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Malta gains a foothold on the climbing destination map





cliff hanger



Malta is in the process of developing a new niche market in tourism. FIONA GALEA DEBONO finds that the islands are a well-equipped playground for rock climbers, and their vast potential is soon to turn them into a popular climbing holiday destination.

Photos courtesy of the Malta Rock Climbing Club

As yet, the islands boast 1,300 established climbs, but many unclimbed routes are waiting to be developed – part of the future plans

While hanging off a craggy cliff face may not be everyone's cup of tea, and the adrenaline rush that comes with scaling a sheer rock may not necessarily appeal to everyone, others are ready to travel far and wide to challenge themselves on different climbs.

So why not choose Malta – blessed as it is with incredible stretches of Lower Coralline limestone cliffs, resulting from faults that occurred thousands of years ago. Its entire south coast is composed of cliffs that can either leave visitors awestruck, or inspire them to summit these rocks and overcome their intimidating majesty.

It is the Malta Rock Climbing Club, with the approval and backing of the Malta Tourism Authority, that is not only enjoying the sport, but is using its expertise to help the Maltese economy by working on the development of this new niche tourism market.

Soon Malta could end up boasting its own *klettergartens*... and although it is a German word, the island could easily adopt it, having more than it takes to establish and equip climbs according to European standard, (which is what a *klettergarten* is). The raw material is there... as well as the enthusiasm, the know-how and the support.

Rock climbing is similar in capacity, in terms of the availability of cliffs, to diving, maintains club president Andrew Warrington, who has estimated that between 10,000 and 30,000 climbers could easily visit the island each year.

"The amount of climbs available and the amount that have yet to be developed is tremendous," he says. "Practically every time we go out to climb, which we do every weekend, we establish a new route – such is the vastness." As yet, the islands boast 1,300 established climbs, but many unclimbed routes are waiting to be developed – part of the future plans.

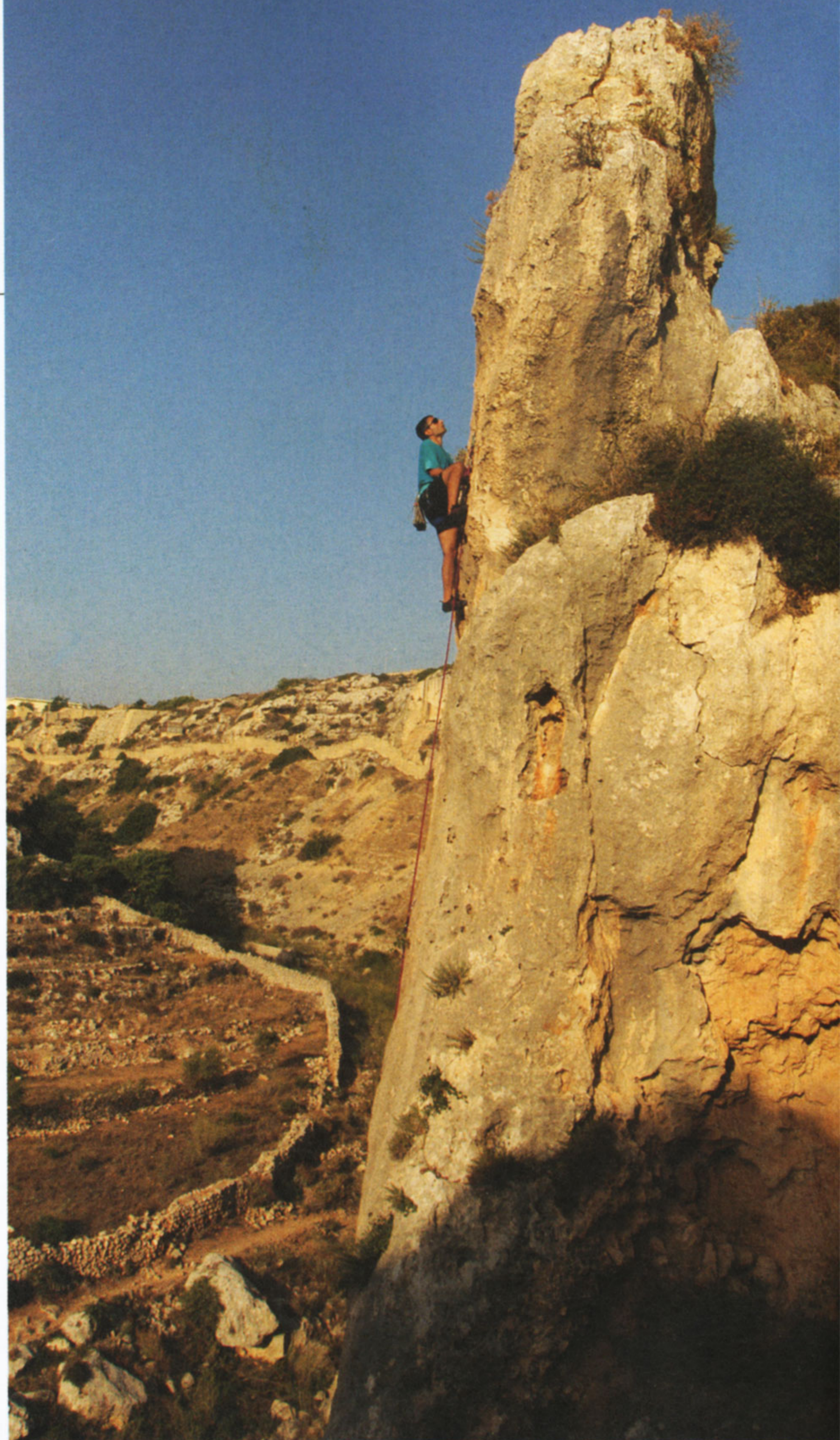
The investment to equip the cliffs with heavy-duty anchors on the established climbs, which is what the club's approved proposal entails, is to cost Lm15,000 – a sum the MTA has readily committed. Not only is it a conservative investment, but it is also of a permanent nature, according to Mr Warrington. "If it is done well, it is set to stay for 30 to 50 years, without requiring any maintenance." The equipment, the highest quality available, is being funded by the MTA, and the first phase, which costs Lm6,000, includes equipping five locations in Malta and two in Gozo, covering in excess of 350 climbs.

