

# On Calypso's Island

Michael Balter succumbs to the charms of Gozo - Photographs by Flip Chalfant





**When I married into** A LARGE ENGLISH CLAN SOME years ago, I acquired by adoption a rich storehouse of family lore. One of my favorite tales was that of Minna Turner, a devout spinster who had devoted her life to caring for her mother, and whom the family had taken under its wing when her mother died. Then one day, when Minna was already in her sixties, a recently widowed childhood friend came into town, proposed marriage, and whisked her off to the Mediterranean island of Gozo.

This romantic story came to a sad end 15 years later with her husband's death, and everyone expected Minna to return to England to live out her days. But she had other ideas. Having winged her way from the gloomy mist of Northamptonshire to the sunny skies of southern Europe, this bird had no intention of flying back. And it was there, in a quiet hamlet on this little island in the Maltese archipelago, I found her, living with her dog, Ginger, in a stone farmhouse that looked out over the cobalt sea.

San Lawrenz was typical of most villages on Gozo. The twin bell towers of a Baroque church stood high over a cluster of balconied houses built of the sienna-colored limestone that gives a burnished tone to the entire island. At the edge of town, where Minna lived, tufts of prickly pear marked the boundaries of farms where goats and chickens peered curiously at passersby.

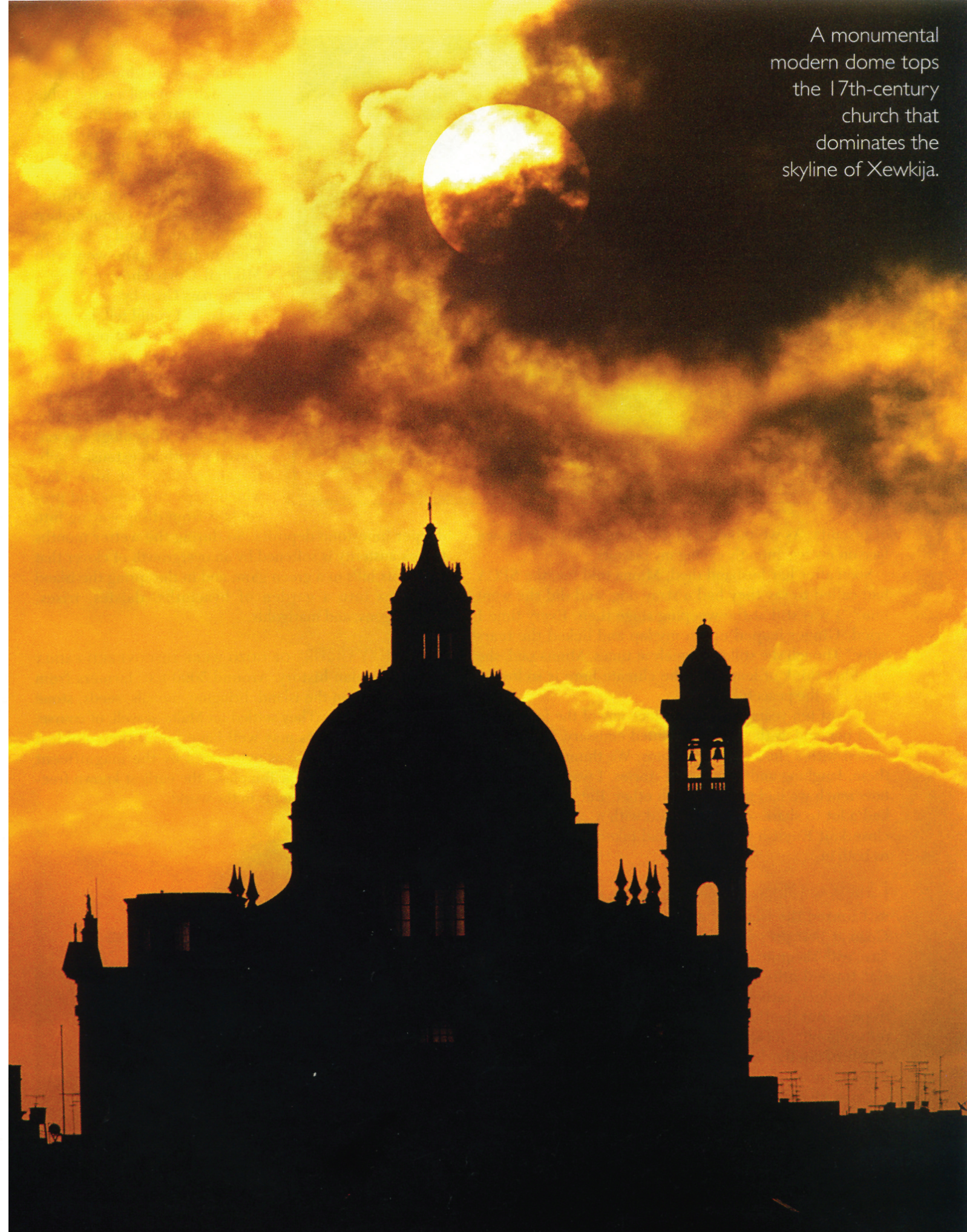
As I climbed her front steps, a warm breeze rose from the cliffs of Dwejra Bay and ruffled the pines on the hills above the village. Ginger began to bark. Before I could knock, the door opened and Minna's smiling, deeply lined face beamed out at me.

