

# The Narrow Street with an Overwhelming History

STRADA STRETTA

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Strait Street, better known as Strada Stretta, is one of Malta's most iconic landmarks. Considered infamous by some, it was, in the past, an entertainment hotbed for many and is still recognised for this trait.



## Strada Stretta has outlived its lewd reputation and most of all its obsolescence

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### Then

Live music was available in most of the bars and music halls. Strada Stretta was still swinging to the big band sounds of the mid-1950s. However, the jukebox and rock 'n' roll later took centre stage.

As a boy, George Cini, author of “Strada Stretta it-triq li darba xeghlet il-Belt” and “Strada Stretta aktar dawl fuq it-triq li darba xeghlet il-Belt”, was used to being drilled by his grandmother to avoid Strada Stretta. In an interview, he describes his encounters with a string of personalities who worked and lived along this lane.

Strada Stretta was full of bars, packed with women, sailors, soldiers, and other military men, mostly from the British services. Not all the women who worked in the bars were prostitutes; the majority worked as barmaids, however, a number of these barmaids did offer the ‘extra’ service but not in the bars.

One bar called Dirty Dicks did not employ barmaids because, according to the owner Ġużeppi Attard, women created problems.

Musicians got paid very well in those days, around one pound a day, whilst a clerk earned slightly more than that in a week. It was said, that British servicemen were attracted mostly to bars, which offered transvestite entertainment. Among the more popular drag queens were il-Bobbie, Sugar and Ġuži tal-Cario. Transvestites were not looked down upon in those days. In fact, most soldiers and sailors preferred entertainment provided by transvestites rather than female singers and dancers.

The street also offered restaurants. One particular restaurant called Cicko’s had two establishments where one catered for locals and the other for the British offering the same exact menu at a much steeper price.



## Now

Strada Stretta has taken a new turn. It is still an entertainment hub but has lost a lot of its connection to the Royal Navy. Gentrification is taking over Strada Stretta. Most of the homes and vacant locations in the street are being turned into food outlets whilst others have been opened as bars. Some of the bars present in the 1950s are still around. Also, a couple of the grandiose houses are being changed into boutique hotels.

George Cini's recollections of Valletta date back to his childhood years when the population of the city "was around 22,500 citizens" but which has now slipped to around 7,000. The reason for this is the new rent laws.

Once the old contract finishes, new contracts with a much higher rent are demanded, resulting in families moving elsewhere. Whilst it was previously inhabited by poor working class families, most of the buildings now accommodate legal offices and tourists. When Strada Stretta was dying out in the 1960s, because of the run-down of the British services, the Maltese resorted to tourism. The same schema is being used today.

Strada Stretta has outlived its lewd reputation and most of all, its obsolescence. It is now still thriving in a rich, historical and cultural manner by embracing its old features through regeneration, architecturally and objectively.