Often overlooked, Malta should be on every Mediterranean sailor's itinerary

Lying fifty miles south of Sicily, Malta doesn't naturally fall into many cruising itineraries. While many cruisers pass around the south of Italy, most are heading to Sardinia and Corsica and possibly on to the Balearics, while the sailing hotspots of Croatia and Greece's Ionian Islands lie in the other direction. Malta, including its adjacent islands of Comino and Gozo, is just 30 miles long. A diversion to this tiny archipelago wouldn't be worthwhile, would it?

Here are six reasons why it would.

1. Valletta Harbour Entrance

Sailing into the fortified port of Valletta makes for one of the world's great harbour entrances. The limestone walls and bastions were first built by the Knights of Order of Saint John in the 16th century, and were expanded and updated under British rule three hundred years later. The city's cathedral domes and church spires are visible behind the walls, which today surround a harbour busy with cargo ships, working boats and pleasure yachts. Time your arrival for midday and you will be greeted by the Saluting Battery, which has been firing cannon into the harbour for nearly 500 years (these days they are thankfully only firing blanks).



There are several marinas inside the harbour, but only one anchorage at the somewhat isolated Rinella Bay. For better connections to the city itself, try the anchorage at St. Julians a little further up the coast.

2. Shopping

When we arrived in Malta on *Ambiente,* we had just spent several weeks in Tunisia, which is literally (apart from the wonderful fresh markets) a shopping desert. Malta's supermarkets – such as Green's and Welbee's – are world-class, while the budget-conscious will find several branches of Lidl. Your boat is also well served by retail, with several excellent marine stores – these include the magnificent Gauci Borda, whose narrow shopfront hides three floors of chandlery heaven. Finally, Anglophiles will enjoy Marks and Spencer, Holland and Barrett and other familiar British names.

3. Check In with your Crew List

For non-EU passport holders, cruising the Mediterranean within the restrictions of the 90-day Schengen Short Stay visa is a constant challenge. Malta may provide

some relief: as a matter of policy, sailors on private yachts are stamped in to the country using the Crew List instead of the passport – in other words, treated as ship's crew, not as visitors. You are required to stay on your boat overnight. If you are arriving from another Schengen country (such as Greece, Italy or France), you would have already been stamped into Schengen, and switching to the Crew List is tricky – better then, if possible, the check out of Schengen before crossing to Malta.

4. Pubs and Cafes

Perhaps continuing the British theme, Malta offers some wonderfully atmospheric pubs, including the Queen Victoria (ornate ceilings and chandeliers); "The Pub" (where hard-living actor Oliver Reed literally drank himself to death); and the tiny Plough and Anchor which specialises in whiskeys, perhaps because it takes up less space than beer.

Many of the cafés and restaurants occupy historic premises with ornate, arched ceilings, but a standout for *Ambiente*'s crew was Caffe Cordina, where the ceiling did very well to distract us from the cakes and pastries.



5. Dwejra Bay

If you anchor in Dwejra Bay, on the west coast of Gozo Island, you will be

surrounded by cliffs, caves and dramatic rock formations, and sheltered from most of the sea by Fungus Rock. A hole in the rock allows the setting sun to shine through, creating a unique photograph. A short dinghy ride up the coast leads you to another Maltese marvel, the **Dwejra Inland Sea**. It’s more of an inland pond, with room for only a handful of fishing boats and tourist excursion boats, but access to it is through a remarkable natural tunnel through the cliff, one hundred metres long, and barely wide enough for your dinghy.

Don’t try any of this in westerly conditions though. Fungus Rock is not sufficient to keep out the swell, and the anchorage turns into a washing machine.







6. It’s Free

For foreign boats in Malta, there are no cruising taxes, there’s no need to engage an agent for clearance, and there isn’t any requirement to track your movements with a Transit Log. That makes it similar to France and Spain, but less bureaucratic than Italy (which issues the *constituto* to be stamped in every port) and cheaper than Croatia, Montenegro, Albania and Turkey, all of which have fees and other administrative hurdles.

Apart from these few highlights, there is much to see and do in Malta. The streets of Valletta are charming and lovely to walk around – particularly notable are the *gallarija* balconies on almost every building. The island has archaeological sites which pre-date the pyramids, and a fascinating story of World War 2 valour. The co-cathedral of St. John houses Caravaggio’s rather dark artwork *The Beheading of St. John*, painted in 1608 after the artist himself had fled a murder charge in Rome. Then there are markets, beaches, the fortified city (*cittadella*) of Victoria on Gozo,

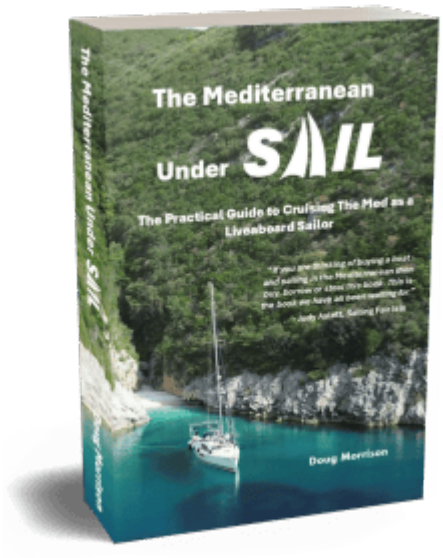
the giant-domed church in Mosta, and countless other attractions.

With no Schengen visa constraints and no fees to be paid, you'll be able to stick around for a while.

Doug Morrison is a retired IT consultant and RYA Yachtmaster. Since 2022, together with his wife Malini, he has been cruising the Mediterranean aboard their Jeanneau 45 *Ambiente*, covering over 12,000 miles and twelve countries.

This article is extracted from Doug's book, *The Mediterranean Under Sail: The Practical Guide to Cruising the Med as a Liveaboard Sailor.* The 340-page paperback can be delivered worldwide.

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