Valletta, Back to its Future

Valletta, spring 2010: a British theatre impresario, a Maltese stage director and a French diplomat greet each other in Republic Street. Valletta, spring 1710: the Portuguese Grand Master Ramon Perellos raises a hand in polite greeting to the Pope’s representative, the Inquisitor, as their sedan chairs pass. Three hundred years apart, yet these two events characterise Valletta. It’s a city that has been always a melting pot of cultures, open to outsiders and influenced by them. All along though, it has retained a unique sense of self as a European, yet distinctly Mediterranean city. Valletta’s Mayor, Alexiei Dingli, echoes this when he says “Valletta is a mirror which reflects our common European heritage, a canvas which lends its spaces to showcase the diverse European identity, a city which respects its past while embracing its European future in a Euro-Med context.”

When Benjamin Disraeli visited Valletta in 1830 before he became Britain’s prime minister, he described it as “a city of palaces built by gentlemen for gentlemen”, its architectural riches comparable to those of Venice and worthy of Palladio. Visitors today still share in Disraeli’s view. Valletta is dominated by the vast cultural legacy of the Order of the Knights of St John who founded the city in 1566, and made it their seat for 232 years. Named after French Grand Master Jean Parisot de la Valette, who defended the islands successfully at the Great Siege of Malta in 1565, Valletta was a fortress city, Christian Europe’s most southerly outpost against the Ottoman Empire.

Born as a fighting machine, Valletta changed guise even as its bastions and grand palaces, auberges, took shape. After the Great Siege, riches flowed in from most of Europe’s nobility and Valletta slipped into a new role as patron of the arts. Valletta entered a golden age under the Knights as a showcase of leading-edge European culture, art and architecture. So many of Europe’s great creatives of the time worked for the Order, Valletta could claim to be a forerunner city of culture. Among them was Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio whose largest and only signed canvas, depicting the beheading of St John the Baptist, hangs in St John’s Co-Cathedral.

A city in search of new authors

Valletta was created as a stage set for
people from beyond Malta’s shores. When they went, it was left the administrative, judicial and commercial centre of Malta, but in search of a new cultural role. With its defences unused, colonisers long gone and industrial harbours abandoned by trade, what does Valletta want to be now? Where next for this isolated capital overshadowed by history and the responsibility of preserving a Europe-wide artistic, cultural and architectural heritage?

Valletta may have been built by gentlemen, but its mission in the 21st century is to be a ‘city of the people for the people’; its cultural life not defined in stone, but in what it does. The city is seeing a rush of regeneration programmes making exciting use of its incredible heritage. Valletta is on a drive to be the relevant, contemporary city it was when founded nearly 450 years ago.

Scene change

Valletta’s UNESCO World Heritage status is now a liberating force, not a straitjacket. New generations are moving in converting spacious patricians’ houses into des res here and seeing the potential of creative and gastronomic businesses there. Private initiatives and public works are joining forces to breathe life into Valletta.

St James’ Cavalier, a fort at Valletta’s city gate, has transformed from run-down government printing press into a Centre for Creativity. Its art-house cinema, performance spaces and exhibition halls are giving free reign to new cultural expression and experimentation in Malta. Old music halls, once favourite haunts of British service personnel, are now wine bars doubling up as arts’ venues, or being snapped up as swish retail units. Valletta has seen a derelict quay become a prestigious commercial waterfront with cafes, restaurants and cruise liner facilities. Ailing docks are now marinas fit for super yachts. European Union funds are helping shore up Valletta’s bastions.

Valletta is centre stage again for trade, this time in a cultural currency. The city, flanked by its two massive natural harbours - Grand Harbour and Marsamxetto - is an evocative backdrop to world-class events such as the annual, month-long Malta Arts Festival in July. Andalusian flamenco troops, American ballad singers, British Shakespearian actors and numerous local artists find themselves performing side by side in venues ranging from city piazzas and a botanical gardens to the ruins of a 19th century opera and palace courtyards.

The Malta International Jazz Festival in...
mid July each year is one of the best-loved uses of Valletta’s old wharfs. It has seen the greatness grace its stage, and love it so much they return. With bastions one side and the flood-lit fortifications of the old Three Cities across Grand Harbour, Malta Jazz is unique for its setting alone.

Italian architect Renzo Piano once said that Valletta was a city of ghosts, but no longer. April saw the start of his plans for the regeneration of Valletta’s city gate area. Some €80m in government funds is seeing the implementation of daring plans for a new parliament building, public and performance spaces and a much-needed ‘green lung’. The new-design parliament will allow its current seat, the imposing Grand Master’s Palace, to be opened to the public. The ruins of an old opera house, bombed flat in World War II, will become an open-air performance space. The fortification ditches will see park benches rather than parked cars when they become landscaped gardens.

City Gate may be stealing the limelight, but at the very tip of the Valletta peninsula is a vast fort that will see upward of €30 million in restoration supported by EU Structural Funds. Fort St Elmo, so huge it houses the Malta Police Academy and the War Museum with room to spare is being renovated to bring socio-economic and cultural life to the fringes of the city.

For too long the city’s waterfronts have been no-go zones of docks, warehouses and military bases. Now, the Grand Harbour Regeneration Project has set about restoring Valletta’s harbours to their rightful place as a national asset and returning them to the people. European Regional Development Funds are helping transform a run-down dock and inner creeks near the old power station into venues for leisure, yachting, heritage trails, cultural activities and quality retail and commercial spaces. Living with a monument and making a monument live are challenges facing not just the city of Valletta but all Malta. The country, like its capital, has an incredible wealth of heritage including more UNESCO World Heritage: its seven megalithic temple sites, some of which predate Stonehenge by 1,000 years; and the Hypogeum, a complex of underground chambers, part temple, part necropolis that was dug out by man in around 2,500 B.C.

On a short stay, and within half an hour of Valletta, visitors can span some 7,000 years of not only Malta’s cultural history, but also a great deal of the Mediterranean’s too. Even Gozo, Malta’s smaller sister island, is little more than an hour away from Valletta by road and ferry, and just 20 minutes by sea plane from Grand Harbour.

Valletta Waterfront. Courtesy of Andrew Galea Debono.

**A city by another name**

Any discussion of Valletta inevitably talks of Malta. The city and the state are inseparable. Malta takes on Valletta’s mantle every time it is described as ‘Fortress Island’, or ‘Nurse of the Mediterranean’ for its role in World War II. But can a micro island state in the Mediterranean have cities at all? Stand in Valletta’s Upper Barrakka Gardens jostling with the tourists snapping photos of the Grand Harbour panorama and see the urban arc around you. Valletta’s pull has always reached far beyond its bastions. Today, the city is a magnet attracting up to 60,000 commuters a day, yet it has around only 6,500 residents. Include its satellite towns and the population of this urban, ‘greater Valletta’ swells to around 250,000, well over half that of the Maltese Islands.

**Valletta as European City of Culture**

Valletta is a city of contradictions. It has city status, though small. It was, and is still, a European cultural centre, though on the limits of Europe, and it became a strategic theatre of war by virtue of geography and history, not from its own desire. Built as a fortress, it could survive only by being open to the outside world. Connected historically by shipping, it is connected today by broadband.

Valletta’s bid to be a European City of Culture in 2018 gives contemporary meaning to these age-old contradictions. It looks not just north, but also south and east as it rekindles cultural ties with old protagonists in its history. This year’s Malta Arts Festival is inviting an act from Istanbul, European City of Culture 2010 and the EU has just opened its Arab-Liaison Office on the city’s fringes. Valletta has gone back to its future.

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