as we arrived; I can't imagine how they must have been feeling.

Richard was very impressed with the scenery even just from his coming into land at the airport, but also commented to me on the weather we'd experienced. Note that I was there over the Easter Weekend, when the weather was ... it was warmer in London, for sure; it may even have been warmer in Glasgow. In my entire time there this trip I had two days that were as warm as most of the days I had on my 2017 trip. Which as you'll recall was in a January.

{RICHARD: Looking on a map for Malta and it just being like a small island, and oh there's more than one island isn't there, cos there's Gozo, and you just think wow, you know, what possibly, the infrastructure of this, what are you going to get when you arrive? And I remember 'Cabin Crew 10 minutes for landing' and we were still over the ocean, and I couldn't even see the runway at this point, and I was like 'oh my god, where, where are we?'. But of course we landed and it was beautiful. I mean, I love the sun when it's out, it reflects so nicely on all the buildings and you get it on the pavements even though the pavements are quite small and a little bit frustrating and cobbled and a bit out-of-place sometimes.

But the place when the weather's nice is absolutely stunning. When there's a bit of wind it is a little bit crazy cos it's all by the sea, so as soon as there is wind, you really feel it. And you really see it in the colour of the ocean as well. I feel like when it's overcast, the ocean changes colour very significantly. And it doesn't upset my view of Malta in that way, but it really highlights Malta more when the sun is out and it's turquoise blue and it's really beautiful.

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The main over-riding vibe for the Maltese countryside though is that it's not as green as you might expect. The country very much has the Mediterranean / North African climate, which means when you, for example, stand on the battlements of Mdina and look out across the country, what you see is a barren landscape of low-rise shrubbery and bare sandy-coloured rock, punctuated by the occasional tree. It's not the fields and rolling hills of places further North, but its size means it's equally not got the olive orchards and vineyards of places of a similar latitude - although as you'll hear later, both certainly exist. In fact it looks a bit like Israel.

{section separation jingle}

On that note. Laura's general thought about Malta was it had similar vibes to places like Tunisia or, especially, Israel and Jordan, whilst still retaining a more European feel in other ways. A true crossroads of culture, as it were. And she said this was especially true in the feel of the city streets. Not just in the towns surrounding Valletta, a vague sprawl of suburbia with different names like Sliema, Floriana, Saint Julian, Birkirkara, and many more, whose boundaries were only noted as the bus stops had different locations. Quiet side streets lined with light tan stone buildings, looking old and well-worn, and only colourful balconies to give a sense of individuality. That doesn't mean they didn't have charm - far from it. The homestay I was in for two nights in Qala, on Gozo, had a very nice and open interior, as well as an unexpected roof terrace. It was just just ... tan stone. Like across the whole of the south and east Mediterranean region.

The other similarity was in the pavements. Malta is not a country for pedestrians, and while I have no direct experience of it, I doubt it's a terribly accessible country for people with mobility issues. I doubt some of the pavements are wide enough for the average wheelchair, for instance. This matches my experiences in places like Lebanon, where walking through the city streets felt a bit fraught.

What made Malta also a bit eye-opening for pedestrians was the combination of a lot of traffic and a distinct lack of pedestrian crossings. It's not an easy place to cross a road; it's best done in a traffic jam, to be honest. The worst situation I encountered was the walk from the hotel I was in for the conference to the main bus stop at the nearby junction. It wasn't a long walk - a few hundred metres - but it involved walking under a bridge

carrying the main highway to the North. The pavement stopped just before the bridge, and became a painted line on the road that demarcated a walkway about wide enough for one person. On the other side of the bridge, this walkway ended at a mini-roundabout. It continued on the opposite side of the road, which itself made a couple of sharp turns, on an equally narrow walkway that was simply one side of a painted line on the tarmac. There was no designated crossing point at the mini-roundabout, and three of the roads that met there had fairly constant traffic, including lorries and vans. While the worst I encountered, it was just one of a multitude of situations and places where it was a bit nervy walking along the streets. There's just over 500,000 people in Malta and it feels that there are just over 500,000 cars on the road at any one time.

Richard agreed.

