



# Last Minute Malta

Ever few years SCOTTISH DIVER reports from the beautiful Mediterranean island of Malta. It's accessible, diving conditions are pretty good for much of the year and you get value for money. Andy Parks confirms this view and comes up with a few of his own ...



*beetle on Kerwala*



*Rozi*



*Mediterranean fan worm*



*We had a long dive on the reef near it for a second dive and then headed to the caves at Ghar Lapsi after lunch; superb swim-through with lots of entrances giving wonderful shafts of light penetrating the caves.*

THE PROBLEM with the Aberdeen coast is that it is basically flat. On the east coast around Aberdeen, and up on the Moray coast there are no sea lochs or islands to shelter behind. When the winds blow there is nowhere to hide.

From September 2008 the winds blew, at least from Thursday to Monday, relentlessly and at near gale force. A combination of a cold and bad weather led to a 7 week spell without diving. Kit was drying out and cabin fever was setting in, something had to be done. A quick shoot to somewhere warm was called for but nothing had been booked and our holidays had started.

This was going to be very last minute if we were to get any diving. Cyprus fell through due to the cost of flights and limited baggage allowance for a rushed booking. We remembered friends had dived in Malta and enjoyed it. I had not really considered Malta before, preferring to go further afield, but desperation was setting in.

We fired off some emails, received back replies and soon the decision was made. We contacted Daryl at the Aquatica Dive Centre in St Pauls Bay and he told us that he could sort out the diving, accommodation, and airport transfers. All we had to do was get there – in the next 4 days! A quick trip to the travel agent proved fruitless. The airlines they used were available but offered a 15kg baggage limit, which could maybe be increased to 20kg if we grovelled and booked at least a week in advance.

Well that was out so on the Sunday I

contacted BA and in no time was booked on a flight (Aberdeen – Gatwick – Malta) leaving in three days with a generous allowance for dive kit, cameras etc. A quick call to Daryl, who assured us he would sort everything at his end and we were off.

Arriving in Malta at 3.00am we were taking it all on trust. We knew what town the dive centre was in but that was all. We had no idea about the hotel and hoped to sort out the diving as we went along. BA (true to form) left one of the bags in Gatwick, sods law kicked in and it had to be the one with all of my dive kit. Learning point – put my computer and spare prescription mask in my hand luggage next time. I would be reunited with my kit 48 hours later. We were picked up from the airport and taken to the hotel; things were looking up.

Day one was spent harassing the baggage desk at the airport so we did not dive but did the tourist bit in Valetta. We also went to the dive shop to see about the diving on offer. We opted for three shore dives a day and would be picked up from the hotel, driven around the island by the dive centre and dropped back at the hotel in the evening. It all sounded ridiculously easy.

Still no kit so I hired gear the next day and qualifications and log books were checked. All the usual questions – ScotSAC who are they? The usual answers – a bit like BSAC but better. They seemed happy enough.

Most of the week there was just Lil, myself and Daryl from the shop. Our

‘check-out dive’ at Cirkewwa was a 33m dive for 50 minutes on the *Rozi*, a tug sunk specifically for divers. Most wrecks were sunk this way and although not yet colonised with loads of life the 30m+ visibility and 24C water more than made up for it. We followed this up with a reef dive to an arch and through some great swim-throughs before finishing back at the starting point.

Entry and exit was simple with stainless steel ladders and handrails at most popular dive sites. We could learn from this, we get rock climbing assault courses on many of our shore sites. After lunch we finished with a fantastic series of interlinked caves in Anchor Bay. This set the pattern for the rest of the week wrecks, reefs, and caves.

Day two saw us on the wreck *Um el Faroud*, a bigish oil tanker now broken in two and a really nice dive. It sits about 200m offshore from the entry point and the normal plan was to swim out at 5m, this seemed strange but appears to work. It was an excellent dive but a bit of a current made the return journey a little harder work. We had a long dive on the reef near it for a second dive and then headed to the caves at Ghar Lapsi after lunch; superb swim-through with lots of entrances giving wonderful shafts of light penetrating the caves. This opens out onto a sandy bay where we searched for (and found) flying gurnards. Daryl was a great guide and the diving was long and fairly deep at times, but always relaxed and everyone seemed happy.



painted comber



Nudibranch

## Last Minute Malta continued

The next day we were off to Gozo, with a Norwegian police diver Espense, and the wreck *Karwela*, the Blue Hole, the Coral Cave, and the Inland Sea. I had been told Gozo was good and it certainly did not disappoint. Good vis, great caves and walls, lots of little life but not too much big stuff, it is the Med!

Our last day diving saw us Back in Cirkewwa, with Daniel an English wreck hound, to dive the *P29* patrol boat in outrageous visibility then on the Valetta Harbour to dive two WWII wrecks the *X127* previously thought to be the

to be touristy if you want to spend some time out of the water. It obviously does not have the variety of life you get in coral seas but it does have a remarkable variety of diving and wonderfully clear water and warm (although some of the locals thought that 24°C was getting a bit cold for them!). The wrecks are good, the reefs are very good and the caves are excellent fun. We stuck to shore dives all week, if I go back it would be good to try some boat diving and some of the deeper sites.

I am a bit of a control freak and usually

tion. Diving with him on our own we felt that the trip was pretty well tailored to our needs. I was also impressed with the goody bag he took on every dive to bring back rubbish from the reef, he certainly gets full marks for effort.

Aquatica do not advertise in the dive magazines very often and we were lucky to find them. There are loads of dive centres in Malta but I would be happy to recommend Aquatica to anyone. My next trip will probably be more planned but it does show what can be done on a wing and a prayer.



*the mast of the P29*



*inland sea*



*Lil and Daryl on the P29*

*Coralita* and *HMS Moari*. We had been warned that the visibility would be terrible in the harbour but these older wrecks were worth diving. 10m vis and green water, we were right at home on these dives.

My thoughts about Malta? It was far better than I had anticipated, language is not an issue and the climate in October was very pleasant. It can feel very British but the travel on the island is really easy and there are plenty of places

like things planned to the last detail. This was different, organised on the back of a couple of emails and telephone calls, taken totally on trust and with no preparation or indeed any idea of what would happen when we touched down in Malta. Daryl and Aquatica were brilliant throughout the week and looked after us really well. I like to think that we left him with a good impression of ScotSac divers, he was certainly impressed with Lil's frugal air consump-

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