

## **BONGU MALTA 2009**

### **Tuesday 9<sup>th</sup> June**

Day 1 – which started mistily in Cornwall at 04:15 and was the same in Devon when we picked up Alan's brother Douglas and made our way to Exeter airport. I felt reasonably calm and even had the first laugh of the holiday when we were standing in the check-in queue. Alan walked forward quickly to the desk and I hastily followed him. It was a good job Douglas was behind me to call out loudly that I'd left my suitcase behind. I had a strange suspicion that my baseline embarrassment level would become much higher during the coming week.

The waiting area was comfortable and because we were under the impression we wouldn't have food during the flight due to industrial action, we had coffee and sandwiches. The Air Malta plane left dead on time, although I prefer to leave the word 'dead' out of any sentence involving planes. We were in row D, near the cockpit and although my adrenaline was flowing nicely/horribly, I managed to keep my cool and not scream aloud. We were surprised when we were served hot food – it was actually the tea and coffee that wasn't forthcoming.

As the flight announcements kept coming in English and another language I took to be Maltese, I realised I only had a very hazy understanding of Malta. It was full of history, it had played a very strategic part in World War II, it was hot and 40 years ago, Alan had been there while employed as a Radio Officer in the RFA and had subsequently promised to take me to the Blue Grotto.

Being a geography drop-out, I hadn't even realised it was so close to Sicily, but this fact dawned when we saw Sicily far below us, looking mysterious and inviting. Then we were over Malta, my first impression of it being a hot, dry place, although trees and greenery were visible. Mostly, there seemed to be a great number of buildings, all made in the same yellow stone. The landing was smooth and as we stepped out of the plane at Luqa Airport, the air was balmy.

We passed through Immigration quite easily, but then it was somewhat chaotic and we had no idea where to go to find our transport to the hotel. A kind English lady with Maltese connections helped us (I overheard Alan telling her about the 40-year-old Blue Grotto promise) and we were soon thankfully whizzing along the Maltese roads in a minibus driven by a young Maltese man.

I noticed quite a few pretty pink bushes along the roadside, as well as prickly pears, palm trees and other fern-type trees. Having been in the Temperate Biome in The Eden Project several times, I felt a satisfying surge of delight to realise that I was actually in the Mediterranean, seeing actual Mediterranean plants and trees in their actual natural Mediterranean habitat.

Our hotel named the Hotel Plevna nestled in a narrow street and was a small distance away from the harbour front of Sliema, known locally as Sliema Ferries. Our rooms were on the second floor, with one room in between Douglas's and ours. Douglas was eager to see what Sliema had to offer, because we'd just had time to unpack quickly when he knocked on our door, looking expectant.

As we walked down the road in unaccustomed heat to the harbour front (past The Lady Di pub) I was struck how Malta seemed to be a place of great contrast.

The limestone buildings were different in their state of repair, with some looking derelict and ramshackle and others either already, or about to be, refurbished to a high standard with part-walls and steps of polished marble. The harbour contained many boats of varying shapes, colours and sizes. In the distance was Valletta, looking old, magnificent and somehow still war-torn (but that was just my imagination, as it was too far away to see the buildings in any detail).



**Looking pleased with themselves**

Across the road from the harbour were lots of roadside caffès, spelt the Italian way, as there's obviously a strong Italian influence in Malta. We stopped at one called Tony's, having realised how thirsty we'd become.



**Refreshment at Tony's**

The waiter sounded a lot like Francesco from *Francesco's Italy*, very friendly and polite with a lilting, sing-song voice. We proceeded to down five iced teas (a choice of lemon or peach) and one Bacardi Breezer between us.

Very much refreshed, we crossed the road to where the boat owners/employees were touting for business by calling out like the often-heard plaintive cry of *Dockyard and Warships!* on Plymouth Hoe. It seemed quite cut-throat, as we were offered a harbour cruise many times, with leaflets and brochures thrust insistently at us. Alan collected a few, as we'd decided a harbour cruise was definitely on the agenda. It *is* the famous Grand Harbour of Malta, after all.

We took photos and bought postcards, before looking for an eating place, as it was gone 18:00 and we'd had an early start. Alan and Douglas veered towards one restaurant called Basilico and we were waved smilingly inside and shown upstairs. It was cool and almost empty, with a great view over the harbour (although Douglas took exception to a tree that was blocking his view).

Alan and Douglas ordered a seafood platter, while I ordered a baked spinach and ricotta ravioli. We also tried a bottle of local red wine and it was all delicious. Dessert was three different flavoured scoops of ice cream, which was light and lovely. We left very happily and it hadn't been too expensive, either.

We strolled along the harbour front again, taking photos of Valletta looking golden and enigmatic in the lowering sun. At one point, we wandered off into some back streets, looking at the building work taking place at Tigné Point. The new stands boldly amid the old, although the new seems in danger of totally overpowering the old, which is a great shame. Many of the old houses have balconies, looking like a living scene from *Romeo and Juliet*.



**Golden and enigmatic Valletta**

In the back streets we came across an old church with a Maltese cross (the cross of the Order of the Knights of St John) on its walls. As we took photos, Douglas's voice caught the attention of a local man and led to a conversation, with Alan saying how he'd been here 40 years ago and how much Sliema has changed.

We walked down to another part of the harbour front that was overlooking the Mediterranean, where big hotels dwarf the scene. Karaoke was blaring out, so although the more expensive hotels have a better view than ours, they also have all the noise. I don't mind music – I didn't even mind Douglas repeatedly singing *What Kind of Fool am I?* throughout the entire day – but karaoke? No!

Tiredness was getting the better of us, so we reluctantly returned to the hotel, where it felt really good to wash off the dirt of the long, hot, exciting day at last. As I pulled the curtains and looked out over the building next to ours, I noticed the moon looking quite small and with a chunk missing from the bottom.

### **Wednesday 10<sup>th</sup> June**

Day 2 – we had both slept reasonably well in our strange single beds, although there was only a sheet covering the mattress and a sheet and cover on top. Alan said he'd become cold in the night because I'd asked to keep the air-conditioning on. In the end, we decided to swap beds, as the air-conditioning did seem to cast more coolness over one bed than the other. The spare pillow was shedding bits of foam, but I managed to improvise with a handy cushion.

We'd set the alarm for 07:00, as we had a meeting with a holiday rep at 09:00 – I hadn't realised we were on a package holiday. After a morning cup of tea in our room, we rendezvoused with Douglas and went down the wobbly banisters to breakfast at 08:00. The dining room was quite spacious, but by the time we left, it had filled up quite a lot. I was content with some fresh fruit and two small croissants, orange juice and a cup of rather excellent cappuccino. Douglas, on the other hand, filled up with scrambled egg, baked beans, bacon and sausage, but later was heard to say he'd overdone it a bit. Alan chose fruit and cereal. The choice was fairly comprehensive and the waiters were friendly and available without any undue hovering, so it was definitely a thumbs up for breakfast.

At about 09:05, we met the holiday rep in the hotel lounge. She had a most interesting voice, on the guttural side but with a melodic Italian accent. I was fascinated to hear her pronounce several place names I'd previously noticed and wondered at, such as Marsaxlokk and Tarxien, where the x is pronounced as *sh*.

She told us what trips were on offer and after some deliberation, we chose one to the Blue Grotto on Sunday morning and a day at Gozo on Monday. Alan and Douglas made sure they were armed with plenty of information about the local buses, as from what we'd seen so far of the Maltese traffic, hiring a car was out of the question. We'd also been given two free vouchers by the travel agents. One was an hour's harbour cruise and the other was free entrance to *The Malta Experience*, an audio-visual presentation of Malta's history.

We shook hands with the rep and then carried on with our holiday. It was hot outside – scorchio! We walked down the busy streets to the harbour and crossed the road to where the boats were waiting for passengers. We'd hardly walked two steps when we were accosted by a fast-talking, pushy girl with a Scottish accent, who wanted us to take a free boat ride as long as we listened to sales talk for an hour about a time-share development. As if! When we turned her down, she asked where we were from. When Douglas said we were from Plymouth, her reply was: "Well, I won't ask any more people from Plymouth, then." How I loathe this current vulture culture.

We walked on and located the vessel for our free boat tour easily enough, courtesy of Captain Morgan Cruises. Unfortunately, our free ticket stated it was for two people only, so Douglas paid his fare. We were almost the first people on the boat, but it soon filled up and began its tour around the two natural harbours on either side of Valletta, namely Grand Harbour and Marsamxett Harbour.

There was a very good, detailed commentary as the boat cruised in and around the different creeks and Alan and I had our cameras out nearly all the time. The sights were many and various – on the land there were forts, battlements and so many houses and buildings of great variety; while on the water it was a similar story, with boats, yachts, cruise liners and at least one rusting hulk, not to forget an operational sea plane. There was no way it could all be taken in, but the cruise gave a good overview of the two harbours and we totally enjoyed it.



**Used as an air raid shelter in WWII**

It was past midday, so we decided to stop at Tony's and had egg sandwiches and iced tea, which rejuvenated the wilting parts well. I'm not so sure it did a great deal for Douglas's hearing, though, because when Alan was talking about the iced tea and how he didn't fancy peach, Douglas responded quite seriously that he too didn't fancy lying on a beach. Or perhaps he really didn't fancy lying on a peach? After a few mirthful moments, we were fortified for our first local bus experience, namely the no. 62 to Valletta bus station.

