



Malta
March 2000

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Trip Report by Tom Riley

Staring 2000 Maltezers...

Der Diverz:

- Tom "Long hose" Riley
- John "Man with no nickname" Kendall
- Iain "Burnin' rubber" Smith
- Siu-Hang "Ultra heavy" Sou
- Ed "Ticket" Coney
- Helen "Depth-hound" Cohen
- Jim "Something's cooking" Harper
- Philip "Exit?" Rae
- Alex "Weighbelt" Hennessy
- James "Super heavy" Donnelly
- Richard "Van Der faff" Van Der Hoff
- Mathew "Where's my Weightbelt?" Pencharz
- Ed "Distressed" Pain

Dem Trainez:

- Tom "Books" Balogh
- Alan "The other man with no nickname" Wainman
- David "Breathless" Cleverly
- Eleanor "CUUEG" Truscott
- Candice "Who's Tom?" Coombes
- Darren "Polaris" Moore
- Steve "not John" Coulthard
- Fiona "Flushed" Bottril

Absent Friends:

- Cat "Never let Iain drive!" Everard
- Clare "Yes, I'm coming, book my place!" Hayward

Off We Went...

This year's CUUEG Maltesers assembled at the airport and the bags were checked in (with Air Malta's rather nifty 30kg baggage allowance). Missing were Cat Everard- injured in action whilst being driven by Iain...and Clare Hayward who had decided she couldn't make it after all.

Shortly afterwards Heathrow security started to take a particular interest in us, Iain questioned on his pony cylinder. Shortly afterwards he was summoned again for the same reason (or so he claims - did anyone notice an awkward walk?)

Fiona's presence was also requested and she found she'd been upgraded to first class - alright for some!

Once at the gate, the Tannoy went for...you guessed it!...Iain, once again!

"Do you have a compressed gas cylinder in your bag, Sir?"

<snip expletives about Heathrow staff's ability to communicate>

"Sorry to have troubled you, Sir."

Fun and games over with we finally ended up in an unusually cold Malta just in time to go to sort the rooms out and go to sleep.

Day one - March 21

The first day dawned bright and early, and CUUEG crawled out of bed and arrived at Maltaqua only a little late to collect our weight and kit from their kit store.

We also collected the legendary Maruti jeeps, Iain taking great interest in the insurance policy...

We loaded the jeeps with gear and with a cloud of dust and screech of tortured tyres, we set off for our first dive at Cirkewa.

Here we discovered the trainees who were busy getting their first dose of Salt water, a bit different from the parkside pool! (or Gildenburgh :-)
) Shewy and I dived in the second wave, and we dropped down onto a ledge at 6m. We spotted several cuckoo wrasse, numerous smaller fish and a long string of fish eggs. Looking just at home in the water (if a little less streamlined) were Fiona and Tom Balogh who we passed as we swam towards the edge of the ledge.

Passing some starfish, black spiny sea urchins and more fish we dropped down the wall to about 12m and contoured along it until we reached the swim through. A large black fish beat a hasty retreat out of the tunnel and we emerged to catching a several shoals of fish by surprise! We then made our way back to the top of the ledge and poked around until it was time to come up.

Day 2 - March 22

For today's diving we paid a visit to Anchor bay, which despite being dosed up on Sudafed (BAD! - see end) and rather shallow was rather hard on the sinuses. Helen and I discovered a well camouflaged scorpion fish, the ubiquitous urchins, damsel fish and several cuckoo wrasse. After a brief double take I realised the polkadotted reprobate from a 70's disco wriggling under a rock was the tail of a moray eel. Despite 5mm gloves I wasn't keen on trying to poke it out into the open!

After lunch we made a dash across to the other side of the island where we dived from Ghar Lapsi.

After the way my sinuses had responded this morning and due to time pressure I decided not to dive.

CUUEG's epic discoveries on this dive included the mythical 20m shown in the dive guide, and another weightbelt made a break for freedom.

CUUEG departed and further spirited experiments on the maximum pitch which can be produced on a Maruti jeep engine resulted in us being back at Maltaqua just in time to return the cylinders.

