

Biblical Malta

Malta seems like a Biblical place upon arrival. There is a lot of old earthy homes that may not be from the time of Jesus but still seem very old. The dry climate and lack of greenery add to the ambiance. Taking afternoon naps are difficult due to the ringing of the numerous church bells. There is a lot of fish and bread to eat and stray cats (not to eat). Malta is where St. Paul crashed and where he started the Catholic Church in Malta.

Valletta is the capital and biggest city and where I based myself. I stayed at the Asti Guesthouse, where Isabella a kind grandmotherly widower, made sure I enjoyed my stay in Malta. The most important building in the city is St. John's Co-Cathedral built for the Knights of St. John who ruled the island for over 250 years. There is an impressive alter and the paintings on the ceiling detail the story of St. John. Within the building, are the Cathedral Museum and the Oratory, containing two important works. One is the graphic *Beheading of St. John the Baptist*, so graphic that the artist was kicked out of the order, and the other is *St. Jerome*.

The other main building is the Grand Master's Palace which is where the Grand Masters of the Knights of St. John used to reside. The group started in Jerusalem but many were French. They were kicked out of Rhodes but as a reward for fighting the Ottomans, Charles V gave them Malta to rule. They were a religious order but they were also knights, so they were military leaders as well. Within the palace is a look at how they held back the Turks in the Siege of 1565. The Armory is quite detailed and gives information about every conceivable weapon used to defend the island including chain mail, crossbows and air rifles.

Despite the Biblical overtones there are a lot of tattoos, dyed black hair, tongue piercings and fashionable Italian clothes. People generally head elsewhere to socialize and party, but Valletta does have social possibilities. Ollie's Last Stand is a pub where British actor Oliver Reed used to hang out and died after a 1999 drinking binge. There are numerous restaurants that serve a variety of food. The Maltese Labors Place, dedicated to union members, served *timpani*, which is somewhat similar to lasagna except with macaroni, as well as roasted rabbit with garlic.

It is easy to get everywhere in Valletta, and indeed all of Malta, due to its small size. One can walk to the attractions in Valletta with the only drawback being the



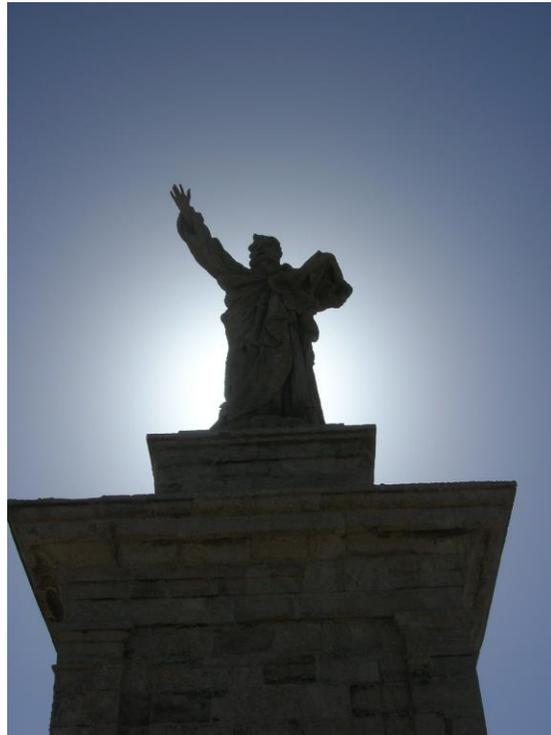


numerous steep hills. Fort St. Elmo is located on the northeast tip but most of the other attractions are in the middle of the city. Just outside the city walls is the bus terminus which circles the Triton Fountain and is the beginning point to nearly all destinations in Malta. There is also fast food here including dry pizza and more appetizing flaky pies made with combination of cheese, spinach, tuna, mushrooms and onions as well as pastries.

