

Forts, Temples & Diving...

by ALEX GALLEGO

When Alex Gallego and his wife Louise were planning their most recent holiday, they knew there were certain key factors that would influence their final decision on the whereabouts of their trip.

They wanted a destination that would cater to their diving passion, whilst providing them with an array of sights to see and places to visit!

After deliberation, Malta emerged as the winner and off they went for two weeks diving and temple touring on the Mediterranean island



wreck diving is a feature of Malta

WHEN PLANNING a summer holiday, some people have it quite clear: 'how is the diving?' However, sometimes it is not so black and white. Non-diving partners, children, pets, finances, other interests, etc. can all influence the choice of holidays. In our case, my wife Louise and I decided to go on a holiday to Malta.

Malta, Gozo and Comino, are situated in the Mediterranean, south of Sicily. The islands have been inhabited from the Stone Age through the wars between Turks and Christians to the Second World War as a British colony and then independence. The historic evidence of this rich past is everywhere, in ancient temples, medieval cities, and assorted forts and monuments. Our idea was to take all the dive gear except weights and cylinders and rent these from a diving centre, hiring a car to shore dive.

We flew from Glasgow one evening and the following morning walked along the seafront in Sliema and asked in several dive centres about cylinder rental for independent diving, as well as organised outings. Even though I was under the impression that independent diving was quite common, it looked like most centres were geared towards the usual commercial courses.

I had done some homework on the internet before travelling so I had a reasonable idea of what the local regulations were but we got widely varying advice about permits and medical requirements from various centres. After visiting several places, we chose Dive Systems, in St. Julian Bay, Sliema. They were welcoming and well organised but relaxed and friendly.

The following day we assembled at the dive centre and squeezed into a couple of rickety pickups to drive to the north west tip of the island, by the area of the Gozo ferry. We changed into our wetsuits by the shore and jumped into the RIB that took us to Comino where we dived Lantern Point.

It was a 34m dive for just over 40 minutes. With visibility in excess of 20m the highlights of the dive were a nice swimthrough cave discovering a cuttlefish, however the fish were very small and most of the algae were not

very colourful.

The plan for the afternoon was to dive some interconnecting caves in the north but the wind was from the wrong direction so we ended up half-way between the Blue Lagoon and Lantern Point. There we went into a narrow cave with a chimney ending in an air-space. We finished up in a narrow gully, open at the surface and just wide enough to squeeze the RIB through.

Three days later we decided to do our own diving, having by then hired a car. We decided to get a couple of cylinders each and my original intention had been to dive two wrecks in Valetta harbour. We knew where the first one was, *HMS Maori*, because we had seen divers going in the water when we visited Valetta the previous day. After a convoluted drive around Valetta, we found the right place to dive the *Maori*.

From the shore we took a compass bearing and swam off toward the wreck. *HMS Maori* itself is upright, partially buried in the sand and quite broken up, but that allows you to swim along the whole length of the superstructure inside the wreck with no fear of entrapment. It is also quite shallow (maximum depth that dive was just over 18m) so there was a lot of light filtering in through various openings.

We had been told about another wreck in the middle of one of the inlets of Valetta's Grand Harbour, so we drove off looking for it. After about half an hour we eventually gave up trying to find the way to the shore. I do not think Louise was too sorry because she did not fancy diving in the middle of a harbour. I think at that point we realised that we could only make the most of the diving there if we went on guided dives, so we popped round to the dive centre and booked ourselves on a dive for two days later.

Wednesday afternoon we were driven to Wied iz Zurrieq, a small village where tourist boats take people to the Blue Grotto however we jumped off the shore and headed west to dive the *Um El Faroud* wreck. This is a big Libyan oil tanker that blew up during maintenance work in Valetta docks. The shipyard was convinced by the local dive operators to



getting close-up and personal



is the action this way?

make it 'diver friendly' and scuttle it; she now sits upright only a short swim from the shore.

