

3014 Words

## MALTA

### A TRIBUTE TO A WORLD UNTO ITS OWN

A trip to scout film locations became a love affair with an island  
that will beckon me to return . . . time and time again.

"THERE'S AN ISLAND CALLED MALTA —AND YOU'D LOVE IT!"

As the warm water began to drench my body, this was the statement shouted to me from the next shower over at the Westside Y. We're in Los Angeles — the heart of the film and television capital — 6700 miles around the world from the island that is Malta.

It was an end of a new acquaintance conversation, and I had just before we each stepped into our respective showers. I smiled as my thoughts returned to an island I had seen for the first time less than a year ago . . . an island who, like a special lover, you know you'll never quite get out from under your skin.

Images returned. Instantly I could *feel* the sharp wind blowing my hair as I was crossing the Grand Harbor — going from Malta's capital city, Valletta — to the northern-most edge of the peninsula across the harbor: Rinella, on Malta's eastern coast. A few miles into the interior of that rocky peninsula, the sprawling Malta Film Studios was awaiting our arrival.

My partners and I, and an incredible team of creators, were here to scout locations and

decipher the complexities of shooting on an island isolated in the middle of the Mediterranean sea. But Malta is actually one of the stars of the film ... so this is where we needed to be.

What we got in return was priceless.

Malta's tiny nation is 56 miles off the southern coast of Sicily, and 186 miles east of Tunisia on the North African coast — and one to three hours by air from most major cities in Europe. It is officially considered "Southern Europe" and is a part of the European Union.

This fiercely independent nation is three islands constituting the Maltese archipelago: Malta, Gozo, and Comino (a nature reserve that comes alive only in the summer) — of which the island of Malta is the largest. It is in the heart of Malta where we find the country's historic capital, Valletta.

Build-in 1565, Valletta is both the nation's capital and main port. Due to Malta's prime location in the Mediterranean, Valletta's Grand Harbour has been the hub of ruthless political power, unending drama, and centuries of bloodshed because of its strategic gateway between the East and West.

Standing tall and stretching high on a hill, Valletta is located on Malta's north-east side, with her ancient harbor as one of the largest in Europe. At the top of the city is the busy center with large open squares, along with The Palace (the President's working office),

outside restaurants, market places, massive churches, museums, shops of every kind, and colorful flags everywhere.

From there, the numerous narrow, compact streets — still reflecting its history and architecture from the 16th century — drop down sharply to the edge of the Grand Harbour. This famous harbor, formed and protected by nature through the millenniums, separates the island's many peninsulas jetting out into the sea like fingers on a hand.

As you cross this sizeable deep-water harbor from ancient Valletta, you are surrounded — almost protected — by the massive sandstone buildings on both sides. As the ferry travels a familiar route across these waters, the afternoon sun catches the strikingly colorful churches that dot the city. The narrow roads lead down to the lower Barakka Gardens, over-looking the breakwater — yet hidden within the layers of defensive walls and fortifications protecting Malta's capital.

Ahead lay the diverse topography of the "Three Cities," each a different finger of the peninsula on the eastern most side of the island.

Grand Harbour is the same ancient harbor where the Knights of Malta (a medieval Catholic military order) docked their galleons. Before arriving in Malta, they were known as the Knights Hospitaller: Officially, "The Order of the Knights of the Hospital of Saint John." After escaping the conquering Ottoman Empire on Rhodes island, the Knights wandered for seven years looking for a home. It was 1530 when they first sailed into

Grand Harbour, knowing they had found safety.

But 35 years later, in 1565, destiny would catch up with them. The courageous people of Malta were about to change the course of world history during *The Siege of Malta*:

By now, the Knights of Malta firmly held the island when the Ottoman Empire tried to invade. The Knights, with approximately 2,000 foot-soldiers and 400 Maltese men, women, and children, withstood the siege. The invaders retreated. This victory became one of the most celebrated events in the sixteenth-century: The long battle for control of the Mediterranean between a Christian alliance and the Islamic Ottoman Empire was over.

Through the stamina and raw courage of its people, and the gift of how nature formed these islands, victory was theirs. However, it would not be the last time the world would owe an enormous debt to this tiny island — a story we will return to soon.

Malta appears to almost float by itself, as an island far from any landmass. Yet, because of its strategic position between East and West, this vital island has been a coveted place diverse cultures have hungered to *possess*— in every sense of the word. The tide has brought ships into Grand Harbour for countless years, where battles have been fought and blood spilled.

Malta's history, and her sheer accomplishment of survival, permeates every stone, every

path, and every street you walk ... it *clings* to you. And ... you can touch it. Pass any building and feel the first stone you see. As your hand moves across it, you realize it easily could have been touched by a Knight in the 16th century. Its imposing architecture dwarfs you ... but the generations of memories, activity, and vibrations have given Malta its feeling of being ... so ... *alive*.

