Elly’s May 2010 trip to Malta
Malta has lots to make it attractive, e.g. the rambling colorful local busses that go very fast on roads full of potholes (and I mean that), the sleepy villages of the island, the wonderful food, and the politeness of the people. I visited at the end of May and there were few tourists and prices stayed the same even if there were tourists. A local bus ride costs .47 eurocents and is a great introduction to the island after landing at the airport. And people wait to get the .03 cents back from the driver. To me, the bus system looks great but, as someone told me who had to get from Żebbuġ to Valletta every day, buses are often full (and you have to wait for the next one) or break down and therefore car density is very high.

Maltese busses

The villages have a middle eastern feel to them and Valletta, the capital, has government departments as well as sleepy empty alleys.

Mgarr grocery store

Valletta

There are some overdeveloped areas, with apartments and high rises (e.g. in Sliema) but they are mainly confined to one part of the island. There is frequent critical discussion on
development in the Times of Malta letters section. Malta is one of the most populated places (certainly by square kilometer); by one count, it is the 7th most populated country/dependency in the world although agricultural land still predominates. This density of population has an effect on the environment of course. Malta broke the highest number of EU environmental rules (in 2008).

Malta from the air, round Valletta

Lots of agricultural land too

One eats well. Rabbit (‘fenek’) is the local delicacy but there are other options (so no worries), especially fish! They have good local beer – the hop leaf beer was my favorite.

The history of Malta is fascinating. The island was most likely connected to Sicily/Europe because the bones collected in the Ghar Daram cave are of dwarf elephants, hippopotamuses, and deer, dating around 150,000 BP (before present). It isn’t clear when the first humans came since these would have been hunter-gatherers and the island may have been too small for them to stay. The earliest evidence of farming on Malta dates from 7200 years ago and since pottery shards are found in this cave as well it is thought that it harbored the first settlers. Later on, it was a cattle pen and contained arms during WW2.

The megalithic temples (older than the Egyptian pyramids) are dated 3600 – 2500 BCE and there are lots of theories on them (many connecting them to Stonehenge and the hunebedden in Northern Europe). Below is a picture of Mnajdra, remains of two temple sites now covered by tent-like structures.
The art found in these is quite remarkable. From Tarxien, right in the middle of Paola, there are the following finds below. There are also faces, animals, and small mother goddess statues.

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<th><img src="http://www.insap.org/insap/album2a.htm" alt="Mnajdra temples from" /></th>
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<th><img src="http://upload.wikimedia.org" alt="Remains of a 2.5 meter high mother goddess statue, from" /></th>
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The temple sites were abandoned 2000 BCE and taken over by a different, Bronze Age culture. After this, waves of new influences occur: around 800 BCE Phoenician sailors arrive, around 480 BCE Malta becomes part of the Carthaginian Empire, and then of the Roman Empire takes over. Christianity is introduced early on by a ship-wrecked St. Paul but it isn’t clear how many people are actually converted. The most influential period (at least for the language and certain cultural patterns) is the occupation between 870 CE and 1090 by Arab speakers. This period is short and comes to an end in 1090 when (Norman and other) knights capture Malta and stay till 1530 after which the Knights of St John take over. The latter manage to withstand a fleet with 30,000 Ottomans during the Great Siege of Malta (still celebrated as a national holiday on 8 September) and are responsible for a lot of the fortifications.
Napoleon’s troops capture the island in 1798 but get thrown off in 1800 after which it become a British Crown colony with various forms of local independence from 1814 to 1964. Malta is very important during the second world war. In 1940, three (old) airplanes keep the Italians away but Malta experiences more bombing than any other place (154 days and nights of continuous bombing). In 2004, it joins the EU and in 2008 it abandons the lira for the euro.

Catholicism is the predominant religion (and the official one). The divorce rate is low, same-sex marriage is debated but will take some doing, abortion is not allowed under any circumstance (and women have to travel, e.g. to the UK). One of the bus drivers on the local busses had two tattoos: 666 in his neck and a cross behind his ear. However, in 10 years, church attendance has gone down by 11% to 56 % in 2005. Children that are born outside marriage have doubled in the last 5 years; the sad fact of that is that 54% of single-parent families live in poverty. The population is aging and 21% of the people above 65 live in poverty, with some geographical differences.

Malta presents one of the most unique linguistic pictures. The language, Malti, is a variety of Arabic (brought there 1000 years ago) that is written in Roman script and does not seem to keep a connection with North Africa but has borrowed a lot from Italian and Sicilian. It is spoken by close to 400,000 speakers (mainly in Malta but also in Australia, Canada, Gibraltar, Italy, the UK, and the US. Almost everyone knows someone abroad. For a variety of reasons (e.g. Sicily is very close), Italian has always been important and of course English, especially since 1800. Malti became the official language in 1934 together with English but Italian was purposefully left out. The Code Switching is fascinating; it is fun to stand in line to listen to people go between Malti and English (and Italian). Education, including university, is free (and obligatory from 5 to 16); literacy was 92.8 % in 2005.

Many emigrants left to Australia, the US, and Britain in the 19th and 20th centuries. Now, there is more immigration, e.g. in 2006, there were 1273 asylum seekers and there are many undocumented migrants.

I didn’t see many dogs but lots of cats in Valletta (one was quite territorial and was looking nastily at me). A final word about hunting and in particular bird hunting. This is one of the more controversial issues. I visited a bird sanctuary at Siggiewi and they talked about the difficulties of having any birds since the hunters shoot them all, and they are not allowed to use the falcons to hunt (a traditional task of falcons) outside the hunting season. If they took them during the hunting season, even more would be killed. There are around 12,000 hunters according to one website (http://www.birdlife.org/news/news/2010/01/malta_petition.html) one of the highest density in Europe. The hunters have the longest bird hunting season in Europe (again according to the website). Malta is a stop on the European-African migration route and therefore hundreds of migratory birds use Malta as well.

In short, I would love to go back; it is a wonderful place with lots of things to explore.