Alan paid the 47 cents each and we walked through the full bus looking for a seat. The bus started and went over some very nasty bumps, jolting us and the bus a great deal. Somehow my finger became pinched between some metal on a pole, which caused a blood blister. It spontaneously burst, so I asked Douglas, who I was by then sitting beside, if he had a tissue. He gallantly offered me some antiseptic cream and a plaster, but the tissue sufficed.

After about 15 minutes, we arrived at Valletta bus station, where it was very hot and busy and where Douglas amused himself by singing *Just one Valletta, give it to me*. Hmm. Stall vendors were selling souvenirs, hot and cold food and drinks. We'd already run out of bottled water bought that morning, so had to buy more.

Our objective was two gardens, a higher one and a lower one. Alan had a map, so we walked quite slowly in the heat past old, interesting buildings. Even the ordinary, everyday streets seemed fascinating with balconies and crumbling, pitted, limestone bricks, replaced here and there with brand-new smooth limestone bricks. Every now and then a Madonna or other religious icon looked out from the wall on a street corner, as if blessing the neighbourhood.



**Underneath the arches in Upper Barrakka Gardens**

We found the Upper Barrakka Gardens with no trouble. Alan was sure it was hotter than yesterday and we were both relieved to enter and find shade from the trees, bushes, statues and arches. The latter were large and imposing and revealed stunning views over Grand Harbour. There was something different at every turn, be it a flower, a tree, a fountain, plaques, monuments, cannons and piles of cannon balls. It was like no garden I've ever been in and I loved it.

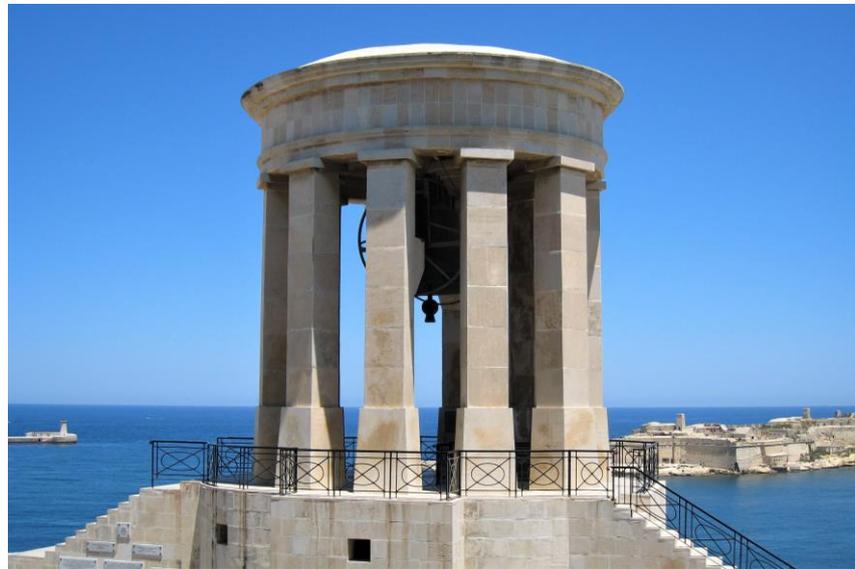
The map showed it wasn't too far to the lower garden, so we strolled along a street lined with what we took to be old olive trees. We were later told Malta has Mediterranean oaks that look similar, so I'm now uncertain what they actually were. I liked them anyway! I'd noticed that lots of the trees in Malta have zig-zag trunks, as if they have a hard time in windy conditions during winter.

Douglas suddenly became very animated when he saw the sea plane taking off from its berth in the harbour below and come zooming in our direction, taking passengers on a tour around Malta and/or over to the neighbouring island of Gozo. We all took a shot or two at a sea plane photo, as it's not something you see every day – not in England, anyway. After this excitement, we continued strolling until we found our way into the Lower Barrakka Gardens.

It was just as breathtaking there, with a pseudo-Greek temple (a monument to Sir Alexander Ball, first British Governor of Malta and a leader of the Maltese insurgents against the French in 1798). Through more large arches, we were confronted with the huge siege bell of Malta, rung daily at noon to commemorate the victory of the Allied Forces during the second siege of Malta, 1940-1943, when 1,500 civilians died. It had been unveiled by Queen Elizabeth II in 1992.



**Palm trees, oleanders and a Greek temple**



**The siege bell**



**A supine cool dude enjoys the Maltese air**

Beside it lay a massive supine statue resting in the Mediterranean sun, whose identity I failed to find out. It didn't matter, because whoever it was must have been a cool dude. We sat for a while on a wooden seat under the shade of a tree (a Mediterranean oak or olive, I know not) gazing at the harbour below. The sea plane came zooming back to its berth, so the cameras were active again.

As it was still only 15:20 and the map showed that we were quite close to *The Malta Experience*, we decided to locate the building in question, which had formerly been the Hospital of the Knights of St John. While we were deliberating which way to go, we were approached by a driver from one of the horse and carts often seen conveying tourists around. He tried very hard indeed to give us a ride down the road for €20, which was apparently a bargain price ... or not!

Having refused and subsequently walked down the road under our own steam (and we were pretty steamy by then) we entered the coolness of the former hospital through an underground tunnel that led into the entrance and gift shop. We had to wait for a while, so looked around the shop. I was intrigued to see souvenir models for sale of what looked like strange ancient goddesses, some of them literally topless, with their top half completely missing. However, a group of voluble French tourists came in then and invaded our space.

Talking of invasion, the 7,000 year history of the Maltese islands that was the subject of *The Malta Experience* was excellent. I really had no idea they had been invaded so often and so consistently and to be honest, I hadn't realised that Malta is an archipelago, with other islands (notably Gozo and Comino).

The audio-visual show lasted for 45 minutes, the audio part being presented through earphones, with an impressive choice of 12 different languages. By the time the show had finished, I felt much more knowledgeable about Malta's roots and culture and extremely interested to learn about the Temple People and the fact that remains of Neolithic temples are still in situ that had been built an astonishing 1,000 years before the Great Pyramid of Egypt and 1,600 years before Stonehenge. There are layers upon layers of history here and this holiday will only be a quick taster. Well, it's certainly whetted my appetite.

We succumbed to a souvenir or two in the gift shop before leaving the coolness of the underground building to swelter once again in the hot, bright air outside. We then trailed along the streets, realising we were uncertain whether the Sliema ferry was still operating at that time of day (past 17:00).

A brotherly misunderstanding seemed to arise between Alan and Douglas, something about where we were, where to go and whether we were catching the ferry or the bus. I'm not sure, I was losing the plot with tiredness at that point. Douglas almost lost his footing as we were heading down to the harbour's edge. The pavements and roads seem very shiny and slippery in Malta and the sound of car wheels sliding on the shiny road surface is a common background sound.

In the end we were fortunate and soon afterwards managed to find the Sliema ferry arrival/departure point. Not only that, but we ascertained we would be able to catch the penultimate ferry and there was even a place selling drinks and ice cream while we waited. Ice cream is such a heavenly commodity when you're very hot, very tired and very hungry...

The ferry ride only took a few minutes across the harbour and we were soon walking back to the hotel for a quick freshen-up. Douglas had shown an interest in the fact that the hotel's bar sold draught English beer, so we had a swift, refreshing half pint before hitting the streets again to look for somewhere to eat.

As before, the pavements were packed with people either walking along like we were, or sitting outside at the pavement caffès, eating and drinking. We looked at quite a few menus as we passed by, but it seemed very difficult to choose. I was particularly tired by that time (it was approaching 19:30 after a full-on, sweltering day out) and beginning to lose the power of speech, as I felt my energy levels becoming lower and lower. Alan and I were developing headaches, although the indomitable Douglas maintained that he was fine.

We made a quick hopeful dive into one place that looked reasonable, but then made a quick dive out again, as we ascertained it was a pub that had a big screen TV playing live football. At that point, it seemed obvious that by far the most preferable option was to return to the Basilico restaurant where we had eaten the previous evening, which is precisely what we did.

As before, it was wonderfully cool, uncrowded and inviting and the two young waiters welcomed us to the seat of our choice upstairs by the window. I noticed the music playing in the background was not the tasteless muzak of our hotel's dining room at breakfast, but sounded like a proper album – respect.

This time Alan chose baked ravioli, while Douglas and I chose a pizza each, which was lighter than the pizzas we have at home and very tasty. This led to some inane chatter about pizzas and takeaway, which in turn led to Douglas becoming confused and saying how he never orders Chinese pizzas!

Alan and Douglas enjoyed a beer, while I gratefully downed an iced tea. For dessert, Douglas chose lemon cheesecake, while Alan and I had three scoops of ice cream again. It was a most congenial and relaxing time, looking out of the window at the street, harbour and boats. The tree was still blocking Douglas's view, but he survived. As the evening advanced, the lights in Sliema and Valletta gradually switched on and added to the magical atmosphere.

There was a somewhat different atmosphere from the bustling daytime one as we wandered back out into the streets of Sliema that had almost become dark at 21:00. The air was still beautifully warm and balmy and the whole harbour front was filled with people who were simply enjoying the evening.

We strolled back in the direction of our hotel, stopping every now and then to look in a shop window, or at something that caught our interest. Douglas was standing outside one small eating establishment looking at the menu, only to be approached by the owner and asked to come inside. I would say that being accosted for trade is the only aspect I haven't liked about Malta so far.

We finally wended our way back to the hotel, very tired but at the same time reluctant for the day to end. Alan and Douglas went to check out the roof terrace, but it apparently wasn't great. The moon was still missing a chunk at the bottom. My finger seemed OK. I had a bath and crawled gratefully into bed.

