

# Scuba diving as Mediterranean Culture. Preservation and presentation of Gozo's maritime heritage

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## S U M M A R Y

Heritage Malta and the Malta Tourism Authority have recently endeavored to increase "quality tourism" in the Maltese Islands. One way of doing so is by encouraging cultural tourism in Malta and Gozo, and by preserving the maritime heritage of the islands by presenting Malta as a premier diving destination. This is in contrast to the "sun, sea, and sand" image that has disappointed recent tourism statistics in Malta. This study discusses the ways in which Gozitans are preserving their maritime heritage through diving and how they are presenting this avenue of heritage to the public and divers as potential tourists.

## A R T I C L E I N F O

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Anthropology of tourism, artificial reefs, Malta, marine studies, shipwrecks, spear fishing, underwater archaeology

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### ***Introduction***

Malta declared independence from Great Britain in 1964 and is now a republic in the process of joining the European Union. As a result, Malta is dependent upon tourism as a source of economic, and thus political, independence, as natural resources are limited to small farms and vineyards, fishing, salt production, and limestone quarries. This poses many problems as the influx of tourism has had a similar effect on Maltese culture and identity as colonization had until 1964, that is, modern Maltese question their identity in the scope of a world that draws strict separation between East and West, Arab and Christian. Furthermore, Malta is already the most densely populated country in Europe, and the hundreds of thousands of tourists who enter each year only add to the physical congestion of the islands. (9) In addition to the "sun, sea and sand" tourism Malta has seen since the 1950s, (5,8) The Maltese archipelago, conveniently situated in the middle of the Mediterranean and roughly equidistant from Sicily and Tunisia, has been continuously colonized since 700 B.C. by the Phoenicians, Romans, Arabs, Knights of the Order of St. John, Turks, and Brits.

The maritime heritage of the islands extends back to Neolithic times, when the original colonizers came by boat from Sicily around 5000 B.C. (13) Thousands of years later, in 700 B.C., the Phoenicians came and coexisted with the indigenous Maltese, setting up colonies there and throughout the Mediterranean. The Phoenicians of course are known for their highly advanced navigational and boat-making skills and their precocious knowledge of currents and winds during the Bronze Age and Classical periods. Their colonization of Malta is evidenced by numerous tomb sites, grave goods, and most importantly, the Semitic basis of the Maltese language, which appropriately resembles Lebanese in dialect. (6,16)

The Romans advanced on Phoenician and Greek maritime skills and constructed a villa in Ramla Bay on the north shore of Gozo. There are also three Roman shipwrecks in Xlendi Bay, and numerous anchor stocks and amphorae have been recovered and are housed with the villa artifacts in the Archaeology Museum in the Citadel in Victoria (Rabat), Gozo. Also in the Citadel is the medieval Old Prison, where the Knights carved various sailing ships into the limestone walls where they were held captive for short time periods, usually for petty crimes. (6)

The Arabian heritage is more complicated and emotional, as they were recorded as being brutal pirates on the Mediterranean who committed all but genocide on the Maltese islands. Likewise, the Turks are passionately hated, and their heritage survives in the form of architecture and in legends such as that of San Dimitri Point (see Research), which do not leave the Ottomans standing in a positive light. This is in stark contrast with the late Roman heritage which, as legend has it, brought Christianity to the islands when St. Paul suffered a shipwreck off the coast of Melite, commonly believed to be Malta. (6) Modern Maltese claim Catholicism as their primary religious affiliation.

The British invasion offers a more direct and current link, as the Royal Navy is from whom the first Maltese scuba divers obtained their second-hand gear. Divers in Malta and Gozo were interested originally only in spear fishing for food and sport during the early 1950s. (16)

As for the fishing industry, modern Gozitans have, despite Westernization and modernization, maintained much integrity, continuing to use some traditional methods. They still employ wooden luzzus, bamboo fish traps, and the long fishing poles that are used without a reel. However, most do not use hand-made sails anymore, and their luzzus are equipped with motors. This form of heritage is also under threat of modernization with coming generations of fishermen, and ef-

forts are being made to encourage perpetuation of traditional methods and conservation of personal knowledge of individual fishermen who do still subscribe to the old way. (14) An example of the importance of this heritage is that the luzzu is represented with oars on the 10-cent piece in Maltese currency, however this is soon to change with their acceptance into the European Union and adoption of the Euro in 2007.

### ***Methodology***

I spent one month in Malta, and most of it was on the island of Gozo. I lived in Xlendi, on the south shore of the island, for three weeks and three days, and in Xaghra, in the north central part of Gozo, for four days. Research results are based on personal observation and interviews. I interviewed fishermen, divers, a member of Heritage Malta, an employee of Heritage Malta, a museum attendant for Heritage Malta, and three employees of the Malta Tourism Authority. I cross-examined the Maritime Museum in Nadur, Gozo with the Maritime Museum in Vittoriosa, Malta, both of which contain some of the first diving gear from the 1950s. I dove eight different dive sites in the waters around Gozo during my stay there, including the Karwela, one of the recently scuttled cruise ships at Xatt L'Aħmar.