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RICHARD: Checking if there's anything I don't like specifically; well, the roads were very busy. It has been a very busy and chaotic road system, and partly probably just because of the infrastructure of the entire place. But you can tell it's been built on history and in one way there's kind of a novelty to that, but also there's a lot of horn-honking and get-out-the-way-ing going on, so that's been quite interesting.

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That doesn't mean it was all negative, though. The backstreets, and especially at the ends of the day, were quiet, even those in Sliema where the main roads along the seafront saw buses roll along and the shops and cafes open out onto the promenade. It's odd looking back at my notes from my 2017 visit, as I'd written that I wasn't overly enamoured with Sliema on my brief visit that side of the water - I'd described it as "full of cafes and people advertising boat trips", which to be fair is true, but evidently on this trip I was more in-tune with the cafe vibe, and also that "going deeper into the town revealed merely more cafes, quite a few shops, and nothing much of any substance". I think that's a bit harsh, but then 2017 me had been staying in a quieter and prettier suburb, with far fewer of either to bring tourists to, so maybe I'd been more blessed with quiet charm from the start.

Steph liked the city streets of Valetta and Sliema.

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STEPH: Well there's actually quite a lot I liked, things I didn't expect to like. Let's start with Valletta. It reminded me a lot of a combination of Paris and [can't make it out] old town. It's quite a unique charm but there's quite so much other European cities. I personally really love architecture and stuff like that so it's a really charming city but I'm glad I'm not actually staying within Valletta itself, as it can get too loud, too bustling. But then again, it was very empty on Easter Sunday when I first explored the city, so if anyone's ever going there during Easter, spend Easter in Valletta exploring the city.

What else is there? Sliema. I actually, I'm quite surprised that I liked it because it was like okay, uhm, I was expecting to be staying in the middle of nowhere but there's so many absolutely charming streets, with original Maltese balconies, it's just wonderful to just wander through the streets and just like go to the ocean, walk along there, check out all the restaurants of which there are actually many amazing restaurants.

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However, for quiet streets one can't do worse than spend a couple of nights in one of the many more rural villages, especially on Gozo. As I've said earlier, I had two nights in the village of Qala, only a couple of miles from the ferry terminal at Mgarr but feels a whole world away. Not long after my arrival, I had a herd of goats pass on the street outside. While pavements were even less present than in Sliema, it didn't feel as dangerous due to there being less traffic, and certainly the nights were quiet, and quite dark. The only problem with Qala was it seems to have been built literally on the side of a hill, meaning it was almost tempting to catch the bus the two stops between the pub near the main square, and the mini-roundabout near my homestay.

And that's one thing that connects Qala and Sliema, and indeed Malta as a whole, is that it's surprisingly a very

hilly country. It's not high, in the sense the highest point is only x metres, but it's a very undulating place and there are hills everywhere. It's especially noticeable in Sliema and Valletta, both of which stand on what are effectively peninsulas that stick out into the harbour area, and while these peninsulas aren't very wide, they are significantly higher than sea level. This means the roads between the seafronts are pretty steep. In Valletta, several of them are narrow, entirely pedestrianised, and lined with cafes, which means when you stand at the top, you can look down at the sea and see nothing but a terrace full of people eating and drinking. It's quite the appealing vista, and reminded me of a couple of streets in Athens.

Richard found similar vibes.

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RICHARD: You know, we went to Valletta to visit there and I felt there was quite a lot of township to Valletta, in terms of there was a lot of nice places to eat and drink and there was a lot of nice outdoor seating and a lot of just community around Valletta, and I really liked that about the place, and I've seen it in Saint Julian as well, it's so nice to just have bars and there's a lot of levels to Malta as well I think, so there's a lot of like buildings on buildings, shops on shops on shops, things are stacked up vertically, and when you've got like a bar, and then you've got like another thing but there's a ramp next to the bar to lead up to it, and it's just a very interesting architecture, but with that all being by the sea, and there being such a nice view to be sat at, it's just being in such interesting architectural places in Malta, has been quite nice because it's something we don't get very often in the UK, is the, is that outdoor vibe of everyone's a community, we eat outside, have a couple of drinks, or a coffee or something, and enjoy a bit of the sunshine, and just have a chat with some music playing. Most of the time it's all just crammed in pubs and you're just in there and that's just where you are and I feel like Malta's got a lot of that mainland European vibe, or a vibe that's reminiscent to me of that.

