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Climbing in Malta The Land Where Cultures Meet

Over the past 7000 years, all the peoples of the Mediterranean region have left traces of their culture in Malta, creating a fascinating mix. Two cultures also coexist in climbing on the rocks and cliffs of Malta and its neighbouring island Gozo: traditional climbing using natural gear, and modern routes using bolts.

Text and photos by Andi Dick

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My fingers probe holds in the honey-coloured rocks which provide a good grip for athletic moves up the overhanging rock. The view beneath my legs vanishes into the turquoise depths of the sea; a mild wind caresses my skin, wafting away the memory of a cold and damp October in Germany. The very first day of my climbing holiday in Malta has already lavished me with enough rewarding climbing for an entire week, confirming that this trip was indeed a good decision.

I had hesitated for a long time before committing myself – after all, keen climbers are not easy to please. To be sure, the brand-new guidebook listed more than 1,200 routes in 21 climbing areas, but I also had to take into consideration the facts of recent history of this Mediterranean island: since climbing here developed first along the British climbing ethic, climbers have to protect themselves on most routes in the traditional way – no relaxed climbing by clipping bolts. However, the photos of steep cliffs overhanging the sea were enticing – and even “trad” climbing has a certain appeal. Browsing through the guide a little further I also discovered modern sport climbs, and the age-old culture of the Island promised an outstanding range of offerings. So finally I thought, “why not?”

“We like climbing on bolts too” – this information provided by guidebook author Andrew Warrington sounds reassuring. It was British soldiers who set up the first climbs on Maltese rock, ingraining the British ethic into the early Maltese pioneers. However the new generation of climbers have also come to appreciate the joys of bolt-equipped climbs - not always, but more and more as the sport develops. Close to the tourist hotspot of the Blue Grotto, a good number of these helpful metal anchors glint in the sheer white cliffs that rise above the Mediterranean for anything from fifty to two hundred metres high. One such line of bolts snakes its way up from an overhanging ledge which my climbing partner for the day, Roland Sultana, has pointed out. Haughtily ignored by a chameleon, [p. 47] we set up our abseil point at the cliff’s edge – two rope lengths of twenty metres each brings us to a wave-cut platform a metre above the waterline. Salt crystals sparkle in the rock’s contours, boats loaded with waving tourists pass by. Roland traverses round a corner onto the sheer wall and vanishes upwards; following my rope takes me, via an

overhang section, up along a compact pillar onto the flat again – the French guides who set up this new route Freebird, have done a brilliant job of it.

A couple of hundred metres from the Blue Grotto, rock-cut steps and a rough path lead into the Wied Babu wadi. There, smooth white rock faces sporting plenty of bolts await; and far below near the mouth of the valley, several multi-pitch routes rise up out of the fjord-like chasm: sloping rocks, eroded by the water; short, sturdy, steep terraces; a view down to the water; bathing before and after – what more could I ask for?

Perhaps a little adrenalin? Kurt Caligari and Claudine Gatt offer me several options when we meet on the next day. Of these I select the Ix-Xaqqa (pronounced “Ish-Sha-a”) ravine. A steep cleft in the rock leads for a hundred metres downward from the road to the sea, walled in on the right by a mirror-smooth limestone rock slab which becomes ever higher as you descend into the abyss. Bolts, broken and rusty, with aluminium hangers which crumble like pastry, bear witness to the fact that in the salt-laden sea air, only glued marine steel bolts hold out a promise of security for the foreseeable future. At least there is one three-pitch line that has glued insitu bolt stances – the climbing in between must be protected with nuts. About eight metres up, on crumbling ledges, Kurt manages to place the first micro-nut of the route behind a dubious piece of shingle. Unfortunately, Malta’s rock does not always provide the ideal conditions for placing reliable nuts. When I take over the lead on the second pitch, I too have to climb a good few metres before finding a reliable spot for an intermediate placement. The British grade of VS (very severe) means that you really have to pull yourself together on this Grade 5 terrain.

