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Malta

Colorful Boats Tell the History of an Island Civilization

Taking the strong arm offered to me, I was the last to board the small boat. I plopped down at the rear of the craft, next to the man who helped me on. During the next half-hour, he navigated my journey into a remarkable world of a hundred shades of blue and green.

A boatman in Malta's Blue Grotto, Carmel D'Amato has the sea in his veins—his family has been plying these waters for over 80 years. He is a third-generation captain of one of 77 boats that bring visitors into the gaping caverns that rise out of the aquamarine waters here. The vessel Carmel and his fellow boatmen use is a frigatina, one of several kinds of traditional Maltese boats.

Carmel said that only six of these boats are still wooden. The narrow bay they call home is enclosed with sheer cliff face, and storms coming in from the south are frequent—four years ago, two-story waves created by gales off the coast of Africa washed away 30 boats. As a result, the boats are taken out of the water each evening and stored in a boathouse. About ten years ago, the owners began converting to fiberglass, which makes lighter work of this daily lifting.

I felt my stomach churn as we motored from the narrow harbor, no more than a slit in a steep rock wall, to the vast open sea. Within moments, we tucked back into a cozy inlet and my anxiety began to turn into anticipation. Then, as my curiosity mounted, we veered right and through the mouth of the first in a series of caves. After an instant of darkness, I was soon transfigured by what looked like a waterborne aurora borealis.

The chamber seemed to throb with a luminous sapphire light, the translucent water serving as a prism, refracting the rays of sun seeping in from outside. As we rocked to the rhythm of the waves, Carmel showed us a stretch of glowing orange coral at the watermark on the cave's wall. Moments



The neighborhoods of Malta's "Three Cities" are densely-packed and teeming with life. Photos © Meg Pier.



Carmel D'Amato is third-generation Blue Grotto boatman who built his vessel, a frigatina, with his brother. He navigates visitors through several caves during a half-hour ride.



later he pointed out another patch, this one purple, just above lapping teal waves.

I asked Carmel if he had ever been frightened by steering against the tide inside the caves, a question he laughed off. When I persisted, he acknowledged a time in his early days when a storm came up unexpectedly, the winds changed, and, yes, he had been a little scared, but the squall had passed quickly.

After weaving in and out of several caves, each a dappled canvas of light and dark hues, he turned a corner and a massive natural stone arch loomed before us, carved in the cliff face by centuries of wind and water. On our return, we saw another formation that has probably existed for eons, a line of fisherman on a ledge in the rocks above, their rods forming a row of right angles in the sky.

A rent of two falcons a year

To the score of ringing church bells on a Sunday morning, I walked through a small leafy park to a marble 16th century "gardiola" jutting out from a promontory overlooking the water. The watchtower was adorned with sculpted ears and eyes signaling a watchful presence high above Valletta's historic Grand Harbor. The handiwork of the Knights of St. John stretched along the graceful curves of the waterline--graduated tiers of golden stone rising from the shore, protectively encircling a swath of inland ochre-colored dwellings.

The Knights of St. John were a long-time presence on Malta, one that continues to loom large today—they make regular appearances in every day conversation with locals. A religious order formed during the times of the Crusades in the 11th century, the Knights were given Malta as a home in 1530 by Holy Roman Emperor Charles V, for the rent of two falcons a year.

Early in their 265-year reign of the island, the Knights established the adjoining "Three Cities" of Senglea, Cospicua and Vittoriosa along the southern coast of Grand Harbor. After a horrific 1565 battle with invading Turks that involved decapitated heads being fired as cannon balls, the Knights built the highly fortified Valletta across the Grand Harbor, on the Sciberras Peninsula. At 1,800 feet by 3,000 feet, Valletta is Europe's tiniest capital.

From the park, I headed down to the waterfront, descending one flight after another of steep steps carved into the rocky headland, snaking my way through the tightly-packed neighborhood. Potted asparagus ferns and pink sheets strung on a clothesline bejeweled the sun-bleached, peeling facades of limestone buildings. Looking up, I spied a toddler on a balcony above, hugging a shaggy long-haired cat as big as her and, across the way, a brooding, muscular man, smoking a cigarette. Passing an open door, a spicy scent wafted by, and I heard what sounded like a well-practiced argument between the elderly couple inside.

