

Illustration: Dragan Stoilov



THE OTHER SIDE OF

# Valletta

Illustration: Dragan Stoilov



**Valletta is not simply made up of palaces, museums, and high street shops. There is another side to this smallest of capital cities that is often missed by visitors. CORINNE VELLA walks through the hidden side-streets.**

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**I**t is the relic of a gracious past and the symbol of an ambitious present, but Valletta is a place of contrasts and paradoxes. It thumbs its nose at the oft-used description 'a city built by gentlemen for gentlemen.' The seat of government and a thriving commercial centre, it is home to both rich and poor. Grand old buildings house powerful companies and families that can trace their ancestors to the time before Valletta was built. Hidden in their shadow are tiny shops, and tiny rooms which provide shelter to three generations of an extended family, who furnish their home with bird-cages from floor to ceiling, and who never have a bed to themselves.

In the streets touching the periphery, the elegant facades of *sette cento palaxxi* stand side by side with rows of aluminium balconies, where lines of fresh laundry flap in a parody

of the national flag, which is proudly flown above the entrance to the offices of every government department. Nuns living in cloistered silence can look out from their convent windows towards a sprawl of kiosk tables, where gaggles of women shriek about the latest lottery results, and holler at their children playing rowdily nearby. And if he looks out of the back window of his palace, the President of the Republic can feast his eyes on the rainbow of fresh produce displayed at the food market.

**“It is a street which attracts people who want to see and be seen, and many a local character has made this his or her daily beat”**

By day the streets are choked with cars, shoppers, and hawkers. Office workers breathlessly rush to beat the clock, and irate drivers make their frustration loudly known. Along Merchants' Street, from the President's Palace to the Prime Minister's

Office, hawkers clang and crash their portable stalls into position at the Monti, the daily flea market that on Sundays moves outside the city walls. Even the “quiet” side streets are not free from this cacophony. During the so-called ‘rush’ hour, when Valletta workers are trying to get in and Valletta residents are desperately trying to get out, bulky delivery trucks block the narrow roads, trapping helpless drivers in the tight space between the two rows of parked cars. The yells, bells and smells immortalised by Lord Byron are very much in evidence: irate drivers caught in streets choked with traffic do not hesitate to make their dissatisfaction known, and at the strike of noon the ringing sound of church bells reminds the faithful of the

Angelus, a religious ritual involving prayers recited at midday. As for the smells, Byron left few details of his experience, but in the densely populated area around the edges of Valletta, the freshly-scrubbed smell of laundry hangs in the air like bedclothes on a

law courts, and where civil servants, bank clerks and other office workers stroll during their lunch-hour.

It is a street which attracts people who want to see and be seen, and many a local character has made this his or her daily beat. It is also the street which leads to many of the 'places of interest' indicated in any tourist guidebook worth its salt, but one of the best ways to see the real Valletta is to fold away your map and to wander off into the side streets, particularly those that lead towards the Grand Harbour.

The narrow streets are galleries of architectural design. The wooden *gallarija* is a motif that appears repeatedly in the collages of design elements framed in the outline of grand houses. The atmosphere is one of cosiness, more like a village than a capital city. This part of Valletta is frequented by locals, and not by tourists, and the shoppers here are regulars, and not passing trade. Unhurried pedestrians ambling down the road call out *bongu* (a corruption of the French *bonjour*) to each other, stopping to chat with shopkeepers who smile in their doorways. Clusters of people gather in the little *botteghe*, transforming them for endless hours into mini-clubrooms, pleasantly passing the time of day in companionable chatter over glasses of tea delivered by the boy from the local bar.

Two, three, even four or five floors up, the day's washing is hung out to dry. Shirts, trousers, skirts, dresses and underwear flap five rows deep above swathes of bedlinen. Undeterred by bad weather, the Valletta housewife determinedly hangs out the laundry, covering it with sheets of plastic to protect it from the rain. Gangs of children play football in a home-made pitch in the road, scattering to allow the occasional car through, and then regrouping to continue their game.

Unaccompanied brothers and sisters in newly-pressed uniforms walk hand in hand to the school, while their mother buys the day's provisions from a grocery shop named after its owner.