Limestone Rock and Herbal Lemonade

Lunch break! Ghar (pronounced “Ahr”) Lapsi is a bay popular with divers, five kilometres further on. At a snack bar we enjoy fresh fish and salad – the aromatic Maltese cuisine is similar to Italian cooking, abundant with fresh fruit, vegetables and seafood. It is accompanied by the national beverage, Kinnie, a type of lemonade with an individual, slightly bitter, orange and herbal flavour – at least as refreshing and thirst-quenching as beer or Swiss cider, but without any alcohol, leaving the head clear for climbing. A [p. 48] quarter of an hour above the bay a long rock escarpment stretches away into the distance. In a cave we climb “Genghis Can’t” (VII) which is protected with bolts, a grandiose, climbing-wall-style overhang that has you pulling on jugs, while enjoying a pleasant view of the sea. As a finale to the day, another “trad” beckons on grey water-eroded rock. Six-pitches of climbing over naturally protected terrain, searching for a route between loose flakes and patches of vegetation – it is certainly no gleeful, worry-free, bolt-clipping climb; but the satisfaction we feel when we gaze from our exit point into the sunset is something different, perhaps even deeper – like a mountain route done independently instead of following behind the mountain guide’s ropes.

Temples and Clay Figures

People who travel to Malta exclusively for climbing have only themselves to blame. Here, even rest days have the potential to offer visitors a special highlight. The Hypogeum, the legendary underground temple at Hal Saflieni, only allows a handful of visitors per day; if you don’t book six months ahead you simply won’t get in. The temple’s giant goddess-of-fertility statues and other works of art from that period can be

admired when visiting the Archaeology Museum in the capital Valletta. According to archaeologists, the first settlement, one of the first advanced civilisations at the time, dates back to 5200 B.C. Influenced by the cultures of Italy and Greece, Egypt and Phoenicia, Malta was a hotly contested stronghold in the Mediterranean. Its history is correspondingly colourful: every society that dominated the Mediterranean has left its mark here. One of the most important formative influences was the period when the islands were ruled by the Knights of the Order of St. John, which received its name here, in the 17th and 18th centuries. The indomitable bastions of the Order with their smooth, gigantic defensive walls that rise above the Grand Harbour of Valletta; from the Upper Barracca Gardens you can look down upon the azure blue creeks of the harbour, lined with cream-coloured [p. 49] palaces and super-yachts at their moorings. Valletta's quirky streets pulsate with shopping life. Boutiques, street stalls, cafés with glass and marble interiors, all offer tremendous variety. The observant visitor with an eye for detail will spot gilded doorknobs shaped like dolphins, oriental electrical installations, ornamented balconies in wood and stone and every conceivable colour.

Even more colourful is the market at the harbour of Marsaxlokk (pronounced "Marsashlok"): here one can find underwear, shoes, handbags, Santa Claus music boxes, sparkling trinkets and live aquarium fish in plastic bags. Fruit and vegetables, sticky cakes, fish – for instance, the Lampuki (dolphin fish), which is one of the national dishes, becomes available from the autumn onwards. All mixed with the din of vociferous bargaining in the guttural Arabic-Italian national language and a wild mixture of smells.

Peace and quiet on your rest day is not so easy to come by. Malta is one of the most densely populated islands on earth, after Hong Kong and Singapore. 355,000 people live in an area of 246 square kilometres, six times more crowded than Germany. One or two-storey ochre-coloured houses cover a large part of the island; there are no forests or lakes; and very few fields. As legacies of long years of British rule – Malta only gained its independence in 1964 and became a member of the EU in 2004 – the island's second official language is English and its traffic drives on the left-hand side of the road. Traffic is chaotic in a typically Mediterranean way, but all the same reasonably considerate. Even the crime rate is lower than in Italy or Marseilles. Might it have something to do with the Christian state religion which the Apostle Paul introduced here on the occasion of his shipwreck? Large, dominating church buildings everywhere you look bear testimony to this heritage – the second largest dome in the world is in Mosta. There is also a magnificently decorated baroque cathedral in the mediaeval capital, Mdina, where one can also find catacombs dating back to the 4th and 5th centuries A.D. – it seems that even then, surface space was limited!