Emerging from this compact universe to the harbor, I was drawn toward a small flotilla of graceful and brightly-painted boats bobbing in the clear azure water. From among them, boatman Carmen Farrugia called a welcome and I boarded his dghajsa (pronounced dye-sa) to enjoy the view from the water. As we glided about the harbor, he taught me about the type of craft he skippered, a passenger boat that sits low in the water, akin to a gondola.

The dghajsa passenger boat is double-ended, with a high fore stem, called a rota in Maltese. The shape of its rota developed for two reasons, both related to its usage. First, the height provides space for the boat's registration number,

St. Paul's Grotto, where the apostle is said to have preached during his stay on the island. The marble statue of St. Paul was a gift of the Knights and sculpted by Micheangelo's assistant Bernini.



Boatman Carmen Farrugia skipper a dghajsa in Malta's Grand Harbor. Annual dghajsa races are held in Grand Harbour on Sept 8 and March 31.



A view from the waters of Malta's Grand Harbor. The Knights of St. John's Grand Master de la Valette, for whom Valletta is named, strengthened Malta's defenses.



Marsaxlokk Bay is home to 70 percent of Malta's fishing fleet. The luzzus, brightly painted traditional boats, can be traced to the Phoenicians.

which, as a passenger vehicle, needs to be visible to port authorities. And second, it gives the boatman a place to hold the boat steady when he brings passengers ashore, while taking the fare with his other.

The dghajsa's backrests are called spallieri, and generally display a glazed oval in the center that depicts a British symbol, such as a lion, St. George, or the Britannia. This practice speaks to Britain's long-standing presence in Malta, which they ruled from 1814 – 1964, and the economic reliance of the Maltese dghajsa boatmen on the English, who they long considered the source of their daily income.

There were some concerns that the dghajsa would not survive the British withdrawal from Malta in 1979, when the island country became totally independent. In fact, tourism has ensured that the crafts have not only survived but thrive, as a popular means of getting around the Three Cities.

Carmen pointed out sights such as ancient Fort St. Angelo at the tip of Vittoriosa, and the 21st century Mediterranean Film Studios beyond it, where water scenes from *The Spy Who Loved Me* and *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* were shot. He told me that after a stint in the Navy, he had emigrated to Canada 42 years ago when he was 24, but came back after a year. During my visit, I met many Maltese who had worked abroad but returned home.

"Now, I go to church every morning and pray for beer and bread," Carmen said with a smile, as we ended my tour at the Vittoriosa embankment in front of the Maritime Museum. "That need is met by taking people for a ride, like this."

The Museum resides in what had been the British Navy's bakery. Built in 1842, its exterior was inspired by England's Windsor Castle. Inside, it now offers a well-documented look at Malta's long history on the water.

Joe Abela is the Museum's ship model maker and restorer. He told me that Grand Harbor hosts two regattas each year using traditional Maltese wooden boats, both commemorating significant passages in the island's annals. The first is held on March 31, in observance of Malta's Freedom Day, when the British departed; the second, on September 8, celebrates the victory over the Turks.

A typical race day for Regatta participants starts with a Holy Mass at 10 a.m. held on the wharf near the rowing club, followed a light dinner. By 12:30 p.m., the rowers have to be at the Deep Water Quay area, ready to race. Each village has a traditional spot from which they shout and sing to encourage their rowers, with the enthusiasm getting wilder as the boats get near the finish line at the Customs House.

According to Joe, when the Senglea team wins, a flotilla of boats from the village cross the harbor to the Customs House to escort the victors back to the Senglea Marina. The contingent is met by a crowd of supporters and a spontaneous party is held near the Regatta Club, which continues till late in the evening.

"The following day everybody sleeps very late and in the morning the city is like a ghost town," he wryly observed.