### **Thursday 11<sup>th</sup> June**

Day 3 – scorchio! I'd taken ages to fall asleep again, perhaps there had been simply too much in the previous day to mull over? I did sleep bearably well, though and Alan said he'd slept a bit better in the other bed.

Douglas appeared as if in a vision at 07:45 and we proceeded to breakfast down the wobbly-banistered staircase just before 08:00. This time the dining room was fairly full with an influx of young German people. We ate much the same as the previous morning, having planned to sneak out a banana each for lunch. Unfortunately, the bananas were over-ripe, so we were sadly thwarted. It's not good to be sadly thwarted on holiday, but life's like that.

We walked to the bus stops on the harbour front just after 09:00, dodging all the harbour cruise offers. Our aim was to catch a bus to Valletta and thence to the Maritime Museum at a place called Vittoriosa, where Douglas wanted to search out information about the SS Ohio, an American oil tanker.

The Ohio had been part of Operation Pedestal for the relief of Malta, in August 1942. This involved around 80 vessels attempting to make it through enemy minefields, bombers and u-boats to Valletta Grand Harbour, to bring in much needed supplies of fuel, grain and ammunition, as supplies were critically low. The Ohio was hit by a torpedo one day and then hit by two more bombs the following day, but managed to crawl into Grand Harbour with the help of other warships. She was greeted by cheers, as people realised Malta was saved.



**A no. 62 bus departs for Valletta**

Back in the present, a no. 62 arrived and horror upon horrors, it was extremely full. Alan and Douglas still got on, though, so I was forced to follow. I ended up standing at the front, wedged in by the luggage section, up close and personal to some young people, including the driver. I noticed a small bottle of what I took to be holy oil swinging around by the wheel, as well as what looked like some sort of bull talisman. The radio was playing music quite loudly and I nearly jumped out of my skin when a hideous noise suddenly blasted out. It was the bus's horn, a most raucous sound with which I later became quite familiar.

After we'd travelled a few stops and some people had extricated themselves from the bus, a woman tapped me on the shoulder and offered me a seat. However, I was so wedged in and even enjoying the experience in a strange masochistic way, that I politely declined and continued to sway along with the bright young things at the front of the bus. I realised that I couldn't even see where Alan and Douglas had ended up – I wondered if they could see me?

We arrived at Valletta bus station, where Alan caused me to smile by his remark, "This is a bustling place!" He was right, though, as apart from the buses (some of which were very old and others much newer) there were people everywhere, including bus drivers larking around with one other quite vigorously. There was a marvellous fountain, called the Tritons' Fountain, in the middle of the circular system used for buses in and out of the station and I must say that the whole character was far superior to the concrete drabness of Plymouth bus station.

The hotel receptionist had advised us to take a no. 3 bus to Vittoriosa for the Maritime Museum, so we stood around for a while, enjoying the lively mayhem while we waited for it to arrive. When it did arrive, it was thankfully far from full, although the bus driver didn't seem entirely certain about exactly where the museum was. This was a little disturbing, although he did advise us to get out at the town square. It has to be said that *he* had seemed a little disturbed when Alan had asked, "Can you tell us where to get off?"

He did actually tell us where to get off, which is why we then found ourselves standing in the middle of Senglea town square in the blazing heat of a Maltese mid-morning, map in hand and with puzzled frowns, wondering where the museum was hiding itself. Fortunately, an old man who had got off the bus after us must have heard our conversation and proceeded to give us directions – two alternative sets of directions as it happened, because we were in the wrong place and should have caught a no. 4 bus...

Our options were either to walk to the museum, or catch a ferry, although we would apparently have to shout to the ferryman to give us a ride. Although Douglas and Alan both have loud voices, we decided to walk. The old man was so friendly, he was smiling and joking all the time and when we left him, he patted us on the back and shook hands with Alan and Douglas. It makes such a difference to be treated with kindness and proper directions in a strange land.

It was very hot. Alan was sure it was the hottest day so far, so we walked along slowly and enjoyed seeing all the lovely old and new buildings, all the yachts at the marinas and all the other boating and shipping. The street names were interesting, too – the word for street seems to be Arabic in origin – Triq.

We had learned yesterday at *The Malta Experience* that when the Arabs had first invaded, a lot of their language naturally influenced the Maltese language. I'd also been interested to learn yesterday that Malta had originally been called Malet, which was then changed to Melita, until it finally became Malta.

As we walked along, Alan espied a fruit stall on the other side of the road, so he nipped across and bought three bananas. This almost led to a Douglas song of the day involving bananas, but we were saved from this by the sighting of the Maritime Museum, which is in the building once used by the British as a bakery.



**Yachts at the marina**

At the entrance, we were politely asked if anyone was over 60, whereupon Alan graciously pointed to Douglas, who was given a concession. It was rather warm in the museum, but there were strategically placed fans, of which I took full advantage. I found some of the exhibits really interesting, mainly the ship doctors' medical equipment, old letters pertaining to Maltese history and newspaper articles about the day the British left Malta in 1979 on HMS London – fortunately with good feeling on both sides, it seems.

Meanwhile, Alan had found what Douglas was looking for, which was a model of the Ohio, so after several photos were taken, our mission was successfully accomplished. This meant one happy Douglas, who didn't even mind when he tripped down a museum step and a sandal strap broke. He made an emergency repair with Velcro and another strap, which seemed to work well enough, as we had a quick look around outside the museum, noticing some intriguing history.



**Intriguing history**

After a spot of map research, we decided to visit the Tarxien Temples, a temple complex comprising four distinct temple units built at different times, from 3,600 BC to 2,500 BC. Before setting off, though, we enjoyed a very welcome iced tea by the waterfront. This time there was only peach on offer, but it was just what we needed. We'd been drinking water from bottles all morning, but the iced tea had something extra, like sugar and tannin, presumably.

While we were walking in what we hoped was the right direction, another old man overheard Alan and Douglas talking and said hello. He asked if we were British and consequently heard the story of Alan's visit to Malta in 1969.

Alan managed to find us the right bus stop by asking a bus driver sitting in his bus at the wrong bus stop across the road. Some German people came along to wait at our bus stop and I heard the woman say, "Gott, ist es heiss!" God, is it hot! It didn't seem that bad, to be honest, I wondered if I'd acclimatised a little.

The bus arrived after about 10 minutes, driven by the bus driver Alan had asked at the other side of the road. We alighted at Paola town square (complete with square trees that seemed to amuse Douglas greatly) and waited for the bus to the Tarxien Temples. This was a longer wait of about 20 minutes, but as usual there was plenty to watch, as people went about their daily activities.

My heart sank when the bus arrived, as it was hideously full and this time I really was stuck, standing up near the driver and the door. Then a woman wanted to get off, so she rang the bell and stood up. There was nowhere for me to go and I must have looked horrified as I tried to move out of her way. She said, "It's OK, it's OK, wait for the bus to stop." So I did, but I still had to almost get off the bus myself to let her off. I could feel people staring at me, I must have become red in the face. So that was quite a difficult bus experience, but mercifully short. In fact, we later realised we could easily have walked there.

Indeed, from the bus stop it was a surprisingly short walk to the temples. While paying the entrance fee, we were again asked politely if anyone was over 60. A little frustratingly, we had no guide (written or otherwise) so had to content ourselves with walking around the site in the glaring heat, taking lots of photos.

It was so old and so interesting, particularly the remains of a large statue of the bottom half of a fat lady, presumably a fertility goddess. I later found out that this was a reproduction and the real statue was safely in the National Museum of Archaeology in Valletta, but I wouldn't have known. There were also animal carvings and well-preserved designs on stone that looked somewhat Celtic:





**A topless Fat Lady**

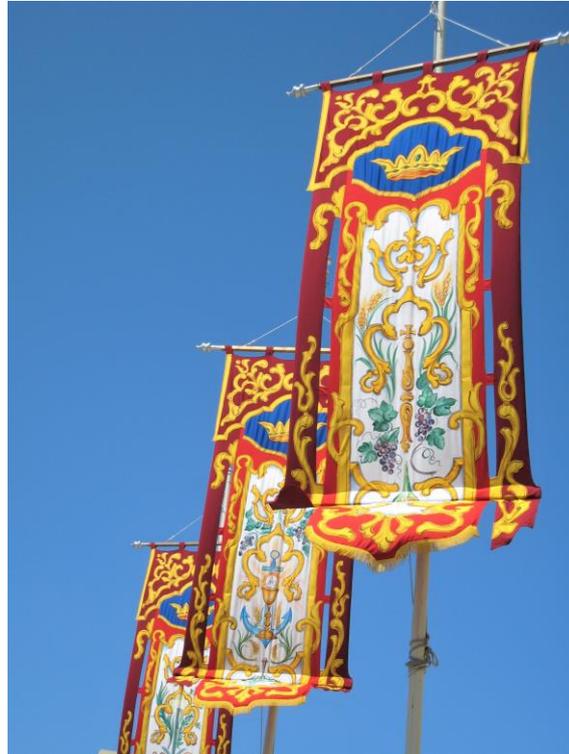
I wished very much that I'd read up beforehand about Malta and its history and antiquities, as I'd planned to do. A tour of German people came in behind us, but they didn't exactly encroach upon our space or photo opportunities, as they walked around quite quickly and left before we did. It was a pity it hadn't been an English tour, I would have liked to listen in. We had a quick look around the small gift shop before embarking on our walk back to Paola town square.