### ***Research Preservation***

Modern Gozitans and the tourists who visit the island make decisions, directly and indirectly, as to what aspects of heritage will be preserved and what will slip into historical realms. Through scuba diving as a sports industry, Gozitans have the opportunity to preserve their heritage by scuttling deliberate wrecks to create dive sites and artificial reefs for the protection of local and migrating marine life. The tugboat Rozi was deliberately sunk off Malta's west coast in 1991 and is a very popular dive site. The Carolita barge was sunk by a torpedo in 1942 off Manoel Island, and other deliberate shipwrecks include the Um El Faroud and the Imperial Eagle, the sister ship to Jaques-Yves Cousteau's Calypso, but the location of these wrecks are too far away for Gozo dive excursions, as is the esoteric location of the Blenheim Bomber, vaguely found off the southeast coast of Malta (2,11) (Map). The Xlendi is, contrary to its name, near Gozo's harbour Mgarr, but a recent storm turned it upside down, so the interior is currently inaccessible to divers (2,16) (Map).

In a €1.2 million effort to increase diving tourism in Gozo, two cruise ships, the Karwela and the Cominoland, were scuttled at Xatt L'Aħmar on August 12, 2006. These new attractions will promote growth of both marine life and Gozo's

tourism industry and reputation as an exciting diving destination. I dove the Karwela one week after being scuttled and can attest to the romantically eerie dichotomy of a cruise boat 37 m under the surface of the Mediterranean.

Not all shipwrecks are available to divers, despite their tantalizing proximity to Gozo's coast. Three Roman shipwrecks were found in Xlendi Bay, 50 m deep. This is outside the safe diving range for recreational diving. The portions of the wrecks that were accessible to recreational diving in the bay were excavated by archaeologists to deter pilfering. The remainders of the wrecks await future excavation. (14) This shows a genuine concern for the wrecks' preservation as well as the urgency for funding to execute a professional and thorough excavation of all three Roman sites. There has been an ongoing contention between the Maltese diving community and archaeology community over the looting of underwater historical sites. Archaeological researchers must record sites that have been altered manually and robbed of artifacts. Some members of the older diving generation of the 60s and 70s have brought forth pilfered items of antiquity from private collections that will assist professionals in establishing the status of underwater heritage sites in Maltese waters, thus enabling them to more accurately piece together the complex history of the islands.<sup>4</sup> The Malta Tourism Authority (MTA) website encourages divers who encounter artifacts on the seafloor to leave them in situ and report the location and artifact descriptions to federal authorities to ensure proper heritage site protocol.<sup>7</sup>

A popular dive site near Dwejra in Gozo is San Dimitri Point, which preserves a popular legend, or imagined heritage. This aspect of preservation is common in Gozo, evidenced by the rumor that the island is the mythical isle of Calypso where the nymph detained Odysseus for seven years in her cave (Homer's *Odyssey*), and there are even local legends surrounding Neolithic sites as well. (13)

The legend of San Dimitri Point is that there was an old widow who lived with her beloved only son in an unassuming cottage next the chapel of San Dimitri on Dwejra Point. When Turkish invaders came to enslave the woman's son, taking him down the cliffs in bonds, the widow ran to the chapel, praying to San Dimitri to return to her the son. The painting in the chapel came alive, and San Dimitri rode away toward the pirate vessel on his white horse, whisking away the boy and returning him to his mother. Then San Dimitri vanished back into the two-dimensional painting. The faithful widow lit an oil lamp under the painting every day, religiously, until the chapel crumbled and fell into the sea.

Some years later, a ship was anchored at San Dimitri Point, but the anchor could not be removed from the seabed. The captain sent divers down to investigate, and they returned breathless with excitement and disbelief. They discovered the chapel, still intact with a light mysteriously burning inside. The chapel's interior was miraculously unaffected by the fact that it was 30 m underwater. (1) Reportedly, divers still occasionally see the light from the lamp that was lit in gratitude and faith so many years ago by a pious widow. (11)