One of Joe's primary resources in understanding the structures and color schemes of historic vessels is "ex voto" paintings, commissioned by sailors after surviving a turbulent storm as offerings to the Madonna or other figures central to their Catholic faith. The Maritime Museum displays one such painting, originally from the village of Qala, on the neighboring island of Gozo. In Malti, Qala, means "sail." The local proverb 'Ghandu r-rih fil-qala' refers



A fisherman's gear, and his day, are laid out in his luzzu in Marsaxlokk Bay.



The cavernous Blue Grotto seen from above. Malta's southern coast is speckled with sea caves, including Honeymoon Cave, Reflection Cave and Cat's Cave.



Joseph Farrugia is a Marsaxlokk Bay fisherman. His boat is a luzzu, suited perfectly for the work, with ample room for all the nets.



to the 'wind blowing the sails,' meaning someone has luck on his side when performing a task.

Marsaxlokk Bay's fishermen are at home in their luzzus, enjoying lunch, repairing nets and pausing to enjoy the sunshine.

A cave wall with mystical healing powers?

Perhaps St. Paul had this proverbial good luck in 60 A.D. when, according to the Bible, he took refuge on Malta's shores after his boat was shipwrecked. There are 365 churches on the island and the Maltese proudly assert they are one of the earliest Christian peoples in the world, having been converted by St. Paul himself. In casual conversations with a variety of Maltese people throughout my two-week stay, reference was often made to the official state religion of Catholicism as having arrived by boat.

"Our religion is part of our national identity, and apostolic origins are claimed for our faith," observed Paul Guillaumier, a Pauline scholar and resident of Rabat. "There have been many different peoples and rulers on Malta and the Pauline tradition has been a consistent unifying force for centuries."

Wandering the winding streets of Rabat, I found my way to a square dominated by a centerpiece of this faith, St. Paul's Church. According to strong local tradition, the saint lived for three months in a grotto under where the edifice now stands. To the right of the basilica, I made my way down rock-carved stairs, the cool air underground a welcome relief from the heat outside.

I gingerly pushed open a heavy wrought iron gate and peered into the cave. An elegant statue of the saint, carved by Michelangelo's assistant Bernini, was set back in the chamber. Four large filigreed candelabras flickered at his feet. To his left, hanging from the ceiling, was a silver scone in the shape a two-masted sailing ship, its light casting strange shadows. I could understand the belief that the cave's walls have mystical healing powers.

The natives that St. Paul converted had already been in Malta for some time. While it is believed that Malta was connected to Sicily at different periods during successive ice ages, archaeologists trace settlement of the island to Neolithic man, believed to have arrived on its shores by boat.

"Seafaring is inseparable from existence on Malta. The first settlers to Malta arrived by boat," said Dr. Reuben Grima, an archaeologist and Senior Curator for Prehistoric Sites with Heritage Malta. "The earliest settlements were established in places that are accessible by boat, where embarkation is possible, such as the ancient temple of Hagar Qim. Because they had no beasts of burden, if they wanted to carry a heavy object to a neighboring community, it was easier for them to carry a load by boat than carry it over land."

My exploration of Hagar Qim began atop a remote, windswept cliff on Malta's west coast, far above a sprawling meadow bejeweled with brilliant wildflowers, and an aquamarine sea further below. The early morning light illuminated a necklace of gigantic rocks--not of the precious variety, but immense inter-locking slabs of golden stone. The object of my admiration was Hagar Qim, translated loosely as "standing stones," one of two adjoining megalithic temples commanding the heights here.

Virtually having the site to myself, I slowly circled the enormous structure, studying the boulders carved into geometric shapes, admiring the ingenuity behind aligning such massive stones together like a giant jigsaw puzzle more than two millennium ago. One alone weighs more than

twenty tons. Some were dappled with pit marks, some engraved with decorative plant motifs and spirals.

A contemporary marvel, the significance of these sites to the prehistoric men and women who erected them remains a mystery. It's theorized that these were places of worship for a fertility cult, based on the discovery here and at other temples in this archipelago of statues dubbed the "Malta fat ladies". A collection of the big-bottomed figurines is now displayed at the country's National Museum of Archeology. In a related intrigue, this distinctive voluptuous female shape can also be seen from the sky in the outline of another Maltese temple, fittingly named Ggantija.