**Tarxien Temples**

*Kay Santillo, 2009.*

Once again, the streets were fascinating, with balconies, little shrines, a church around a corner, funny front doors, small shops, banners in the blue sky – all things you'd never really notice unless you were walking. We found the square easily and headed straight to a kiosk selling ice cream, as sustenance was badly needed. This time we all had a Pro Maxim, which was ice cream inside a biscuit wafer. It felt as if it contained hundreds of calories but I really didn't care.



**Banners in the blue sky**

The bus to Valletta soon arrived and this time we actually had a seat. Alan and I were chatting about how to pronounce Maltese names, when the man in front turned around and said, "You speak good English, are you French?" He seemed quite a character, he and his wife must have been in their 60s. They were from Montpellier and they seemed to want to talk a little.

The man had a puzzle page from *The Times* in front of him and said it had a puzzle he'd never seen before, but he couldn't do it, so he must be stupid. Then he said he was upset, as Maltese people over 60 are allowed half-price fare on the buses, but although France and Malta are European and both belong to the EU, they wouldn't let him and his wife pay half fare...

The conversation certainly passed the journey to Valletta, where we got off the bus and straight on to another bus, for Sliema. It was crowded as usual, but we managed to find a seat at the very back (which had obviously been left till last because the seat itself was burning hot). About 15 minutes later, we arrived at Sliema, with the final bus journey of the day over, thank heavens.

We walked back to the hotel to wash, then convened in the bar for a refreshing drink. Douglas decided to walk to the shops to look for a new pair of sandals and returned a short while later looking very pleased with himself, having bought some nice ones for €22, plus a t-shirt and two postcards.

At about 17:45, we left the hotel for our evening meal. I was incredibly tired, so instead of looking around for a new place to eat, we returned to Basilico. This time we sat at a different table, where the tree didn't obscure Douglas's view. I chose rocket (rucola) and mozzarella pizza, while Alan chose vegetable risotto and Douglas chose seafood risotto – this contained seafood complete in its shell, stuck artistically into the risotto. It was up to the usual high standard, with a local rosé wine and three scoops of light, flavoursome ice cream. Douglas said he would be happy to sit there with another drink, but I was feeling conspicuous, so we left. My baseline embarrassment level clearly needs to be much higher.

We strolled along in the warm evening, with the aroma of food from pavement bars, restaurants and caffès – eating out is a popular pastime. Crossing the road to the harbour front, we saw boats preparing to go out for an evening trip. Alan and Douglas stopped to talk to a bus tour rep and ended up booking us a day's tour around the north of Malta tomorrow. It was true we'd already planned to do this trip, but I was so tired, I just wanted to go back to the hotel and wished they'd stop talking. In my next life, my sociability level also needs to be higher!

Back at the hotel, Douglas disappeared into the bar, while Alan and I returned up the wobbly-banistered staircase to room 216. I wrote up the day's notes, looked through the day's photos and realised I hadn't yet had time to read one page of the novel I'd bought to read on holiday. Tonight was no exception...

### **Friday 12<sup>th</sup> June**

Day 4 – scorchio! My legs had been rather restless in the night, no doubt from all yesterday's walking, but it had been good exercise. We'd both slept quite well and after showering and a cup of tea, it was soon 08:00 and Douglas time.

This morning the dining room was comfortably full/empty and we were even in time to purloin three good bananas for later in the day. The usual background muzak was playing above the hum and clatter of breakfasting tourists. The time our booked bus tour was supposed to start was unclear, so we didn't loiter and strolled purposefully down to the harbour front at just gone 09:00.



**The harbour front at just gone 09:00**

The usual touting for boat and bus rides began, but we'd become somewhat inured. Alan and Douglas discovered we were about an hour too early for our bus tour, so we crossed over the road to Tony's and enjoyed an iced lemon tea. It was most pleasant sipping tea and watching the Maltese world go by until bus embarkation time. It was an open-top bus, so we naturally sat on top to have a good view. There seemed to be a mixed group of passengers – some German ladies, an Australian couple with a toddler and some older people.

The first part of the journey was to Valletta, after our tour guide had introduced himself as Eric. He was Polish, married to a Maltese lady and had the usual sing-song Italian accent. Alan later found out he was a linguist, which was the reason he gave us lots of interesting information about language and place names.

For instance, as we passed through the town of Marsa, he told us that 'marsa' is the Phoenician word for 'harbour'. Lots of Mediterranean names and nearby countries have 'marsa' as a name or part-name, for instance Marseilles in France. He also mentioned that the Maltese language has Semitic roots, plus a large Arab influence and a lot of Italian, although it's even more complicated than that. The development of the Maltese language obviously mirrors the very colourful story of Maltese history and I would have liked to learn more.

Our first stop was at Mosta meaning 'centre' and located funnily enough at the centre of the island. Our bus stopped outside the Sanctuary Basilica of the Assumption of Our Lady, commonly known as the Rotunda of Mosta. This Roman Catholic parish church boasts the third largest dome in Europe, standing at an impressive 220 feet/67 metres high. After we had all entered the church, having been surveyed to make sure we were suitably clothed, with no bare shoulders or too much bare leg on display, we gathered around the guide.

He told us how in 1942, a 500 lb German aerial bomb had pierced the dome and fallen into the centre of the church during Mass without exploding and without anybody being hurt, which had been interpreted by the Maltese people as a miracle. He also seemed to want to tell us about St Paul, probably because St Paul is thought to have been shipwrecked on Malta and there is a small island named after him where this is supposed to have happened.

After this all too fleeting stop, we returned to our seat on the top of the bus and nearly succumbed to toasted buttocks – or as Douglas described it to Eric, two sides of roast beef. Having gingerly re-established contact with our seats, we were then whisked away to our next destination, the romantic sounding Ta' Qali.

This was the site of the former World War II aerodrome, but unfortunately we didn't have enough time to explore it properly. We did have enough time, however, to wander through a shaded garden in which we ate our breakfast bananas. Alan and I then zoomed into a shop selling beautiful glassware and wished we had a lot more time before we had to zoom out again.

Another short bus ride took us further on to the Ta' Qali crafts village, where again, time was very limited. It was clear that this bus tour was just as we'd expected, a quick taster of what northern Malta has to offer. However, there was sufficient time for Douglas to buy a sought-after Maltese falcon t-shirt and for Alan and me to spend money in the rocks and minerals shop we'd spotted.



**The enormous prickly pear**

After taking photos of an enormous prickly pear, we climbed back on the bus, acclimatised our buttocks to the burning seats and drove off to the next stop on our route. It was a very picturesque drive along roads lined with more prickly pears, oleanders, fennel and other interesting flowers and vegetation. Vineyards slumbered in the glaring midday sun – Eric told us how Malta has been forced by the EU to grow its own grapes for producing wine, rather than importing them from Italy, as it used to in the past. This has resulted in a price rise, although the local wine we've tried has seemed quite reasonably priced to me.

Soon in the distance a town on the top of a hill appeared enigmatically in the heat haze. As it became closer, it was obviously the walled and fortified town of Mdina, along with Rabat. Mdina had been the capital of Malta, its settlements dating back to over 4,000 BC. It was first fortified by the Phoenicians around 700 BC, but unfortunately it was practically impossible to take a decent photo from the top of a bumpy bus, especially when the view kept disappearing behind trees. It was a lovely sight, though, now firmly committed to memory.

We approached Rabat, which means 'suburb' in Arabic and archaic Maltese and is indeed an obvious suburb of Mdina. Entering Rabat brought back memories for Alan, who frequented a bar there with RFA colleagues in 1969, but we won't go there... Meanwhile, upon leaving the bus, Eric led us to a pleasant looking place for lunch that was apparently much cheaper than anywhere inside Mdina.

We sat at a table under a parasol and drank iced lemon tea, while deliberating what to do about food. It was 13:00 and I was hungry, so although Douglas said he didn't want anything and Alan was demurring, I knew I needed sustenance. In the end, Alan and I shared a toasted cheese and mushroom sandwich, which was delicious and came with some really good chips and salad.

We were all due to meet up at 14:00, so the three of us walked around a nearby garden and then went up to the gate of Mdina to take photos. When I say 'gate', it was far, far more! It was also very hot – Alan was sure it was the hottest day so far. On the way back, Douglas bought us an ice cream, which was much appreciated. I would imagine that lots of energy is expended as a tourist walking around foreign countries, which is my excuse and it makes perfect sense to me.



**Alan outside the gate of Mdina**

In due course we convened with the rest of the group and were led up to the 'gate' of Mdina, which is also known as the Silent City. This is because traffic is limited, presumably to that of the 300 or so residents who are Malta's nobility and direct descendants of the Norman, Sicilian and Spanish overlords who made Mdina their home as far back as the 12<sup>th</sup> century and onwards.

Once inside the entrance, Eric started one of his frequent talks along the way, pointing out places or features of interest. The streets looked ancient and worthy of exploration, with some magnificent houses and also a lovely cathedral church. This had twin towers and two clocks, one of them set at the wrong time for some superstitious reason, possibly to avoid the so-called witching hour of midnight? I didn't quite catch the explanation, as I was distracted taking photos.