"Do sit down," she said, showing me to a wicker sofa. "I've just come back from my yoga lesson, so I haven't had time to put on the tea."

Despite her 83 years, she seemed to glide through the room as quickly and gracefully as a young woman. Soon she came back with a pot of tea and a plate



A monumental modern dome tops the 17th-century church that dominates the skyline of Xewkija.



Transplanted islander Minna Turner (top, with Ginger) enjoys rural Gozo, where floral reflections (right) soften the glare of modern life.



the trio, overshadowed by historic Malta but still a respectable size compared to minuscule Comino. Gozo's tiny harbor at Mġarr cannot compare with Malta's breathtaking port at Valletta. And the international meetings that are commonplace on the main island – such as George Bush's pow-wow with Mikhail Gorbachev in 1989 – largely pass Gozo by.

As far as I could tell, however, the Gozitans are not put out by this relative anonymity. For one thing, as even the Maltese admit, Gozo is by far the prettier island, greener and more fertile. An accident of geology has endowed it with an extensive subterranean layer of blue clay, which traps rainwater and prevents it from disappearing into

of biscuits. As we talked, Ginger planted his soft brown face on my leg, intently eyeing my biscuits.

Soon after her husband died, Minna told me, the SPCA had called to say they had a stray dog, and did she want him? "I was still at the weeping stage then. Every time I cried, Ginger leaped up on my lap and licked the tears away." Though she still gets lonely at times, Minna said, she wouldn't think of leaving. "The climate here is so lovely, and I like the peaceful life."

At least ten years had passed since any of the family had seen her, and as the clan's appointed emissary, I had come armed with a thick stack of photos. We thumbed through them, laughing and exchanging stories. I was surprised at how much we had to say to each other. But, of course, we had a lot to share – a loving bond with a close-knit English family that had taken us both in.

**I would see Minna** SEVERAL MORE TIMES as I toured the island she called home. Gozo at first presents an austere, rocky face, with sheer limestone cliffs and quiet, flat-topped hills. Its beauty is raw and rough-edged rather than coquettish and tropical. But the three islands of the Maltese republic, located less than 60 miles south of Sicily, have been a Mediterranean crossroads for thousands of years.

Gozo, shaped like an arrowhead about nine miles long, is the second largest of

For a vegetable vendor in Victoria, marketing is an open-door policy.

deeper limestone deposits. So during the wetter months Gozo's austerity is softened by an overgrowth of clover that bathes its hills in a green glow, and in the spring the island blossoms into a garden of hyacinths, daisies, irises, snapdragons, and marigolds.

**The quirky charms** OF GOZO WERE DISCOVERED FAIRLY early in human history. Around 5000 B.C. farmers from Sicily settled on the island, bringing animals, seeds, stone tools, and pottery. They settled on Malta as well, of course, but the immigrants may well have found their noblest inspiration on Gozo, as evidenced by the magnificent remains of the Ggantija Temples – the earliest known free-standing stone monuments in the world.



Once a fishing village, Xlendi still exudes the romance of the sea for visitors.

The notion of Gozo as an ancient paradise lives on in one of the most enduring local traditions, which holds that Gozo is the island Ogygia, abode of the beautiful nymph Calypso in Homer's *Odyssey*. According to the story, Calypso fell in love with Odysseus and kept him captive for seven years before allowing him to return to his wife, Penelope, in Ithaca.

Though a Maltese scholar recently disputed Gozo's claim to fame, I saw no indication that the signs directing tourists to "Calypso's Cave" on the island's north coast were about to come down.

The steep rock steps descending into the dark, boulder-filled grotto led to something less than the "great cavern" described in the *Odyssey*, however. And there was no sign of the great hearth fire Homer had described, with its scent of burning cedar and juniper logs – just a crouching boy renting candles for a few coins. Instead of Calypso's singing or Odysseus's weeping, I heard only the music of laughing children on the beach far below and the whisper of the sea as it lapped the orange sands.

