



Malta
March 2001

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Trip report by James Donnelly Edited by John Kendall

Starring:

- Ed "Sudafed Junkie" Coney
- James "Heavy Sleeper" Donnelly
- "Cheshire" Kat Hadfield
- Jim "Pants" Harper
- Adrian "Snap-happy" Hart
- Jenny "Squeamish" Ireland
- John "Wetsuit" Kendall
- Lydia "Back-seat Driver" Lobo
- Ed "Toilet Training" Pain
- Marion "Take That Road" Prosser
- Phil "Portable Sun" Rae
- Richard "Maruti Maintenance" van der Hoff
- Helen "The Body" Whiting

And co-starring Special Guest:

- Chris "Dark Side" Pirry

Day 0 - Sunday - Airplane!

After [last year's](#) little escapades ("Is that a compressed gas cylinder in your baggage or are you just pleased to see me?") the annual delegation of Malta-bound divers rolled up to Heathrow in the sure and certain knowledge that nothing could possibly go wrong. Amazingly, we were nearly right, in spite of John having "accidentally" drunk a large number of interesting cocktails the previous night. [*However I was certain everything was going to go wrong, and was pleasantly suprised*] So to the check-in desk, where John and Phil amused Air Malta by checking in together with an entire person's allowance-worth of excess baggage between them, in spite of the 30kg limit. "We're part of a large group", explained John, "and the others don't have any dive kit. Honest." Incredibly, they believed him, and we were checked in a good 25 minutes before take-off. As getting past security would take all the rest of our duty-free gin buying time, this classed as an emergency, so we used the Fast Track lane. They waved us through without so much as a raised eyebrow.

Landing at night in Malta, we were bussed to the familiar Sands Apartments in St. Paul's Bay, and dragged selves and kit up the steps. Jim and Ed C announced that they needed a beer, but whether they ever found one at ten past midnight on Sunday in a Catholic country is unrecorded, as the rest of us crashed and slept. [*Editor's Note: A large contingent of the rest of us, found beer near EdC and Jim, and so played this game as well*]

Day 1 - Monday - Blue Grotto

A somewhat cloudy and breezy morning. Had we come to the right island? Any doubts were dispelled by the unforgettable noise of Maruti engines as the CUUEG fleet rolled up and were proudly fitted with their team flags, lovingly crafted by Helen and Marion. How long would it be before we blew one up? After a short fuff with dive permits and cylinders, we sold our SD trainees (Helen, Marion and Lydia) to the instructors at Maltaqua and set off for Marfa Point, the traditional first day site.

40 minutes was how long it took to blow up a Maruti. Halfway to Marfa, Rich's engine made a funny noise and the exhaust produced a thick cloud of white smoke, slightly scaring John who was tailgating him at the time, now in zero vis. We stopped, regrouped and restarted Rich's engine, which seemed to be running as well as ever and making "who, me?" noises.

[*At this point, I think I need to point out that the Maruti Man had handed over the keys WITHOUT doing any paperwork, saying, I'll come round this evening to deal with it, this could have been an error*]

At Marfa, the wind was blowing a northwesterly force 5ish straight onto the rocks, and diving there suddenly didn't seem appealing. Fortunately, in Malta, you can always hide behind the island, so we hacked our way off south to the Blue Grotto, a pleasure-boat harbour with

some gentle scenic wall diving among clouds of tiny fish to get us used to warm water again. Kat, who would spend the entire week spotting marine life no-one else could see, found a cuttlefish and Phil an octopus. We might have seen more octopi but a Maltese diver was spotted leaving with his pockets full!

Coming up from the first dive, John had the pleasant experience of a scantily-clad Maltese girl being thrown straight at him. [*Thanks Lads!*] It was a bank holiday and the site was obviously popular with the schoolkids - as you could tell by the number of bottles on the seabed, which proved very hard to lift with air. Jim emerged wearing a large pair of pants over his suit. We can only imagine how they were lost.

As the shops were shut, we were reduced to eating in a pub (damn!) that night, and found the bar next to the dive shop was selling beer at 50 cents (about 75p) a pint and had a pool table. Surprisingly, we never made it to downtown St. Paul's Bay all week.

Day 2 - Tuesday - Marfa Point

A calm day, and with the wind set to blow from the northwest all week we took our chance to dive the Rozi. A tugboat sunk as a dive site, she sits right way up in 35m and makes a great underwater photo. And speaking of photos, where was Ed Pain's camera? Oh yes, he'd left it in the middle of the road outside the apartments when we left. D'oh! The two Eds screeched off at high speed to retrieve it, whereupon the divers from the Sands penthouse arrived, and handed it over. In fact they'd be picking up stuff we left lying around all week, though we weren't quite so grateful when this extended to borrowing our weightbelts.