Cliffs and Pebble Beaches

It doesn't always have to be about the search for cultures of antiquity. Rest days can also be spent hiking, for instance on the marked paths which the Malta Tourism Authority recommends in its brochures. Ignoring the beaten tracks, it is sufficient to drive to the coast and simply follow the coastline for a great day out trekking. This coast is so varied that boredom is not an option. Sand alternates with pebbles, with steep cliffs and flat limestone surfaces moulded by the water. Sometimes rocks with hour glass formations invite you to boulder, at other times you must battle your way through coastal scrub (without any fear of encountering poisonous animals as there are none here),

sometimes you balance your way over the undulating clay ridges [p. 51] of a dune. And the water temperature is suitable for swimming almost all year round.

Gozo, the “Island of Love and Honey” and of hand-gathered wild capers is the quiet, green little sister of hectic, arid Malta. The ferry crossing takes just half an hour, past the deep-water soloing paradise of Comino, to the port of Mgarr (pronounced “Em-jar”). The citadel of the capital Victoria offers a panoramic view of the whole tiny island. The rotunda of the Church of St. John in Xewkija (pronounced Show-keeya), the third-largest dome in the world, built in the 1950s. The Ta’Kola windmill which bears testimony to the emission-free use of energy of days gone by and which is now home to a folklore museum. The ruins of the megalithic temple of Ggantija (3600 B.C.) built of rocks that weigh many tons, upright around a complex ground plan, far older than either Stonehenge or the Pyramids. The Qbajjar salt pans, a labyrinthine chessboard of shallow basins, hewn into the coastal rock by generations of long ago. The quarries near San Lawrenz abound with crisscrossed saw-lines cut into the ground in the soft Globigerina limestone, then blocks are split off by means of a horizontal cut; right from the outset they are shaped like building blocks and lend the churches and palaces their character as well as their crème brûlée colour.

Bolts and Boulder Hall

This unusually soft type of limestone is not suitable for climbing, but there is also good rock on Gozo. The quiet, relaxed atmosphere of the island has rubbed off on the climbing style adopted here, which has a definite south-of-France feel to it. “We want well-protected routes which can be enjoyed without stressful fumbling on rock hostile to the use of nuts.” Xavier Hancock believes that the work done to equip Gozo’s rock faces will allow it to reach its potential and meet climber’s expectations, hoping to attract visitors to his organisation, Gozo Adventures. The Gozo Climbing Association of which he is joint founder has built a small boulder wall and is developing the open-air potential using stainless steel equipment. Helpers are welcome and opportunities for new routes still abound, whether on the cliffs above Marsalforn, in the wadi of Xlendi (pronounced “Shlende”) or the crag of Ghajn (pronounced “Ayn”) Abdul. While we are selecting our routes among the caves and white rock faces, black clouds roll in over the sea. The autumn is the wettest season in Malta and Gozo, but this does not really deter climbers. “The rain passes quickly here,” Xavier explains.

In fact, the clouds remain well-behaved and it is only the storm, far away on the horizon, that bears witness to the power of the elements. The Azure Window, a twenty-metre high rock window on the coast, is almost overwhelmed by the surf from the surging breakers. The five-metre high natural tunnel which connects the Inland Sea behind the Azure Window to the sea outside is filled to bursting with the froth of the waves – bad news for our plan to climb another of the traditionally protected multi-pitch routes here. We find an alternative objective in Gozo’s main climbing area Mgarr ix-Xini (pronounced “Em-jar ish-Shini”), a meandering wadi with severely eroded walls of varying consistency – the water-eroded black karst slab of “Flying Dutchman” (5c+), the white Swiss cheese wall of “Moby Dick” (6b+), the slots and holes of “Flying Picket” (6c). Excellent material for more than one day’s climbing...but there is a lack of visitors to these places.

“Malta is so fertile,” Didi Treptow, a German diving instructor and partner of Xavier Hancock tells me, “if I spend a day cutting back bramble hedges, they’ll have run riot again within a fortnight.” We burrow our way through blackberry brambles and bamboo fields down the valley until it ends at a bay. Then, sitting on the terrace of Maria’s grill restaurant, partaking of sardines, mussels and gilthead sea bream, washed down with a cool, fruity white wine, we take stock. Malta and Gozo are not Kalymnos. But anyone who is interested in more than just climbing will find them an inspiring all-round option in the heart of the Mediterranean.