**At the Paradise** RESTAURANT AT XLENDI BAY, I SAT BEFORE A plate of perfectly grilled *lampuki*, a local fish, as a warm midday breeze played with the white lace netting strung

over the restaurant's open doors. The walls of the Paradise were cluttered with dozens of pictures of Elvis Presley: Elvis in uniform, Elvis in Las Vegas garb, even a huge framed replica of the Elvis U.S. postage stamp.

"Joe's crazy about Elvis," the waitress explained, pointing to the proprietor, a cigar-chomping man in a sport shirt who stood behind the bar, talking to some friends.

After lunch I walked along the waterfront. A handful of British tourists sat at plastic café tables, reading the *Daily Telegraph* or watching the heads of swimmers bobbing among the fishing boats. A small boat with bright blue-and-green trim was moored in one corner of the tiny harbor, near a sign advertising "Ted's Enjoyable Trips." Ted himself, a friendly young man with long dark hair, wearing one earring, came up to ask if I wanted to book a cruise around the island. He didn't seem very disappointed when I said no.

"I only go out when it's calm anyway," Ted said, glancing at the rising swells beyond the white cliffs that lined the inlet. "I don't want my passengers to be seasick."

On a craggy spit of land across from the mouth of the bay, a massive stone tower stood in lonely vigil over the choppy sea. Built in the 17th century, the Xlendi tower was one of many fortifications erected by the Knights of Malta during their 268-year rule here.

Cacti compete with wildflowers along the road to Zebbug, a ridgetop village known for its view.



The Knights of St. John of Jerusalem, as they were originally known, were founded in the 11th century and distinguished themselves during the Crusades. By 1291, however, the Holy Land had fallen to the Muslims. The knights fled – first to Cyprus, then to Rhodes, and finally to Malta, courtesy of Holy Roman Emperor Charles V, who granted them the islands.

But while the knights were busy fortifying Valletta and constructing its magnificent harbor, they neglected the defense of Gozo. The smaller island had long been vulnerable to attacks by pirates, and in 1551 a Turkish force landed on Gozo and seized almost the entire population, some 5,000 people, who had taken refuge in the citadel overlooking the main town of Rabat. The unhappy souls were dragooned into slavery in Constantinople. Many years would pass before a trickle of returning Gozitans and Maltese immigrants repopulated the island.

**On present-day maps,** GOZO'S MAIN TOWN IS LABELED Victoria, which is not surprising, since the British occupied the islands from 1800 until independence in 1964. Nevertheless, I was assured by Catholic priest Joseph Bezzina, "Nobody here calls it Victoria; we all call it Rabat, the old name."

Father Joe, as he is known on Gozo, is a native of the town who looks much younger than his 45 years. A professor at the University of Malta and director of the Gozo section of the Maltese national archives, he is the closest the island has to an official historian.

I had caught up with Father Joe in his office next to the Gozo library, at the end of a winding street garnished with wrought iron balconies and carved wooden doorways. He was sitting at his computer, surrounded by ancient books and folders stuffed with parchments.

"I began creating these archives in 1989," he told me, "searching in attics and cellars and wherever else I could."

But the earliest document dates only from 1560, because all records prior to the disastrous Turkish raid were lost.

"Life came to an end in 1551," Father Joe said. "The island was uninhabited for some time."

He opened one volume and showed me a yellowing document, a list of authorized prices for items on sale in the Rabat marketplace. The faint handwriting was in

Malta," he said. "In earlier times, if the people saved anything above what they needed for food – and I can prove this from documents – they spent it on two things: Sicilian wine and donations to the church."

I left Father Joe and made my way through Rabat's narrow back streets. Somewhere a rooster crowed. Two elderly ladies stood chatting under one of the enclosed

**The island's golden villages gleamed in the sun, each crowned with a church.**

Maltese, the only Semitic language that uses Latin letters, and still the principal tongue here.

What about the splendid churches that dominate even the most modest island villages? I asked Father Joe. Where had the people found the money for the marble columns and gilded arches?

"It is true that Gozo was very poor compared with

wooden balconies that embellish so many of the town's limestone houses. Set into the corner of one building was a glass case with a blue-and-white statue of the Madonna and child; directly across the street a sign announced the "Shape Up Fitness Center." Beyond the marketplace where vendors were packing up their vegetables and secondhand clothes, I climbed the steps to the citadel.



The stone ramparts gave views of the sea in all directions. And tucked among the fields and terraced hills, the island's golden villages gleamed in the sun, each crowned with a church: the ornate belfries of the basilica at Xaghra, the monumental rotunda of the church at Xewkija, and the 1920s brick facade of the Ta' Pinu church, with 76 stained-glass windows imported from England. When the Gozitans had finally returned to their island, it seemed to me, they came back in style.

