

GOZO:

A Mediterranean odyssey

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Thought to be the island of Ogygia in Homer's *Odyssey*, Gozo is steeped in myth and history. The second largest island in the Maltese Archipelago, it's a land of startlingly scenic extremes; a riot of colour in bloom one moment and the next of stark contrast between barren limestone and cobalt ocean.

A year-round destination blessed with mild winters and sun-drenched summers Gozo is intimate, striking, relaxed and active, a place as varied as it is charming. Rich in a mélange of past and present the island is a haven in which you can do everything or nothing. Gozo has it all.

Unlike its larger and more developed neighbour Malta, Gozo remains traditionally rural in character and feel, embracing the visitor in an ambiance that owes more to the traditions of days gone by than to a racy present.

For good reason Gozo is popular with visitors who enjoy the outdoors. A magnet for climbers, divers, and hikers the island is also popular with artists seeking to capture its unique landscapes on canvas, photographers seeking to do likewise through their lenses and history buffs seeking out the rich heritage that is all around.

A paradise for walkers and photographers, in spring Gozo erupts into a riot of colour. Climbers are drawn to its dramatic cliffs and famed limestone arches and sun worshippers to its many secluded bays and inlets.

Gozo's topography is dramatic in the extreme with the famed limestone arch known as the Azure Window a geological wonder beneath which an underwater limestone cave known as the Blue Hole numbers among the region's famed dive sites. The 100m high towering rock formation's precarious table structure is popular with cliff divers with the cave beneath a highlight of many diving holidays.

Gozo is ancient. The island's history dates back to 5000BC when it was inhabited by people who somehow

journeyed across the sea from Sicily in Neolithic times. These first inhabitants are believed to have most likely lived in caves around Il-Mixta in the north west of Gozo and pottery shards found in the area indicate that Gozo was likely inhabited earlier than Malta.

During what's known as the Temple Period (4100 - 2500BC) Gozo was as the heart of what's considered an important turning point in the evolution of Prehistoric Man with the Ggantija Temples built in 3600 - 3000BC by the pre-Phoenician Gozitans in Xaghra documented as the oldest free-standing structures in the world. The temples take their name from the Maltese term 'Ggant', meaning 'giant'.

Like Stonehenge in the UK the megaliths' construction in ancient times is a challenging mystery but local legend holds that the work was undertaken by a giantess called Sansuna.

Following the Temple Period Gozo's history is aggressive. Warlike Bronze Age inhabitants were followed by the Phoenicians, Carthaginians, Romans and Byzantines before a period of Arab rulership between 870 and 1127.

European domination began with the Normans and lasted until 1530 when the Knights of St John took over until 1798 when they were ousted by Napoleon. France's rule was short lived with the Gozitans rising against Napoleon's forces and enjoying a brief period of autonomy until the British took the Maltese islands under their protection in 1800 making them an official British Colony in 1813. Not until 21st September 1964 did Malta and Gozo become sovereign independent states within the Commonwealth. They were declared a Republic on 13th December 1974.



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WHERE TO STAY: LELLUX GUEST HOUSE

Blessed with short winters and dry, hot summers Gozo is an idyllic year round destination. So where to stay?

Lellux is a large luxury house of character in the picturesque village of Qala. Recently renovated while retaining many of its original features such as stone arches, wooden beams, stone slabs and traditional wooden balconies, the property offers modern-day comfort while at the same time embracing and celebrating Gozitan traditions.

Named after the Crown Daisy, or 'Chrysanthemum Coronarium' that grows on the island, Lellux is a boutique home away from home in which to relax and enjoy the unique atmosphere of one of the Maltese archipelago's best kept secrets.

Stone arches, unique to many farmhouses on the island, grace a central living area in which an open fire warms rare chilly evenings. An atrium with a five-person indoor hot tub is a central feature and an imposing stone staircase leads up to the first floor.

Lellux's unique charm lies not just in its traditional stone walls but with its host, the convivial Dennis Wiltshire who fell in love with Gozo when he first visited the island 40 years ago. Enthralled by the island's charm he has maintained close ties with Gozo ever since and his local knowledge is second to none. Most notably Dennis is one of the island's most experienced divers meaning that guests wishing to explore Gozo's acclaimed underwater world can enjoy local insight and introductions.

www.lelluxbedandbreakfastgozo.com



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“ A Mecca for divers, and voted ‘second best diving destination’ by *Diver* magazine, the island boasts 50 dive sites, most of which are accessible from the shore.

Gozo's present is absolutely moulded by its past with the island's culture and tradition referencing its many varied influencers. Most notably the island was given its name by the Aragons who conquered it in 1282. In Castilian 'gozo' means 'joy'.

Architecturally the Arab legacy is strong and Medieval and Baroque buildings number among Gozo's UNESCO sites. The Citadella, a small fortified town atop a hill on the centre of the island overlooks the capital. Ta' Pinu the 'church of miracles' stands on a cliff top outside the village of Gharb. The basilica predates the 15th century and has most recently hosted Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI in 1990 and 2010. Then there's Rabat, part of the Roman city of Melita. And the list goes on...

Historic as Gozo is the island is also a place of action, lending itself to adventure and exploration. A Mecca for divers, and voted 'second best diving destination' by *Diver* magazine, the island boasts 50 dive sites, most of which are accessible from the shore including three wrecks; the Cominoland, Karwela, and the Xlendi Ferry. Gozo is also well known for its underwater topography, renowned for its amazing drop-offs, walls, caves and caverns.

Just as the island's dramatic landscape beneath the waves makes it a sought after destination so its towering cliffs present unique opportunity. Gozo is a world class climbing destination.

CAUGHT ON CAMERA

Gozo's landscape and climate make the island an inspirational destination for photographers with many visitors now making the journey to Gozo specifically to work on their photographic skills.

British landscape and underwater photographer Pete Bullen - whose images illustrate this feature and whose work is featured in our Photography and Portfolio section - is based on Gozo and runs specialised underwater and landscape photography courses and holidays on the island. Courses can be tailor made to meet individual needs and requirements and Pete's intimate knowledge of the island affords his clients unique opportunity to get the very best photographic opportunity from their stay on Gozo.

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Home to the 'King of Kings', a 55m roof climb that is one of the longest in the world, and hailed by international professional climber and Gozitan Stevie Haston as "the next big climbing destination", Gozo is becoming more and more popular with climbers looking for year round challenges and training opportunities. The island's mild climate makes it an ideal winter climbing choice.

For those not seduced by Gozo's delights above and beneath her coastline there is always the open road. The fastest growing leisure activity on the planet, cycling, as every child who has ever climbed on a bike knows, means freedom. On Gozo the bicycle provides just that, freedom. The island's landscape offers spectacular views from spots that are more easily reached by bike than by a car and what better way to experience the tranquil and serene feeling of the narrow village streets, or rubble-walled country lanes than by cycling along them?

The short distances between villages and towns means that cycling between them is easy so it's possible to ride to historical and cultural places of interest in different locations. Gozo is a little hilly so you need to consider fitness levels when planning routes but don't be put off as cycling is a wonderful way to explore the island.

In *Odyssey* the beautiful nymph Calypso detained Odysseus for seven years on Ogygia to prevent him returning home to Ithaca. Many modern-day visitors to Gozo dream that they too could be detained on the island for so long.