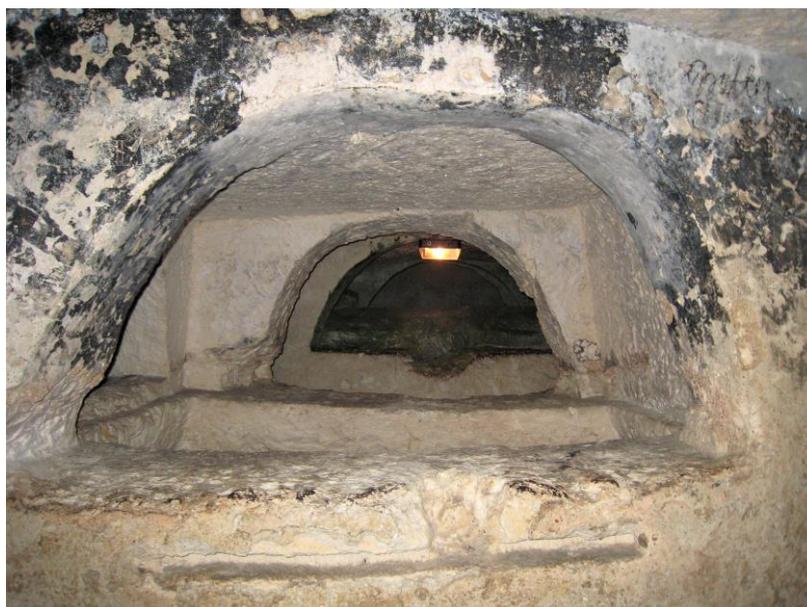
We were all invited into one gift shop to sample some prickly pear liqueur. Apparently, the prickly pear is used in many ways, but nowhere else uses it to make liqueur. We were limited to a quick swig from a small plastic cup, of course, but it was very good and we bought some. Douglas hadn't come into the shop, so he didn't know what he'd missed. He later said he'd been irritated by Eric's frequent stops, but I'd found them fascinating.



**A pretty house in Mđina**

We carried on to a place that had a wonderful panoramic view of Malta, where we rested in the shade of some trees for a short while. Then we retraced our steps, but left by a different route that took us out of Mđina another way, whereupon we were once again in Rabat. Here we were taken to a stall/shop that sold confectionary and were offered a taste of some traditional Maltese sweets. The piece I took from the proffered tray was a bit like peanut brittle, but rather too sticky in my estimation and not too good for teeth.

From there we walked to St Paul's Catacombs, where some people chose to stay behind at a large caffè and gift shop, but a small number of us went inside the catacombs with Eric for a €5 entrance fee each (€3.50 for over-60 Douglas!) It was dark and humid inside, but extremely interesting. I was glad we had a guide, as Eric told us lots of facts and pointed out holes that grave robbers had made, as well as tiny niches in the rock for babies.



**The catacombs**

He explained how the high humidity helped to decay the bodies quickly. As Malta is a small island, the bodies were permitted to stay in the catacombs for two years, by which time they would have become skeletons and would then be transferred to a proper burial site. I was so glad we'd visited.

After re-entering the world of bright daylight, we perused the nearby gift shop before heading back to the open-air bus. This time the seats weren't so burning hot, which was a relief. 'Our' double seat with a single seat in front had been taken, so we were further back in the bus where there were other empty spaces.

It was then a straight but picturesque ride back to our different hotels, through the central parts of Malta and then out onto the coastal parts. We passed a sandy beach called Golden Bay – this was a surprise, as I hadn't realised there are any sandy beaches on Malta. It was very windy up aloft, but not at all cold.

We passed through St Julian's, an extremely built-up holiday area, where the bus offloaded some passengers. All over Malta there is so much building taking place – cranes and half-finished apartments are a common sight. I feel sad that the old Malta is being spoiled by the relentless advance of money-making modernity, but I suppose people (and perhaps island people in particular) have to do whatever they can to make a living somehow.

As we were bowling along the Maltese roads once again, I suddenly realised Douglas was missing. This was most alarming, seeing we were on an open-top bus. We found him scrabbling around underneath the seats, looking for his hat which had blown off in a sudden gust. He came up empty-handed and said it must have flown over the side, but after another search a little while later, he found it under one of the empty seats at the very back of the bus.

We were dropped off a little way from Hotel Plevna as it's not on the front, so walked back tired but definitely happy with the day. It was nearing 18:00, so we freshened up and went out to eat at Basilico. The young waiters recognised us, which I think Douglas and Alan like, although it caused me to feel conspicuous.

The food and view were lovely, this time accompanied by a bottle of local white wine. Alan and I had a salad (rucola salad for me, basically rocket leaves and cheese) and we shared a dish of potato wedges, while Douglas had a pasta dish. Alan and Douglas then decided on lemon cheesecake for dessert, while I chose tiramisu, although I found it slightly too cakey for my liking.

As it was still quite early and there was a bit of life left in my legs, we walked the other way along the harbour front (the way to Valletta) and ended up by a marina and then in a garden. Lots of the public gardens we've seen so far seem to be in a state of renewal, both the hard landscaping and planting. Many beds look dug over and ready to receive plants, as if the height of either the growing season or the tourist season hasn't yet arrived.

As the evening wore on, the earlier wind eased and it was pleasant sitting in the garden, then stopping to watch fish in the harbour and people fishing from the harbour's edge. We took our time strolling back to the hotel, where we had a drink at the bar. However, it was crowded and noisy, so we took our drinks into the lounge area and then afterwards up the wobbly-banistered staircase to bed.

### **Saturday 13<sup>th</sup> June**

Day 5 – scorchio! The day began at 07:00 with a slight teabag crisis. The maid had failed to replenish supplies yesterday and we thus discovered ourselves to be completely devoid, but Alan nipped across to Douglas's room and the crisis was averted. Breakfast was enjoyable as usual and we sauntered nonchalantly out of the dining room with a banana each.

The plan for the day was to catch the bus to Valletta yet again, so I tried to prepare myself psychologically for the approaching ordeal. It's just as well I did, because the bus was very full again, with standing room only and the three of us were the last on. Douglas ended up almost out of the door, while Alan and I were forced to hang on to the bar running along the top of the bus with grim determination, as it bumped and jolted its merry way along.

Fortunately, several people got off after a couple of stops and although it was a very awkward manoeuvre for poor Douglas, it meant that I had a seat. I must confess it was such a relief to no longer inhale the aroma from other people's armpits. Even sitting down was an experience, though, because more people got on at further stops and they couldn't avoid having to press extremely close and squashingly personal as other people got off. So it was another thrill a minute ride to Valletta bus station, every journey different in its own way.

The bus station was the same as ever, which is exceptionally busy, very hot and full of people, noise and movement. This time we stopped deliberately to take photos of the impressive Tritons' Fountain, which was designed and constructed between 1952 and 1959. It consists of three Tritons holding up a large basin – Triton being a Greek god of the sea. The fountain is considered one of Malta's most important Modernist landmarks. It was impossible to miss it:



**The Tritons' Fountain at the bus station**

We then walked along to the Statue of Independence, which we'd noticed from the tour bus yesterday. It struck me how it's such an unusual delight to take photographs with a backdrop of pure blue sky, rather than having to contend with a lot of changeable cloud cover far too often in the UK.



**The Statue of Independence**

Further along was a 'Mall' that was basically a garden with statues and plaques. Having emerged from the Mall at the other end, we continued to a war memorial that had a gilded bronze eagle perched on its top (not quite as Douglas referred to it in RAF-speak, as a golden Maltese s\*\*\*e hawk). It was around 50 feet/15.2 metres high on top of the Commonwealth Air Forces Memorial. Over 2,300 airmen died during World War II in and around the Mediterranean with no known graves: 1,550 in the RAF; 300 in the Royal Canadian Air Force; 200 in the Royal Australian Air Force; 170 in the South African Air Force and 85 in the New Zealand Air Force. I hope they now smile at their gilded bronze s\*\*\*e hawk.



**The Maltese gilded bronze eagle**

Next on our agenda was the archaeological museum, but in order to get to this we had to return to the bus station and then walk to Triq il-Republikka (Republic Street). Valletta's main entrance is the City Gate, but it's unfortunately rather plain, as the original Baroque Gate was demolished in the 1960s to make access easier. As soon as we stepped inside the City Gate, though, the scene was so vibrant, packed, hectic, colourful and noisy, that I felt we could easily have been in a street in Marrakech. It's very true that Malta's Arab influence is significant.

The National Museum of Archaeology wasn't a great distance away, whereupon Alan and I dived thankfully inside its cool interior. This time Alan pre-empted the question and actually asked for one entrance fee for an over-60! I later found out that the museum building itself is of historic value, being the Auberge (Grand Hostel) of the Knights of Provence, built in 1571.

This is a really good example of what a first visit to Malta feels like, in that you find yourself surrounded by so much history that you're not even aware of at the time. The museum itself wasn't exactly big, but it was very informative, with lots of exhibits from the Temple Period and before. I walked around still astounded that the archaeology on Malta predates so much.