Gozo is being prioritised, and one area, Ghajn Abdul, has already been completed, while the next, Kercem, should be tackled soon before moving on to Malta. Another seven areas have been earmarked for the second phase, which should be concluded by the end of 2007, after which new areas would be identified and developed.

According to Mr Warrington, some of the most popular areas are Wied Babu near Zurrieq, which has 55 climbs on one cliff that stretches 200 metres. Ghar Lapsi and Xaqqa Valley in Malta and Mgarr ix-Xini in Gozo are other prime sites.

The local climbers – a 25-strong community – are doing the groundwork on a voluntary basis. Their idea is to create a combination of the British, traditional, natural method of climbing, which means leaving the rock intact and using only its natural features for protection, as well as metal wedges of various sizes, which are removed as you go along; and the European way, which involves the permanent bolting of strong stainless steel anchors in the rock at regular intervals to create the *klettergartens*.

In Malta, climbing was introduced by the British and adopted by the





locals, and “we do not want to give that up”. But the ideal is to preserve the two to turn Malta into a popular climbing destination, maintains Mr Warrington, who has been an avid climber for the last 20 years and has been traveling to Europe to climb for the last decade.

The natural climbs would serve to attract British and Americans, who like the traditional method, while the *klettergartens* are making climbing more accessible and increasing the popularity of climbing holidays in general. Even though they reduce the “purity” of the climb, the challenge and the element of danger, which is important for the adventure aspect, they offer a different type of climbing that also plays its role in developing the sport. And the environmental impact is relatively low because the anchors barely show.

Other countries have already travelled along this path – the Mediterranean coast of Spain, the South of France and northern Italy primarily – but Malta, which is following in their footsteps, is on the right track and could soon catch up. After all, the island has a number of advantages: good weather and an easy life that northern Europeans lack and love. And although climbers would have to fly to Malta, it is growing increasingly common for them to travel more than once a year to practise their sport. Access to the cliffs is also easy and quick – the longest walk-ins in Malta are about 15 minutes for the remote climbs, as opposed to the possibility of three hours of walking to the cliffs overseas.

In Malta, climbers’ companions, who may not necessarily have a penchant for the sport, are not going to find themselves stranded in a secluded, sleepy village, where the only source of entertainment is the surrounding cliffs. The short distances mean they can indulge in sightseeing and culture, or the sea and the sun, while their more adventurous counterparts do the groping and the grappling.

It is estimated that Europe is home to around one million climbers. So who could we expect to find scaling our cliffs? “The British have a long, solid tradition of climbing, as do the Germans and the Swiss, while the Italians’ small community of mountaineers has developed into rock climbers, and the French cannot be left out of the mix.” Strangely enough, even a flat country like Holland has spawned climbers who travel extensively.

“Twenty years ago, climbers would have been young and adventurous youths, ready to quit their jobs and live off social security to climb all day. Today, many of the full-time climbers are sponsored by companies and can afford to travel to climb,” says Mr Warrington. There are also a number of climbers who, in the 1960s and 1970s, were teenagers, pioneering new climbs, but are now established, like their luxury and only indulge in five-star travel, with their families and spending money in tow.

Apart from a good climb, they want their good food and their comforts... which is understandable when you consider that climbing is a total body workout, which involves contorting the body in angles you would never dream physically possible. ■

