

GOZO Europe's winter warmer

by Sean Arrowsmith

Situated a 25 minute ferry ride North of the Mediterranean island of Malta, Gozo enjoys a climate that varies from hot summers, to balmy winters. With easy access from Europe, crystal clear waters, and easily accessible diving; it is small wonder Gozo is so popular with divers. It might not have the coral walls of the Red Sea, but what it does have is a wonderful mix of diving and is exceptionally good value for money. How good? 12 dives, including flights from the UK, accommodation and transfers can be had for less than 400 Euros.

Getting there

Getting to Gozo is a simple affair. Air Malta has regular flights from many major and regional airports to Luqa Airport, also known as Valletta, on Malta. They offer the standard 20kg free hold baggage, but it is possible to book an additional sports bag, of up to 32kg, for the exceptionally reasonable sum of 20 Euros each way. As Malta is in the EU, there are no visa requirements for EU citizens, and given the amount of diving that takes place, there are no

questions asked at customs on arrival, even when you have enough camera equipment to stock a small shop.

Any of the dive centres you choose will be able to arrange transfers for you, and these will generally occur in two stages; from the airport to the ferry, and from the ferry to the dive centre or accommodation. On the ferry crossing, there is a lockable trolley into which you can place your kit, leaving you free to have a quick wander around, or even a cheeky lager.

Climate

With a typically Mediterranean climate, expect hot summers, with mild winters with some rain over the winter months, usually overnight. Being a small island, the wind can occasionally pick up, and with it the sea too. In winter, it would generally be the Northern sites that become undiveable, and for this reason, a selection of wrecks has been placed to the South of the island. The dive staff are able to advise on likely sites if you are unfortunate enough to get some bad weather.



*Diver with Seastar
Ikelite Nikon D90, 10-24mm @ 10mm,
YS110 strobes, 1/125 @ f/9.5, ISO 200*

*Right. Typically Mediterranean
architecture
Nikon D90, Sigma 17-70mm @ 29mm,
1/30 @ f/3.3, ISO 220*

The Diving

The chosen dive centre had plenty of space, with facilities for washing and hanging kit, as well as being able to provide a multitude of cylinders and any gas mix you liked, from air to trimix, up to 300 bar. The camera rinse tank was a bit on the



small side for a DSLR rig, so I would just shower the rig off once back at the apartment. Helpfully, the accommodation was situated next door to the dive centre.

For the first 3 days diving we were accompanied by one of the dive centre guides who was invaluable for directing us to the dive sites and showing us the best places to enter and exit the water. He was also a rather helpful pair of spotting eyes underwater. The guide was also sympathetic to the needs of us photographers by allowing us to stay in till we got cold, or low on air.

After the guided dives we hired 4x4 pickup trucks, were given directions to the sites and let loose on the island ourselves. It's a small island so nothing is ever more than a 25 minute drive and the actual dive sites themselves are signposted, showing just how entrenched diving is on the island.

The standard of driving is pretty poor, but better than Malta and the roads are patchy. Most of the vehicles are very 'well used', but at no time did it feel unsafe, just a little bit 'adventurous'. Some of the dive sites are down some tight twisty tracks but the directions and maps from the dive centre staff were always perfect.

Shore diving is the general rule here although there are several boats available which will take you to some of the offshore sites and to the other islands. However, with depths down to 65m+ available at some of the shore sites, there is bound to be something for everyone, even for the confirmed depth junkies.

As it is mostly shore diving, and the shores are generally quite rocky, some of the entries can be a little challenging, especially if conditions are not perfect. Many of the sites however have kitting up



Diver in morning light

Ikelite Nikon D90, 10-24mm @ 10mm, YS110 strobes, 1/125 @ f/11, ISO 200

Right. Flabellina nudibranch

Ikelite Nikon D90, 105mm, YS110 strobes, 1/125 @ f/32, ISO 200

benches, steps cut into the rock to allow you to enter the water, and ladders to allow you to exit. And if it is too rough to dive a certain site, there will always be somewhere else on the island where you can get in.

Visibility is generally in the region of 20-30m with some of the shallower sites suffering from run-off if there has been a sizeable amount of rain. Temperatures range from 26-27°C in August and September, to 16°C in February. This may seem cold to some, but when your dive boat has been cancelled for the 4th week in a row, and the alternative is an old quarry in 4 or 5°C, then the prospect of 16°C in winter can seem positively tropical.



Despite limiting myself to a maximum depth of 20m, there was no limit in the choice of sites. Others in the group had no such depth limitations and were all kept happy by the sheer variety of sites, many of which you let you pick your depth and then finish in the shallows on the reef, allowing true multilevel diving.

Sample Dive Sites

Hondoq

Situated to the South, this is a very accessible site, with a cafe, toilets and easy entry to the water (small giant stride). Once underwater you follow a pipe and eventually come to a large sandy area, interspersed with eel grass beds. The maximum depth is in the region of 14m, so suitable for a really long dive. The highlight here are the Flying Gurnards, there are also baby stingrays buried in the sand and Flabellina Nudibranchs to be spotted by those with keen eyes. The exit is either via a ladder, or a slipway (with handrail). This site is also a good choice for night dives, where you will be met by hunting octopus, cuttlefish, occasional squid plus a whole host of invertebrates.