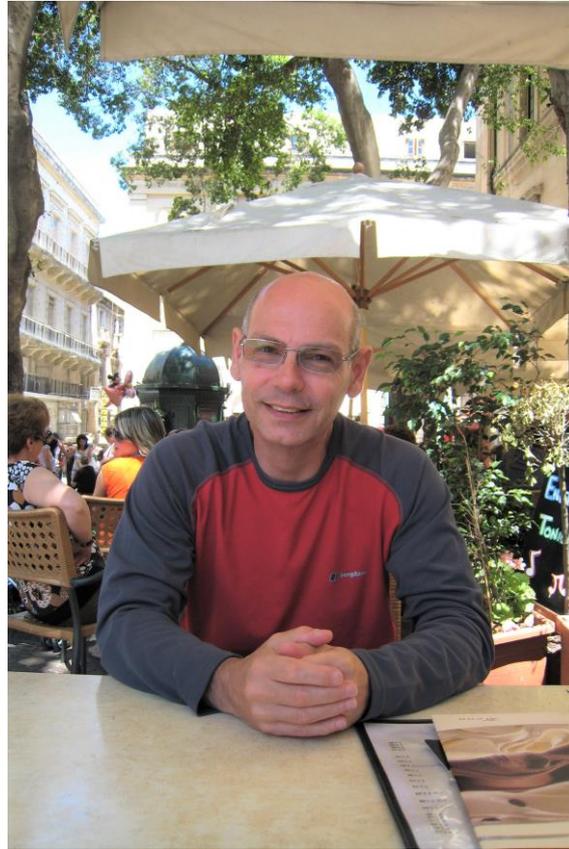
We could take photos with no flash, so Alan and I were happy. I loved the spiral, concentric designs on lots of the old temple stones and the statues of bottoms of fat ladies with interchangeable heads. The fertility goddesses were fabulous and it's interesting how there's no bother about naming them 'fat ladies'. In fact, until 20 years ago, it was considered feminine and healthy for Maltese women to be well-fed and rounded – although the fat ladies *were* too fat and a healthy compromise needs to be found. As I was considering this, the longing for a future visit to Malta began to take hold, one in which we can investigate its antiquities much further, after doing a lot more necessary background research.



**Spiral and concentric designs**

We emerged from the museum at about 11:40 and ate our breakfast bananas in the shade of the museum entrance. Then we wandered awhile along the busy street until Alan turned off into another street and espied a caffè.

It was very busy, but we managed to find a spare table and all followed Douglas's idea of having a frappé – this was much like a fruit milk shake, made with yoghurt and fresh fruit. It was most refreshing and very relaxing sitting there calmly in the midst of the hubbub. There were a couple of close encounters with pigeons at our feet, but no trouble really. Talking of birds, Douglas has posed an interesting question – why are there no seagulls on Malta?



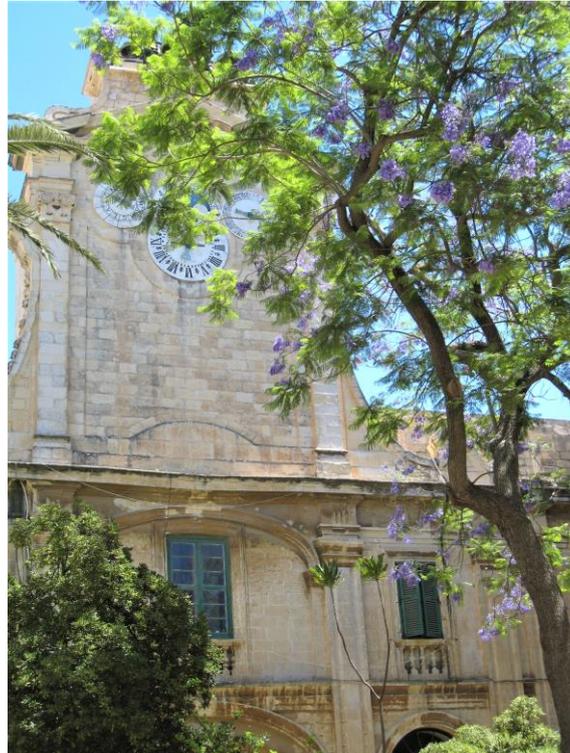
**Alan in après frappé bliss**

After the bell of the church behind us had ceremoniously dinged out midday, we continued our street walk. The architecture was as fascinating as ever, I can't believe I've taken so many photos of buildings. I couldn't help whipping out my camera when noticing a BHS store on the ground floor of a grand old limestone building that in England would probably belong to English Heritage.

At one point, Alan stopped to buy a honey cake that brought back memories of his 1969 visit to Valletta. It seemed to be a large ring of pastry filled at intervals around its circumference with dates and cooked with honey. I chose what looked like a macaroon and in a moment of inspiration and bad taste, informed Douglas that the song of the day was *Hey Macaroon!* In my defence, this was partly in rebellion that he'd failed to think of a song for yesterday.

We walked to the nearby Lower Barraka Gardens, where we sat down in the shade to consume these delights. Alan remarked that the taste of the honey cake took him back, to which Douglas said, "but not in age." Cruel, but true. My macaroon was good, but Douglas said he found the pastry very filling. I became a bit jumpy, therefore, when he was inspired to feed a couple of sparrows and some marauding pigeons then tried their best to get in on the act.

After sitting for a while and gazing at the view over the harbour, we returned to the streets, with the objective of visiting another garden. En route we inadvertently walked by the Grand Master's Palace. For over 200 years, this 16<sup>th</sup>-century building was the home of the Grand Master of the Order of the Knights of St John, but is now the President's office and seat of the Maltese Government. We walked inside the courtyard, which was pleasantly cool and looked around for a short while, appreciating the historical value of the building and garden. A lovely jacaranda tree with beautiful purple blossoms was obligingly in flower.



**The jacaranda in the Grand Master's Palace**

We continued our slow, hot way along the fascinating streets. Alan was sure it was the hottest day so far. Perhaps this was what led him to stop and buy us two scoops each of delicious Italian flavoured ice cream in a cone? Fortified once again, we arrived at some walls that were in the same state. Some of the fortress walls we passed were incredibly thick. In fact, several young couples were lying down on them – "canoodling couples" as Douglas so quaintly put it. Some were in the shade, but others were sizzling in the full sun.

Having arrived at Hastings Garden, which seemed to be in the same state of mid-planting as other gardens we've visited, Alan and I attempted to find some shade for a while. The oleanders were very pretty, although I've since learned that every part of them is poisonous. There were also some other interesting trees with hanging red seed pods that I'm convinced I've never seen before. I wish every plant and tree could be surreptitiously labelled.

From one place, there was a panoramic view of Sliema that sadly highlighted how built-up it is and there is every indication it's becoming worse. Alan said it had been more or less a fishing village 40 years ago. I realise Malta relies heavily on tourism and money is scarce in places, but the building is at the expense of a beautiful, historic island and it simply doesn't feel right.

Having had our fill of the view, we wandered back to the main street of Valletta for Douglas to buy some more water. Just standing outside a shop waiting for him, I noticed a Roman building, proving that history really does pop up everywhere. As it was gone 15:00 and Alan and I were wilting (Douglas can seemingly go for miles in the sun), we decided to catch the ferry back to Sliema. After we'd wandered down the shiny, slippery pavements to the waterside, we were greeted by a hugely long queue. However, the ferry was in and luck was on our side, as we managed to buy tickets and find a seat, albeit separately.

Back at the hotel at 16:30, we enjoyed a drink at the bar (Maltese beer for Douglas and Alan and a shandy for me) that was wonderfully refreshing after a day out on the hot, dusty streets of Valletta. Then we washed and prepared ourselves for our fifth meal at Basilico. Saturday evening business was definitely brisker at our favourite restaurant, especially as time went on. We were still shown the same courtesy, though. When Alan and Douglas decided to have fresh fish from the special menu, the waiter was very helpful when they had to go and choose which particular fish and consequently dithered for Britain.

Perhaps that's a little unkind, as I wimped out and chose baked ravioli again. It was all washed down with the local red wine that we like, even though it should have been white wine with fish. Who cares what Oz Clarke would say! I had lemon cheesecake for dessert, while Alan and Douglas had another type of cake. We then walked along the harbour front again, feeling replete and happy.

Douglas suggested sitting on a bench overlooking the harbour, as Valletta was looking pretty and golden with the setting sun shining on its walls. We sat there for an hour or so, as the sky gradually became tinged with bands of pink and purple and the lights of Valletta came on in succession against a backdrop of ever-deepening blue sky. It was a lovely, emotive sight I'll never forget. It must be much more uplifting to be on Sliema and watch night fall over Valletta rather than the other way around, as Valletta is a thousand times more picturesque. I can't help wondering how local people must feel about the insidious onslaught of so-called progress and what amounts to the near-rape of Sliema?



**The pink and purple Maltese sky**

### Confession of the day

My moon that was missing a chunk from the bottom turns out to be a false moon! This morning I was looking out of our window and wondered why the 'moon' hadn't altered shape or position. Then it dawned on me – the 'moon' is a white globe light high up on the roof of the building opposite and the chunk missing out of the bottom is where it's attached. In my defence, I can remember seeing a horizontal crescent moon in Nicaragua many years ago (or many moons ago) and assuming this was because of its position near the Equator. In my next life I obviously need to be an astronomist...

### **Sunday 14<sup>th</sup> June**

Day 6 – scorchio! I slept the best I have so far this holiday, although Alan said he was inclined to be restless. I'm not surprised I was tired after all the walking we've done, as I've noticed the bottoms of my feet are slightly sore after all the pavement pounding and my calves are just a touch on the achey side.

Breakfast was fine and the bananas were bountiful, which meant we were able to slip out a good one each. We were ready to walk down to where the tour minibus was picking us up at 09:22, the exact time specified on the ticket. As I wandered across the road and took out my camera for what seemed like the thousandth time to photograph some oleanders in the morning sun, I decided my own personal song of the day must be *Turning Japanese!*

It was a lovely morning as ever and we watched a few joggers passing by, plus some people walking down to the Plevna Hotel Beach Club, which we could have frequented if we'd so desired. Not on your life, I found myself thinking, as I would find that a stultifying way to spend a holiday, particularly in historic Malta.

The minibus came along and unfortunately we were the last to be picked up, which meant we that we had the last three seats. Douglas was on his own, while Alan and I were at the back, with Alan squashed up against a big man. However, our tour guide was very good and told us lots of local information. She was saying how the Maltese, being Roman Catholic, aren't happy about cremation. They're having to consider it, however, as they're running out of burial ground because of all the building for tourists taking place.

