

The Weekend Travel

Sun, sea, sheep's cheese



Peter Hargreaves visits an island jurisdiction, Malta, and then spends nine days exploring its smaller island, Gozo

FRUSTRATED by lockdown, I jumped at the chance of joining a group visit to Malta, which is served by frequent direct flights from Heathrow and Gatwick.

The jurisdiction

The population of Malta is the most vaccinated in the EU and, as an island state, it has strong Covid-19 controls.

Malta is also the smallest member of the EU, both in physical size and in population. The archipelago comprises three islands, Malta itself (246km² – double the size of Jersey), Gozo, which is 67km², so just bigger than Guernsey, and Comino, which is located between Malta and Gozo, and which is 3km².

Malta is 80km south of Sicily and 280km east of Tunisia, and its strategic location in the central Mediterranean means that – much like the Channel Islands – it has been heavily fortified and fought over.

In the 16th Century, the population of Gozo was enslaved by Barbary pirates, while Malta itself was successfully defended in the Siege of Malta by the Knights of St John, formerly a crusading religious order, when besieged by the Ottoman Turks.



■ Peter climbed limestone rock walls under expert tuition

Malta was in British possession from 1800 to 1964. It was a naval base and, during the Second World War, it became one of the most bombed places in the world. Its continued possession during the war by the British ensured the retention of British credibility, lost east of Suez by the surrender in 1942 of Singapore to the Japanese. After the war, and before she became Queen, Princess Elizabeth lived in Malta while the Duke of Edinburgh was stationed there with the Royal Navy.

Malta became independent in 1964 and, in 2004, it joined the EU. There are a number of mementos of British colonial rule, from three-pin electrical plugs and milestones commemorating Queen Victoria to red telephone boxes and driving on the left. There also used to be a significant group of British retirees in the island. As a boy in the 1960s, I recall an ex-army relative who lived there. Despite this, you don't gain the impression Maltese links with Britain are particularly strong.

English is spoken by 80% of the

population. The national language, Maltese, is a more interesting survivor. It derives from medieval Sicilian Arabic, which died out in Sicily itself, but survives with layers of Italian and Spanish in Malta.

Flying into Malta, you are struck by just how built up it is. The population of Malta is approximately 479,000, while Gozo has a population of 34,000, and Comino is effectively unpopulated. The population density of the main island is over twice that of Jersey, whereas the population density on Gozo is half that of Jersey. This means Malta ranks as the world's 9th most densely populated jurisdiction.

Not only that but its population has been growing by over 4% per annum. This was out of step with other members of the EU, which recently have experienced low or negative growth in numbers, closer to population growth in Jersey of just under 1% per year. Malta enjoyed economic expansion after joining the EU, attracting foreign workers

who contributed to population growth, which must have changed the island. On accession to the EU, only 3% of the population were born overseas, yet by 2020 this had risen to 23%.

Gozo

While I flew into Malta, I spent the entirety of my nine-day stay in Gozo, the smaller, less-developed island. Before making the trip I had enquired about cycling on the main island, but I was told there was too much traffic and that it was not somewhere for cyclists. As such, I had decided to instead stay in Gozo, which is limestone with perpendicular cliffs. The countryside comprises steep, narrow valleys, leading to the sea and stone terracing, which is presumably very old indeed and is currently being rebuilt with EU money.

The principal town, Victoria, lies at the centre of Gozo and, from here, you can take buses all around the island. The town was formerly known as Rabat. It was renamed to mark Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee in 1887.

It is built around the fortified Citadel, which would have been densely built up. The Citadel now contains a baroque cathedral and little else. Below it there are handsome town houses with oriel windows. Remarkably, although it has a population of roughly 7,000, Victoria has two competing opera houses.

There are a number of other attractive hilltop towns and villages each with a distinctly Moorish feel, including San Lawrenz, Nadur and Qala (the 'q' is apparently silent). They are centred on Catholic churches, several of which are out-of-scale with the surrounding settlement.

At the restaurants you can eat Gozo specialities, which include sheep's cheese, potatoes, seafood and rabbit, and there are also local wines to enjoy.

We visited the large Neolithic temple complex at Ggantija, one of the oldest in the world, and wondered if its size and features mirror the sea caves as some religious architecture reflects natural places.

Our visit was in early November. There were heavy rains in both October and November, which followed an exceptionally hot and dry summer even by Mediterranean standards – presumably another sign of global



■ Flood waters on the main street in Xlendi

and red telephone boxes



■ A scenic view of the interior of Gozo

warming. With the rains, there was new growth in both flowers and grass. I was told Gozo appeared more verdant than usual, and that it would typically have been greyer, drier and stonier, looking generally more Arabic.

We stayed on the coast at Xlendi at the foot of a newly improved road running downhill from Victoria. More than once, the road into Xlendi flooded, which was presumably a result of heavy run-off on the newly tarmacked surface.

Downsides

There are a couple of sites which are promoted on the tourist literature, the Blue Lagoon on Comino and the Inland Sea, a beach on Gozo's north coast, which is accessible from the sea by a passage running through the surrounding cliffs. We visited them by sea kayak.

Even in November, however, they were

over-visited and spoilt by tacky stalls. This must have been worse in summer. In both locations, space is restricted, so the attractive ambience is easily lost.

There are other indications of poor planning controls. Apparently it is standard practice to submit unobjectionable plans and, once these are approved, resubmit larger and more intrusive plans, but only those objecting to the original plans can object to the later plans. This explains how Xlendi, with its attractive seaside restaurants, is increasingly built out with relatively high-rise hotels and apartments.

The lack of effective planning controls mirrors Malta's reputation for bribery and its low assessment under money-laundering standards. That this is a continuing feature was reflected in the murder in 2017 of the investigative journalist Daphne Caruana Galizia, which was followed (eventually) both by prosecution of individuals close to the

government and government attempts to weaken judicial pursuit of those responsible. The local press continues to report government bribery, so, if you spend time in Malta, this is something which is hard to ignore.

While paddling, we saw numerous instances of outlawed fishing techniques which are apparently ignored by the island authorities. Another unwelcome feature is the widespread shooting of birds of passage. Given its location between Africa and Europe, migratory birds overfly Malta and are shot, apparently for pleasure. We saw birds which were trapped and kept in cages to attract other birds, which are then killed. Paddling along the cliffs you hear rifles fired repeatedly.

When climbing on the gorge leading down to Gozo's south coast, we encountered a hunter carrying a shotgun, despite this being a protected area, and we found numerous spent cartridges

while walking down.

I was told bird shooting has become more open following lockdown, with shooters walking over the countryside while others were remaining indoors. These changes mirror those in the US where gun ownership and gun carrying both increased following lockdown.

Malta was prosecuted before the European Court of Justice for the hunting and trapping of overflying birds. It was argued by the Maltese government that it was a traditional cultural activity. The ECJ remains dissatisfied with the response to its rulings.

Given all of the above, would I return to Malta and Gozo?

They are both historically complex, with some beautiful coasts and, for those interested in island states, an intriguing study area.

I do, however, have reservations about aspects of Maltese life and so I don't know whether I will return.



■ Ggantija, earth mother figurine



■ Kayaking along the cliffs into spectacular caves and under natural arches