**Minna Turner** WASN'T THE ONLY ENGLISH WIDOW IN San Lawrenz. There was also Ann Monsarrat, whose late husband, Nicholas, had been a naval officer, diplomat, and the author of *The Cruel Sea*, *The Tribe That Lost Its Head*, and a number of other bestsellers beginning in the 1950s. When I called Ann, she immediately invited me over for a drink.

Tall, handsome, smartly dressed, and with a quick, hearty laugh, Ann struck me as a bit too sophisticated for this modest little island, yet she had stayed on after Nicholas's death in 1979. They had met at a party in London, although he had been living in Canada, where he owned a tiny island in the St. Lawrence Seaway. But the couple tired of the bitter winters and decided to try Guernsey, in the Channel Islands.

"As soon as we got there, people started talking about Malta," Ann said. "We were at a party and C. Northcote Parkinson was there – the English historian who invented Parkinson's Law – and he told us he was building a holiday house on Malta. He also mentioned Gozo, which he said was much prettier, but no one could possibly live there because nothing happened – it was too quiet. Nicholas and I looked at each other and said, 'This is it.'"

Ann checked her watch. "What are you doing for dinner?" she asked. Had I been to the Paradise restaurant in Xlendi?

Indeed I had. "The owner seems to have a thing about Elvis," I answered.

Ann burst out laughing. "He put up one picture," she



Boats in traditional colors brighten the monochrome harbor at Mġarr:  
Top left: Ann Monsarrat at her San Lawrenz farmhouse.

said, "and then people started sending them. Now he's sick of Elvis, but what can he do?"

We drove instead to a seaside restaurant at Marsalforn, where Ann went on with her story.

"There were no real estate agents on Gozo then, so we were taken around by a teacher who showed houses on the side. The man kept saying to Nicholas, 'You're a famous man, you have to have a villa.' And Nicholas would insist, 'I don't want a villa, I want a farmhouse!' Finally he took us

to this old farmhouse in San Lawrenz. It was dark, and there was no electricity. But when we saw the lighthouse beaming through the windows...that decided it."

By now the sun was setting, turning the cliffs above the bay a soft pink. The waiter brought us plates of a rich rabbit stew, a Maltese specialty.

"We were taken to see a lawyer, a dashing figure named Anton Calleja, and signed the papers," Ann said. "When we came back three months later to move in, there was Anton

on the dock to meet us, wearing his white panama hat. That was in 1969. Nicholas died ten years later, but I've been here ever since."

It seemed strange to me that Ann had never remarried. She seemed too sociable to spend the rest of her life alone.

"Nicholas was a hard act to follow," she said. "He was a walking encyclopedia and very, very funny. He was never dull."

She gazed at the lights across the bay for a long moment. "You know," she went on, "Nicholas thought that people



were nicer on islands, because they have to be. You have to learn to live together.”

**Archaeologists believe** THAT THE GGANTIJA TEMPLES, perched on a hilltop overlooking Gozo’s Ramla Valley, date back at least 5,000 years, centuries before the earliest Egyptian pyramids. The massive facade, built from enormous slabs of limestone, stands more than 25 feet high, and may originally have been twice as tall. Five inner chambers, each suggesting the shape of a cloverleaf, are guarded by huge, precisely cut standing stones. Inside one chamber an elaborate, altarlike structure was constructed of skillfully placed limestone blocks. I leaned against what looked like a

was going to take on my mother as well.”

She had known Cecil Turner when she was younger, and might even have married him – except that she wasn’t really in love with him then. But when Cecil came looking for her after his wife’s death, she soon felt differently.

“The old affection was still there,” she said, “and after about three visits, I knew what was in the wind. But I was very worried. Could I really marry him and go off to this island?”

She came to Gozo for a visit – Cecil passed her off as a distant cousin – and at first she was thrilled.

“I was so much in love that I wasn’t being practical. But when we were married and I came here for good, my homesickness hit me full in the face. It was hot. I couldn’t

## I’d heard that Gozo wine was strong stuff, made from anything from figs to pomegranates.

stone washbasin with a hollowed-out depression for a sink. A green-and-black lizard ran across the stone floor near my feet, his rough skin glistening in the morning sun.

Only a handful of objects were found when Ggantija was first excavated in the early 19th century: a stone pillar, a stone carved with the likeness of a snake, and a couple of limestone heads. The early Gozitans left behind few clues about their life on the island.

