



**Malta  
March 1998**

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Trip Report by Sam Cockerill, 6th April 1998

**Maltesers:**

- Nick Harrison
- Sam Cockerill
- Peter Huxley
- Kathy Gubbins
- Mike McCarthy
- Jochen Rink
- Naomi Dobraszczyk
- Praveen Wignarajah
- Tom Riley
- Philip Rae
- Helen Cohen
- Jamie Wilkinson

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**The Journey**

Noticing that the sweep-stake on Praveen's arrival time at the check-in desk had been forestalled by his unexpectedly prompt arrival, Air 2000 were quick to offer us alternative entertainment at check-in in the form of their regular "Baggage allowance lottery" draw. The rules here seemed a little vague, but we deduced a few basics: You must be able to lift hand luggage to shoulder height with one hand without grimacing; any surplus may be carried on as hand luggage provided it split into any number of attractive "Air 2000" carrier bags; all bags should be tagged with an Air 2000 lottery entry ticket, offering an range of incredible prizes including :

- (1st prize ) your own suitcase when you get to Malta
- (2nd prize) A 3 day wait before half your luggage turns up in a foreign taxi, followed by a lengthy process of insurance loss adjustment and your very own balloon on a stick for your troubles.

As improbable as it sounds, every single one of us won (in a way). Buoyed up by the heady euphoria of victory, we hardly noticed the horizontal driving rain at Malta international airport.

**The Jeeps**

After the first night spent quaking at the sound of thunder directly overhead, and still coming to terms with the squalor of Maltaqua's Sands Penthouse apartments (The marble floors hadn't been polished for hours, the batteries in the air conditioning remote looked like they were on their way out, and one of the rooms didn't even have a balcony) , our rose-garden of optimism was beginning to suffer from over- fertilisation. Enter the Maruti 900cc all terrain beast.

Nothing could have prepared Nick and I for the savage unfettered power of these brutes. As the engines roared to life for the first time, an eerie calm spread across the street as passers by dropped their babies and looked on in awe. From behind the steering wheels, demon eyes gazed out of empty sockets: the race had begun.

Realising his mistake was now contractually binding, the jeep hire assistant slumped his shoulders and whispered mechanically "Be careful, always give way, and have a nice day"

But we had already gone.

**Ghar Lapsi (1 dive)**

Having spent the best part of a day driving from side to side and end to end of the island looking for a site without the 6ft swell that seemed to be hitting the island from all sides simultaneously, we ran out of options at Ghar Lapsi. At least here a choice of bays provided clean water to get in before heading out into the tempest.

Although the first half of this dive involved a nauseating and quite disorienting swim through a mess of foaming surge and seaweed, the open

sea seemed a lot calmer, and the visibility opened out to around 25m.

#### **Blue Grotto (3 dives)**

On day 2 we headed to the Blue Grotto on the advice of Maltaqua. The wind direction was now stable, and this side of the island was increasingly calm.

Here the visibility was upwards of 30m, and the whole inlet seemed to be teeming with life. We found one of the largest octopus I've seen, which had a reasonable go at servicing my second stage. Kathy and Nick bumped into some sort of weird leviathan type deep sea fish, which not even Maltaqua could classify. Jochen found a spiky worm on some fishing gear, which provided us with 5 minutes of gruesome interest as it dried up in the sun. Compassion finally got the better of him, and Jochen removed his tackle from the worm's rear end (Fnarr fnarr) and cast the beastly back.

After yesterday's disappointing tumble, it was a real thrill to be finning along cliff edges, shoals of tiny fish illuminated by the first suggestions of sunlight.

#### **Carolina (1 dive)**

Day 3 showed further signs of the weather letting up, but the diving options were still limited. After a whistle-stop tour of the island's dive sites, and some entertaining off-road meandering, we finally arrived at Manoel Island where a cargo vessel was sunk during the war. The wreck's style of parking shared a lot with Gildenberg's bus; the comparison was re-inforced by the absence of any noteworthy life and some quite appalling vis; After a pile of chocolate and a pragmatic appraisal of our options, we headed back to the Blue Grotto (3rd dive).

#### **Marfa Point (2 dives)**

At last, the weather! With the swell down to a modest foot or so and barely a cloud in the sky, we headed to Marfa point. Rumour has it that some new ferry terminals will take this site off the dive map of Malta in a few years' time, so we made the most of today's dives. The exposure of this point meant the visibility was down to a shocking 15m or so, but this was compensated by an abundance of rainbow wrasse, wormy things, small shoaling photogenic cliff wrasse and a whole load of other fish which I could name but you probably couldn't visualise so what's the point. OK I'll buy a fish book next time. They probably all taste the same anyhow.

#### **Inland Sea, Gozo (1 dive)**

The last time I dived here it was one of the best dives of my life, and this time had to be a close second. Swimming out through the archway from the inland sea, the sunlight creates a distant blue haze filtering down between the sheer walls. In the open sea, the visibility extended to upwards of 30m, and we progressed out along a cliff wall with both the surface and the seabed clearly visible 25m in each direction. I was quite surprised to see a lone 5ft tuna (confirmed by Kathy) criss-crossing the cliff face at incredible speed, but my attempts to point this out to Nick were mis-interprested as some sort of fit.

#### **Blue hole, Gozo (1 dive)**

Probably the most spectacular dive on the islands. Site access is not the best, with a 5 minute walk over some bizarre rock formations in full kit, but is well justified.

The blue hole is just that; about 4m in diameter, round and blue. Descending to 15m, a huge boulderfield is revealed, framed by a 10m archway facing into the open sea. The sunlight is now strong enough to illuminate the whole scene, even across to the foot of the Azure window - a colossal archway stretching 50m out of the water, all of which can be seen.

Nick and I make a circuit of this foot. The abundance of fresh boulders directly beneath the Azure window makes us a little uneasy - we have a quick look for any fin-tips sticking out from underneath them.

#### **White House Point (1 dive)**

The final day's diving! A relatively shallow but highly scenic dive. After 10 minutes finning around 6m, an unexpected drop-off to 22m appears. This forms a wide brim facing the open sea, populated by the regular assortment of cliff-dwellers. We find a moray eel sun-bathing amongst some reeds, who is not impressed by our rude interruption.

#### **Slugs Bay (1 dive)**

Following a Maltaqua tip-off we spend 1 hour rooting around in the shallows for sharks' teeth. Our catch is not impressive.

And that (for the sports divers) was that...