



Malta
17-24th March 2002

There were two nuns in a bath...

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Trip Report by Steve Clark

CUUEG Divers

- Robin Basu-Roy
- Steve Clark
- Tina Collier
- Kirstin Croney
- Geoff Elliott
- Liz Elliott
- Emma Faid
- Jim Harper
- Roger Hulbert
- Ian Hylands
- John Kendall
- Hannah Lim
- Ugo Mayor
- Zoryana Oliynyk
- Michaela Reichmann
- Max Salven
- Ruth Seager
- Matt Worsley

CamBSAC Divers

- Mark Anson
 - Luis Briseno
 - Toby Chamberlin
 - Maria
 - Padds
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Sunday 17th March 2002

My holiday started with a tasty Weatherspoons' breakfast in Terminal 4, good, solid, greasy preparation for a long day...

Post September 11th security measures were well in place at Heathrow, Matt got searched and I had to remove my shoes to put through the X-ray machine. No major hassles with diving kit that we're aware of and we all boarded the Air Malta flight with no problems.

A few minutes into the flight, I started talking to a friendly guy sat in the window seat, after his bottle of now pressurised mineral water exploded over the pair of us. I introduced myself and described our trip and we sat chatting for a few minutes before he told me he was called Luis, worked in Cambridge and happened to also be on the CUUEG trip. Cheers for the introduction John.

We landed in Malta, after superb views of Gozo and Comino. All the baggage made it and we were quickly bused off to Maltaqua's 'Sands' Apartments. The apartments were plush. After settling in we got on with important post-arrival activities: beer and food. We ventured down to the harbour for a few beers, ate out at a local restaurant and we were introduced to the qualities of Maltese food and service, the latter could be aptly described as "relaxed".

Monday 18th March 2002

A quick breakfast, and we headed to Maltaqua to get kitted out and meet the instructors. Kirstin, Ian, Mark, Matt and I were grouped with 'Commando' Graham. The debate regarding octopus placement and "donating the primary" soon followed, with Graham making it very clear that we would be doing things his way whilst we did our training.

Our diving for the week started with a 6m dive at Qawra Point, near St Paul's. After some basic skills we had a bit of a swim and saw lots of rocks and sand and rocks and sand and rocks. Water temperature was a balmy 16°C, still, some of the Maltaqua suits weren't exactly toastie.

Max had a bad cold and was felling pretty bad after the first dive, having filled his mask with blood and given himself serious sinus-ache he sat out the rest of the day and ended up being out of action for the whole week. The second dive of the day was much

the same, but a bit deeper. Kirstin managed to spot an octopus on the way back.

The evening was spent disassembling tables from various apartments, to form a big one in preparation for John's legendary chilli. HotSauce™ is indeed HOT and even without kidney beans (which were accidentally left on the shelf in the shop) the chilli was excellent.

Tuesday 19th March 2002

We sorted kit, bought lunch, loaded cylinders and piled out in the vans to Ghar Lapsi on the far side of the island. It was a beautiful warm day and Lapsi is a terrific place to dive from. When we arrived we headed down the slipway to the water's edge for a briefing by Graham, interrupted briefly when Matt went arse over tit after slipping on some seaweed on the path. Probably one of the mistakes to make before you go down there in full kit. As we walked back up the slipway, we were greeted by the smell of burning clutch as John endeavoured to hill-start the Maruti and get back up to the road.

The "lagoon" at Ghar Lapsi, it was a beautiful day!



The first dive was out of the left-hand bay through a rock gully. I took a couple of photos and stashed the camera in my BC pocket (never to be seen again although myself and Matt did try and snorkel for the escaped item).

The second dive of the day was navigation skills on the sandy bottom at 10m: Take 40 fin strokes on a bearing, turn round and 40 more should land you where you started. However, when you can see where you started when you turn around, the compass is pretty irrelevant.

In the evening we went out for pizza to celebrate Hannah's birthday and headed down to a local restaurant not far from the apartments. The pizzas were delicious and very well priced and Hannah had a good night.

Wednesday 20th March 2002

On Wednesday we dived off Manoel Island (apparently the site of some WW2 submarine pens). We used the entry point for Corelita barge dive, but we didn't get that far round. As well as permanent SMB practice (and some underwater portraits) we were going to play at being dive leaders, and each had to prepare a briefing before leading the dive.



Manoel Island from Valetta and Valetta from Manoel Island.



In the interval of our first dive we watched a very large ferry run over the SMB of Antonio's dive group. Although we were slightly concerned, Graham was fairly unflapped so we didn't think too much of it in the end - Antonio's group apparently didn't even notice. Our second dive (leading) was quite good fun although my briefing was a complete f**k-up. The dive introduced to the pleasures of sunken crap (a la Gildenburgh) - a car seat, shopping trolley, truck wheel...

JK, Rog, Ruth, Jim went on a night dive that night whilst a few of us stayed as surface cover. "Night dive" is a debatable term for JK and Roger's dive - John's portable sunshine lighting up the water for several metres around them - wasn't very difficult for us on the beach to follow their progress! We managed to lose our keys somehow and then Hannah, Tina and Michaela cooked for us all.



Jim and Ruth before their night dive in Slugs Bay.

Thursday 21st March 2002

Roger joined our group as we kicked off the sports diver open water dives. Today we were diving off Zonquor Point on the Eastern coast of Malta. The first dive was filled with rescue drills: tows, AV, landing casualties (clambering up the rocks avoiding sea urchins). At the end of the dive we saw a Sea Hare too.