Moving beyond the city walls is the suburb of Floriana. There is really nothing to distinguish Floriana from Valletta and it seems like just one city. One again sees the importance of the Roman Catholic faith as there are numerous references to that religion. An example is the patron saint heavily displayed in every area of Malta, including Floriana.

Across the Grand Harbor is the city of Vittoriosa. The Inquisitor's Palace illustrates the Counter Reformation which includes a torture chamber and the actual place where the trial occurred. One would need to kiss the crucifix, kiss up to the Church official and swear on the Bible that you told the truth. The Maritime Museum looks at the history of Malta and the close relation they still have with their old colonizer, Britain.

If Valetta is more traditional than the city of Bugibba is the more decadent city. The city has a lot of bars and a lot of rocky beaches located next to St. Paul's Bay. The bay is located on the sport where St. Paul was shipwrecked according to the Bible. The Church of St. Paul's Bonfire is located where St. Paul swam to shore and thus laid the foundation for Christianity. The church of St. Paul Welcomed is where Paul was welcomed by Publius, who later became bishop of Malta. The church is inland and up a significant hill. It is not the original church and has deteriorated but it is the original location. There is also Apostle's Fountain, a statue which indicates the spot where Paul baptized the first Maltese convert to Catholicism.



One can visit the actual island where Paul was shipwrecked via one of several boat trips. There is an option for a glass bottom boat ride, a longer trip to the nearby island of Gozo or a short hop to St. Paul's Island. Passengers can disembark and climb up the island. On the top is a large statue of

Paul and what appears to be a very small church, along with a lot of thistles and jagged rocks.

On the far west side of Malta are a couple points of interest. The Dingli Cliffs are nearly 700 feet high overlooking the Mediterranean. There is a small, isolated Chapel of St. Mary Magdalene and an ugly radar tower but the rest is nature. East of Dingli is the Buskett Gardens which have pine and oak trees which are a welcome relief from the heat. It is the only place resembling a woodland in Malta. Nearby is the Verdala Palace which is the summer residence of the Maltese president.

Heading back towards Valletta is the walled city of Mdina and the adjoining city of Rabat. Mdina is a beautiful maze of streets with horse drawn carriages and the large St. Paul's Cathedral and an accompanying museum. The Mdina Dungeons has a gruesome display of mostly medieval torture and resistance to the Muslim Empire and the rats of the Black Death. The city has several other churches and gardens to visit. There are a lot of interesting door knockers, which often depict animals or religious items. The larger but less charming city of Rabat has most of her attractions located around the square of Misrah il-Parrocca. St. Paul's Church is located to the east of the square and was getting decorated for what appeared to be a large festival when I was there. To the south are a couple of interesting catacombs, St. Paul's, dating from the 3rd century, and St. Agatha's.

In central Malta is the city of Mosta which is an attractive city, but most people



only come to see the Mosta Dome. The dome is based on the Pantheon in Rome and is conspicuous due to its enormity in relation to other Mosta buildings. During World War II as parishioners were listening to mass, three bombs were dropped on the dome. Two bounced off and landed in the square while the third landed in the church but did not explode. There is a replica of the bomb in the church.

In Paola there are two historically important sites. The Hypogeum is an underground acropolis from about 3000 BC. There is a limited amount of people allowed to visit because carbon dioxide emitted by humans damages the limestone of the burial chambers. The Tarxien Temples are outside and thus have unlimited visitors. Some things are noticeable life a relief with bulls but for many items it takes imagination to see what they are. However, the

importance is that they date from before The Pyramids.

Waiting for my departure flight, I talked to a young man, Conrad, about life in Malta. He talked about the 4,000 illegal immigrants, many of whom were Libyans,

coming into the country (when I told him the US had ten million illegal immigrants he was shocked). Many would come to Malta as the country had recently joined the EU, but he said the EU was unwilling to pay for patrols to stop the immigration. It was a point of agitation for Conrad, but I could see why people wanted to come. Malta at times seems like an Italy clone, but life moves at a slower pace than in Italy and has a Biblical charm.