

# Malta teaser

**Dini Martinez** and her four-headed, live-aboard family spent seven months wintering in Malta. She shares her insights, secret tips, do's and don'ts, including a list of anchorages and marinas.

Measuring a mere 27 kilometres from east to west and 15kms from north to south, the three main islands which make up the Republic of Malta rank in the top ten smallest sovereign states in the world.

Sailors have used the small archipelago strategically for centuries to either find a new home or dominate both sides of the Mediterranean Sea. The most densely populated main island gets a mere few outdated pages of mentioning in the back of our 500 page strong Italian Pilot Guide. Yet, with some insider tips on hand, there is so much to discover and enjoy whether it is for a whole winter or a one week cruise. We chose to winter in Malta due to two reasons: first, it promised mild climates which would allow us to live afloat comfortably. Second, it is the only English speaking economy in the Med where prospects of finding work did not seem ludicrous.

Both turned out valid points as we had a wonderful, sometimes wondrous time and managed to top up the kitty during our little while there.

## A bit of history

There's no escaping history anywhere on the islands. Whether you stroll through ancient Arab-Roman streets, explore the oldest

prehistoric free-standing temples or sail into what must be one of the most impressive natural harbours in the world.

Many cultures left their traces: the Phoenicians in the traditionally painted fishing boats; Roman, ancient Greek, Arab and Norman architecture, customs, crops, cuisine and language; the Knights of St John in many of the most impressive fortifications; and last but not least the British who awarded the islanders the heroic George Cross which still adorns the Maltese flag today. It acknowledges the Maltese remarkable endurance and strength in the face of continuous bombing and starvation during World War II.

One of the greatest religious influences was when around 60AD St Paul was shipwrecked in today's St Paul's Bay. The legend goes that he converted most of the islanders to Catholicism during his subsequent stay. Until this day, Malta remains staunchly Roman Catholic and has one of the highest church per inhabitant ratios in the world.

In 1964, Malta became self-governing for the first time since prehistoric history. It is a member of the Commonwealth and gained full membership to the European Union in 2004, welcoming the Euro and numerous EU funded development projects.

Gozo's famous Azure Window, a superb photo and diving location.





### Culture and customs

Given this intense history of continuous invasions, it is not surprising that generally Maltese appear rough on the edges.

Do not expect smiles and friendly greetings on the streets like in neighbouring Italy or Spain.

But if you really need help, you are likely to find it. When we first arrived, a local neighbouring boat with same-aged kids on board not only helped us refuel for half of the price than publicly available, but also dropped off a massive bag of nappies and kids clothes. They even drove half way around the island to pick us up and take us to the annual bread festival.

As a society, Maltese are traditional and conservative. As such, divorce was only made legal in 2011 and abortion is still illegal. Family values are held in high regard and the sense of community is juxtaposed by a lack of privacy and tendency for gossip. Malta's 'degree of separation' is likely to average two: if someone does not know you, they are bound to know someone who does.

This still did not help us get our dinghy anchor chain and pushbike back, which were stolen in Marsamxett Harbour.

In winter, most places beyond the built-up Valletta area look like ghost towns. Only when spring arrives, tables and chairs appear once again along the seafront for picnics and dinners of Ftira (traditional Maltese flatbread), Pastizzi (popular parcels of flaky pastry), Bigilla (bean dip), Lampuki (local dolphin fish) and Fenek (rabbit) in all its variation.

### Sailing in Malta

With 75 nautical miles of coastline, you can easily circumnavigate the islands in a week, day-hopping from one anchorage to the next.

There is a small charter industry which rents skippered or bareboats.

If you want to take in more of the rich culture and history on land, it might be worth arriving early or adding on a week of land holiday after your sail.

Let's look at all the safe harbours, starting at the Grand Harbour in the capital of Valletta on the south-east corner of the main island. Use map to the left for reference.

Malta has three large natural harbours on its main island, all of which offer only a handful of anchoring spots each. The first two are a miniature version of Sydney Harbour and Pittwater and the most likely place to start your cruise.

### Grand Harbour

The Grand Harbour, located at the eastern side of the capital city of Valletta, has been a harbour since Roman times.

It has several marinas, extensive docks and wharves, as well as a cruise liner and ferry terminal where connections to Sicily arrive daily apart from January.

The only anchoring spots available are in Rinella Creek, straight to port after the breakwaters.

