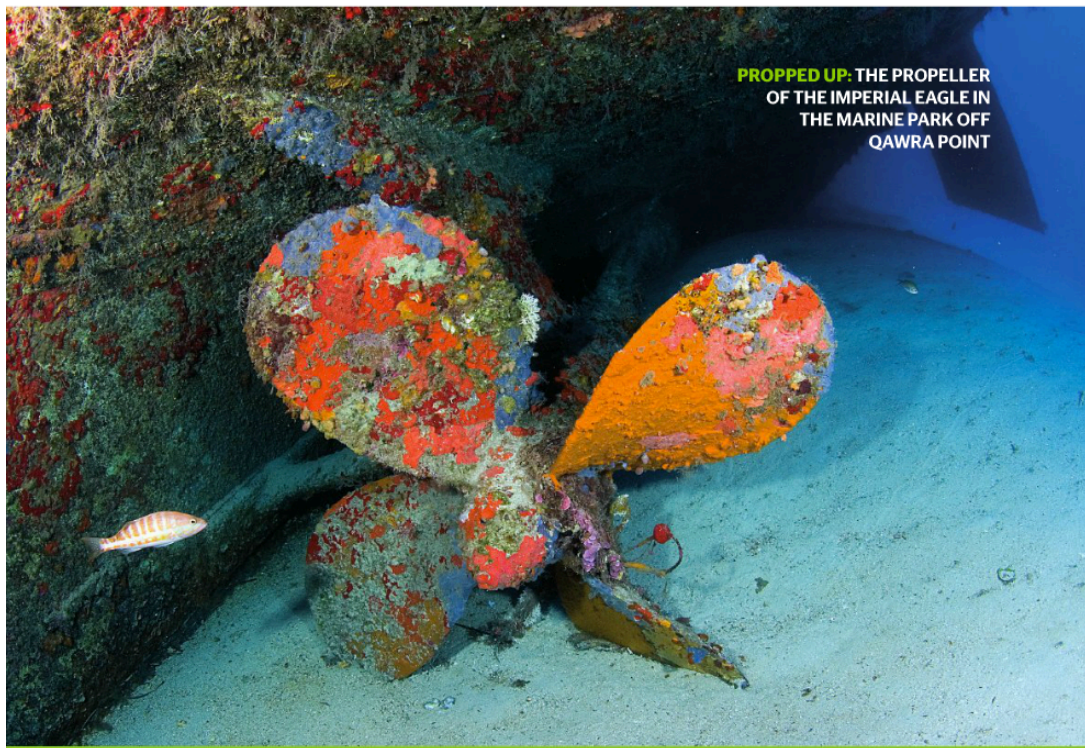
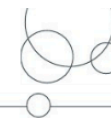
A full-page underwater photograph of a diver exploring a large, rusted shipwreck anchor. The anchor is heavily encrusted with coral and other marine life. The diver is positioned near the base of the anchor, illuminated by a bright light. The water is clear and blue.

ANCHOR MAN: A DIVER
VIEWS AN ANCHOR COVERED
WITH MARINE LIFE AT
CIRKEWWA

**DIVE
GUIDE**

MALTA

Blue water, shipwrecks and affordability put Malta and its neighbouring islands among the strongest of Red Sea alternatives. And now, a forward-thinking government has put diving at the top of the agenda. Report and photographs by **Jane Morgan**



PROPPED UP: THE PROPELLER OF THE IMPERIAL EAGLE IN THE MARINE PARK OFF QAWRA POINT

Malta is fast acquiring the reputation of a wreck-diver's haven, due in no small part to its government's proactive campaign to attract divers by sinking decommissioned vessels. In the past, Malta and its neighbours, Gozo and Comino, were known for their complex underwater topography: a vast network of blue holes, caverns, chimneys, gullies and drop-offs, many of which were accessible from the shore. There is little sediment or run-off, so the full beauty of the blue Mediterranean can be appreciated here like nowhere else.

With divers (especially British ones) providing a large proportion of foreign visitors, Malta has recently gone to great lengths to be 'diver-friendly', sinking the Xlendi ferry in 1999 off Gozo, followed by the Karwela and Comino Land in August 2006. Two more wrecks, including a P29 ex-minesweeper, are about to be sunk off Malta and Comino. What's more, the draconian demands for special diving medicals have been abolished, and Air Malta, the state airline, has

introduced an extra 15kg luggage allowance for diving equipment, on top of the standard 20kg.

Much of Malta is built up and is seen as a desirable getaway for well-heeled Europeans in search of a second home. Footballers in particular, including several Manchester United players, are known to buy property here. To see this land as it was, you need to head out of the towns or over to the quieter, less commercial islands of Gozo and its smaller cousin, Comino.