Because of her long and multi-cultural past, there's an abundance of historical sights, buildings, churches, mosques, museums, and forts (both above the ground and deep, deep beneath) — and exploring it all would take weeks. But, it's amazing how the modern world had blended itself almost effortlessly to the untrained eye. The indoor marketplace in the center of Valletta could be in San Francisco, Washington DC, or Madrid, with its shops of pottery, glassware, packaged food items, and gifts alongside a myriad of specialty restaurants where one can buy fresh fish or a custom veggie salad. The old and the new are placed side by side without conflict.

In Valletta, on almost every street as they descend to the ocean, row after row of thick colorful doors on the attached homes appear not to have changed in hundreds of years. However, the layers of electrical and phone wires discreetly ascending each building tell you the modern world has been invading for quite awhile.

The number of restaurants, hotels, bars, and individual shops — not only in Valletta but also in every city and village throughout the island — count in the *hundreds*. And, as night falls, lights twinkle everywhere. The island is lit ... entirely and beautifully — no

electrical problems. Disney would be proud.

All bathrooms, everywhere, are hidden. It's the nature of the centuries of architecture: up the tight spiral staircase, around the corner, and to the end of a small hall, with windows that allow you to peek down on the colorful umbrellas that dot the sidewalk below. The bathrooms are impeccably clean — often with a fresh flower awaiting the next visitor. And the plumbing worked perfectly every time. Hallelujah! Few places in the world can make life that easy for the adrenaline-induced, sleep-deprived traveler who is new to a country's accommodations.

Malta is densely packed (almost 500,000), but it's easy to drive on somewhat lonely wind-swept roads as you crisscross the 16.8-mile long and 9-mile wide island (the furthest away *any place* you want to go is 30 minutes). However, although each city shares the same tapestry of history and architecture, each is uniquely different.

A few miles away from the active city center of Valletta are the beach towns, still busy, but with a distinct personality difference. Somewhat reminiscent of the beach cities on the Southern California coast during the '40s and '50s are Sliema and St. Julian — trying to retain their laid-back atmosphere even as modern construction cranes are competing for the little space available. Affordable compared to the south of France, they're drawing families who want to enjoy the continual sunny days and summer's 75-80 degree water. And those that *can* afford the South of France are finding their way to Malta's vacation spots because of the authenticity and uniqueness of coastal towns not driven by today's

high priced culture.

And you'll know when you're in Marsaxiokk. Southeast from Valletta, it's a traditional fishing village that supplies most of the island's fish. Marsaxiokk comes alive when your eyes gaze upon the sea. All you can see are the multitude of small ancient native boats called luzzus, dressed in a stunningly beautiful array of colors ... with each bow having a "pair of eyes" painted on it!

Quieter than Valletta is the majestic beauty of Mdina; the long, long ago ancient capital of Malta when the Knights arrived. It rises high on a hill like a silent sentinel, guarding all the land it commands, as far as the eye can see. Its formidable and almost breathtaking outline in the morning sky has been filmed countless times ... and Mdina reminds all who first gaze upon her from afar of Camelot. Still protected by a moat and untouched by the centuries, traditional Maltese horse-drawn "karozzins" clip-clop through the narrow stone-paved streets. And because of its centuries-old battlement overlooking all the land between it and the sea — to the east, north, and west — Mdina became a highly strategic and vitally important place during World War II.

And, quieter still are the Three Cities. Across the Grand Harbour from Valletta —are the three fortified cities of Vittoriosa, Senglea, and Cospicua: the oldest is Vittoriosa (or Birgu). As the first home to the Knights of Malta, the Three Cities' palaces, churches, forts, and bastions are far older than Valletta's. An authentic slice of life, reflecting generations that have come and gone ... time, has stood still on the streets of these cities.

This is Malta, but there's nothing uniform or continual about the vista in front of you. North, south, east, or west ... in the island's rolling interior, or on her rocky coasts ... a new array of buildings, structures, and formations await you. The Maltese sandstone is now familiar, but the color — often golden in the sun — and its diversity within the architecture commands your attention. Only its palaces feel hauntingly familiar: Sitting on hills like the sandcastles you built as a child at the shore . . . continually dripping the wet sand from your hand, building the layers of the castle walls over, and over, and over.

And always — there is the sea. Hidden are the many reefs and caves that delight divers from around the world. But the joy of the sea is to watch it from almost anywhere you are on the island. And as the sea flows green to blue to a vibrant "dark," it mixes with the sand and rocks, giving way to that timelessness that is ... Malta.

HOWEVER ... to truly appreciate this island's place in the world, it's essential to understand the dynamic culture that the Maltese citizens have made all their own. It's no stretch to feel the mark left on this island by those who crossed the waters to rule her — their vibrations still linger in the wind.