Although spear fishing is how diving started in the Maltese islands, as opposed to sponge diving in western Mediterranean coastal areas, dive instructors have made an unofficial pact to ban spear fishing, especially in Gozo. This is due to the widespread awareness of over fishing in the Mediterranean, which affects the waters on both an environmental and aesthetic level. If waters are drastically over fished and the fish who remain are skittish of human contact, the tourists will have one less reason to dive in Malta. Another reason for the ban is simple good sportsmanship. The fish must compete with a diver who has a tank strapped to his/her back and is armed with a spear gun. Some Gozitan dive instructors go so far as to check the automobiles of independent divers renting tanks from local dive centers for spear fishing equipment. If evidence of the intention to spearfish in Maltese waters is found, tanks will not be rented or filled. As Joe of St. Andrew's Divers Cove said in an interview, if divers wish to shoot something, he will rent them a camera and put their digital photographs on a disc so that they can enjoy the images of marine life for years to come without anyone being harmed. Many Gozitan divers are also vegetarian, living by the "if you don't eat me, I won't eat you" adage. This has been the unofficial stance since the early 1990s. (16)

Divers have been known to develop close bonds with individual marine inhabitants, as in the case with the grouper off the coast of Comino, who had been handfed hard-boiled eggs and small fish by local and visiting divers for years.

The grouper grew to 120 kg and was both a tourist attraction and a pet. In 1993, an Italian diver and spear fisher was diving that site and killed the grouper with a spear gun. After discovering this, a Gozitan dive master armed with his rage and his dive knife was in hot pursuit of the Italian, each on his respective speedboat, with the intention of "an eye for an eye." Fortunately for the Italian, his boat was faster, and he escaped unharmed. Thus the grouper's life remained unavenged.<sup>16</sup> Thus far, the Maltese government has not taken the initiative to officially outlaw spear fishing in national waters, although strict licensing is the norm. (7)

As with other aspects of heritage preservation, funding is an inconvenient but integral part to a successful preservation program. In the case of scuba diving as part of Gozo's preservation program, the funding comes from both group and individual sources. Group sources include the national government, with assistance from the European Union, which pays for projects such as the recent scuttling of the two cruise ships. They also maintain Web sites (see Presentation) to inform potential tourists of diving opportunities on the Maltese islands, and to assure diving tourists that there is now a hyperbaric chamber located at St. Luke's Hospital in Malta.<sup>7</sup> Other funding comes from small groups and individuals within the diving subculture and families of divers, mostly from northern Europe, who come to Malta and Gozo because of their reputation as a diving destination which offers good visibility, a variety of marine life, cave diving, wreck diving, and instructors with a wide variety of languages spoken and who represent all diving organizations from PADI to TDI and everything in between.

### ***Presentation***

If Maltese are to have any sort of financial gain from the heritage that they do preserve, it must also be presented in such a manner as to bring in responsible and informed foreign visitors, who will contribute funding, which in turn, can be used to perpetuate that heritage (Scheme).

Ironically, although placed in the geographic center of the Mediterranean, the Maltese islands are remarkably inaccessible. Sporadic ferries run between Sardegna, Tunis, Sicily, Tripoli, Naples, and the Lipari Islands, but none go to or from Greece, Spain, Egypt, Turkey or France. Direct flights go to most large cities in Europe, but for overseas travelers, the flights are horribly expensive and inefficient, with layovers of several hours, even days. Until recently, if tourists are residing in Gozo during the off-peak season, they also had to take into consideration that the Gozo Channel Line stops service at 18:00.

Recently, the ferry service was expanded to all 24 hours. However, on a micro level, once the tourists get to their residence in Gozo, transportation is easily made throughout the island by car rental agencies, public buses, inexpensive taxis, walking, and hitchhiking. Dive shops abound in every coastal city, with businesses located right on the waterfront in Xlendi, Mgarr, and Marsalforn. As was mentioned previously, the dive masters speak many European languages fluently, so they can communicate with almost anyone who wishes to dive or obtain open water certification. So

although the islands themselves may be comparably inaccessible to travelers, once the diving tourist is in Gozo, the certified dive shops are as plentiful and accommodating as bayside tourist markets.

The tourist markets actually promote diving by selling postcards of underwater scenery around Gozo's shores, including images of marine life (octopi, lobsters, barracudas, groupers, jellyfish, and nautiloids) and scuttled ships, mainly images of the Rozi and the Imperial Eagle, although soon enough postcard images of the Karwela and the Cominoland will flood tourist shops as well. Although these postcards are indubitably purchased by non-divers, divers use these as a way to stir memories of their diving experiences in Gozo. For example, on my 50th dive, which was the Blue Hole off Dwejra Point, we saw a small yellow seahorse. I did not have my camera with me on this dive, and the lighting was poor, as we were in a cave. Later, I was browsing in a tourist shop and saw a postcard of a seahorse. This of course reminded me of the one time I saw a seahorse in the wild.