Worries over, we set off for the wreck. As it suddenly appeared out of the clear blue water, Rich and I bolted for it with big grins on our faces - so big that Phil asked us later how much we remembered. For variety, John got lost on the way back from the wreck rather than the way out this year, but the Rozi's anchor prevented him striking out for Sicily. He did however get a furious rate of beeping from his arm, when wearing two Aladin computers (to compare the algorithms) he put them both into deco at once. He eventually emerged rather sheepishly having breathed down half his pony, whilst his buddy Kat still had 60 bar in her 12l tank. Those of us on 15s muttered about photosynthesis.

[But having been the only pair to see the Baracuda, Kat and I were glad I got us a little lost :-)]

Scene of the day: Rich's wetsuited legs sticking out from under a jeep: "Phil, I think I've fixed it!"

We had a second dive at Marfa as well, playing in the swimthrough and admiring the statue of the Virgin Mary placed at 20m by a Maltese club (plastic flowers and all.) Kat and Ed P found two and a half octopi between them - perhaps a family? Getting changed, Jim briefly exposed himself to the world atop the harbour wall, but made up for it by cooking bangers and mash for tea.

Day 3 - Wednesday - Zonqor Point

We got a bit lost today.

Deciding to dive at the eastern end of the island, we set off along the coast road, with Phil and Adrian in the lead. For some reason the route involved going twice all the way round a roundabout in Valletta just to turn round, getting the convoy stuck in the same dead end twice, splitting up and driving round and round the backstreets of St. Thomas' Bay getting some amused looks from a set of workmen. Eventually we found the point, a rocky promontory with old salt pans and very little shade, and two tugboats sunk about 200m offshore.

After nearly going diving in completely the wrong place, we surface-swam out on a bearing and continued it underwater to pick up a bottom line leading to the smaller wreck; a line off the bows connects it to the larger. Both are absolutely covered in marine life, including several very pretty species of nudibranch, with whom Kat fell immediately in love ("I want one as a pet. I'm sure they're intelligent, you know,") and Adrian's camera was kept busy. The larger wreck's cabins are easy swim-throughs, though the toilet is a bit small for comedy photo poses. Both can easily be explored in one dive, unless you miss them altogether (Rich and John, who claimed the piles of sand were very interesting.)

Rich and John headed off back to Maltaqua for air, while the rest of us played how-many-ants-can-you-get-stuck-to-the-jam, much to Jenny's disgust. Two hours pass and no cylinders. It probably wasn't wise to send the pair who missed the wreck to navigate home again, even with Kat and Marion's help - they got resoundingly lost both ways and saw some very obscure bits of Malta, but did return with a set of newly qualified trainees who shore-covered the second dive so we could all go in at once. It suddenly felt a bit unpleasantly crowded on the wrecks, especially as Rich and John made it this time, and I won washing-up duty with the most sarcastic underwater comment of the trip ("You two. Here. Well done!") Ed C did the Titanic pose on the small wreck, and I posed as a figurehead, but the signal "My bosom isn't big enough for this job" seemed to confuse him. On the way back, Rich and John lost Malta, and surfaced to find they'd been heading for Crete. Tee hee.

Amazingly, no-one got lost on the way home; Phil navigated by the sun, which seems much more reliable than Maltese road maps, and John invented the jeep windscreen wash, involving a passenger standing up with a bottle of water whilst travelling at speed. All the trainees passed their theory exams to become our newest Sports Divers, and John mused on whether he could get girls into bed by sleeping with the Frosties.

Day 4 - Thursday - Das Boot (Comino)

How many divers can you fit on a boat? Maltaqua seemed to think the answer was the best part of thirty, and they were just about right, if you didn't mind falling over kit everywhere and having nowhere to sit. Our first dive was at Lantern Point, where a chimney and cavern lead down from the 6m shelf to emerge at 25m amongst the boulders and walls. Those who had been before had no trouble finding it, with Jim glaring at anyone who put a fin anywhere near the bottom, and we had a play under a huge boulder in about 28m before wall-diving back up to the 6m shelf against a bit of a downward current over the edge.

John's drysuit, which had given him a worryingly damp knee the previous day, had now given him two wet legs in spite of much Aquaseal. On the roof of the boat, it was obvious Lydia had prepared lunch, which contained such delights as mozzarella and sundried tomato salad, lettuce and individually wrapped chocolate bars in addition to the usual bread'n'spam'n'Nutella. Rich and Kat went for a snorkel, and fortunately "feeding the fish" only involved bread, [and batteries - long story] provoking a frenzy among the damselfish that could be seen from the roof of the boat.

