



Malta
April 1999

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1999 Maltesers:

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Two pieces of information were gleaned from our Maltese taxi driver on our way back to the airport, both of which may come in handy next year:

1. April - May is generally regarded as the windy season in Malta, during which time dive sites are dictated daily by the prevailing wind, which can be a little restrictive.
2. Billboards of blurry road signs with the word "OBDIHOM!" (Obey them!) emblazoned across the front are the most visible part of a government campaign to crack down on a small minority of reckless drivers contributing to a spiralling accident rate. Hooligans.

Blue Grotto (4 dives)

This became our most repeated site in part because of its sheltered aspect, in part because of a recently - deliberately - sunk tanker, the Um El Faroud, which has attracted more life in 8 months than the famed Rozi has in 8 years. The vessel drifted a little as it sank, and now sits around 200m offshore which presents certain difficulties with diving from the shore. However..

We drop to 20m and take a bearing of 240deg from 50m beyond the west side of the inlet. From this depth the seabed is still faintly visible dropping away to 33m, although recent swell has hazed the water to a miserly 15m viz. After 5 minutes of finning out into a seemingly endless blue a faint edge emerges, stretching off to each horizon, and the sheer scale of this 115m vessel dawns on me. Still in pristine condition, hardly a fleck of paint has been dislodged. We drop into an open hold and head up a stairway onto the superstructure where a gangway is filled with cardinal fish, damselfish and saddled seabream.

As we reach the stern, a 300 strong column of barracuda greet us with pike-toothed smiles. I am amazed by their immobility; the entire assembly hangs motionless, a haphazard collection of silver daggers. After a few seconds, something alerts them and the column makes a collective quarter-turn with effortless speed and precision, before resuming this sublime still.

Suddenly I am gripped by a terrier-inspired fit of delinquency BAD SAM BAD SAM, and the column scatters as I fin between them, reforming to one side, apparently unperturbed. Only later does it occur to me to read up on these fish...

Collins Pocket Guide: Fish of Britain and Europe pp204

Barracuda

Elongate, torpedo like predators with large jaws and fangs.

May attack humans, usually aiming at male genitals.

Inland Sea, Gozo

On our second day the wind had all but dropped, so we took the ferry across to Gozo. Usually the first site to get blown out, but also the most scenic. The rule is - if its diveable, dive it.

From the entrance, we descend through the channel to the open sea. Having dived through here in near zero visibility before it is refreshing to see the expanse of this cavernous pass, as four boats zip in and out overhead. Further out the dive becomes a familiar cliff scene, with shoals of damselfish and anchovies scattered around us. We prod around some of the holes, but to no avail. Either the octopus have wised up to our clumsy search methods or the spearfishermen have beaten us to them.

Blue Hole, Gozo

A 1m swell makes entry here quite entertaining, but once beneath the surface this is imperceptible. We cross to the foot of the azure window, towering above us like some huge stone portal. Heading back across the boulderfield and under the archway of the blue hole itself, we spend a while at the entrance to the cave at the back before spiralling up the walls.

Cominetto Reef, Comino

On day three we took advantage of Maltaqua's offer of a boat ride out to Comino between Malta and Gozo where we witnessed one of Malta's more unusual game sports. A speedboat with what I mistook to be a backfiring engine was charging in chaotic circles whilst a gunman perched precariously on its bows took hopeful pot-shots at an unfortunate seagull.

Our dive takes us down over a shallow reef to a sheer wall, which we traverse at 30m. Philip points out a huge admiralty anchor 15m below, but discretion being the better part of valour, we elect not to try and recover it.

Crystal Lagoon, Comino

A shallower dive, beginning through an archway reminiscent of the Inland sea channel in form, if not in scale. We fail to find the Conga Antonio (Maltaqua) boasts of finding in here, but find alternative amusement on a sandy area at the other side where we take our fins off, dump our air and have slow-motion running races. Hilarity nearly turns to tragedy as Ed realises his fins are buoyant, and we watch helplessly as they make their bid for freedom. Fortunately Phil is having none of this nonsense, and fins to the rescue.

Corelita barge

Not a first choice dive, but the only diveable site on Saturday. The visibility is better than last year, but the dive is a good day at Gildenburgh at best.

Ghar Lapsi (2 dives)

After a return jaunt along the edge of a large reef, we finish off in the mesmerising caves that link the inlet with the open sea. Between 6m and the surface these shallow caves lie flat along the shoreline, and the open access, absence of silt and bright surface light make these ideal for investigation. Surface breaks fill them with shafts of sunlight which contrast against the shadowy background like spotlights on a stage of bright red cardinal fish and rainbow wrasse.

HMS Maori

Having dived here before, Tom and Phil lead the way onto the bow section. Most of the structure has disintegrated or submerged beneath sand and silt through the years, but some sections are still discernible. Tying our SMBs off, we fin through the fore section where stonefish seem to lurk on every surface. We see a pair of these duelling outside, their preferred method of attack being to bite each others lips (!). The wreck is teeming with fish, and this is a good opportunity to test my recent efforts to memorise their names. Parading through the hull, every specimen we've encountered is here, with the exception (to my relief) of those long silver ones.