Day 3 - March 23

After yesterday's antics in a Maruti CUUEG decided to allow the citizens of Malta to cross the road without fearing for their life and opted for a life of luxury on a boat for the day. The first dive of the day was on Lantern point, Shewy and I hit the water in bright sunshine and dropped towards < text mangled at this point>. At this point I experienced a rather wet feeling known to all drysuit divers- stripping off my glove I discovered that in my haste to suit up and get in the water I'd rolled the seal over. That sorted we had a poke around looking for the vertical cave, but didn't find it. Dropping over the edge we made our way down to about 15m avoiding the silt clouds that had been kicked up. We saw the shoals of Damsel fish around the end of the gully- at which point my fin binding decided to give up (it was turning into one of those dives!) and having put that back together we carried on.

At about 20m it became apparent that Shewy was overweighed and we didn't go any deeper. We settled down to explore the gully (apparently we missed a Moray and a Barracuda) at the end we found the entrance to the cave, with accompanying fire worm and so we ascended up it into the sunlight to end the dive!

In the afternoon we dived Commino caves, this was preceded by a scary briefing by Antonio which almost resulted in us opting not to do the dive. We dived as part of the second wave and swam into the entrance of a enormous cave. We'd been told that there were Congers lurking in the holes in the wall so keeping it on our left we made a thorough survey of the wall and didn't find anything!

Reaching the airpocket we surfaced into the sunlight from an opening in the roof. After a brief chat we dived down into the erieily lit cave and made our way to the other end of the cave where we turned round and came back- exiting the cave with 120 bar.

Removing 8lbs of lead from Shewy's weightbelt had worked wonders on his air consumption and he was busy tapping his gauge to make sure it was working!

With plenty of time left we explored the area under the boat, after we'd found the anchor we swam under a rock arch under which all the fish were upside down- serious disorientation! After swimming around a bit more we found an octopus which decided to make rapid exit. A few rainbow and Cuckoo wrasse eyed us balefully until with brilliant dive planning (even if I say so myself) we surfaced at the foot of the ladder within seconds of being made to do the washing up for being late! Fiona used the boat's toilet to express what she thought of that as we reached the ladder.

Day 4 - March 24

Today dawned sunny and calm, so we decided to head across to Gozo. The first dive was done in the Blue Hole which was great! Dropping into the hole and swimming under the arch (which has to be the best dive entry point in Malta!) we had a good look around the rocks on the way out to the pillar. There were absolutely tonnes of fish around. A group of Red mullet were nosing around the rocks and there were generally loads of fish including a few Rainbow Wrasse, Cuckoo Wrasse and some Saddled Sea bream. As we swam around the pillar we saw a huge shoal of Damsel fish evading attack from a Tuna which was streaking up and down the reef -from about 40 to 6m and back down again in seconds. It was very spectacular and I'll certainly look at the cans in the supermarket with a new respect!

From the edge of the pillar we swam back on a compass bearing at about 15m and came back to the Blue Hole which appeared, in front of us. As we still had plenty of air left we carried on around the headland at about 10m, where we found another tuna hunting it's dinner. Looking down the wall disappeared into the darkness and serious depths!

[Thought for the day: Those tuna are sharkfood, I'm much bigger and slower, just how thick are sharks?]

[Webmaster: Not very - the big shiny metal thing on your back gives them gas - very unsociable.]

Having rounded the point I started trying to work out which gulley was the exit point. We swam into one of them and had a spectacular tour of the beautiful Dwejera gardens with sponges and corals all over the walls before discovering it was a dead end and retracing our finstrokes!

A few minutes later and we came to another promising gulley, as we were getting down to our reserves and I wasn't sure it was the right one, we decided to surface and swam in on the surface.

A very nice dive.

The second dive was the Inland sea, I've done this before in good viz and it is an excellent wall dive. However today the viz wasn't very good and it lost a lot of it's impact. We swam through the cold thermocline into the tunnel and out onto the wall. Having come to the end of the tunnel we turned left and made our way along the wall swimming past shoals of Saddled Sea Bream, Cuckoo & Rainbow Wrasse and, of course, lots of Damsel fish.