ABOVE: Map of Malta with every harbour listed in the story.

TOP RIGHT: Thajjn Tuffieħa Bay and the 186 steps leading down to one of Malta's few sandy beaches.

BOTTOM RIGHT: Ta Pinu, Gozo, one of Malta's 365 churches.

OPPOSITE PAGE: Traditional luzzu in front of Masaxlokks' busy Sunday markets.



### Marsamxett Harbour

Marsamxett Harbour, located on the western side of Valletta, accommodates a number of yacht marinas.

The mere handful of anchoring spots lie between Msida Yacht Marina and the entrance to Lazaretto Creek. At the time of writing, there was also a rusty three mast buoy-minder anchored in Sliema Creek to which visiting yachts often tied up. This spot is conveniently close to shops and restaurants along fashionable Sliema and St Julien's, but too full of moorings and day-boats to anchor here.

Both Grand Harbour and Marsamxett are vulnerable to north easterlies.

### St. Paul's Bay

One of the largest bays on the island, it looks quite tempting on the chart.

In reality, it is filled with mooring buoys and thus close to unnavigable much beyond Mistral Bay to the north west. The latter provides a few nice anchoring spots on rocky ground at its entrance. Great swimming, green views and stunning nature walks. With the exception of winter gales, north easterlies and occasional gusts out of the bay on windy days, this is a pleasant overnight spot within a couple of hours sail from Valetta.

For longer summer stays, moorings in St Paul's Bay can be rented. The jetty in St Paul's to the south east does not provide a reliable depth of more than a metre. It is here and in adjoining overdeveloped tourist paradise Bugibba, that shops and restaurants can be found.

### Mellieha Bay

Just around the headland lies Mellieha Bay.

Its north is dominated by Marfa Ridge's barren land with splendid nature walks. In the south the quaint village of Mellieha has sprawled down the slopes to the waterfront, lined by large hotel complexes, restaurants and bars.

At the head of the bay, Maltese's favourite sandy beach gets packed with tourists and ice-cream vendors from June to September.

Anchoring in four to eight metres of sandy bottom is possible throughout most of the bay during the prevailing north westerlies. However, care needs to be taken of the just-submerged marked Mellieha Rock right in the middle of the bay and potential violent gusts off the northern peninsula.

### Northern bays

On the north side of the Marfa Peninsula, looking over to Gozo, a few anchorages, including Paradise Bay and Anchor Bay invite

### MALTESE IN AUSTRALIA

According to the 2011 Census, there were 163,990 people of Maltese descent and 41,274 Malta-born people residing in Australia, mainly living in Melbourne.



with pretty beaches and attractive scenery on calmer days or light easterlies.

None of these grant protection when the prevailing north westerlies are blowing. Most boats coming through go straight for the renowned Blue Lagoon off Comino Island.

### Blue Lagoon

The emerald crystal colour of the sea gives this snorkel and diving paradise its name and a substantial part of the bay is reserved for swimmers.

Anchoring is allowed north of the bay in around five metres. Ideal for an overnight stay

promising a wonderful snorkel in the first rays of the sun in the morning before the tourist masses flow in.

Many people find this to be a highlight of their Malta sailing holiday.

### Gozo's Fungus Rock

An hour's sail from Comino, Fungus Rock is another highlight situated next to the legendary Azure Window, a remarkable natural rock formation shaped by wind and sea and one of the best dive spots in the Med.

In the bay east of Fungus Rock, named after a mushroom with outstanding medicinal properties, a boater's haven awaits with high rock formation enclosure and sea depth of no less than five metres. It is protected from most winds and the rocky seabed provides effluent marine life.

### Gozo's North

Marsalforn is a village and bay where Gozitans crowd up to swim and sunbath on the rocks during the warmer months. It is the place to stop for lunch in one of the numerous cafes and restaurants lining the seafront.

If greenery and sandy beaches are more your thing, sail on for a few more minutes until you get to Ramla Beach or picturesque San Blas. Both are open to the prevailing north westerlies, but also can get you the perfect holiday picture moment.

### Western Bays

Heading back to Malta mainland, the north west is home to our favourite beach-trio: Golden Bay off the Radisson Resort where diving and horse-riding can be arranged and with the most family friendly and tasteful Café right on the beach; Tuffieha only accessible via a set of 186 stairs, thus less crowded even during the busy summer months; and Gnejna Bay, lined by what looks like shanty towns but really are Maltese summer houses carved into the cooling sandstone rocks.

