

## A tale of two cities in Malta's small but enchanting capital Valetta

Malta was one of Europe's most bombed countries during WWII — Domhnall O'Donoghue visited its underground cities to learn about the islanders' resolve



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Domhnall O'Donoghue

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Consent

I've just arrived in Valetta, the EU's smallest but most enchanting capital. Rather than witnessing the daily gun salutes over Grand Harbour or glimpsing the duo of Carra-  
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Malta, anticipating  
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guide, Denis Galea Vella  
nose and remaining

vertical to laugh.

However, during WWII, these passageways truly became a lifeline for this Mediterranean country — then a British colony — when it endured a salvo of German and Italian air attacks. Malta's strategic location at the crossroads of Europe, North Africa and the Middle East made them vulnerable, resulting in 15,000 tons of bombs being dropped. Fortuitously, many locals — 38,000, in fact — could find refuge from the destruction in these centuries-old tunnels and cisterns.

Today, Valletta — a limestone kingdom and world heritage site — defines elegance and beauty, but it's down here, amongst the damp, narrow corridors, where the islanders' courage is perfectly showcased.





A cistern in Underground Valletta © Heritage Malta

## UNDERGROUND WARREN

I pass a series of musty alcoves, transformed by locals into bedrooms — the colourful tiles, salvaged from bombed buildings and used to decorate the floors and walls, remain visible. Doors, no longer present, offered privacy and protection from robberies — a common practice, given that many had lost everything.

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“Families then could have 12 members,” Denis remarks, highlighting the cramped conditions the Maltese endured within these spaces. “Although, they were the lucky ones because not everyone could afford the rent for them — those without money slept along the corridors.”

Elsewhere, etched into the walls are graffiti of British flags, aeroplanes, Neville Chamberlain and the target of their contempt, Hitler. I imagine the many carved statues of Madonna and Child comforted the predominantly Catholic Maltese as their world unravelled.

We pass a 12-metre-high chamber, where daylight spears through a manhole cover overhead before arriving at a makeshift cinema. The film projected against the walls suggests parents consoled frightened children by encouraging them to embrace the darkness, odours and claustrophobia by imagining being rabbits, living in a warren.

“During air raids, everything down here shook, and parts of the ceilings collapsed,” Denis says. “It must have been terrifying.”

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“Even though the family couldn’t accommodate large quantities, they invited neighbours to hide here — 130 in total,” says tour guide Audrey Bartolo as a curious parrot in the courtyard above attempts to distract us. “The zig-zag excavation prevented the blast of bombs from going through the tunnels.”

Among the shelter’s many historical features is an original copy of the Times of Malta documenting the 1938 Munich Agreement — a futile attempt to appease Hitler.

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“As soon as you heard the siren, you headed to a shelter,” Audrey menti . “My late grandma used

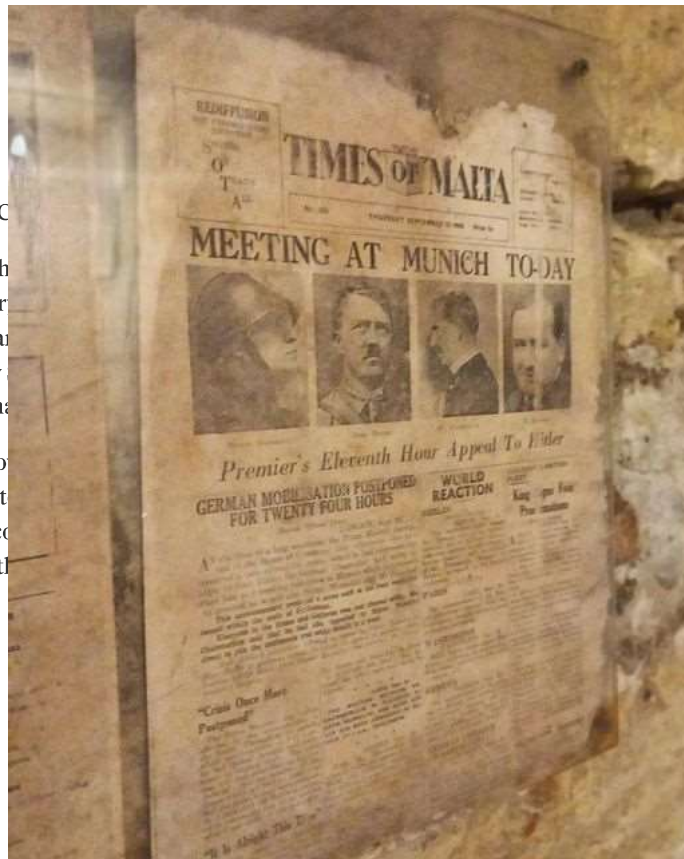
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“It was heavily targeted in 1942,” Robyn says. “Openings along the fortification walls were used as air-raid shelters.”

Despite the devastation, Malta persevered. Many locals I chat with during my stay reference the miraculous arrival of a supply convoy, which saved the country from starvation. I also suspect their survival resulted from impenetrable solidarity. Don't take my word for it: following the war, the entire Maltese population was awarded the George Cross, Britain's highest civilian honour for bravery.

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Princess Elizabeth dancing in The Phoenicia Malta's Grand Ballroom

DANCING QUEEN

Like the rest of the country, The Phoenicia Malta rose from the ashes in the post-war years and has since welcomed the world's most notable figures, namely Queen Elizabeth II. In her younger years, the late monarch regularly tripped the light fantastic in the Grand Ballroom.

"Everyone in Malta knew it was the queen's favourite hotel," Robyn reveals. "When she died, locals came here to pay tribute."

"Our story is unique; the property has so much history and character," PR and Marketing Manager Christine Darmanin accurately describes when she joins us, adding that the hotel hosted the official celebrations to mark the country's independence in 1964.



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The property recently received a refurbishment where many original features from the war era were maintained. Unsurprisingly, it enjoys repeat business, partly thanks to the spa, gardens and dreamy outdoor pool sculpted into the rock outcrop. But, according to Christine, guests see The Phoenicia Malta as a home-from-home — "We host weekly drinks receptions where everyone can mix and mingle."

She adds that in this post-pandemic world, where many people work remotely, these human interactions are more important than ever.

"In Malta, whether you're a local or visitor, you're always part of a community," she says — a spirit evident today, during wartime and, no doubt, well into the future.