The second dive at Comino Caves was even more crowded as everyone pegged it straight for the interesting cavern system to get there while the vis was still good. In the huge cavern, which has a sunlit air-pocket, an arch inside it you can swim over or under and many other exits, Jim behaved like a conger, darting in and out of holes to see if they were still where he remembered them. He even hid in a hole only just large enough for one diver to try and leap out at the trainees, but the bubbles gave him away. Meanwhile Lydia mistook John for her instructor in spite of the neon webbing, and John and Kat found that it's hard to eat Mars Bars underwater when you start laughing at your buddy failing to eat a Mars Bar underwater.

After a queue to get back on the boat caused by Chris' DL rescue assessment lifting Helen up the ladder (those in the queue uncharitably suggested parbuckling), we made our way back to shore, John cursing the name of Oceanic as he poured two inches of water out of his boots but being very glad of his [Weezle!](#)

In the evening we pulled out of the Maltaqua bowling trip on the grounds of being knackered, but went to St. Julian's anyway and ate in a restaurant - rather posher than most dive trip evening meals. Coming home, John and Phil set off in opposite directions, and John's jeep, navigating by the stars, returned via two car parks and Mosta cathedral (those with [maps of Malta](#) will mutter about right-angled triangles). Indeed, John's driving was so much its usual style that it even provoked a "F--king hell, John!" out of Jim in payback for last year.

Day 5 - Friday - The Faroud / Ghar Lapsi / St. Paul's Bay

This year we made it to the El Faroud, an artificially-wrecked oil tanker in 40m off the Blue Grotto. While John (wearing a wetsuit!) [Grrr] and Phil took the new SDs on a wall dive similar to the first day, the rest of us swam out on a bearing from the point and all just about hit the stern of the wreck in spite of the current. It's quite a big boat, really, and with the deck at 25m and the longish swim there only the non-breathing could make it to the bows, but we all had a good poke around the superstructure. Penetration was possible but discouraged, as none of us had enough air and loops of electrical cable said "uncuttable snag hazard" everywhere, but the bridge was accessible and offered good views. Rich won the Comedy Profile Award by dropping his torch 8m to the deck, and nearly put his computer into deco going to fetch it. Allowing for the current, we swam back to shore to end a spectacular wreck dive.

Our second dive was at Ghar Lapsi, a bay just along the coast with a fun flat cavern system from 4-6m with enough exits to feel very safe in spite of the low ceiling. It also contained an octopus, which seemed a little put out at our invasion but still stuck around till we returned. The cavern system leads out onto the reef, and Ed C and I followed a spur out into the sea, finding a big fish (I'm no marine biologist, OK?) to annoy with torches and a spectacular vista from the end of the spur. Meanwhile the new SDs found two more octopi, but didn't go through the caves. On the way back, I managed to set a record for nonchalance by actually falling asleep in John's jeep while he was driving it.

With an early flight on Sunday and therefore no diving on Saturday, we decided a night dive would round the trip off nicely, and so went diving in St. Paul's Bay itself, just round the corner from the apartments. A shallow dive with a 6m maximum, it was a good introduction for those of us who hadn't night dived before, and several pairs saw octopi, though some of these turned out to be other divers! The rest saw mainly weed and fish by torchlight, and phosphorescence in the dark.

At last we made it home for John's famous chilli, complete with HotSauce™, and Lydia's chocolate biscuit cake and ice cream. We all muttered about going out, and then fell asleep, Rich and I exactly where we were on the sofa. If only Rich had put his beer down first. It must have been a very comfy sofa as we happily spent half the night there.

Day 6 - Saturday - Valletta

A lie-in on Saturday morning came as a relief, and once we'd returned our kit to Maltaqua half the group went for a coastal walk in the blazing sunshine around the Blue Grotto whilst the sensible half went to Valletta to shop and sat under a sunshade with beer and ice-cream. Meeting under the same sunshade for a late lunch, we failed to visit the cathedral as its Saturday lunch break runs from 12 till 4 (I want to work for the Maltese church!) and returned home to take the trip photos, frantically reassemble the Marutis and pack. After an evening in the bar, we turned in fairly early in anticipation of the joys of the next day.

Day 6½ - Sunday - Airplane! II The Sequel

We've all got up at stupid o'clock in the morning for CUUEG before, but this was pushing it. The plane left at 7. Check-in at 6. Bus left the apartments at 5. Alarm clocks set for 4:30am, except that of course the clocks chose that night to go forward. So it was really 3:30. Yawn. Sleepy, hung over and dishevelled, we nonetheless made it back to a traditional UK welcome of grey skies and cold winds, and air temperatures half of the Maltese water temperature at 20m. But we didn't mind. Especially not Phil, who was flying straight off to Oman. We hadn't made it to Gozo, or dived the Maori, so we'll have to go back, and the Jim Harper Sweepstake prize remained unclaimed, but we'd all had a wonderful week's diving nonetheless. Many thanks to John for organising such a great trip!