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A city with even quieter streets, albeit by design, is the ancient capital of Mdina, an awkward hour away from Valletta by bus. It's not quicker to walk, but it might be quicker to run. If you could run on the pavements without fear of being run over.

It's definitely a place to stop a while and take pictures, or even video. But what the camera can't show very easily is the character and 'feel' of a place; walking down these narrow, dimly-lit passageways barely wide enough for a horse & cart (there are restrictions on motorised vehicles in the town), alongside these towering buildings of stone that have stood here for centuries – it evokes the very essence of history; one can easily imagine merchants in doorways displaying their wares, of the clash of metal around every corner as armies fight militia in hand-to-hand combat, of the slapping of sandals and bare feet against the cobbles as people run errands, or to escape.

Although not the only town with streets like this in Malta (the citadella area in Victoria is very similar, reminiscent of the Silk Road town of Khiva in fact), it is arguably the most important. Mdina was the effective capital of the proto-state of Malta, in pre-St John days when it was controlled by first the Byzantines, then the Arabs, and then the Spanish. It's been habited since prehistoric days, and was an important site since as it sits on a relatively high rock, it's an easy lookout point to defend. Indeed standing on the ramparts and looking out to the landscape beyond gives a sense of just how important the site is - you can see pretty much the whole of the central part of the main island and it's very easy to spot Valletta and Sliema, and indeed the sea all the way beyond St Paul's Bay, to the north of Saint Julians. Only when the Knights Of St John arrived and set up a capital on the coast at Birgu (Fort St Angelo) did the city start a slow decline.

These days most people live in the neighbouring city of Rabat; the two are basically the same place, but have a totally different vibe. The biggest invaders of Mdina in the modern world are the hordes of tourists wielding cameras rather than swords, but when they leave at night, the city returns to its historical, foreboding, eerily quiet, self. It'd be an interesting place to spend the night, to be honest.

Another town with a vibe is Marsaxlokk. This is a small fishing village on the south-western coast of the main island. It's notable for a large Sunday market, selling pretty much anything that a market can, but is especially famous for its fish, Most of the time though it's a quiet, off the beaten track sort of place where one can smell the salty air and have some freshly caught lunch, not having to do much here but wander cross the cliffs or past

the brightly-coloured fishing boats that sail in and out, each unique. Just try to ignore the power station on its outskirts. The boats are painted in a variety of colours but the most common are stripes of vibrant pastel blues and yellows. Far too interesting and lively to be considered for Pride Flags.

I visited the town on both my trips, and had a very different experience each time. In 2017 I visited on a Wednesday afternoon in January, and it felt like I had the place to myself - it was very chill to sit on one of the benches and just look out over the harbour contemplating life and mood. On this year's trip we went on Easter Sunday and it was full of tourists visiting the markets and the seafront restaurants, and while it was possible to find places to be alone in your thoughts, it wouldn't be the reason to be there. Rather, it was a place to celebrate life, and eat some freshly-caught fish. It was €35. I have no regrets.

{section separation jingle}

Malta is strongly Catholic (the 2021 census reported Catholicism accounted for 83% of the population), so it's not surprising that many of the notable spots to visit are related to religion. Indeed it's said that the country has 365 churches, one for every day of the year. This works out as one church for about every 1,400 people. I don't know if that's a lot or not. Wikipedia says there are only 359, and references them all, but maybe six have closed recently, who knows.

The main event here is St John's Co-Cathedral in the centre of Valletta, and I have to say it's one of the most opulent and over-the-top religious buildings I've been to. It was built in the late 1500s and extensively brightened up in the 1600s when baroque was in fashion.

Extravagance begins at the marble floor, which is brightly painted with a series of what appear to be tombstones of the rich and famous. The sides of the nave are made up of little chapels, each dedicated to one of the eight 'languages' (a byword for 'ethnic origin') of the Knights of St John (this is also why their symbol was an eight-pointed star), and decorated accordingly - so for example the Chapel of Aragon has a prominent crowned dolphin. Some chapels (notably the French one) are grander than others (Castille/Leon/Portugal); this of course is a relative statement. Each of them also contains the remains of associated Grand Masters of the Order, and even some saintly relics.

