



# THE X FACTOR

ANDREW WARRINGTON

*What is it that would make Sonnie Trotter and Tommy Caldwell, two of the world's most accomplished climbers, choose the north cliffs of Gozo for a two week expedition to create new climbing routes? What is the magical lure - the X-Factor - that has captivated these rock stars and a steadily growing number of climbers from all over the world who come to climb our vertical rock faces? 🇲🇹*



*Jeff Camilleri, Malta's hard-man-of-rock, leading a route called 1500m 7a at Ghar Lapsi, Malta.  
Photo: David Simmonite.*



Sonnie scoping a new line called Sudden Death, il-Mistika Cave, Comino. Photo: Andrew Warrington.

**M**ention to most people that you practice climbing on Malta and their reaction is “huh, where?” Malta has no mountains and the islands' highest point is just 253m above sea level. Yet Malta's western and southern rim drops vertically into the water creating cliffs as high as 150m; 60% of Malta's coastline is cliff and this mighty bastion forms a separate reality, a world apart that is home to some of the most magnificent, and tempting, rock faces in the world!

The facts emerging from this secret world of the vertical tell a story. Malta Rock Climbing – the Comprehensive Guidebook lists 1200 climbs spread around the three islands: Malta, Gozo and Comino. Since we published that book in 2007, another 300 routes have been created and the number grows almost weekly. The climbing community is growing too as our younger generation discovers this adrenaline sport, and the number of visitors from overseas is multiplying exponentially... and then there are the climbing celebrities. These have a choice of any destination in the world, from Talkeetna to Kathmandu, yet a small but significant number have found our little island too

tempting to resist. There has been a string of them, starting in the 1980s and continuing steadily until this year in April when the two world class climbers Tommy Caldwell and Sonnie Trotter teamed up with Corey Rich, probably the world's best adventure photographer and Becca Caldwell (Tommy's wife and a very gutsy photographer too) to spend two weeks out here exploring the cliffs of Gozo and putting up new routes. My climbing buddies and I were fortunate to get to climb with them a couple of times during their stay.

The Maltese contingent made up of Roland, Kurt and myself, joined these rock stars, trying out one of their new routes ominously called When I Start to Panic. Meanwhile they led another new line called Club Paradiso, with monstrous waves chasing them up the cliffs. The culmination of their exploration was a fantastic line, an incredible 20m hand-jamming crack that follows the roof of a cave over the sea on Gozo's intimidating Ħarq Ħamiem cliffs. This they called The X-Factor and once completed, it could well be one of the hardest roof crack in the world!

Later, as we settled down to dinner, my inevitable question was why? Why would four people who have travelled the world



Doing what I love best on Miss Pat and the SATU Warriors 6b+, Red Wall, Blue Grotto Promontory, Malta. Photo: Claudia Ziegler.

tackling the most difficult vertical challenges anywhere, choose Malta as the place for this epic battle with the rock. Their answer was simple yet surprising: where else can you find such raw, untamed rock, where the challenges are endless, where access is easy, the weather accommodating and where it is impossible to take a bad picture! In fact, the pictures taken during this trip ended up beating images from all round the world to make the front cover of equipment manufacturer Black Diamond's digital catalogue for Autumn 2012!

So this is the X-Factor to Malta's climbing scene: our island offers an incredible array of challenges in an idyllic setting. Thanks to the MTA-MRCC Bolting Project, over 400 of our climbs are now equipped with bolts - permanent anchors embedded in the rock that provide security against a fall. The island's mild weather makes the climbing season year round. We have picturesque inland valleys, multi-pitch sea cliff climbs over the azure waters that surround us and infinite potential for Deep Water Soloing, the new style of climbing without ropes, with only the brilliant blue sea below to catch a fall! Friendly locals, our laid back lifestyle and warm, welcoming smiles are the unique catalysts that bring it all together, without which we would just be any other climbing destination.

Malta's X-Factor makes us such a magnet for the vertically challenged and will continue to draw climbers from the global community as long as there are cliffs surrounding our shores...are you ready to discover your own personal X-factor, hidden somewhere inside Malta's vertical world?

The MTA-MRCC Bolting Project is co-sponsored by the Malta Tourism Authority; Hilti Malta; MC Adventure and private sponsors. For information about climbing in Malta and the Bolting Project visit [www.climbmalta.com](http://www.climbmalta.com). For guided climbing excursions of all levels visit [www.mcadventure.com.mt](http://www.mcadventure.com.mt). 

*Author:*  
Andrew Warrington started climbing in 1985 and has never stopped. He is active in establishing new routes and leading groups on the cliffs of Malta. He is President of the Malta Rock Climbing Club; Originator and Manager of the MTA-MRCC Bolting Project and Guide Leader at MC Adventure. He also runs the advertising agency Media Consulta Malta Limited.