"Humans are always in search of new lands"

Clive Cortis of the Museum said, other types of carvings are also found at the 30 temple sites across the Maltese archipelago. He noted that images of boats are found at Malta's Tarxien Temples, a prehistoric site of megalithic structures dating back to around 3600 B.C.—1,000 years before Egypt's pyramids were built.

"Seven thousand years ago, man came to Malta from Sicily—we know this because pottery found in caves here matches that from there," Cortis said. "Some may ask 'Why did they come?' Well, why did we go to the moon in 1969? As human beings, we are always in search of new things, new lands. If early Sicilians were fishing in the channel between the two islands, they could have seen Malta."

If seen from the seat of an airplane, Malta's outline resembles that of a fish, and Marsaxlokk Bay is at its "mouth". Home to about 70% of the Maltese fishing fleet, the harbor is like a bowl of beautifully-wrapped candy, with scores of vibrantly-painted boats in hues of yellow, red, blue, green and brown, all nestled side-by-side. The bows of many boats are painted with the symbol of the "eyes of Osiris," a practice believed to have been inherited from another civilization that once called Malta home, the Phoenicians, a Mediterranean trading culture dominant between 1550 – 300 B.C.

Decorating the bows evolved from the days when seafarers, always superstitious, created figureheads that originally represented fearsome creatures intended to scare the 'bad spirits' at sea. Later, the figureheads assumed a more altruistic appearance. Traditionally, the bows of Maltese boats boasted a triangular area called the "moustache", which identified its home port, a tradition no longer observed. According to the old custom, when the master was in mourning, this area of the bow was painted black.

I arrived here to find it was market day, and the harbor was abuzz with activity. The shoreline was crammed with stalls selling local handicrafts, merchants vying for the attention of the crowds milling past tables spread with wares. The water was strung with boat upon boat, bow to stern across the crowded bay, fishermen calling to each other as they unloaded their catch. With each step, my eyes were drawn in a dozen different directions, jumping across the intersecting angles, the scene an ever-changing kaleidoscope of primary colors.

The harbor is ringed with seafood restaurants, most of them two-storied, family-run enterprises. Business was brisk, with extended families at big tables piled high with platters. Hungry from the sea air, I soon was eagerly devouring Stuffat Tal-Qamit, a delicious octopus stew.

Joseph Farrugia is a Marsaxlokk fisherman whom I met on a late Saturday morning as he and his son unloaded the catch

from their luzzu (pronounced loots-zoo). They go out every morning just after sunrise to retrieve the nets they put out the prior evening before sunset. Their daily routine is dictated by a startlingly simple fact--in daylight, fish can see the nets.

Like Joseph's boat, almost all those in Marsaxlokk Bay are luzzus. He said the luzzu is much more suited to a fisherman's work than a fiberglass boat—heavier, more stable, with its shape providing more space for his nets. Joseph uses three different kinds of nets, ranging from 24 – 40 square millimeters, with which he catches bottom fish, such as squid, octopus, and mallet. A good day brings 100 kilos of fish; a bad day can be as little as five kilos.

In the summer months, Joseph may go out as far as ten miles into the sea; in the winter, it's not safe to go out more than a mile. If he has a favorite watering hole, he's not saying. Other than spots off-limits to fisherman, such as sanctuaries and diving sites, he sets his nets all around the island.

Joseph said his family has fished for as long as he can remember. His son joined him recently; he was taught by his father and uncles when he was 15, more than 40 years ago.

When asked what he does for fun, Joseph smiled, and replied: "Fish."

I left Joseph's boat, and meandered along the harbor's circumference. Before me, in a luzzu, a fisherman cut a line with his teeth. To his right, a man tugged on one of the piles of blue and green nets he seemed swaddled in. To his left, an old salt took lunch out of a paper bag. Behind him, the dark head of young fisherman popped up from below board, and scanned the horizon.

The string of boats across the harbor called to mind the double helix of a DNA strand. And my visits to Marsaxlokk Bay, Grand Harbor and the Blue Grotto seemed to weave together a millennium of life on Malta's waters, a palpable pattern of time, place and tradition.

Meg Pier

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