The central ceiling is a series of painted murals depicting the life of St John the Baptist, stretching over six panels stretching the length of the nave. The walls across the whole cathedral are decorated in intricate patterns of gilded gold, and the doorways connecting each chapel are flanked by gold-trimmed red curtains, presumably velvet. Huge paintings and sculptures dominate the remainder of the spaces; works by Caravaggio are especially present.

You could probably clear off the entire debt of a small country with the value of what's inside.

Oddly, the entire 'bling' is only internal. From the outside it looks like just another building made of stone, slightly obscured by some trees. I don't know if that was a specific intent of the designers.

Note that the original design by famous Maltese architect Girolamo Cassar was equally sparse inside. The interior was redesigned in 17th century with the Baroque style by order of the Grand Master Cottoner to much the splendour of the churches in Rome)

Now, it's called the Co-Cathedral for a reason. It shares top billing with (and is in fact subject to) St Paul's Cathedral, in the old city of Mdina - the reason for this of course is Mdina was the capital of the island in days gone by. There's been a cathedral on this site since around 1200, but the vast majority of the current building, a quite Baroque masterpiece, was constructed after the 1693 earthquake caused irreparable damage to the older structure.

St Paul (he who had a vision on the Road To Damascus) is probably the most venerated saint in Malta, due mainly to the story that he was shipwrecked here while travelling across the Mediterranean. Indeed, this cathedral is said to be built on the site where he met the incumbent Roman governor. There is a church in Valletta also dedicated to him, which is said to have part of the marble column on which he was executed; it was donated by a Pope in the 19th Century in honour of Malta's Catholicism.

Now, I'm not the right person to be talking about the finer points of religious art (if I'm being honest, all saints look the same to me, when they're not being executed at least since they all at least tended to have a unique and notable 'ending'). So unfortunately I don't know what any of the paintings contained inside represent in Christian theology. All I can tell you is they look very impressive and anyone looking up (and indeed around; this is not an isolated example) cannot help but be moved by the power invested here.

There's a related museum just across the square from the cathedral which displays quite a few items that used to be in the cathedral itself (think of it like a 'storage unit on display'), along with a whole host of coins dating back to pre-Roman days, and other small memorabilia of Maltese History.

Of course it's not just the big towns that have impressive religious buildings; pretty much every village has a church much more impressive than the place it's in. One example of that is the village I stayed in for two nights on my recent trip, Qala, in the east of Gozo. I didn't go inside because it was closed when I passed by, but in the main square of the village is a very large (relatively) church (tech details). It looks pretty impressive all lit up at night, especially in a village with a relative lack of street-lighting.

Zabbar, my base last time, is still (just) within the urban area of Valletta, lying on the SE edge, and about 2-3km from the Three Cities area, just the other side of the waterway from Valletta itself. It's a pretty quiet area, made up of lots of little winding backstreets lined with stone slabs rather than tarmac.

See, the main focus of the town is the church – a 'sanctuary' dedicated to Our Lady Of Graces built in the mid-1600s. It's surprisingly ornate for a small suburban church, but what I've noticed during my time here in Malta is that almost every church has its fair share of 'bling'; maybe it's a Catholic v Anglican thing (and yes, I am aware of King Henry VIII etc, but that was a long time ago and you'd have thought that at least since Catholic Emancipation in 1829 they'd have done some 'catching-up'), or maybe it's just a typical reserved British mentality, but the standard church in the UK, while imposing, usually tries to impress with its 'space' inside and upwards, its windows, and it's almost reverent feel. Here, no matter how small the church, it feels like every available space has a full-colour mural or some kind of gilded motif.

On that first visit, my initial impression was Zabbar was quite a religious (devout) town, with 9 or 10 churches serving its 15,000 people, but across both trips I've realised it's pretty true for Malta as a whole. And these aren't just churches standing idly by while the people go about their business; the main church has several Masses a day which all seem to be pretty full judging by the numbers of people I've seen leaving them. In addition, I heard what I presume is The Angelus Bell toll out at 6pm on a number of days.