We had to borrow reg set from local dive shop – only to find octopus didn't actually work and Graham was greeted with a mouth full of water when I did my AAS drill (of course with donating the primary and necklace backup this wouldn't have happened). Matt and I peeled 10lbs of potatoes for Jim's Bangers and mash. (Or was that meal yesterday...?)

Friday 22nd March 2002

Today we took the opportunity to join the experienced guys on the Maltaqua charter hard boat, to dive off Gozo and Comino. After loading the kit, we bagged the best seat on the boat – right at the front with an excellent view. As the boat started to manoeuvre, we were slightly worried by the closing of all the cabin windows behind our heads. Our doubts were confirmed as we were hit by a wave as we rounded the harbour wall. Two more waves and we elected to move to the roof, and laughed as Matt's cap took off and joined my camera for retirement in the Mediterranean.

We went out to Fessej Rock, a rock pinnacle in 50m just off Gozo and a renowned wall-dive. John 'I don't like boats' Kendall and Emma were pretty green by this stage and were looking eager to get wet. After a briefing from Graham we piled into the water and descended as buddy pairs to 20m. The bottom was way down in the blue and in the excellent vis it really did feel like flying. We circumnavigated the pinnacle at 20m, in shoals of tiny fish. The surface of the rock was teeming with star fish, sea anemones and 'stuff'.

We were met by John and Emma, making their ascent from depth on torpedoes. We'd been able to see them (several tens of metres!) below us ploughing around on the DPVs for some considerable time, I'm sure "nitrogen happiness" featured in JK and Emma's

reports of their dive! Our buoyancy control was getting better and we held a mid-water simulated deco-stop at 3m - excellent dive, really starting to see and do stuff apart from spot rocks and do mask clearing drills.

During the surface interval, the boat put into Gozo harbour to let people recover from sea-sickness. Before long they were fixed and tucked into bananas and Nutella for lunch. The planned second dive site at Comino Caves was blown out and we opted for an untried site on the sheltered side of the island. This had the best visibility of any dive all week.

We piled in and did CBLs, tows, AV and boat-landing rescues. Congratulations must go to Kirstin who managed to carry my fat arse up the ladder. Matt also learnt an important lesson in buoyancy by trying to carry two wet belts at once and realising some serious water-treading was required to keep an extra 20 kilos at the surface successfully!

Following a quick dive around the reef with some reg retrieval and mask clearing practice we surfaced and got back aboard the boat. The swell had picked up for the return trip and we decided to keep the wetsuits on. John however, had got changed and ended up piss wet through - just like his Maruti which had been drenched by waves all afternoon in its quayside parking spot.

Saturday 23rd March 2002

Today we got to dive a real wreck, the Um El Faroud at Blue Grotto. We descended as soon as we got in and swam out to the wreck at 10m to avoid the swell. Was very exciting to watch the wreck appear Titanic-style out of the blueness. The Faroud is a Libyan gas-tanker which was deliberately scuttled in 1996 to provide diver fodder. We did a lap of the upper deck in a follow-my-leader style chain of divers, Graham at the front, Emma bringing up the rear.

The wreck looked mightily fascinating but, as newly-qualified Sports Divers, our instructions had been very clear: swim, look, follow-me. Thus Matt's ambiguous signal, "Point your torch in there" was interpreted by Emma as "How about it Steve? You fancy a wreck penetration?" and was greeted with a stern finger-wagging!

Ian had been running low on air and was getting a bit floaty in his almost-empty aluminium cylinder as we did a safety stop at 6m, before we surfaced into considerable swell. I didn't appreciate exactly how out of air he was until he needed to borrow my cylinder to dry his dust cap!



Happy divers following our first ever wreck dive on the Faroud: Kirstin, Tina, Matt, Graham, Steve, Michaela, Ian

On the way back to the shop we were entertained by Graham's endless sexist jokes – well at least now I know what W.I.F.E. stands for... Since we were due to fly in 24 hours, diving was off for the afternoon, so eleven of us packed into John's Maruti and set off for Valetta. The journey was interesting to say the least and we all prayed for our lives as Ruth tried desperately to conceal Michaela's splayed legs from the Maltese truck drivers, who were edging ever closer to get a better view.



How to load a Maruti. Clockwise - Steve, Rog, Matt, Michaela, Kirstin, Tina, Max, Ian and Ruth in the middle.



We toured the tacky gift shops before everyone met up again and we had a brief tour of the cathedral. To get full value from the jeep hire, JK took the jeeps off-roading on the way home before we all headed out for a meal. Agnes at Maltaqua had organised the meal at the 'Incognito' restaurant in St Paul's. It was good food and we were all presented with our hard-earned Sports Diver certificates.

We all went out into St. Pauls after the meal for beers (and tequila!) The bouncers at the Salsa bar didn't like our shorts so we ended up in 'Reflections' – possibly the tackiest nightclub I have ever seen (and I live in Blackpool).

Sunday 24th March 2002

We flew home... not much else to say!

Thanks to Emma, John and everyone for organising a great trip.

Quotes

- Michaela (whilst revising for SD theory test) – "What does DCS stand for then?"
 - Numerous females (on the nun joke) - "Oh, I get it – It's not meant to be funny, right?"
 - Matt - "I don't believe in any of that nitrogen micro-bubble shit."
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Lost

- **Proper Camera (Ian)**
 - **Cheap Camera (Steve)**
 - **Snorkel (Ruth)**
 - **Dive knife (Roger)**
 - **Hat (Matt)**
 - **Fins (Matt)**
 - **Temper (Emma)**
 - **Stomach contents (John)**
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