Take a glance at the succession of powers that dominated this solitary, isolated, but highly strategic nation throughout history:

- The Phoenicians (now Syria, Lebanon, and northern Israel)
- The Carthaginians (modern Tunisia and northeastern part of Algeria)



- The Romans
  - The Byzantines (Turkey)
  - The Moors (North Africa)
  - The Normans
  - The Sicilians
  - The Kingdom of Aragon (the Iberian Peninsula; Spain)
  - The Knights of St. John (escaping from the Ottoman Empire)
  - The French
- and finally ——
- The British

Molded by centuries of foreign rule, in 1800, the British were asked *by the Maltese* to help them blockade the islands against the conquering French ruler, Napoleon Bonaparte — who had taken over two years earlier Malta from the Knights on his way to Egypt.

The British ruled modern-day Malta from the 19th century until 1964 when Malta was given independence under Queen Elizabeth II to be its own "state." Nationhood was still a decade off.

However, Malta was still a British colony when the Second World War reached its tentacles into every continent on earth. And once again, this tiny island stepped up.

It was during the 1700's Age of Enlightenment that the French writer, Voltaire,

commented about the *Great Siege of Malta* in 1565:

"Nothing is better known than the siege of Malta."

Now — some 400 years after the siege that no one was going to forget — Malta would take her place on the world stage again; destined to change catastrophic events with *The Siege of Malta, World War II*:

It was always an essential British base for both the Royal Navy and the British Air Force. This island had been abandoned and given up as lost immediately after Mussolini joined the Axis. Literally overnight, Malta found itself behind enemy lines. A few stayed behind, mostly a rag-tag group of flyers, mechanics, navy, army, and submarine personal. Along with their wives, and the valiant citizens of the island, they fought to stay alive while being pummeled daily with 15,000 pounds of bombs. With limited resources and planes and on the brink of starvation after two years of endless fighting, Malta successfully stopped Rommel's supply line to North Africa — ultimately ensuring an outcome far different than Germany's expected demise of western civilization.

If they hadn't stopped that vital supply line, Germany would have conquered Egypt, and then the Suez Canal ... and then ...

This mighty little tight group of islands — sitting alone and without outside defense in the middle of a vast sea — changed the course of WWII for the Allies. In 1942, with the war still raging, the King of England flew to Malta and awarded her *The George Cross*;

"for acts of the greatest heroism or for most conspicuous courage in circumstance of extreme danger." It was the first and only time this prestigious honor was given to *an entire country*.

The victory was once again theirs. All because of the courage and stamina of its people. Indeed, there seems to be a power that comes from deep within the rocks that formed this island — transforming all.

This victory was the story we were here to tell.

How often does a filmmaker, *any* storyteller for that matter, get to live the life of its characters? Climb the same hills? Share a collective memory?

At the Valletta waterfront, we stopped to enjoy the music wafting from a bar protected by the rugged terrain. It was the same bar that our film's heroes shared drinks and laughter... just before the unrelenting pounding of bombs brought death and devastation to the island in 1940. And yet, here it stood with its outside bar signage: "Established in 1937."

New places can either make you feel like you will always be a visitor ... *or* provide an atmosphere where you feel comfortable in your own skin. Malta enfolds you and lets you become part of the island.

While walking the ground so many had shed blood for, knowing her history influences everything you see. You find yourself thinking about the people behind the colorful doors

that mark the labyrinth of streets in Valletta. What were their stories?

And what tales do the families of Mdina — generations who have lived in the same grand homes inside the ancient city's walls — have to recount?

Are the fishermen who leave the Marsaxlokk Harbor each morning before sunrise still part of their forefathers' same legacy?

Their common thread — they are survivors. Their history and their isolation have taught them to be.

When Malta became a fully independent *nation* in 1974, as the *Republic of Malta*, they knew they were on their own. They had no one to rely on except themselves. This knowledge was now part of their collective DNA as they prepared for the future: from their growing university system to outstanding healthcare; by encouraging innovation and economic responsibility while being acutely aware of heritage conservation.

And always, a deep reverence for their past. Each child is taught both their native Maltese and English, speaking both fluently (along with French and Italian for many, based on their ancestries). The university education is free under one condition; it is required that you give something back.

When asked, "where else would you like to live?" many of the island's young, productive

citizens enthusiastically answered that they'd love to travel more, or have a second home in another country ... *"but I'd always return to Malta"* was the universal theme, without exception.

No country could be more honored by such a declaration by its young citizens ... the youth of tomorrow. And like those generations before them, quite an admired group. They are innovators, leaders, and collectively strong independent people — this is how they've survived and thrived, against all odds.

They call Malta the "Battleship of Mediterranean," and its citizens are proud to refer to their country as such. A battleship stands alone, a beauty unto itself, resting in the water. But, as a self-sufficient floating city, it awakes each day with vigor to go forth in defense of its territory.

This is Malta — relaxed and timeless in the sun with the changing ocean cradling it. But the citizens of each generation who are the temporary guardians of this magnificent rock, are well prepared to nourish, protect, and defend her at all costs.

How can one not love her?

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