Azure Window

Being in the North West of the island, this site is a bit more weather dependent, and the entry and exit requires some concentration and fitness with a walk down steps over some slippery rocks. The entry is into a pool approx. 10m in diameter and, once submerged, it quickly becomes apparent that the wide angle rewards are worth it, swimming under an enormous natural archway then out

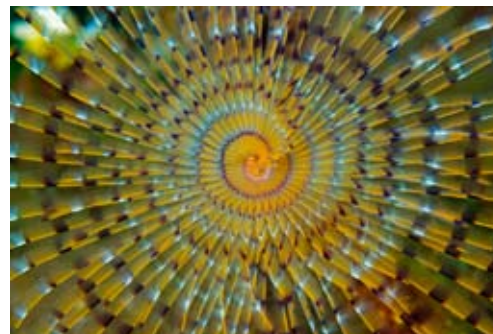
into the open water you seem to be hovering in endless blue. Here the guide will find you tunnels, swim throughs, and impressive rockfalls. The deeper parts of the dive are inhabited by some sizeable groupers.

The exit requires a little teamwork if you are passing up cameras but natural ledges allow you to step out easily. Then a short walk back to the car park, complete with all facilities, as this is a very popular spot for tourists, not just divers.

Wrecks & Reef

Purposefully sunk off the Southern end of the island, allowing an alternative when the North is blown out, there are 3 wrecks with depths ranging from 20m on the deck to 42m on the sand. With a walk down the path then entering over the rocks and a short surface swim to just 100m offshore you descend onto the chosen wreck. As they are purposefully sunk, they are in a good condition with marine life starting to colonise.

Once finished on the wrecks, you swim back to the reef, where there is a good selection of macro life, seastars, scorpionfish, octopus and others all putting in an appearance. The reef is worthy of a dive in itself as it has a number of terraces dropping down to 25m. The morning light is well worth exploiting with a wide angle lens and model.



Tube worm abstract
Ikelite Nikon D90, 105mm, YS110 strobes, 1/250 @ f/22, ISO 200

Exit is via a ladder and you can then walk back to the car park, complete with purpose built kitting up benches.

Ras Il-Hobz

Again on the South of the Island, good conditions are necessary for this dive. The access to this site has to be the smelliest I have ever done, as you drive right past a sewage works. With a short walk to the waters edge you simply slide in over the rocks into (thankfully) clear water as the sewage outfall was relocated elsewhere some years ago. This is a steep wall, with the bottom at 35m. As you round the headland, a pinnacle looms into view, just 15-20m off the wall. This is only 10m deep on the top, but round the back of the pinnacle, it is 70m+ to the seabed, which then slopes away to even greater depths. Circling



Diver on pinnacle at Ras Il-Hobz
Ikelite Nikon D90, 10-24mm @ 10mm, YS110 strobes, 1/125 @ f/11, ISO 200

the pinnacle as you ascend, you are surrounded by shoals of Chromis (Damsel fish) and smelt/sardines. Heading back over to the wall, the cracks and crevices hold morays, octopus and the ubiquitous combers. Exit is via a natural bay, with slipway

P29 Wreck and Reef

The P29 was a 51m Condor class patrol boat, scuttled in 33m of water just outside the Malta ferry



*Scorpionfish resting in the seagrass
Ikelite Nikon D90, 60mm, YS110 strobes,
1/60 @ f/11, ISO 200*

Out of the water

Unfortunately, sometimes we have to be out of the water, especially the day we fly home. Gozo has quite a number of surface attractions to help pass the time while you are off-gassing. The island has a predominantly Catholic population, and as such there are churches everywhere, some of these are really quite spectacular,

and definitely worth a visit. The citadel is situated in the centre of the island and the views commanded allow you to see 360 degrees, taking in the entire coastline, as well as learning about the history of this small island. Couple this with craft fairs and markets, as well as plentiful bars and restaurants, and you are sure not to be bored on your last day.

Conclusions

Gozo is hard to beat for value. Based on a group of 4, our bill for diving (6 guided, 6 unguided), self catering accommodation, transfers and car hire, was less than 200 Euros each. With return flights to Malta from 150 Euro, it is quite possible to get a week's blue water diving for under 400 Euros, plus food and drink (which is also very reasonable). This also puts it within reach of long weekend type trips, flying out on the Thursday, doing 3 dives a day for 3 days, and flying back on the Monday.

As a destination for European divers, it is different to the Red Sea but it is also closer and generally cheaper. It would make an ideal destination for schools to finish off their training over winter, rather than wait till the sea calms down or the quarries warm up.

This was my first time in Gozo and I was exceptionally well catered to by Gozo Aquasports, based in Marsalforn. They can supply you with accommodation, guides, hire cars, and arrange transfers for you as well. I will be going back again very soon.



Sean Arrowsmith

I would like to credit the people who have helped me with my photography/diving.

I took a Martin Edge photography course in April 2010 (the first time I used a DSLR underwater) and feel his teaching was of immeasurable benefit and he has shown me the way.

www.edgeunderwaterphotography.co.uk

Also the dive centre I used in Gozo was Gozo Aquasports

www.gozoaquasports.com

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terminal. Easily reachable by boat from Gozo, this intact wreck allows for a nice dive even when the winds are from the North West. If you start to slip into deco on the wreck, it is quite possible to swim the 100m or so to the reef where you are greeted by archways, swimthroughs, and a whole host of macro life, including morays, fireworms and octopus.

Comino Caves

These are a collection of swimthroughs and caverns and the only cave diving equipment needed is a torch. The shallow depth (14m max) and sheltered location means that this is often a second boat dive after the P29, and dive times of 80-90 minutes are quite possible. The light here can be exceptional, spilling in through cracks and over openings, so a wide angle lens is essential. There are also dense shoals of black spot bream, no doubt attracted by the many boats full of snorkelers who like to feed them.

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