Over in Marsalforn, in the North of Gozo, is an oddity. The town is surrounded by hills. One of them, to the SW of the town, has a kind of mini 'Cristo Redentor' on the top of it.

The hill is known locally as 'il-Merzuq', which means something like 'Hill of Light', and it's been the site of a cross since around 1900; a stone statue of Christ was added a couple of years later, but due to weathering and natural erosion, it was replaced at some point between the mid-1960s and 1973 with a concrete and fibreglass structure, which was itself updated in 2014 and is now supposed to light up in the dark (I didn't stick around to see if it did). The statue stands at around 12m tall.

The hill itself is just under 100m high. There's allegedly a path to the top; whether that was the path I took or not is unclear; the way I went, although well used, was unsignposted, muddy, and flew up the hill rather steeply, after a while degenerating into mere scree. I decided not to try to reach the very top; a combination of unsuitable footwear and a lack of balance going down hills meant this was as close as I got. Jesus can wait. He often does.

I went to the pub instead. Unlike Jesus, Maltese craft beer does not wait.

{section separation jingle}

This seems like a good segue to talk about Maltese food and drink.

Now, despite being heavily influenced by the UK, Malta isn't yet experiencing a 'craft beer revolution'. Cisk, the most widely available beer, is merely a continental lager, and there are very few pubs that offer other local

beers. One I went to on my trip in 2017 was the Glassbox Bar in Marsalforn, but this seems to have long-closed by now. Which is why I don't write blog posts about cute cafes and the like. However, a couple of breweries do exist, including (both in Sliema) Stretta and The Brew, the latter being a brewpub on the southern waterfront near the ferries to Valletta that do several craft beers and some decent pub food.

To be fair to Cisk, actually, the brewery (fully known as Simonds Farsons Cisk due early 20th Century takeovers and mergers, and usually referred to as 'Farsons') do make more beers than just the standard Cisk lager, including a pale ale, a red ale, and a light mild (which I had; it didn't look like any mild I'd ever had!), it's just that the Cisk lager they make is so ubiquitous it's usually the only beer of theirs you can get. They now have a brewtap and restaurant at the brewery itself which is where you can get most of the other labels from.

I had a couple of Cisks, not just from seafront bars while waiting for restaurant tables to become available, but also one from one of the more interesting pubs in the country - Qala has more pubs in it than shops (and its one and only supermarket keeps limited hours), and one of them is called The Stoneage Bar. It looks unassuming from the outside but it goes back a long way. Inside the walls are decorated with pictures and framed newspaper front pages from across the ages, with trinkets, signs, and bottles covering shelves and the ceiling. It was an unexpected find and I whiled away a couple of hours there - note I didn't have phone reception inside and at the time of podding, it only takes cash.

You may be unsurprised to learn that Malta's location makes it a prime place to plant grapes, and Maltese Wine does exist and is exported. However the sheer size of the country makes it harder for Maltese vineyards to compete on the world stage, so it's less likely you'll have come across it. On my recent trip though I did visit one of the mid-range vineyards, Ta'Betta, who produce roughly 25,000 bottles per year, around 30% of which are exported to places like the UK, Netherlands, and Singapore. The majority of wine they produce is red, although they do do a couple of whites, I found them quite smooth and, the reds especially, not at all lingering or cloying. Similarly, Ta'Betta is one of the places in Malta with olive trees, and olive oil is produced here, although again not in quantities that are going to compete with the likes of Greece or Italy.

Speaking of Italy, Maltese food is, on the face of it, heavily influenced by their neighbours to the north. There's a lot of pasta restaurants and pizzerias here, serving any number of twists and takes on the standard cheese-on-toast concoction made famous by Italian immigrants worldwide. The Brit in me is always impressed there are places you can buy pizza by-the-slice, in the same way we might buy a sausage roll. And yes, while I might rave about Greggs' pasties, I've never been fond of their pizza. I think Laura disagrees. But regardless, Maltese street pizza is better.