The excitement suddenly mounted for Alan and me when the guide announced in due course that we were approaching the Blue Grotto at Wied iz Zurrieq. The excitement plunged quite radically, though, as she said that when we turned the next corner, we would see whether the fishermen were running the boats or not. What? After 40 years of waiting for Alan's promise to me finally to be fulfilled, the fishermen might not be running the boats?

There were a few wispy, half-hearted clouds on the horizon, but the sea and the sky were beautifully blue. In fact, even the clouds seemed to disappear – or perhaps I simply ceased to notice them, because when we turned the corner, we discovered that the fishermen were running the boats after all. The minibus stopped to let us out, although not everybody was apparently going to take a ride, as we overheard a woman moaning to her husband that she wasn't going to pay any more money for a boat trip. Come all this way and not pay an extra €7 to see the Blue Grotto? What sort of madness is that, especially when the fishermen were running the boats, for heaven's sake!

After thrusting our €7 each to the man in the kiosk, we were led by the tour guide down a rather slippery road to the water's edge, where the fishermen were waiting. Alan, Douglas and I were the last three to make it on to the first boat, a 9-seater. We had to put on a lifejacket, but the fisherman was obviously a fast worker, as we started off straight away. I thus spent the first few minutes of the long-awaited Blue Grotto trip fiddling around with an unfamiliar lifejacket and enlisting Alan's aid in this very troublesome task.



**A boat on its way to the caves**

The boat was low in the water and I kept thinking how tragic it would be if my camera fell in the sea and all my photos of Malta were lost. I gripped my camera tightly as the fisherman took us in and out of a few caves, pointing out a stalactite here and there, places where the water was a stunning azure blue and purple coral along the edge. Dappled sunlight was reflected by the water onto the roof of some parts of the caves, whereas in other parts it was really dark.



**The blue, blue water**



**Purple coral**

Several boats were behind us in a convoy and before we knew it, we were back at the water's edge, taking off our lifejackets and being ushered out of the boat to make way for the next incoming boat. The worst aspect of it was that it felt rushed (unlike 40 years ago, according to Alan), but it was a magical place and the thrill of having made it at last to the Blue Grotto outweighed anything else. I wouldn't have missed it for a whole lifetime's supply of Italian ice cream!



**We made it after 40 years!**

We walked back to the kiosk to take a photo and then had a quick wander around, looking at the small island of Filfla in the distance. Filfla is one of the islands included in the archipelago of Malta. There seems to be some dissension about the exact number of islands, as an Internet search ranges from three to seven. I managed to find five named islands: Malta, Gozo, Comino, Cominotta and Filfla, with the last two being large, uninhabitable rocks. Filfla was used by the Royal Navy as a gunnery range, but is now a protected bird sanctuary.

After purchasing some postcards, we rejoined the minibus and settled in a better seat this time. The woman who had complained about the extra boat trip fare got on after us and when she saw us sitting in what she must have perceived to be 'her seat' said pointedly, "Oh, we're changing seats, are we?" Rude.

Our next stop was at the fishing village of Marsaxlokk, which is a fantastic name. There was a large market there and we walked through it for a while, but it was incredibly hot, packed, smelly (fish) and an onslaught to the senses. However, it was a cultural experience I was happy to undertake, although only the once.

It was so hot, Alan was sure it was the hottest day so far. We stopped at a caffè with pavement tables for a life-saving peach iced tea, then wandered along eating our breakfast bananas. At the water's edge, we gazed at colourful fishing boats. The Maltese Luzzus traditionally have eyes of Osiris painted on their bow for protection and are based on the ancient Phoenician fishing boats. They were so colourful, painted mainly in bright blue and yellow, so out came our cameras.



**Marsaxlokk**

At our agreed pick-up time of 12:15, we boarded the minibus, but two people were missing (the moany woman and her husband). The tour guide waited and waited. When she rang the office after she'd looked in the nearby caffè and all around the area for the missing pair, she was told to wait for 15 minutes and then leave. She was worried and waited for 20 minutes, but they never showed.

At this point I must confess to some confusion about Luzzus and the other type of traditional Maltese boats, named Dghajsas. My confusion is not how to pronounce Dghajsa, but how a Dghajsa differs from a Luzzu. This difference is obviously nothing to do with Douglas's statement that he wouldn't get on a Luzzu, because they take you for a ride and then Luzzu (lose you). Hmm.

During the drive back to our hotels, I noticed a temperature sign saying 29° Centigrade, but it felt so much hotter. We were the first people to be delivered to our hotel – Alan and Douglas gave a gratuity to the driver and guide, telling the guide they thought she'd done all she could to find the missing pair.

We had a quick freshen-up, followed by a slow discussion in our room about what to do next. The verdict in the end was to stay in Sliema and walk in the direction we hadn't yet taken, apart from a small way on our first evening.

It really did seem hot, I agreed with Alan that it was definitely the hottest day so far. We strolled along, looking at many local people out in the sun on a Sunday afternoon, lying on towels in swimwear (a couple topless) on the limestone rock shelf next to the sea. Some were swimming and diving off the rocks.

On the pavement where we were, we came across a caffè that sold Italian ice cream, so we naturally stopped and bought one. Three to be precise, cheaper than in Valletta, but just as good. It was also an appreciated courtesy that we could eat it sitting in the shade at one of the tables belonging to the caffè.

We ambled on in the heat, with Alan and me trying to keep in the meagre shade of the small trees along the edge of the pavement, until we came to a garden overlooking the water. Here Alan and I sat for quite a while in the shade, while the intrepid Douglas sat in the sun. It was very restful sitting and watching the world go by, interspersed with desultory conversation.

At around 15:00, we strolled back past several interesting local fish-eating places, exactly the sort we haven't been able to find at the end of Sliema we've been frequenting. This gave rise to talk of "next time", but meanwhile, I was finally able to take a photo of the evocative White Shadows sculpture I'd noticed on the first day when we were being driven to our hotel. I'm not sure where the white comes from, as the shadows were looking decidedly blue:



**The White Shadows sculpture, looking blue**

Back at the hotel, it was time for a shower and my turn first. As the water was cascading down in refreshing relief, I noticed a mark on the side of the bath and thought how the maid wasn't exactly the keenest on the planet. When it was Alan's turn for the shower, I heard a commotion, which turned out to be him trying to capture the 'mark' on the side of the bath, which was actually a cockroach. Thankfully he succeeded and despatched it out of the window.

We met Douglas in the bar for a long, cool drink. It was then time to saunter to Basilico for the last time, as the following day we were anticipating being fed on our day trip to Gozo. Basilico is just right on all counts, the only trouble for me being the slight embarrassment of turning up there every evening, which Alan and Douglas can't understand. Come to think of it, *I* can't understand...

This time Alan and I chose rucola (rocket) pizza from the special menu, while Douglas finally tried the baked ravioli and enjoyed it as much as Alan and I had. We chose white wine to accompany the meal and to round off the whole Basilico experience, each chose our favourite dessert – lemon cheesecake for Douglas and three scoops of sorbet-like ice cream for Alan and me (this time pistachio, coffee and chocolate). It was then time to say goodbye, with the kind and friendly waitress wishing us a safe journey home.

Outside at around 20:00, it was very busy as usual, with pleasant warm air and interesting aromas from the busy caffès, bars and restaurants. We crossed the road to the harbour front and once again sat and watched the light changing over Valletta, until it was almost dark. A few people were fishing from the wall of the harbour and in the distance, fireworks were exploding in the sky. The mood of the evening was expansive and all-encompassing and we later walked back to the hotel with the ambivalence of tourists who love where they're visiting, but know they'll soon have to leave.

### **Monday 15<sup>th</sup> June**

Day 7 – scorchio! I didn't sleep half as well as the previous night, but wasn't perturbed, because a day trip to Gozo on the final day of our holiday (with an inclusive tour of some temples) beckoned with more than a little excitement.

As it was an 08:05 start, we stepped gaily down the wobbly-banistered staircase for breakfast just after the dining room opened at 07:00. Sadly, there were no bananas, but I noticed that Vivaldi was playing in the background rather than the inane muzak, which was quite uplifting. I didn't even mind when Douglas presented me with a hot chocolate after very kindly going to get me a cappuccino from the machine. One apparently wasn't wearing one's glasses...

The coach was slightly late picking us up at the bottom of the road, but we weren't the last ones on this time. The tour guide was the same lady who'd guided us yesterday. She had a spot of bother when we called at other hotels along the route and had to go looking for some people. Who'd be a tour guide?

When everyone was accounted for, we set off to the harbour where we would be catching the Gozo ferry. The guide explained that the Maltese bus driver wasn't allowed to drive us on Gozo, as jobs on Gozo are reserved for its inhabitants (called either Gozotans or Gozitans, another Maltese confusion of mine.) She also told us that 62,000 language students stay with Maltese families in the summer, while they study English at the Malta language school.

We soon arrived at the ferry terminal and were handed our tickets when we got off the coach. To my surprise, it was a big car ferry, although the crossing would only take about 20 minutes. I did have the feeling that we were being herded along and onto the ferry like so many cattle, but I suppose it was necessary, as there were hundreds of people, not to mention vehicles.

