

The unique ex Gozo Mail Bus saved from possible destruction

by
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Following the restructuring of the Public Transport Service and launching of the “Arriva” buses with their complete replacement of the iconic Malta-built ones on the 2nd July 2011, it looked like the fate of the only bus in existence that had been specifically purpose-built and contracted to carry mail and passengers to and from the Gozo Ferry was doomed. Fortunately this was not the case and it is fitting to commemorate the event.

On postal service

The specially licensed mail bus, built by local coach builder Debono, had originally entered service in February 1960 and continued to ply the route as bus 6512 between Valetta and Marfa for the next seven years. It had replaced its predecessor, built in 1953 and having registration number 8808, which in December 1959 was involved in a serious accident when it fell over the



A fully loaded Gozo Mail Bus negotiating the steep hill from Ghadira Bay towards Mellieha

Ghajn Rihana Bridge on the Burmarrad Road. Although the bus had sustained considerable damage, fortunately nobody was seriously injured in the accident.

The thirty-six seat bus built by Debono normally used to be parked outside *Palazzo Parisio* in Merchants Street Valetta, where the General Post Office was located. It was the only regular bus allowed to be parked in a Valetta street and not at one of the two designated Valetta terminuses. It was also easily recognizable as besides the unique post office red livery, Debono had incorporated a particular feature which consisted of its large under-floor locker on the nearside behind the entrance doorway. This was used to store the mail while in transit. Occasionally, especially over the Christmas period, the locker was not large enough to cope with the volume of mail to be transferred and for this reason the back seats of the bus were used for carrying the mail in excess.

Whenever this was the case, passengers were only allowed in the front seats and the bus conductor had to keep a watchful eye on the bags. A penciled note

at the back of an original photograph of the bus taken in September 1961 which I have seen, records that at the time the bus covered circa 31,000 miles a year.

The fare paid by commuters boarding the bus to make the trip from Valetta to Marfa or vice-versa originally was of eleven pence, which was later increased to one shilling one penny. It is to be noted that the bus did not stop at any point between these two places to either pick up or disembark passengers, as this was a requirement in one of the conditions stipulated in the mail bus contract.



Bus driver Carmelo Micallef next to the partially open mail bag locker waiting for the ferry to arrive at Marfa

Gozo Mail Bus 6512 continued to run regularly back and forth between Marfa and Valetta until 1967, when the ten-year contract awarded to the well known entrepreneur Eucharist Zammit ended and a decision was taken by the postal administration not to renew it. During all the time it was in service as the Gozo Mail Bus, it was driven by Mr. Carmelo Micallef who hailed from Birkirkara, and who had been the regular Gozo Mail Bus driver since around 1958. Mr. Micallef passed away on the 5th May 1975 at the age of sixty four.

The post Gozo Mail Bus contract years

Following the termination of the mail bus contract, which directly also meant the termination of the special license of the bus as per one of the clauses in this same contract, the prevailing situation at the time necessitated that the ex Gozo Mail Bus had to be garaged for a couple of years and left idle waiting for better times. It was later sold by Eucharist Zammit to the owner of Rabat bus license 3495.

After a minor rebuild which saw the removal of the under-floor post office bag locker, the bus officially re-entered the public transport service as the new 3495 in April 1971. It now bore the dark blue Rabat bus route livery which was in use up to 1973.

Its color was changed once again when it was next repainted in the red Group C livery in use between September 1973 and November 1977, when all scheduled buses were grouped into three major divisions, with individual buses no longer being allocated specific routes within the sector their group covered.

The next livery it was repainted in was that of spray green. This was the color adopted by the whole public bus fleet when the three groups were merged together in November 1977.

The fifth and final livery the bus had was that introduced in 1995, when the deep yellow ochre and deep reddish orange colors used up to the end of the “Malta Bus

Era” was adopted for the Malta public transport fleet.

The bus remained in use in the public transport service until the very end with registration FBY 784, the number that it had been allocated when a new nationwide alpha numeric registration numbering system was adopted for all motorized vehicles. It was normally scheduled for making the trip covering route number 88, namely Valetta – Zebbug – Valetta.



Maximum Card showing the bus with registration FBY 784 passing past Bombi Gate on its way to Zebbug

A fresh beginning

After being out of service for nearly the next one and a half years, facing an uncertain future, the bus was given a new lease of life and returned to its original livery.

The idea of refurbishing the bus so that it may be preserved for its unique history, and not end up scrapped as was the fate of many Malta-built buses following the introduction of the Arriva fleet, was that of Mr. Francis Galea and his son Norbert.

With this project in mind, they approached the previous owner who agreed to the sale, following which they then contracted Mr. Emanuel Cutajar of Zinnu Bus & Coach Works, where a general overhaul of the body was undertaken. After three months of dedicated restorative work,



Denis Micallef, son of bus driver Carmelo, helping out during the final stages of restoration

the bus was ready to take to the roads once again and bring memories to those who still fondly remember making use of it as the Gozo Mail Bus when still young.

The Galeas plan to make the historic bus available for private hire.

On behalf of all those who like me are thankful for all initiatives taken to preserve our national heritage, especially more so when such initiatives are taken by private individuals, I would like to take the opportunity to commend Messrs. Galea for taking the lead and not let such a unique relic of our postal history be lost forever.

Thanks are also due to Mr. Denis Micallef for his help in supplying me with information and photographs.