In addition to its underwater attractions, Malta is one of the most culturally rich islands in the Mediterranean, having been populated since 4,500 BC. Its cultural melange includes elements of Italian, French, Arabic, Spanish and British traditions, due in part to its strategic importance during centuries of maritime conflict and trade. The island's dramatic history includes an occupation of more than two centuries by the Knights of St John, culminating in the infamous Great Siege, in which practically every citizen of the island fought alongside the Knights to wear down a Turkish armada that was feared across 16th-century Europe.

Under British occupation during the Second World War, the island became even more strategically important due to its position in the middle of the Mediterranean, and was the subject of sustained bombing by the Luftwaffe.

Again, the people of Malta endured a terrifying period but emerged triumphant and were collectively awarded the George Cross, the highest civilian award for bravery.

Today, the islands are regarded as a sleepy getaway for travellers in search of blue water and long sunsets. That they have so much to offer divers – both in terms of the established infrastructure and the sea itself – is key to the Maltese government's new offensive to tempt as many away from the Red Sea as possible.

MALTA

With 135km of coastline, Malta is the largest island in the group. As the country's main cultural and commercial centre, it is the most built-up island in the group, and developers are jostling for more space to build for its growing population. There are numerous dive centres to choose from, and the mixture of caves, wrecks, good visibility and a dry, sunny climate should ensure that its popularity continues for many years to come.

Cirkewwa is particularly popular with divers and is the location of the main terminal for ferries to Gozo. There are several dive sites here, including the Rozi tugboat, which was originally sunk for the entertainment of Captain Morgan's submarine tours but is now a popular site with divers. You can also find a small statue of the Madonna, a very photogenic anchor and plenty of swim-throughs in addition to crystal-clear visibility. That said, dive sites in Malta are not limited to the Cirkewwa area; there are fantastic dives all around the island, from deep technical wrecks to pretty, shallow bays.

BEAUFORT FIGHTER

Maximum depth: 37m

The Beaufort fighter lies at a depth of 37m and is just ten minutes by boat from Sliema on the east coast. The pilot experienced problems after taking off from Luqa airfield en route to a raid in Sicilian waters during the Second World War. Both members of the crew escaped unharmed after ditching. The aircraft is still recognisable and reasonably intact, making it a stunning first sight as you descend through the clear blue water. The plane is inverted but the propellers are in place, although half-buried in the sand. As with most wrecks in Malta, much of the structure is covered in a red sponge, and squid eggs hang from the undercarriage.

IMPERIAL EAGLE

Maximum depth: 40m

The Imperial Eagle was a car and passenger ferry that operated between Malta and Gozo and was the sister ship of Jacques Cousteau's Calypso. It was scuttled in 1999 as an artificial reef in the marine park off Qawra Point. Standing very proud and upright in the white sand, the Imperial Eagle is quite an impressive sight. The wheel is all that remains in the wheelhouse, and it is covered with a beautiful red sponge, as is the propeller on the sea bed at 40m. The wreck

is breaking up in many places, but still makes for a great dive. Divers can also take the opportunity to visit the impressive statue of Christ nearby.

HELLESPONT

Maximum depth: 41m

A British-built paddle steamer, Hellepont was launched by Earle's Ship Building of Hull in 1910 and met its watery grave in Malta in 1942. The 46m-long vessel lies in 41m of water, just off the Grand Harbour. The bow has completely disappeared but there are still plenty of interesting details, including two coal-fired furnaces with their doors ajar. Coal bunkers nearby, are now filled by schools of fish patrolling the wreck. Plenty of other marine life can be found amid the wreckage, including large moray and conger eels, as well as tiny nudibranchs crawling across it.

UM EL FAROUH

Maximum depth: 35m

A gas explosion destroyed this 110m-long oil tanker and killed nine Maltese dockworkers in 1995. Three years later, the cleaned vessel was scuttled in its current position as a dive site and now lies 150m offshore of Wied iz-Zurriq. Winter storms have split the tanker into two sections, but this huge wreck is still very impressive, with plenty of opportunity for penetrations and swim-throughs. Much marine life can be found here, including scorpionfish, moray eels and even barracudas.

Malta is blessed with many beautiful caves

GHAR LAPSI

Maximum depth: 20m

Ghar Lapsi is a fishing hamlet on the southern coast of Malta, about 25 minutes' drive from Sliema. Access to the water is easy from the shore; however, you must walk down quite a few steps. Praised by Jacques Cousteau, this site offers a mixture of small caves and reef where interesting critters such as torpedo rays can sometimes be found. Ghar Lapsi is also great for night diving: cuttlefish and squid are common, while crustaceans such as slipper lobsters and hermit crabs can put in appearances.