The postcard serves as a nostalgic reminder to the specific events that occurred in a place far away and a time long ago, essentially halting space and time. (13) The other possible outcome is that if I had not seen a seahorse during my diving experiences in Gozo but had wanted to see one, I could have purchased the postcard to remind myself of what I missed, a reason to return to Gozo and dive again. Images are very closely linked with memory and imagination, and those non-divers who purchase postcards of underwater scenery may be compelled at some point to become Open Water certified so that they can experience those discoveries for themselves instead of depending upon the two-dimensional imagery of the postcard. I once traveled across the Greek mainland because of an image I saw on a postcard at a bus station in Athens. When traveling, people have the choice to make the ephemeral into something tangible, and some of them choose to do so. Postcards and tourist photography have the ability to de-contextualize the signified, thus unifying the signifier and signified, and making both the represented and idealized symbol into reality. (10,13)

Dive shops in Gozo also rent cameras to divers and put their photographic images on a disc for later recollection and to share their experiences with others upon their return to their home community. (16) This also promotes diving in Gozo through positive word-of-mouth to other divers and current non-divers who may eventually make a dive trip to Gozo or encourage others to do so based on their opinion of the visual memories provided by the original acquaint-

ance. In this age of Internet technology, the most obvious way that Gozitans can and do present their maritime heritage through diving is online. Many of the more prominent and prestigious dive shops have Websites that are well maintained and very professional, with maps of dive sites, photographs of typical underwater scenery, pricelists, and contact information. They list specialty courses that can be taken in areas such as cave, wreck, Nitrox, fish identification, search and recovery, stress and rescue, night, and deep diving. Many also sell guidebooks to dive sites around Malta and Gozo, popular fish identification guidebooks, and DVD documentaries of diving in Gozo. Over forty dive shops are advertised via links from the MTA Website alone. (7)

The MTA has also done an excellent job in promoting Gozo as a unique dive destination online. They advertise Gozo as an off-the-beaten-path destination for tranquility, emphasizing its leisurely pace of life, and they promote Gozitan culture, from wine to limestone heritage, to potential tourists. (5) In particular, Gozo's uniqueness for diving among the Maltese islands is shown through examples of marine life frequently encountered, relatively unpolluted waters, unique underwater geological structures, and underwater archaeological heritage. (7) They also promoted the recent scuttling of the *Karwela* and the *Cominoland*, appealing to the public with a press release that included the precise time, date, and location of the event. (6) However, the immediate gratification that Internet information provides can function as a double-edged sword.

Advertisement travels instantaneously online, as do news reports. During my stay in Gozo, father and son divers from Great Britain perished in waters off Marsalforn due to lung barotraumas, or burst lungs. This event flooded international newspapers and news Websites, and several tourists who had signed up for open water certification canceled due to the tragedy, not to mention the unknown numbers who altered their plans and were not even on the islands yet. (3) This single negative experience reflects, however unjustly, poorly upon the reputation for professionalism of Gozo's dive masters.

The dive masters of St. Andrew's Divers Cove, and perhaps others additionally, encourage diving tourists to bring up any trash found during the dive. They also organize clean-up crews in September to rake the waters clean of the tourist aftermath that winds down in late August. (15) However, during those summer months of heavy tourist influx, plastic bottles and cigarette butts are deliberately thrown and carried by the wind off boats and seaside restaurant tables and end up in the leeside of bays, washed by the currents along with scores of jellyfish. Glass bottles litter the bottom

of Xlendi Bay alongside waterlogged plastic bags. Although having one regular annual clean-up session after tourists leave the resort locations is the most convenient solution, a more frequent tidying is necessary to preserve marine life safety and present the bay to topside and diving tourists in a more pristine manner, thus encouraging longer and return vacations and ensuring a positive word-of-mouth reputation and photographic referrals to the island.

## Conclusions

Gozitans are undoubtedly concerned with both preservation and presentation of their maritime heritage, despite the reclusive private collections of some artifact-owners and the noted lack of current funding. This lack is being abated however, by the new push in "quality tourism," although that phrase implies a level of personal financial wealth that can't be met practically. (5,8) Four-star hotels remain empty or charge three star prices to maintain steady business. (15) The push should perhaps be rephrased to "responsible tourism" or "least-invasive tourism," which could result in an increase in cultural tourists and international students, not just wealthy sun and sea-goers who spend their time in hotels and beaches and rarely communicate with the indigenous society. The rise in "responsible tourism" would inevitably include an increase in diving tourists and tourists who are generally interested in the maritime heritage, as well as the agricultural, limestone, and Neolithic heritage, of Gozo, Malta, and the Mediterranean. (13) These are the groups and individuals who will ultimately make the difference in Malta's future of political independence and financial self-sufficiency, while enabling native Maltese to maintain their own cultural identity. Although culture, by definition, is perpetually in a state of constant evolution, from a historical and socio-political perspective, the Maltese have had thousands of years of experience in the maintenance of their unique identity and resilience to the powers of foreign influence.

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