This side of the island is much less developed than the bays in the north west, but is open to the prevailing north westerlies.

### Marsaxlokk Harbour

A circumnavigation's longest inevitable non-stop sail of 17 nautical miles takes you past scenic Dingli Cliffs to Malta's third natural harbour.

The resort town of Birżebbuġa at the head of the west basin has a few anchorages, but else is dominated by big tankers and Ro-Ros of Malta's main cargo terminal. Much nicer is anchoring in two to five metres depth closer to the island's main fishing port and town to the north east. Only spoiled by the power station, this is the closest spot to Marsaxlokk's popular Sunday markets and a sumptuous seafront seafood lunch.

MALTA MARINAS - OVERVIEW			
Marina (location)	# Berths Depth Max LOA	Services	Author's Observations Disadvantages
Kalkara (Grand Harbour)	120 berths 5-10m 20m	Water, Electricity, Showers, Well established boatyard, 40-ton travel-hoist, 24 hours CCTV	Friendly staff; Next to Kalkara Boat Yard; Wi-Fi at Office; Locked pontoon gate; Extremely exposed to swell; Isolated
Grand Harbour Birgu (Grand Harbour)	240 berths 3-15m 135m	Water, Electricity, Showers, Laundrette, complementary Wi-Fi, Pump-out, 24 hours CCTV	Pretty historic setting; Restaurants on adjacent promenade; Glamorous and upmarket; Most expensive marina in Malta; Quite isolated
Manoel Island Marina (Marsamxett Harbour)	200 berths 2-10m 80m	Water; Electricity; Showers; Toilets; Pump-out; Extensive refit and repair facilities, 40-ton travel-hoist; 550 ton floating dock	Very central and accessible; Close to chandleries and Manoel Island Boat Yard; Exposed to NE swell; No securely locked gates on pontoons
Msida Yacht Marina (Marsamxett Harbour)	720 berths 2.5-17m 22m	Water; Electricity; Showers at RMYC which can be up to a 10 minute walk away – depending on your Pontoon; 24 hours CCTV	Well protected from swell; Friendly pontoon staff; Relatively close to chandleries; Right between Valletta and Sliema which can both be reached by bus or ½ hour walk; Walk to shower facilities can take up to 20 minutes; South Pontoons give onto one of the busiest roads
Tax'biex Quay (Marsamxett Harbour)	55 berths 2-8m 40m	Water; Electricity; Showers at RMYC Club 10 to 15 minute walk away	Bordering on to a park with playground and cafes; Close to chandleries, bars and shops; With NE yachts need to be kept well pulled of the quay
Portomaso Marina (N)	150 berths 3-3.5m 20m	Water; Electricity; Showers; Toilets	Close to a large variety of bars, cafes, spas, nightclubs and restaurants; Very up-market surrounded by luxury apartments and the Hilton Hotel; Not the place to hang your washing outside; No visitor berths available
Mgarr (only marina in Gozo)	300 berths 1.5-5m 80m	Gozo's ferry harbour with a few visitor berths available	Good spot from where to wander into the village, taste some Gozitan delicacies and explore the island by foot, bike, car or bus. Ferry swell; Strong E/SE makes most berths uncomfortable, some even dangerous
Cirkewwa Harbour (W)	Almost hourly car ferries operate to Mgarr, Gozo. No other facilities or berths available.		



Care needs to be taken due to many laid moorings. Depth becomes shallow quite quickly into the bay which is open to the south east. Swimming is not too enticing.

### St Peter's Pool

Around the headland one finds a lovely secluded bay with high rock formations of the lovely yellow Maltese limestone.

Five metre depths are perfect for a chill out and swim at what is probably the nicest beach in the island's south.

Valletta lies an approximate two hour sail away.

### Where else from here?

If you are looking for some competitive sailing, do not miss out on the Rolex Middle Sea Race held each October. It goes from Malta around Sicily and back. For crewing opportunities contact the Royal Malta Yacht Club ([www.rmyc.org](http://www.rmyc.org)).

Malta's position in the centre of the Mediterranean makes it an ideal jumping off point for many other cruising grounds. The closest options include Italy's Sicily (60nm N), well known for its rich culture, fascinating historic sites and great food; Pantelleria (120nm NW) famous for its landscapes, great marine life and delicious sweet wine; and little Lampedusa (95nm SW) not only prominent for its quaint villages and protected sea zones, but also the influx of illegal African immigrants.