L'AHRAH POINT

Maximum depth: 20m

Malta is blessed with many beautiful caves, but this one stands out from the rest. Swim around to the rear of the cave: the water is shallow and the colours of the rock walls are a stunning mix of oranges and pinks. Starfish decorate the boulders on the sea bed and the opening to the sea is like a beautiful blue picture window.



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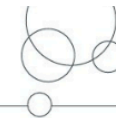
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MALTA MOMENTS:

[1] CUTTLEFISH [2] STATUE OF CHRIST
[3] WHEEL OF THE IMPERIAL EAGLE
[4] NUDIBRANCH [5] INSIDE THE
WRECK OF THE COMINO LAND [6]
SANTA MARIA CAVES [7] GULLY
OUTSIDE BLUE HOLE

GOZO

The island of Gozo is more rural than Malta and has a rugged landscape and spectacular coastline. The pace of life is slower and it's a haven for those who want a quiet retreat. At 26 square miles, Gozo is the second largest of the islands and can be reached from Malta in half an hour by ferry or 15 minutes by helicopter. It is the choice of single travellers and those with young children: it's small and friendly with practically no crime, and is safe to walk around at night. There are several good restaurants in the main towns of Rabat and Mgarr and in the fishing villages. Plenty of dive centres are based here – some will also book accommodation for you. The number of dive sites has increased with the sinking of three wrecks in recent years, boosting Gozo's popularity with divers.

BLUE HOLE

Maximum depth: 60m
Located at Dwejra on the western side of Gozo, the Blue Hole is typically dived from the shore. A couple of minutes' walk across the rocky terrain brings you to a natural round pool in the rock. After descending to 10m, you can exit into the

open sea to see the rest of the Azure Window underwater. The dramatic cliffs drop to depths of more than 50m and the visibility is usually excellent – which, combined with gullies and swim-throughs, makes for an excellent dive.

INLAND SEA

Maximum depth: 60m
Often incorporated into the same dive as the nearby Blue Hole, the Inland Sea is a landlocked lagoon that was created when two limestone caves collapsed. From here, you swim through a room-long narrow canyon that winds from the headland to the ocean. At the far end of this tunnel, the open sea greets you with a burst of the most stunning blue. Small fishing boats constantly ferry tourists through the canyon, so good buoyancy is a must.

MV KARWELA AND MV COMINO LA

These Gozo wrecks were sunk together in 2006 as artificial reefs and both stand proud from the sea bed at a depth of 39m, approximately 50m from the shore. Located at Xatt l-Ahmar, the Karwela and the Comino Land offer divers good swim-throughs – the Karwela has the added

attraction of a Volkswagen Beetle on its deck.

CATHEDRAL CAVE

Maximum depth: 8m
The Cathedral Cave is located in the opening to the Ghasri Valley. This dive can be done from the shore but access is down some steep steps, so a boat dive is preferable. The cave has a huge dome-shaped ceiling and when you surface, you find yourself surrounded by the most beautiful electric blue water. Large boulders with sponges and corals are found on the sea bed and jellyfish are often present.

COMINO

Covering just one square mile, Comino is the smallest of the inhabited islands and is wedged between Malta and Gozo. The island's most popular attraction is the Blue Lagoon, which, at the height of summer, is full of visiting boats and tourists. Very few people actually live on the island, and its sole hotel – the Comino Hotel – is situated on a pretty bay that has a shallow, sandy bottom and is ideal for diver training. Comino Dive Centre is located at the hotel and is part of

Subway Scuba Centre, which is based on Malta. The hotel runs its own ferry to and from Malta and Gozo, with up to seven services a day during high season.

SANTA MARIA CAVES

Maximum depth: 16m
Once used as the backdrop for scenes in The Count Of Monte Cristo, the Comino caves are located in a sheltered area on the eastern side of the island. They are very open and it is possible to swim through one cave and exit through another. The sunlight creates beautiful patterns as it glimmers through the crevices, and much of the inside of the caves is bright red when illuminated with a torch. Outside, you can find schools of sea bream and the occasional octopus.

LANTERN POINT

Maximum depth: 40m
Lantern Point is found at the most southerly point of Comino. This site is accessed through a chimney that levels out onto the limestone plateau at 16m. Barracudas can be found here, along with moray eels, groupers and scorpionfish.

MALTA: THE LONG-WEEKEND OPTION

Malta may seem a tad distant for a long weekend, but for those who have to squeeze their breaks into less than the standard seven days, it is possible to be more flexible in the duration of your stay. If you arrive early enough in the afternoon to squeeze in a cheeky dive, then you could have a full day's diving the following day and fly back on the afternoon of the third day, with a 24-hour no-fly margin still intact.