We turned round and made our way back to the entrance of the tunnel. My plan had been to carry on and swim along to the right but Matt was having mask problems so we went back through the tunnel. Ed P. and Ed C. were swimming along the bottom of the tunnel and their bubbles and fins back-lit by their torches in the gloom was very memorable.

CUUEGs attempts to emulate Colin McRae were not sufficient to get us back to Maltaqua in time so we locked the cylinders in the kitstore and after a great meal and writing up the dives we turned in.

Day 5 - March 25

Today's dive was, by popular request, the 'Rosi'. This tugboat is an artificial reef, and has been there for a few years. We dropped into the water and followed the ledge around until we saw the remains of the pier which collapsed in the past couple of years. Before dropping over the ledge to the bottom and following that for a while. We saw the anchor and the remains of the wheelhouse and swam on to the wreck itself. We swam under the hull, through the gap where the propeller used to be and along the starboard side up to the bow. After a quick Leonardo di Caprio bit (well what else do you do on the bow of a wreck?) and a brief poke around we made our way back to the wall and up to 6m for a safety stop.

As we contoured round we caught up with Antonio who was doing a guided dive so we followed him and looked in the requisite holes.

As we got to the end of the dive I was grabbed by an underwater photographer- I thought he'd got me confused with someone else, but my protests fell on deaf ears. Having decided that if he wanted to burn his film it was fine by me I checked Shewy's air and posed. It turned out that he'd been told to photograph me- thanks guys it's really nice.

After that we had a look in a hole which had been pointed out by Antonio and found the front end of a Moray eel which was very cool, and had very sharp teeth!

The second dive of the day was at Anchor Bay which was very different we contoured around at about 9m and found the cave but didn't go in we swam back and had a search around and found the wreck of a small boat a small shackle.

We surfaced and (after shore cover had weighed up the pros and cons!) were warned that the steps were covered in excrement and that there was a clean way out on the other side of the pier. For the evening meal we went to Johnathans, which was memorable for the time we had there.

Day 6 - March 26

The plan for today had been to dive the El Faroud which is another Artificial wreck off the Blue Grotto. However when we got there it was extremely rough and completely blown out. Four of us took advantage of Malta being such a small island and hopped across the island to Valetta to dive HMS Maori, while the remainder opted to sun themselves back at the apartment.

HMS Maori was a Tribal class destroyer which during WW2 was one of the six which attacked the Bismark in extremely rough conditions and one of three which torpedoed two Italian Cruisers before entering Valetta harbour to a hero's welcome. She was later bombed in the harbour (after most of the crew had been removed- see end) which blew her in half and the bow section is the bit which can now be dived.

Swimming out on a bearing of 020 from the entry point we went over the drop off and landed right on the bow. We entered the ship through the large hole on the starboard side and swam through to the stern - this is a very eery penetration, many things are still recognisable as parts of a ship and you can get a good feel for being inside a WWII destroyer. We saw a few rainbow and cuckoo wrasse, we swam along the deck and looked at some of the red mullet and found a small flat fish before swimming up through a hole in the bridge and then back to the entry point.

We did this dive again which was a bit of an anti-climax as it's a cracking site for one dive but as it's so shallow you have plenty of time to explore on the first dive and there's not much left for the second dive.

Day 7 - March 27

Home...Sweet...Home

Not content with the photo I also got given a torch (my old one had flooded) and a signed dive guide (Sam reckons I should encourage this!) Thanks to everyone for making it a great trip.

End notes:

1. Diving with a cold isn't a good plan- I forgot to take a sudafed before the second dive on the Maori and ended up with practically no hearing and titinus in one ear for a 2-3 months afterwards. Not a pleasant experience.
2. I believe there was one casualty when HMS Maori was Bombed and this was in the stern part of the wreck (Which is still somewhere in the Grand harbour) there were no casualties in the bow section which we dived, and this is regularly dived by both local and foreign divers.