### Navigational dangers

Between Sicily, Malta and Tunisia, there is an increasing danger of small unlit crafts carrying passengers and related Navy patrols.

We sailed the 60 nautical miles from Sicily through a moonless October night. It was a pleasant sail apart from an unidentified medium sized motor boat approaching us about 20 miles south of Sicily. It came within two metres of our stern, almost blinded us with its powerful spotlight for a minute or two, did not respond to our radio request for identification and then disappeared as mind-blowingly fast and mysteriously as it had appeared in the first place.

We have never been able to find out who this was. More trivial, but care needs to be taken nevertheless, are the countless fish farms around Malta. Because they can move, charts should not be relied on to avoid them. The good news is that most are marked and lit.

### Weather patterns

Overall north west winds dominate.

In winter these so called Majjistrals occur almost weekly reaching 45 knots and more. The occasional north easterlies are worst for the three large natural harbours which are all open to it.

In spring and autumn the Sirocco from the south blows frequently, bringing with it sand from the Sahara desert, often causing eye and sinus issues and at times reducing visibility quite remarkably.

In summer, a sea breeze from the north west with 20 to 25 knots, prevails. At times it can continue through the night if pressure differences between the two large land masses of Tunisia and Sicily are high.

Winter temperatures are relatively mild, rarely dropping below 10°C. Summer temperatures can reach up to 40°C.

### Wintering in Malta

Its climate, central location, flight connections with many European and other hubs, decent repair facilities, intriguing history and English as an official language make Malta a pleasant wintering spot.

Anchoring is not possible, however, due to regular Mediterranean winter storms. If long-term planning is not your thing, the key is to join the queue for a berth patiently in late autumn and wait for 'Round the worlders' and the Middle Sea Race visitors to leave in November. Eventually they do and then marina spots become available at half of the soaring summer rates.

ABOVE: Paradise Beach, small but worthwhile.

BELOW: History at every corner in picturesque Mdina.





## MALTA IN A NUTSHELL

**Area:** 316km<sup>2</sup> made up of three main islands: the largest, Malta, is the economic and administrative centre. Gozo is smaller, more tranquil and beautiful. Tiny Comino lies between the other two only occupied by one hotel complex.

**Coastline:** 75nm.

**Population:** 450,000 (plus well over a million tourists every summer).

**Government:** Parliamentary republic.

**Currency:** Euro.

**Capital:** Valletta.

**Time zone:** UT+1 DST Apr-Sep.

**Language:** Maltese and English (official); Italian quite widely spoken.

**Ethnic groups:** Mixture of Arab, Sicilian, Italian, Norman, Spanish and English.

**Religion:** 98% Catholic.

**Economy:** Tourism, e-gaming, financial services, movie and

maritime industry, plus some manufacturing. Over 80% of agricultural goods are imported. Foreign companies are attracted by taxes as low as 5%. Wages are also considerably lower than other European countries.

**Transport:** Traffic drives on the left like in Australia, but road rules are rarely adhered to. Europe's fourth highest car density with constant traffic jams, particularly in the more densely populated eastern part of Malta. No trains and the public bus system was taken over by a Spanish company early 2015 to try and improve its quality and service.

**Geography:** Sandstone, cliffs, arid land, some sandy and many rocky beaches; no rivers, woodland, forests or mountains; less than 40% arable land.

ABOVE: Msida Creek Marina.

Kalkara marina tends to have berths available, even last minute and without reservation, but surge makes it uncomfortable. Msida Yacht Marina offers by far the best protection. Manoel Island Marina, next to the yard with the same name, is closest to shops and bars, but can be exposed to surge. Grand Harbour is by far the most expensive and quite isolated from both Valletta's historic and administrative centres and Sliema's and surroundings entertainment and chandleries.

All marinas in Malta have laid moorings and are open to, but do not really cater for live-aboards. As such, the distance to and state of shower facilities can be less than satisfying. Moreover, a common space for cruisers to gather is unheard of, laundry services absurdly expensive and the only DYS laundrette on the island in Sliema is miles away from all but glamorous Portomaso Marina.

We were one of less than a handful of long-term cruisers who spent last winter in Malta. Most others chose Marina di Ragusa in Sicily due to more competitive prices and efforts to make live-aboards' wintering experience as enjoyable as possible.

