

A Green Island in the Sun

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Introduction

How often have we heard of Gozo's communications problems, its quaintness, ecology and quietness? And how many times have we heard that insularity makes Gozo the attractive place that it is? Recently, I have come across a number of reports featuring Gozo which were published in *The Times of London*. These reports refer to these characteristics which can be said to form part of the Gozitan body tissue even though the 'body' has changed a lot over the years.¹

This article focuses on a number of reports, starting in 1953, which show that although times may have changed some perceptions, many of the present day issues regarding Gozo have changed very little. In these newspaper reports we find various descriptions of Gozo and Gozitan life at the time, as well as frequent references to it as being greener than Malta and as being the centre of Maltese lace-making. One account depicts Gozo as an island where every female inhabitant above the age of five is engaged in lace-making! This must be a far cry from the situation today.



Traditional lace making in Gozo. Lacemaker sitting at her pillow making lace in the traditional way.

Communications – Enter the Helicopter

Transport between Gozo and Malta has always been a hot topic – for obvious reasons. In recent years we have seen the building of a helicopter landing pad as well as the beginning and the end of a couple of helicopter services. The earliest account of a helicopter being used in inter-island transport might be that carried by *The Times* of 8 June 1953, which reported that the day before, the Acting Governor of Malta, Mr Trafford Smith, flew by helicopter to the island of Gozo to attend the coronation² celebrations being held there while a second helicopter flew in the Acting Prime Minister Sir Paul Boffa. This mode of transport, a one-off occasionally provided by the British Military services and not as part of a regular service, was used because the sea on that day was too rough to permit a ferry crossing. The report continues: “To the Gozitans, most of whom had never seen a helicopter before, their landing was almost the major excitement of the day's events.”

Three helicopters of the Sikorsky Dragonfly type are thought to have arrived in Malta in December 1952 and were unloaded from the carrier *Perseus* at Marsaxlokk. The first helicopter demonstration in Malta took place a couple of days later. Hence the ride into Gozo on board a helicopter by Mr Trafford Smith and Sir Paul Boffa on these 'new flying machines' was a novel experience for many – not only Gozitans.

A More Tranquil Life

Further down we read: “The Gozitans, who have a tradition of rivalry with the Maltese, certainly

¹ The oldest of these newspaper reports dates back to the 22 October 1789, but I do not intend to go back that far in this brief assessment, other than to highlight in order to satisfy the curiosity which I may have already aroused, that the 1789 one just quoted, consists of a write-up by a Paris-based *Times* correspondent, describing the Maltese uprising against the French. Based on a “letter from Malta” sent by the French garrison on the island to the authorities in Paris, it includes this short description of the ‘revolutionary’ events in Gozo: “we have no intelligence on the fate of the garrison on the island, composed of 350 men, nor of that of the Old city, which consisted of 100 men; much fear is entertained of their having fallen under the poniards (daggers) of the assassins. The insurgents have rendered themselves masters of several batteries, which command different landing places, and of a powder mill”.

² The coronation of Queen Elizabeth II took place on June 2, 1953.



Princess Elizabeth with Philip in Malta.
 Photo: http://i.telegraph.co.uk/telegraph/multimedia/archive/00429/travel-graphics-200_429447a.jpg

vied with them on this occasion in the vigour of their expressions of loyalty to the Queen. The whole of the small capital...was decorated with flags, arches and bunting, almost every other house displaying a picture of the Queen. By a coincidence, the principal hotel here has for long been called the “Duke of Edinburgh” and today it proudly displayed photographs of the Queen taken, when as Princess Elizabeth, she visited it with the present Duke of Edinburgh in April, 1951.” The article describes Gozo as being greener, more fertile and less crowded than Malta, and the Gozitans as being “less afflicted by the worries of the modern world than are the Maltese.”

Helicopters feature again in 1955 when according to *The Times* of Saturday 22 October of that year, some of the members of a UK delegation involved in the round table conference on the proposal to integrate Malta and Gozo with the UK, were carried to the island by helicopters.