But Malta has taken this another step, and created a pizza-like dish called the 'ftira'. This is a small, thin, dough based food to which they add standard ingredients like tomato, onion, tuna, anchovies, rabbit, but then fold the sides over to create a kind of pseudo-thick-crust, then heat in a very hot oven for no more than three minutes. Fast food. And simple to make, as long as you stretch and thin out the dough enough.

Another thing Malta has imported the vibe of from Italy is gelato and ice-cream, the exact difference having several times been explained to me but sticks in my head about as long as the year my mother re-married, and the capital of Morocco. There's many a Gelateria on the streets of Valletta and Sliema, and not many disappoint. It's not just the variety of flavours, as they're fairly standard across the world (and no-one's yet created rabbit ice-cream), but the creaminess and sheer flavour blows anything in the UK out the water.

Every country has a filled pastry; the traditional item in Malta is the 'pastizz', a baked package of filo pastry filled with either ricotta or peas. And by peas it's not randomly-slotted peas that all fall out, it's more of the consistency you'd find in an Indian samosa. Other flavours are available but they're not traditional - it'd be like putting pineapple on a pizza. And you can tell which is which by the design on the top - ricotta-filled ones have the join on the top, pea-filled ones have it on the side.

I did have rather a lot of cheese while I was in Malta, not just on the pizzas and ftiras, but also in salads; at a restaurant I went to in Qala I had a three-cheese salad made up of three local cheeses from Gozo. None of which were blue. I have my limits. At the Ta'Betta vineyard we also had a large charcuterie buffet, which was more cheese and cold meats than anyone needs, especially with three glasses of wine, no matter how small they were. Another cheeseplate I had was at the small apiary near the Dingli Cliffs, made up of maybe 10 or 12 different types and formulations of cheese, from soft ricottas to hard and matured cheeses with chilli and wine.

Obviously the apiary also made its own various different kinds of honey and mead - there's many similar apiaries on the islands too so this wasn't just a one-off.

In terms of main courses, the two stand-outs from a typical Maltese perspective are seafoods, including fish, as befits an island nation surrounded by fishing villages, and, of all things, rabbit. If there was a meal that encapsulated Malta, it would be some kind of rabbit pasta dish. The best meal I had in Malta, and possibly the best restaurant meal I'd had for a long time, was at a place in Sliema called Ta'Kris (Ta means 'of', and Kris is the name of the owner), a small but always crowded place me and Laura were lucky to get a table at, and which served a whole myriad of Maltese foods.

Malta is also noted for a soft drink. Kinnie is made by Cisk, is kind of brown in colour, and has a quite unusual, possibly unique taste. It's not one that everyone would appreciate, it must be said. To me it tasted a bit like ... my nearest reference-point is irn-bru, which if you're not familiar with it, it's the national drink of Scotland and someone on Discord described it as 'lucozade for masochists'. Imagine a very angry orangeade. That's a good starting point. Anyway, Kinnie felt to me like irn-bru that had been made in a Soda Stream or other home-carbonated drinks machine with not-entirely-true-to-taste syrup, then left to go slightly flat. Slightly watery, slightly old, irn-bru or lucozade.

I'm not selling it really, am I?

{section separation jingle}

After all that food and drink, you might want to head back home, So you may be pleased to know getting around Malta is relatively simple. Obviously there are no railways; there's not even a light-rail system. It'd be hard to know where to put it, for one thing, and as already noted, the country is both quite small and quite hilly, making a rail network somewhat impractical. Instead, the country runs mainly on buses.

The majority of buses are relatively new, having been implemented in the mid 2010s. They are sleek full-length single-deckers, with voice announcements and electronic displays, and at some bus stops they have electronic 'next bus in' indicators. It's very easy to trace bus routes, either online or with physical maps, and buying tickets is very simple too - a single bus ticket is valid for two hours rather than for one journey (at the time of this podcast, they were €2), so transfers onto another bus are included in the price. There are also a range of day, week, or month tickets that are valid for any bus in Malta (including Gozo) that you simply hold over a machine by the driver on entry. There's a couple of express buses where the fare is higher and the standard travel passes aren't valid - these are those marked TD (which means what?!), but there's only a handful of them and it's easy enough to avoid them if you're on a budget,