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Panorama Info

Climbing on Malta and Gozo

Malta and its neighbouring islands of Gozo and Comino bear the stamp of British culture, yet possess Mediterranean-Arab charm. The main island of Malta is densely populated, exuberant, almost hectic, and rather arid. Gozo is greener and quieter, whilst Comino is a rock lying between the two. It is easy to communicate everywhere in English, the second official language. The currency is the euro.

How to get there

Malta is served by flights from many German airports. CO₂ offsetting for the flight can be paid, for example, at www.atmosfair.de or www.myclimate.de (e.g. from Frankfurt 900 kg CO₂, offsetting 22 euros).

In spite of its relatively small size and a reasonable bus service, a hired car is to be recommended to reach the often somewhat remote climbing areas; driving is on the left. The ferry between Cirkewwa (Malta) and Mgarr (Gozo) sails roughly every hour; journey time around 25 minutes.

Best time of year

Climbing is possible at any time of the year in Malta. The best time is the spring (March-May) with pleasant temperatures, blossoms everywhere and little rain. In the autumn (October-December) temperatures are also moderate, but it can rain more frequently, even if only for short periods. In the winter (December-February) it is still as warm as in Spain and drier. In the summer, the sun is very hot, but ideal for climbing over the water.

Protection and equipment

In some areas on Malta (Wied Babu, Ghar Lapsi) and very often on Gozo (Mgarr ix-Xini, Ghajn Abdul) there are sport climbing routes with bolts, mostly from 6a upwards; new routes are constantly being added. Climbers who would like to set up new routes are welcome. However, the local bolting ethic stipulates that many areas and routes have to be protected in classic British style and only have the occasional bolt. For these, a complete set of nuts and SLCs are essential, particularly small sizes. More info:

www.alpenverein.de>Publikationen>Panorama>online. In general, a climbing holiday on Malta is worthwhile if you climb UIAA Grades 6/7.

Guides

- J. Codling, A. Warrington, R. Abela: Malta Rock Climbing, ISBN: 9789993205401, Moonstone Communications, 2007, €28.50, obtainable at www.malta-rockclimbing.com
- Gozo Adventures: The Adventure Guidebook to the Maltese Islands, ISBN 978-99932-0-643-9, ca. € 18.-, obtainable from info@gozoadventures.com.

Tourist info

Malta Tourism Authority, Auberge D'Italie, Merchants Street, Valletta CMR 02, Malta. Tel. 00356/22 91 50 00, fax: 00356/22 91 58 93, info@visitmalta.com, www.visitmalta.com. Sports facilities on Gozo at: www.gozoadventures.com and climbgozo@hotmail.com.

[Subtitles and Photo Captions]

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DAV Panorama 5/2010

Out of breath: In "Genghis Can't" (VII) in Ghar Lapsi you have to step on the gas before your arms get too pumped.

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DAV Panorama 5/2010 Malta / On the move

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Unsupported - only the occasional nut between bolt stances protects the smooth rock faces of Ix-Xaqqa directly above the sea. At the Blue Grotto (top left and bottom left) and in Ghar Lapsi (bottom right) there are also modern sport climbing routes.

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Malta: Thrills in the densely populated human circus and on unprotected cliffs

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Gozo: green oasis of rest for people who like bolts and coast-walking romantics looking for solitude

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Without boundaries: In Ghajn Abdul you find panoramic views all the way to the sea and beyond; many new sport climbs have been installed at Mgarr ix-Xini (top right and bottom right). The potential for new routes is still great. The Azure Window (top left), one of the highlights to be reserved for a rest day.

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Cast off: the luzzu boats built along the lines of a Phoenician design, are just as typical of Malta as its magnificent churches, its priests and nuns, and its vibrant markets. Sea salt used to be extracted from the Qbajjar salt marshes (bottom right).

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Malta: an inseparable pair of islands providing the perfect choice of climbing styles, nature and culture.