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line, and the smell of home-cooked meals is enough to drive you in search of the nearest restaurant. This, the tiniest of capital cities, is a place of many faces, a living museum of lifestyles.

Republic Street, still fondly referred to by the old colonial name of Kingsway, is a veritable catwalk of human types. Here, a visiting dignitary on a walking tour can rub shoulders with a wide cross section of the population. The main pedestrian thoroughfare of the capital, it is where the resident busker

runs through his repertoire umpteen times a day, where harassed mothers try to shop while dragging reluctant children along, where the vendors of

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lottery tickets attract trade by shouting each other, where the drivers of horse-drawn carriages try to nab the tourists, where career-loafers sun themselves on the stairs outside the



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While high-street Valletta displays neatly arranged goods behind stylish exteriors, St. Paul Street is a *mahzen miftuh*, an open warehouse where tiny wooden shops display hand-painted signs and spill their goods onto the pavement. Just before opening hours, the street is a hive of activity as shopkeepers remove the brightly painted wooden panels from their windows and hook samples of their wares over their doorways. Bargain packs of bed sheets and pillow cases jostle for visual attention with piles of colourful vegetables ('fresh is best' says the sign). Rolls of cloth, carpeting and li-

noleum lean against walls blackened by years of pollution. Toys, party crackers and streamers dangle on coat hangers outside a wood-fronted shop labelled 'haberdashery.' In and around

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this area you can equip your kitchen, fill your larder, flood your wine cellar, revamp your appearance and refurbish your home. Bed linen and mattresses, curtains and cushions, fruit and vegetables, toys and games, wines and spirits, *pastizzi ffrizati u friski* (cheese-

cakes, frozen and fresh), are all to be found here, as are gold and silversmiths, hair stylists and shoe repairers.

Dipping downwards from near the Auberge de Castille, St. Paul Street is lined with pavements cut into shallow steps of *gebel tal-qawwi* - Maltese hardstone pockmarked and polished by countless feet over the centuries. The streets that cut perpendicularly across, running sharply downhill through St. Ursula Street, are closed to traffic. This side of the city is a haven for pedestrians, and heaven for photographers. The area is relatively quiet by late morning, belying the busyness that lies within. It is a treasure trove of traditional trades and a peep through an unprepossessing doorway may reveal the crowded workshop of a knife sharpener, shoe maker, printer, clock maker, iron worker, frame maker, gilder, or barber. Many of these trades are learned the old-fashioned way, through apprenticeship, and some are dying not for want of a market but for want of an apprentice.

Walking around in these streets is a delight even in the summer: the height of the buildings means that one side is always in the shade. But when the sun beats down at noon, the only side to be on is the inside. Around here, there are plenty of chapels and churches whose cool interiors are quiet sanctuaries which offer relief, rest and recuperation, and the chance to contemplate the art and architecture, and the religious devotion that compels the Maltese to turn their places of worship into an Aladdin's cave of riches.

Religious fervour is in evidence in the icons by people's front doors,



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in the churches and chapels that punctuate the streetscapes, in the *statwi tal-indulgenzi* set into the niches on street corners and in the gold and silver objects draped over the church *viri* (statues) as a sign of gratitude for divine favours received. The faithful, fearful

the indulgence, are inscribed in Italian below the religious image. As Italian was not widely understood before television was introduced, many would have been unable to comprehend the inscriptions, and would have had to rely on guidance from their in-

Valletta is a capital that does not throb with the vibes of a big city. It may indeed be a "city built by gentlemen for gentlemen", but its streetlife by day and sleepy serenity by night have something to offer anyone who visits. **HF**

## “Gangs of children play football in a home-made pitch in the road, scattering to allow the occasional car through”

for their soul's fate in the afterlife, visit the *statwi tal-indulgenzi*, statues of saints and the Madonna in whose honour a specific set of prayers is offered, in exchange for a stipulated amnesty in purgatory. The type and number of prayers, and the length of

tellectual superiors. Several *statwi tal-indulgenzi*, some instituted by prominent members of the church, are scattered around the stepped streets, ensuring their sponsor's safe passage into heaven and offering lesser mortals the chance to atone for their sins.