Such is the beauty of a unified bus network run by a single operator, rather than the horrendous mishmash of bus companies that competition has brought to the UK. "But it makes things cheaper...." - maybe it does, maybe it doesn't (I've yet to see evidence of this but am open to the possibility), but what competition does do is make things much more horrendously complicated. The only downside to them is the timetables tend to be, er, post-truth, but that's more due to Valletta only really having one road going to/from it, and therefore traffic tails back quite severely. The drivers more than make up for it between stops, to be fair. This also leads to another problem, that the buses are frequently incredibly crowded, and if you're at a random stop in, say, Sliema or Birkirkara, there's a reasonable chance the first bus that passes won't stop because there's no room on it. Just be aware of that and prepare accordingly.

The other slight quirk is that many of the buses don't take the most direct route between two places, and therefore even without traffic feel like they take far longer than they need to. On the converse side though, this is because they make sure that most parts of the island are served by buses - this is especially notable on Gozo where even villages like Qala are served by a regular route. It makes the country pretty easy to travel around without a car, indeed with the issues around traffic and busy roads, it might even be better not to hire a car. Obviously I know nothing about car parking facilities in the country.

But anyway, as I say, these sleek buses are a pretty new innovation. For years, Malta was known for its old, decrepit bus service that seemed to be made up from a variety of random sources; indeed the quirkiness of its buses was itself a tourist attraction. A couple of these old buses still exist in one guise or another - one in Sliema has been converted into a 'souvenir shop' on the waterfront. There's a couple of others still in operation

for tourists - one runs a service each day to Saint Julian, while another operates a special Sunday service to Marsaxlokk.

Now, if you look at a map of the main urban area of Malta, you'll notice Valletta is at one end of a long peninsula. Catching a bus to or from the city involves a long drag (in traffic) to where the main island opens out, and then, depending on where you're going, potentially a slog back along the waterfront to almost exactly where you were, just on the opposite side of the channels. Like, you can see where you need to go, but the bus might take upwards of half an hour to get there. There is, however, an alternative.

Between Valletta and Birgu (in the Three Cities), and between Valletta and Sliema, there are large ferryboats that runs every half hour, for €1.50, allegedly with free WiFi. The journey doesn't take very long - literally only a handful of minutes - and while the Valletta ferry terminals are at the bottom of steep hills and require a short trek up to get to the centre, this is counterbalanced by the buses having to route around the edge of the harbour, taking forever because of the traffic, and also as I say, being usually standing-room only by this point. In any case, by the ferries to/from The Three Cities, there's even a lift (elevator) you can ride for a euro or so that takes you up to the city centre with ease. Note the cheaper period travel passes don't include ferry trips, but you can get ones that do.

On my first visit in 2017, there were also 'water taxis' operating between Valletta and Birgu for €2, though as I didn't head that way on my recent visit I can't validate if they still operate. At the time though, these 'water taxis' were small pirogues, motor-operated (don't be fooled by the oars!), which leave as and when required, and can safely hold around 6 people. They're operated by a single boatman, and though they do the same trip as the larger ferry, it's a much different experience. Being lower down in the water means you get an alternative view of the journey, plus there's something oddly magical about being so close to the water - it's more calming, more 'natural' (even if I'm not by nature a water person). It's possible to hire these boatmen to take you on a full tour of the waterways around Valletta if you wish, but their main role is to ferry people across. Interestingly, this isn't a service put on for tourists; it's a frequent commuter service for the locals too, in competition with the larger ferryboats; indeed there was a higher % of tourists on the ferry I took than the water taxi.

Obviously Malta hasn't discovered what tunnels are yet ... :p Actually I jest - there are several tunnels on the main roads in the suburbs, as highways plough through the hillier inland ground, but I guess, especially given how high Valletta is compared with the surrounding sea, tunnelling under the harbour probably isn't worth the expense.

Valletta commuter ferries aren't the only ones to exist, of course, as Malta is predominately made up of two islands. There are two ways of getting to Gozo, and if you're starting in Valletta, on balance they take about the same amount of time. In the far north of the main island, at the end of several hour-long bus journeys, is the ferry port at Cirkewwa. This is the terminus of a very frequent 10-minute car and passenger ferry, that costs €5 one way (specifically, the one way when leaving Gozo; travel to Gozo is free and ticketless). It sails alongside Comino and provides good views of that island, especially when you're standing on the top deck with the wind in your hair. I removed my hat, just in case.

