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## Malta Uncovered

Departures up to October 2018 and May to October 2019

You will be amazed at the Malta so few people have yet discovered. There are wonderful seascapes and a coastline eroded over the centuries into sheer drops, huge caverns and contorted pillars of rock blending perfectly with the deep blue sea. See the imposing 16th-century fortifications of Valletta, the hauntingly atmospheric old capital of Mdina, early Christian catacombs, richly decorated cathedrals and the oldest temples on earth. Blend all this with beautiful old towns, wonderful scenery and genuinely friendly local people, and you have a superb destination for a tour.

### Price includes:

- ❖ Guided tour of historic Valletta, city of the Knights of Malta and a baroque masterpiece, including a visit to the Malta Experience
- ❖ Tour of the unspoilt island of Gozo
- ❖ Discover Mdina, the atmospheric former capital city during ancient times
- ❖ Guided tour of Rabat plus a visit to St Paul's Catacombs, burial place of early Christians
- ❖ Visit the picturesque fishing port of Marsaxlokk
- ❖ Visit to the temples of Ggantija and Hagar Qim, claimed to be amongst the world's oldest free-standing structures, pre-dating pyramids, accompanied by a local guide
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# A Diver's Paradise

**Tempted to try diving? Then head for the tiny Mediterranean island of Gozo. Jo Caird shares her love of this underwater wonderland...**

I'd seen it in photos, but nothing could have prepared me for the astonishing experience of descending into the crystal-clear water of the Blue Hole – the most famous dive site in Gozo. Above me, a ring of limestone, carved out by thousands of years of wind and waves; below me, an underwater archway flooded with bright blue light.

This tiny Mediterranean island – which lies just a 25-minute ferry journey from its big sister, Malta – is known as Europe's best destination for divers. Less than a minute into the first dive of the trip, I understand why.

## Learning to dive

If you've always fancied having a go, Gozo is the perfect place to learn. I learned to dive there 10 years ago, completing my PADI Open Water qualification in Xlendi, one of several sheltered, sandy bays that are ideal for practising the skills you need as a scuba diver.

In a lot of destinations, these skills sessions take place in a swimming pool, whereas here

you have the chance to see flounders, octopuses and even cuttlefish as you get learning!

There's a theory element to the qualification, too, which you can complete in a classroom alongside the practical training while you're on holiday. The whole course takes four days. Or, if you're happier using a computer, you can do the theory online before you set off on holiday. It takes 12-15 hours to complete, and then you get straight into the water for the skills part when you arrive.

## Special sites

On this trip, I'm staying in the island's biggest resort town, Marsalforn – M'forn for short – setting out every day with a guide from the Atlantis Diving Centre to explore some of Gozo's dozens of dive sites.

Most take no more than 20 minutes to drive to, making it super-convenient. Even if you do two dives per day, you've still got time for a relaxed lunch and a spot of sightseeing in the afternoon.

The area I go back to again and again is Dwejra, home not just to the Blue Hole, but also



Snorkelling at the Blue Hole



Fishing boats in Gozo harbour



The Inland Sea, Dwejra



The impenetrable Citadella



Village of Xlendi

to a shallow reef called Coral Gardens; to the Inland Sea, a landlocked lagoon connecting the Mediterranean via a spectacular 100-metre cliff tunnel; and to the impressive remains of what was once the Azure Window – a rocky archway whose collapse in March 2017 was something of a national tragedy.

All three interlinking sites are accessible to beginners, but have lots to see at greater depths too, if you're more experienced. Sightseeing trips are also available with traditional Gozitan fishing boats heading out from the Inland Sea for tours of the imposing cliffs and sea caves.

Gozo's coastline has been carved by the sea, leaving an underwater landscape that's a

not obligatory. But, if you do fancy it, there are several on the island with entrances so wide you could park a bus in them!

It's the geology that's the star here, but there's varied marine life, too. As I go through the channel from the Inland Sea, I see bright-yellow anemones, scorpion fish lying camouflaged among the purple algae at the Coral Garden and, shining a torch into cracks in the cave at the Blue Hole, moray eels. And, everywhere we go, there are cute, colourful sea slugs no bigger than my fingernail.

### Sightseeing

En route to and from the dive sites, I'm captivated by the picturesque villages that dot the Gozitan countryside, with their limestone houses and

narrow, winding streets.

Overlooking it all is the Citadella, an impenetrable fortress in the centre of the island, perched atop Gozo's main town, Victoria. Built mainly in the early 17th century, when the island was ruled by the Knights of St John, the Citadella has its roots in the Bronze Age. Until 1637, Gozo's entire population would spend the night here to stay safe from Turkish raiders.

Just a couple of families live within the walls now, including Miriam, who sells me some traditional Gozitan knitwear.

There's history to be found at the seaside, too, with some of the rock-cut salt pans just west of Xwejni Bay dating back to Roman times. These days, Gozitan families work together to scrape salt from the pans using methods unchanged for centuries. I walk across the harvested salt pans on my way to dive at Reqqa Point.

I pack in a whole day of sightseeing on the final day of my trip. Doctors advise that you leave 24 hours between diving and flying to minimise your risk of decompression

sickness, so I dash from the gold-encrusted St George's Basilica to the idyllic sandy beach at Ramla Bay via the ruined Ggantija Temples – a UNESCO World Heritage Site that predates Stonehenge.

Just as the sun is going down, I catch the ferry back to Malta for my flight home. With the limestone churches on the hill silhouetted against the sunset and the boats bobbing in the harbour, it's a beautiful scene. But then my eyes are drawn to the water itself, glowing a glorious shade of pink in the last of the afternoon's rays, and I can't help but wonder what else there might be to see far beneath the waves at this gorgeous spot.

I'll be back...

### Getting there

Airlines including easyjet, Ryanair and Air Malta offer return flights from multiple UK airports to Malta from £40. Transfers to Gozo via taxis and the ferry cost around £100 return, plus return ferry tickets (around £4 per person).