Once on the ferry, the queue for the 'Ladies' was rather long, as it so often is. By the time I emerged, it was crowded up on the sun deck, so we had to stand. This was no hardship, though, because we had a good view standing at the rail and were quite happy taking photos as we passed the smaller island of Comino and gradually approached Gozo, with a population of 31,000. Gozo means 'joy' in Castilian. The island of joy remained hazy in the heat until we were close.



**A ferry at Mgarr harbour, Gozo**

It was soon time to join the mass exodus from the sun deck and other ferry parts and be herded on to the dry land of Mgarr harbour. The ferry terminal was incongruously large, but we managed to find our tour guide in the mêlée.

This was despite me finding myself at one stage caught in the middle of a large crowd and having to crane my neck to keep sight of Alan and Douglas, who were being carried along by the crowd in front of me, while I was being forced behind by other people. Sometimes it's horrible being small, but thankfully Alan resolutely stood and waited for me when he realised my predicament and we made our way to the coach, complete with its Gozotan/Gozitan coach driver.

Our first stop was at the Ta-Pinu National Shrine, which is deemed a very special church on Gozo, as a local girl had once witnessed something miraculous there – I'm not sure exactly what, as the tour guide's accent was sometimes difficult to understand, but apparently the Pope had recognised the miracle.

Alan and I went inside, while Douglas stayed outside. As ever, all uncovered shoulders and too short shorts or skirts had to be addressed by borrowing clothes to cover the offending parts. Alan took some photos, but it was a short stay and we were soon on our way to the next stop along the coast.

On arrival at Dwejra, we were given the opportunity to take a short ride on a fisherman's boat and see the Azure Window for €3.50. The Azure Window is clearly Gozo's answer to the Blue Grotto and cheap at exactly half the price. Douglas said he wouldn't bother, but Alan and I joined the happy throng on its way to the water, where fishermen were ready and waiting to take passengers.

It was indeed very much like the Blue Grotto, with lifejackets and all, as we were taken through caves, some with stalactites, to see some very blue water and pretty purple coral at the waterline. The view through the Azure Window was slightly misty and therefore somewhat less than azure, but it was still a beautiful blue, as was the water of the Mediterranean. Just before we left the boat, Alan and I dipped our hands into the water, which was pleasantly cool. I had felt a burning need to touch the Mediterranean (to cool my burning need?) and was happy that it had been yet another magical experience.



**The Azure Window from the sea**



**The Azure Window from the land**



**Alan ... and the Mediterranean looking green**

Douglas was waiting for us as soon as we returned and greeted us excitedly with the news he'd discovered some salt-pans in various stages of salinity. It sounded intriguing and we had a few minutes left, so we walked over quickly to the salt-pans Douglas was indicating. The sun was beating down fiercely and I had the beginnings of a pounding headache, but I really wanted to see those salt-pans.

Douglas led us across solid rock that was mainly safe to walk on, but there were depressions in which salt water was indeed in various stages of drying out. Some German girls were sitting on a ledge above us and called out for us to move so they could take a photo of the cave in the background. Like idiots, we moved and it was either this, or Douglas calling out to Alan to be careful as he hopped from rock to rock over the salt-pans, that caused him to put a foot straight into a salt-pan, breaking the surface of the drying salt to the water beneath. It was a good job he was wearing cropped trousers and washable sandals...



**Salt drying out in the hot sun**

We hot-footed it (or in Alan's case wet-footed it) back to the coach and carried on to Victoria, the capital of Gozo. Here we could either walk around the shops, or take an upward direction to Fort Chambray, built in 1749 and offering a bird's eye view of the surrounding countryside. We chose the climb and the view! It was extremely hot (Alan was sure it was the hottest day so far) and very dusty, but it certainly gave a good view of the surrounding countryside. As is fairly common, there were lots of prickly pears growing all around.



**The view from Fort Chambray**

On rejoining the coach, we were told it wasn't very far to our lunch stop, which was good news as it was 13:15 and we'd been expending lots of energy after an early breakfast. We stopped outside an ordinary but comfortable looking eating place and were shown up the stairs to sit down at a few communal long tables.

I have to say I didn't enjoy it in the slightest, as there was a terrific hubbub and I found it almost impossible to hear what anybody was saying because of my recently compromised hearing. I was sitting in between Alan and Douglas, who were mostly engaged in conversation with people they found themselves beside. I felt trapped and isolated – it was my social nightmare and I hated it.

However, the food was good. We were offered vegetable soup or pasta to start with. Douglas chose pasta, not realising it was just the starter – oops! Alan and I chose the soup, followed by a main dish of fresh, local fish with salad and small fried potatoes. Douglas chose omelette – the third choice had been veal. There was red or white wine to choose from on the tables and dessert was ice cream.

Earlier in the day, the tour guide had announced that one of our passengers was called Joe, he was travelling alone and today was his 95<sup>th</sup> birthday. He was sitting next to Douglas in the coach for quite a while and they were chatting about when Joe had been posted to Plymouth. Just before we left the eating place, the tour guide presented Joe with a birthday cake and people sang happy birthday to him. The tour guide gave him a hug, she seemed to be a really kind, caring lady. Personally, I could hardly take in the fact that he was 95 and travelling by himself, what an extraordinary gentleman!

Incidentally, earlier on the guide had mentioned to us three that the moany woman on yesterday's trip had since rung the office to complain bitterly about having to pay extra money for the boat ride to the Blue Grotto and had called her a thief. The guide told us she couldn't help wondering if the woman and her husband had got off the minibus at Marsaxlokk and purposely caught a local bus back, purely to make things difficult. Sadly I wouldn't be at all surprised and unfortunately the tour guide still seemed upset by it.

We all got back on the coach and travelled a short distance to the next stop, a tiny village that basically had a couple of craft shops, an old communal well and washing place and not a great deal else. It was still incredibly hot and I could feel sweat running down my back. Alan, Douglas and I looked around the shops and made some small purchases, then simply waited to get back on the coach.

We had a major disappointment when we did, as we'd been fully expecting to visit the esteemed Ggantija temples on Gozo, but to our astonishment the guide was telling us the procedure for the ferry trip back to Malta. I think we must have just sat there feeling very confused and bemused – and also very hot and sweaty as we were driven to Mgarr harbour and the ferry terminal.

We were sitting in the departure lounge discussing our disappointment, when the couple behind us made themselves known. They said they'd overheard us talking and they'd been expecting to visit the temples too. One of them went to tell the tour guide, who immediately came over to us and told us that the temples had been dropped from the itinerary as of today. When she realised our holiday rep/s hadn't mentioned this, she became quite irate and rang her office. She spoke in rapid Maltese and appeared to be telling them exactly what she thought, complete with frustrated hand gestures.

When she'd finished the call, she told us the office had forgotten to tell the reps and we'd have to contact our individual reps for a refund for the temples' entrance fee. We had to tell her we were leaving early tomorrow morning. She checked our ticket to make sure, went away for a short while and then returned with our refund from her own pocket (keeping our ticket as proof, so she could claim it back from the office). She was really apologetic and clearly felt bad on our behalf, saying she knew the refund didn't make up for not seeing the temples. She was right, but there was no point in letting it spoil the day.

We managed to find a seat on the ferry's sun deck this time as we left Gozo. However, we spent most of the time standing up and watching the sunlight creating pretty, starry sparkles dancing on the surface of the sea. It was chaotic upon arrival in Malta, but we found our coach and began the drive back to our hotels. The guide sounded tired and frankly I'm not in the least surprised. I was nearly nodding off myself, because I hadn't slept well the night before.

The coach dropped us off at the bottom of our road and the tour guide waved goodbye – I think the poor lady was relieved we'd been nice to her! After a quick tidy up, we walked to the harbour front for a final ice cream – this was Alan's idea and Douglas's treat. We sat on a seat overlooking the boats with the sun still very hot at 18:30. Then we walked up to Tigné Point, looking over at Valletta from quite a close distance. Once again, I found it truly inspiring the way the setting sun gives the whole of Valletta such a golden glow:



**Farewell to golden Valletta**

Reluctantly, we three weary travellers then walked back to the hotel for a last drink in the bar, as Douglas would never have let us get away without doing so. Then it was up the wobbly-banistered staircase for the final time, followed by the inescapable mundane reality of packing and finalising everything. In view of our forthcoming early start, it was lights out at 21:00 and good night Malta!

### **Tuesday 16<sup>th</sup> June**

Day 8 – good morning Malta at 03:00 on travelling home day. Last night we'd been given a tray of 'breakfast' for this morning, consisting of a roll, cheese spread, jam and a croissant. I hadn't slept at all well, but was reasonably hungry, even though it felt odd sitting up in bed and eating, in what felt like the middle of the night. Everything went smoothly and we were waiting in the hotel foyer at 04:00, as arranged. Our transport was late, but at least it arrived and we joined other travellers on their journey through a dark Malta to Luqa Airport.

That's it, really. The flight was on time and apart from a hideous bump, which the pilot later explained was us being caught in the turbulence of the trail of another aircraft, it was fine. That is, it was fine if you don't have a phobia about flying, or rather dropping out of the sky like a stone trapped inside a metal coffin. In my next life, I hope the art of personal translocation will be possible!

However, back in this life and back home once again, I find I'm completely astonished by Malta – by its history, vibrancy, richness, language, contrast, diversity – astonished by so much. I would love to return, to visit the temples and other historic sites, this time with some background knowledge.

I found the overt show of Catholicism overwhelming at times, rather too gilded, ornate and 'in your face', but it's all part of who the Maltese people are and our brief experience of them was generally a very happy one indeed. In a week, it was only possible to touch the surface of Malta and I can say with great honesty and hope that one day I would very much love to go deeper.

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