There's also recently implemented a 'fast ferry', from Gozo directly to Valletta, that takes about 45 minutes but which runs only until mid-morning and then again from mid-afternoon - there's a period of time around 4 hours either side of lunchtime when it doesn't operate. It costs a bit more, around €7.50, but you get a more comfortable indoor journey and sail along half the Maltese coast, so you see more of the coastline than you otherwise would. Be sure to sit on the correct side though (right leaving Gozo, left leaving Valletta) otherwise you see an awful lot of sea for over half an hour.

{section separation jingle}

That's more-or-less all I wanted to say, but there's two other things to talk about. One came out of my chats with both Steph and Richard, where they talked about the people of Malta. Steph points out something well-known the world over, but in a country with such strong links to British culture and history, it's sometimes hard to remember because it's just so easy to fall back on what you know.

{STEPH: The people, well I kind of realised that the people of Malta are actually much friendlier if you actually know a few words in Maltese. So if anyone's visiting, learn a few basic words first, and actually listen to

the pronunciation of the Maltese word for 'please' because that one is freakin' tricky, while the other words like 'bongu' are much much easier because they have some roots in French or Italian.

}

Richard had some very good encounters with, and a vibe for, the people here.

{RICHARD: I will say the people here as well have been outstanding. I had a couple of issues over the weekend, and I had people just coming over and talking to me, making sure I was okay. It was instantaneously, like, people just care about everybody here, everybody's been so polite, the people have been incredible, and I think that's really one of the highlights for me being in Malta, is really the genuine kindness of the people, which you don't get to see in a lot of bigger cities or, you know, more rural areas. I feel like it's been very unique to Malta specifically.

}

I travel quite insularly, so I'm not really one for more than transactional interactions with people (to be honest I'm like that even at home), but the lady who ran the homestay in Qala was incredibly friendly and chatty, and also possibly immortal. Nothing seemed to be too much trouble for her. Would recommend staying there again.

The other was something I mentioned in passing on my podcast about travelling for sporting events, some while ago, and concerns something I did on my previous trip to Malta, back in 2017. As you know from my more recent podcasts on Inter-Rail, one of my ambitions was always to visit an international football match, which I finally achieved in 2019 in Liechtenstein.

However, on that previous trip to Malta, I had a related and equally ... high-level experience; I had a Saturday to kill, and thought I'd pop along to watch a top-flight domestic league match.

It's quite an odd experience. Firstly, there are only a handful of stadiums capable of hosting matches, so few clubs play at 'home'. Secondly, this means that you often have 'double-headers'; two matches played on the same day, at the same ground, and your ticket is valid for both. Thirdly, fans are segregated, and security to get in is stricter than in games in England. However, the segregation applies to a game, not to a matchday; fans of clubs in the different games are not segregated.

What this means is, as I watched both matches (Mosta v Sliema Wanderers, then Valletta v St Andrews), I was sat in the 'home' side, with the Mosta fans *and* the Valletta fans, the latter who started coming in roughly halfway through the first match - there were quite a lot of them, and their support was quite vocal too. Until then the stadium had been largely empty and quiet - there's only seating along one length of the ground; the other three sides aren't built on or used at all. Had Mosta been playing Valletta, the two sets of supporters would have been split.

What the games lacked in quality (Mosta v Ebbsfleet might work) they made up for in entertainment; Mosta somehow won 2-1 while Valletta drew 1-1 and should have won. I'm also not sure what it takes to be sent off in the Malta Premier League but evidently not for fighting...

{end podcast jingle}

So, that's all for this episode. Join me next time for another adventure 'beyond the brochure'. Until then, be patient when crossing roads, and if you're feeling off-colour, keep on getting better.

{Outro voiceover:

Thank you for listening to this episode of Travel Tales From Beyond The Brochure. I hope you enjoyed it; if you did, don't forget to leave a review on your podcast site of choice.

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Until next time, have safe journeys. Bye for now.}