Other Competing Destinations

In “Green Island in the Sun” which appeared in the edition of 10 February 1962, a number of contrasts are made between Gozo and Malta emphasizing in greater detail the reasons why the former is more attractive than the latter. However, one sentence in the report caught my eye: “The great majority of Maltese live and die without ever crossing the five-mile strait that divides them from it (Gozo) – it is easier if you want an excursion, to skip over to Sicily.”

Now that is surely no longer a fact of modern life: I would think that nowadays the majority of Maltese have crossed over to Gozo at least once in their lives. It is also the case that in the age of low cost travel other localities, alas Sicily not being the only one, compete with Gozo as destinations for the Maltese outbound travelers.

Malta Noisy, Gozo Quite

In the same article, and before describing in more detail the rest of Gozo’s attractions, the anonymous correspondent writes: “Malta the maritime crossroads of the Mediterranean , noisy with bells and traffic and thronged with people; Gozo, on its doorstep, primitive and secluded, a green island in the sun that has slept the centuries away, and somehow escaped invasion by the most determined of travel agents.” Nearly half a century has passed since this description was written. Since then travel agents have discovered Gozo, quite a lot of construction has taken place which changed the face of the island and traffic jams occur as well. But still Gozo is renowned to be quieter than Malta and less hectic.

The First Royal Visit?

According to *The Times*, in 1967 Gozo experienced the first visit by a reigning British monarch when the Queen and the Duke of Edinburgh crossed over from Malta on the minesweeper Walkerton to lay the foundation stone of a new hospital and place a wreath on the war memorial at the main Rabat square (It-Tokk).

Under the heading “Rustic Gozo Greet the Queen”, *The Times* of Friday November 17, 1967 describes the Queen’s welcome thus: “The square of Rabat was filled with a sturdy, forthright crowd, many of the men in their working clothes, and with the robust rhythms of two energetic brass bands which local rivalries and local earthiness brought to a fine measure of stentorian vigour.”

The report quoted the late Dr Anton Tabone, then President of the Civic Council as summing up this Gozitan welcome for the royals thus: “a surging welcome by the island’s unsophisticated people.”

The Causeway

As the islands of Malta and Gozo were approaching the 1971 election, more important issues found their way in the pages of *The Times*. One of these concerned the building of the new hospital while the other was the proposed causeway to link Gozo with Malta and put an end finally and perpetually to the inter-island transport problem. In an article “Controversy Over Gozo Causeway Plan” which appeared on 29 September 1970, Lola Sammut had this to say about the causeway: “Most Gozitans are realistic about this venture and feel that there are more immediate needs, apart from the fact that the stretch of water which cuts them off from Malta is an important ingredient of the magic of their island.”

At the same time, Sammut did not under-rate the problems Gozo faced in its communications with

the rest of the world when she stressed that the “foremost problem is communications, and this affects workers, students and visitors as well as the transport of produce. The islanders need more than one ferry running more frequently, as well as better berthing facilities...The telephone service is inadequate and frustrating for both Gozitans and Maltese, and utterly exasperating for the few hoteliers and others in the tourist trade.”

What Can we Make of This?

This brief account is by no means a historical one as defined by professional historians. It relies on a few reports on Gozo written in a British newspaper, *The Times*. A lot has happened in the past sixty years: the harbours at Ċirkewwa and Mġarr have been improved, ferry services have been ameliorated with the commissioning of three vessels and frequent crossings, air services have



Malta and the Comino Islands as seen from Gozo.

Photo: http://www.gozoandmalta.com/pb/wp_e49f4e8e/images/img169204b488f41ca707.jpg



The Imperial Eagle was a Gozo ferry between 1958 and 1968. It could accommodate seventy passengers and ten cars.
Photo: <http://dmdiving.nl/images/ImperialEagle.jpg>

been tried on and off but they are too expensive to be turned into a viable regular service, fixed line and mobile telephony have improved the links between the two islands, as has the internet, but the communications problem persists. While quite a lot is heard of the need to provide an air link to connect Gozo to Malta (or is it to the rest of the world?) little is heard in public of the proposal to build a causeway.

The island is still greener and quieter than Malta, but life has changed in Gozo, irreversibly so in many instances. The proposal to turn Gozo into an ecological island builds on the island's enduring characteristics, but could it also be the case of shutting the gate when the horse has already bolted?

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