Tony Backhurst Scuba (01483 271765, www.scuba.co.uk) promotes such trips in association with Oxygène Dive Centre. DIVE went on one such trip and found the set-up to be determinedly diver-friendly. Guests stay at the Hotel Fortina Spa in Sliema, a 25-minute transfer from Malta International Airport and conveniently situated next to the dive centre. The hotel itself is very much in the luxury spa mould, with a choice of restaurants and therapy sessions that should keep non-diving partners occupied.

The dive centre offers boat diving six days a week between May and October, and the boat – an original Maltese luzzu (a traditional fishing vessel) – can be chartered on request during the winter months. It's designed to make diving as easy as possible for the long weekend, so it's just a short walk across the road from the hotel to the dive boat, with popular dive sites just a few minutes away. Nearby dives include the Beaufort fighter and the Hellespont paddle steamer, while visits to more distant sites include a lunchtime stop. Weekly visits are also offered to the neighbouring islands to dive the new Gozo wrecks and Comino's Santa Maria Caves.

Shore diving is available all year round and the house reef is well worth checking out. Two comical blennies have made their homes at the bottom of the ladder, and many varieties of nudibranch, sea hare and flying gurnard can be found on the sandy bottom. The Second World War wrecks of the HMS Maori and the X131 Lighter are also just round the corner and make great night dives too.

For technical divers, trimix courses are available for diving the local deep wrecks, including Le Polynisien at 60m and the HMS Southwold at 75m. The dive centre has stages, rebreather tanks and twin-sets for rent, and Sofnolime for sale. ●

Need to know:

THE SEASONS

Malta is a year-round destination – even when the weather is bad, there is always a secluded bay where you can dive. The best conditions occur from May to October, and the water is warmest in August; in the winter, weather permitting, you will miss the crowds and have the dive sites to yourself.

TEMPERATURE

Water temperature varies from 15°C in March/April to 25°C in August. During the summer, expect air temperatures of up to 29°C; in the winter, they can drop to a chilly 13°C.

TOPSIDE ATTRACTIONS

With such a colourful past, Malta is strewn with interesting historical and archaeological sites. Museums and mediaeval sites mix with beautiful stone buildings and brightly coloured fishing boats to excite the senses.

Contacts:

DIVE CENTRES

AQUAVENTURE

00 356 21 522141

www.aquaventuremalta.com

GOZO AQUA SPORTS

00 356 21 563037

www.gozoaquasports.com

NEW DIMENSION

00 356 21 340511

www.nds-malta.com

OXYGÈNE

00 356 21 345 986

www.oxygenediving.com

SCUBA KINGS GOZO

UK: 0121 288 7385 • Mob: 00 356 9923 0788

www.scuba-kings.com

UTINA DIVING COLLEGE

00 356 21 550514

www.utina-diving.com

to find more Malta dive centres go to
www.divemagazine.co.uk/malta

Thanks to:

Scuba Travel (01483 271765, www.scuba.co.uk), Hotel Fortina Spa Resort (0800 917 3001, www.hotelfortina.com) and Oxygène Dive Centre (+356 21 345 986, www.oxygenediving.com) for their assistance.

GETTING THERE

Malta is probably one of the easiest dive destinations to access from the UK. Flights depart on every day of the week (subject to availability and flight schedules) from airports including Bristol, Birmingham, Nottingham East Midlands, Manchester, Liverpool, Newcastle, Glasgow, Heathrow, Stansted and Gatwick. Air Malta offers divers an extra 15kg luggage allowance on top of the standard 20kg on production of a diving certificate.

WHAT TO PACK

During the winter, a good semi-dry system or even a drysuit is recommended, along with a hood and gloves. In the spring and autumn, a 5-7mm wetsuit would be adequate; a 3-5mm wetsuit should do the job in the height of summer. A decent torch is a good idea, as much of the diving is on wrecks and inside caves. In the winter, don't forget to pack some warm clothes for when out of the water, while the summer requires swimwear and plenty of sunscreen.

TOUR OPERATORS

Crusader travel

020 8744 0474

www.crusadertravel.co.uk

OonasDivers

01323 648924

www.oonasdivers.com

Regaldiv

0870 220 1777

www.regaldiv.co.uk

Scubasnacks

0870 746 1266

www.scubasnacks.co.uk

Scuba Travel

01483 271765

www.scuba.co.uk

For more information about diving in Malta see
www.pdsa.org.mt

DIVE says:

With daily flights from most of the UK's regional airports, a flight time of less than three hours and a selection of dive sites to suit all – from novice through to hard-core tekkie – Malta really does have something for everyone.

