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The striking Azure Window

## The Quieter Sister

15th January 2016

**Olivia Greenway finds out more about the small island of Gozo... a sunny European destination that revels in its quiet and peaceful reputation**

The trip on the ferry from Malta to Gozo only takes half an hour, but the little island in my sights couldn't be more different from its bigger, brasher sister. Nibbled at the edges by day-trippers in the summer, Gozo is largely untouched further inland. A few tourists might make it to the capital, Victoria, and to a handful of well-known sights, but mainly it's unaffected by the throngs – and by early evening, the visitors have gone and one has this quiet little rural backwater almost to oneself.

Gozo enjoys a long summer and early spring, making it a perfect destination for escapees from the British winter. Flight time is only three hours too, with Air Malta flying direct from London Gatwick daily. But don't expect exciting retail therapy or much nightlife – a few market stalls selling fresh produce and a couple of antique and curio shops and that's your lot. If you are happy with just a flamenco guitarist to entertain you at dinner, you'll be very satisfied.

My base is the five-star San Lawrenz hotel in the northwest, named after the hamlet of the same name. With three pools and a large terrace, it is here that I enjoy the local drink, Kinnie – a

bittersweet blend of oranges and aromatic herbs – on the balmy evening of my arrival. As I sit gazing at the stars in the unpolluted sky, the only sound is from the cicadas, the low hum of voices and the occasional clatter of cutlery on plates.

Ready to explore the next morning, I walk down to the Azure Window. It provides a good photo opportunity, although there is little else to recommend this tourist hot spot, reproduced on every holiday brochure about Gozo. Retracing my steps, I begin a two-hour circular walk, recommended by the hotel concierge, starting in the hamlet of Gharb, where the island's first printing press is displayed. I press on to San Dimitri chapel – only open on feast days – which is set rather alone in fields, but well tended. This 15th century building was rebuilt in the 18th century. Legend has it that Corsairs attacked and took away the only son of a young widow. Distraught, she rushed to the chapel to pray and her son was miraculously returned the next morning, after the saint rode out of the altarpiece to bring him home. The woman lit a lamp to show her gratitude every day for the rest of her life and, even today, sailors claim at night to be able to see a lamp burning in the chapel from the sea.

I walk along the coast on to the Pinu Point lookout and then through the Ghasri Valley with its narrow creek, past plantations of bananas and pomegranates, cactus and olive trees, to the Jordan Lighthouse, built by the British in 1851 and previously fuelled by oil lamps. It's a steep ascent, but worth it for the far reaching views and the solitude. Apart from one farmer in the distance, I don't see a soul.

The next day I take advantage of the hotel's courtesy bus to Victoria. As well as being the capital, this is the main town and more or less in the centre of the island. A severe earthquake in 1693 destroyed many buildings, not just here but as far away as Sicily. St George's church was rebuilt and, with its cupola based on the one in St Peter's, Rome, it's an opulent and magnificent building, a stark contrast to the relative simplicity that surrounds it. Gozo is a devoutly religious island and on Sundays alone there are 13 masses held at this one church. A colourful painted wooden statue of the saint is carried through the streets on feast days.

Nearby is the much older hilltop Citadel building, dating from 1500BC, with views of the surrounding area. The cobbled square just below the church has a few shady corners with a market in progress on most days during the season, selling fresh fish and local cheese. Local produce includes pomegranate liqueur, Gozo capers and prickly pear preserve. Take the opportunity, too, to enjoy an ice-cold beer – Cisk is the local one. Nearby are narrow backstreets with antique and curio shops, ideal for wandering through.

Back at the hotel, I've been promised a dive – and there can be few better places to do this than Gozo, with its famous calm turquoise waters, varied underwater landscape, and wide variety of fish, attracted for the same reason. I'm not an experienced diver, and rough seas elsewhere last year unnerved me rather, but I needn't have worried. The Blue Waters Dive School trainer is excellent and puts me at my ease, tailoring my dive to suit my capabilities. I manage to get down to about nine metres, with Doris from the school accompanying me. I'm able to observe very clearly and during my 45-minute dive see an octopus swimming and looking for food, along with some bright blue damselfish, a shoal of silver-grey horse mackerel and a myriad of other sea creatures I sadly can't describe well enough to identify when I resurface. There's a repeat performance in the afternoon. Gozo is regularly voted as one of the best diving spots in the world and you can usually find a dive spot on the island, regardless of the weather, as the north and south coast vary so much.

With inspiration from the sea, my thoughts turn to food. Fish is a fixture on all the restaurant menus, and for good reason. Daily catches of a huge variety are served in harbour side cafes and restaurants dotted along the coasts. In fact at our first evening spot, at Pontevecchio restaurant in Mgar Harbour, a tray of freshly caught fish – amberjack, red bream and rockfish – is presented to us to choose from. Wrapped in foil and with a squeeze of lemon and fresh herbs, the fish is simply cooked over charcoal, and much the better for the unfussy treatment. Simply served with boiled potatoes fresh from the fields, it is fit for a king. Rabbit is also popular here, as is marrow stuffed with pork. And for vegetarians, there's the delicious pastizzi, a type of pastry filled with ricotta and peas.

Gozo also has surprisingly good wine, especially red, and offers several places to visit for wine tours, with a tasting at the end; two wines from the Ta Mena estate are so delicious that I pack a couple in my suitcase to take home.

The hotel has good facilities for swimming and sunbathing but on days when only the sea will do, set off for Ramla Bay on the north coast, a twenty minute drive away and one of the Mediterranean's finest beaches. The horseshoe shaped bay has headlands at both ends and pristine, reddish golden sand in-between. Unless it's high season, it won't be crowded and even then, you'll find a space. Simple cafes at either end serve ice-cold beer.

I've saved the best until last, as possibly the most interesting visit for me is the one to the Ggantija Temples near Xaghra. Built around 3,500 BC, and therefore over 7,000 years old, they're something of a mystery as the building material is definitely not local. These vast stone structures were moved to the island and hewn by hand in the days before the Iron Age and the invention of the wheel.

Thought to be the site of human sacrifice, prior to Christianity arriving on the island, these imposing buildings pose more questions than they answer.

Other questions, though, are much easier. Would I visit Gozo again? With a pleasantly warm climate most of the year; good, simple food and fine wine; and enough exploring and diving opportunities to occupy a few days, the answer is obviously yes: for me, it's an ideal winter or spring break destination.

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