The *Um El Faroud* is a really lovely wreck, there were a couple of small barracuda as we approached the stern and not much fish life besides that, but the wreck is very intact and the visibility was really good. We swam along the whole length of the ship, which at the forward deck seemed as big as a football field, passing by lots of tempting places (I was under severe instructions not to go into any 'pokey holes'). When we got to the bow, we came off the wreck and swam back onto the shore. I would have loved to swim back along the wreck but going back to the shallower shore was the sensible thing to do.

The following day, the dive centre was organising a trip to Gozo. Since we had heard such good reports about diving there, we had to go. So we met up relatively early and were driven to the ferry and then straight to the Blue Hole, on the north west of the island.

By the time we got there, there were lots of divers about so instead of jumping into the Blue Hole straight away, we went in a bit to the left. We swam down and dropped off by a lovely cavern, just short of 30m, turned back round towards the area where we had gone in, went down a narrow chimney, swam round the reef and then towards the Blue Hole itself, where we surfaced. This was a great dive, with visibility well in excess of 30m.

Although there were quite a few divers around, the site is big enough for individual groups to take different routes – and you can still see them in the distance! After a surface interval to de-gas, grab a bite and (try to) warm up, we did our second dive from the Inland Sea, through the Azure Window. That is a shallow lagoon that connects to the sea by a tunnel, used by little boats to take tourists for a ride along the cliffs (therefore keeping low and close to the walls is a good idea). After coming out through the other side, we visited a large cavern and a smaller one. We found a smallish spiny lobster and some tuna

chasing shoals of little fish. It was a nice dive but we did not enjoy it as much because we were already cold when we went in – entirely our own fault, of course.

We spent Friday looking at Stone Age temples and pretty villages, but on Saturday we drove to Gozo ourselves. The aim of the trip was mainly sightseeing but we decided to do one dive as well (probably to keep me quiet) so we took one cylinder each and the dive gear.

The north coast was suggested, given the prevailing breeze from the ferry, so we drove to Marsalforn to dive Reqqa reef. There we had the chance to dive an offshore reef or go round along the shore towards a very large cavern, sometimes called Billinghamurst Cave or The Railway Tunnel due to its size.

My initial plan had been to dive the offshore reef but Louise was not too sure because it was a bit deep (around 45m). After a short swim in open water in just about 35m she suggested Plan B so we turned round to follow the shore towards the entrance to the cavern. We knew we would only have enough gas to explore the entrance but it was still a very enjoyable dive, with the rocks covered in colourful sponges and big shoals of sardines and other small fish.

Sunday was a day of rest but on Monday afternoon we dived the tugboat *Rozi*, on the northwest point of Malta. This was another artificial wreck, and a pretty one, sitting intact and upright in just under 35m of water. We went round the wreck and then continued the dive along the reef, including a visit to a grotto with a statue of the Virgin. It was a very nice dive with visibility in excess of 20m, and it was Louise's last dive in Malta.

I had, on the other hand, been given permission (for good behaviour) to do a couple of extra dives on the last full day of our holidays. I dived the *Rozi* again in the morning, although this time we visited a small arch instead of the grotto after the wreck. Then

the *Carolita barge* I had wanted to dive earlier on in the week. This wreck is quite far inside the harbour so there is quite a lot of sediment on her. Regardless of the relatively poor visibility (no more than 5 or 6m), it was quite light and it was a good dive to round off the holiday.

I found the diving in Malta quite pleasant although perhaps not too impressive. Malta is a good holiday destination where you can combine some decent 'normal' diving with other activities (and I write 'normal' diving because I think there is some potential to do some 'tekkie' stuff but it was not that type of holiday this time!).

For a diving holiday, I would not go for longer than a week (nor would I go for longer than a week for a non-diving holiday; our 2 weeks vacation was just right because we varied our activities quite a lot), and Gozo is probably a better diving destination than Malta itself, although it is a very small island. If you are interested in intensive diving, a liveboard in the Red Sea is probably better value per dive but Malta it is a relatively affordable destination with quite a lot to offer. And if you decide to dive in Malta, we can definitely recommend Dive Systems – they were helpful, safe and fun!

For more information on Dive Systems visit www.divesystemsmalta.com