If you are in need of more extensive boat repairs, it might be worthwhile considering Tunisia where haul-out, fuel, marina and labour costs are cheaper.

In fact, despite the added language barrier, Malta has been losing increasing numbers of European yachts who prefer to put their boat up in Africa over winter as facilities there continue to improve. Others opt for Tunisia to reset their 90 day visa for Europe.

### Entry formalities

Australians do not require a visa for the Schengen zone but are only allowed to spend a maximum of 90 within 180 days.

Being part of the EU, custom declarations are not necessary for Malta if sailing in from another EU member state. On approach, you are required to contact Valetta Port Control on VHF Channel 12.

You will most likely be told to directly contact the marina where you have reserved a berth.

### Our arrival

The journey across the strait from Sicily was busy with expected tanker traffic in the narrowest stretch of the Med.

We sailed into Marsamxett Harbour as the sun rose. Valetta's impressive walls even left our toddlers speechless. It felt like a sail back into history with the immense fortifications and us shaping the backdrop for Brad Pitt's Troy movie (which, by the way, was filmed at the entrance to Valletta Harbour).

Across the creek expanded Sliema's promenade with runners, tourist boats and hustle-bustle business, somehow reminded us of a busy summer morning on Sydney's Bondi.

### Dos and Don'ts

To make your stay in this unique spot of civilisation more enjoyable try and follow these helpful tips.

- Do buy fresh produce from the local food trucks found on every second street corner
- Do scout around patiently for provisioning needs. Eventually you will find everything you could desire from supermarkets, health food stores, Asian markets and fresh produce markets
- For vegetarian dishes, raw food and healthy treats check out the Grasshopper in Gzira and the Mint Café in St Julian's. Both work with love, sustainability and consciousness

- Eating out prices are reasonable
- So are rental prices, except for the summer months in tourist areas. Get a secondhand car if you are spending the winter here. You'll see and experience much more of the island
- Do go for a snorkel or dive, it is likely to be amongst your best in the Med
- Don't expect fresh, local seafood. Apart from Lampuki (dolphin fish), tuna and swordfish during their respective season, most is imported
- Don't be on a timer when using public transport, especially in summer when the population almost triples
- Don't leave belongings unlocked
- Don't cycle, on most Maltese roads there is a state of anarchy with traffic accidents common
- Don't expect boat repairs to happen quickly. The few decent boating professionals take months to get back to you, if at all.

#### Things to do on land

The magic and magnificence of Valletta, Vittoriosa, Mdina and Rabat never tired us throughout a whole winter with both above and underground well-preserved historic relics.

Other cultural highlights included visits to any of the local bread, strawberry, Nutella and other festivals. Maltese love fireworks, loud music and karaoke.

Off the beaten track, we also loved visiting Villa Bologna (get in through the pottery door) with its organic gardens and wholesome grandma's kitchen café; and the surrounding royal gardens in Attard.

For nature enthusiasts, Dingli Cliffs (including an isolated panoramic café with local delicacies) to the south, Marfa Peninsula and Mistral Bay to the north and Gozo's famous Dwejra coastline all invite for awe-inspiring walks.

More of a secret hide-away, the Creativity Vortex near Zebbieh was one of our personal favourites. Tucked away past Mosta's impressive Dome, younger generations of creative Maltese together with ecologically conscious expats have created a stress-free communal zone here. It is open for everyone to chill out, dig in a local veggie patch, take up painting, start a music jam, gong-heal in the tippie, chase kids through a treehouse or make wholesome pizza to share in the home-made outdoor stone oven.

In summary, despite a mere land mass of 316km<sup>2</sup>, there is plenty to see and do for the active and the chilled-out; culture lovers and nature enthusiasts; sailors and land-lubbers alike.

If Poseidon is sympathetic, it can be a little sailing paradise.

Regardless, Malta is utterly unique in culture, history and the psyche of its people which is likely to continuously surprise, fascinate and intrigue. ch

#### cruisinghelmsman Dini Martinez



Dini Martinez lives on her Moody 425 with her husband and two little boys. They left settled life in Sydney in July 2013 and are cruising the Med at the moment, slowly making their way back to Australia over the next few years. Updates on their journey and yoga retreats Dini teaches on the way can be found on [SailingYogaFamily.com](http://SailingYogaFamily.com).

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