I glanced at my watch. Minna should be home from church by now, I thought. I was taking her to the fanciest restaurant on the island, and it was time to pick her up for lunch.

She answered the door in a dress speckled with bright pink flowers and wearing a broad white sun hat. A short time later we were seated under a stone arch in the garden of an old inn, surrounded by people celebrating anniversaries and weddings.

“I hadn’t wanted to wait so long to marry,” Minna said. “In fact, I was fed up with not marrying, but no man

stand the smell of the goats and sheep and cows. But I made up my mind to stick it out. I began to make friends, and after two years my roots went down.

“My life is here now. As long as I can take care of myself, this is where I am going to stay. I want to see the next century in.”

Minna laughed and gave her head a girlish toss. It wasn’t hard to see why Cecil had come back for her.

**Maria Calleja**, THE SISTER OF THE DASHING LAWYER WHO helped the Monsarrats buy their farmhouse, is well known on Gozo for an oral history she co-published a few years ago. When I finally tracked her down in the village of Kercem, she answered my knock – a slightly stooped, elderly woman

Malta’s bicolor banner (opposite) waves in Victoria’s Independence Square. Above: Signs of faith light up Xaghra’s cathedral at Easter.



The “Azure Window” frames the seascape at Dwejra Bay, a favorite vista for islander Maria Calleja (below).



Maria and Anton, survived beyond infancy. Anton – the man in the photograph in the study – became a lawyer and later a member of parliament. Maria became a teacher and ultimately a headmistress. And why had she never married?

“In those days, if you were married, you stayed at home,” she said, laughing. “I would see the other women working hard, washing clothes, washing dishes, so I said, ‘No. I am quite all right as I am.’ I had my mother to look after, and my brother.”

Maria’s brother was only 54 years old when he died of cancer. She looked at me directly as she spoke of him, but something changed in her eyes. “He was a very spiritual person, very aesthetic,” she said. “He would take me to watch the sunset at Dwejra Bay.”

Was there something very special about a Gozo sunset? I asked clumsily.

“I don’t know any other,” Maria answered, offering me another piece of lampuki pie.

**A few mornings later,** AS I WAS GETTING ready to leave Gozo, I was awakened early by the telephone. It was Maria Calleja.

“I’m sorry to disturb you,” she said. “I thought you might be leaving the island.” She said she wanted to give me a poem that Anton had written many years before.

I could come by later that day, I said.

She said she’d be out, but the poem would be under the doormat.

I spent most of that afternoon visiting Minna. The sun was low in the sky when it came time to say good-bye. I left her waving at the top of the farmhouse steps,

Ginger by her side. I didn’t know if I would ever see her again, or Gozo either, for that matter. But we pretended not to be thinking about that. I walked down the road and climbed to the highest point I could reach at the top of the sheer, striated cliffs of Dwejra Bay. The sun was nestled in a blanket of clouds on the horizon, a swirl of red and yellow. I pulled out the poem Maria had left for me.

“Live with them on the island,” it began, “Know their faces, know their fears. Farmer, fisherman and the maker of white lace...Live in the Golden Cage.”

I read the rest, then carefully folded up the paper and put it back in my pocket. To historians, the myth of Calypso might belong to another island, but for me it had its rightful place here. Like Homer’s sad nymph, each of the three women I’d come to know here had loved a man – and then been left adrift on this lonely sea when he departed for another world. ♦



with a big smile across her angular brown face.

“What a surprise!” she said. “Please come in.”

She showed me into a small study. On the wall over the desk was a photograph of a handsome man in a broad-brimmed hat.

“Now,” Maria said, “tell me who you are.”

My answer must have been satisfactory, because she invited me to come over for lunch the following day.

“I’ll make a nice lampuki pie,” she said.

I showed up with a bottle of Maltese wine, apologizing that it wasn’t from Gozo. I had heard that the local wine was pretty strong stuff and could be made out of all kinds of things, from figs to pomegranates.

“I’ll tell you a joke,” Maria said. “A dying Gozitan winemaker called his sons to his deathbed.

‘My sons,’ he said, ‘I want to tell you a secret: Wine can also be made from grapes.’”

In the kitchen the fish pie sat steaming on the counter, giving off wonderful smells of baked crust, aubergines, and tomatoes. I poured the wine.

“*Bis-saħħa*,” Maria said, raising her goblet to me. “To your health.”

As we ate, Maria told me about growing up on the island.

“My father was a carpenter,” she said. “He made farm implements. It was all done by hand. When I was a girl, I would take him his lunch every day – a melon, some goat cheese.” And he also loved books. “There was no school in this village – this was 1920 or 1921. I was about five years old. My mother thought I should stay home; there was plenty to do in the house. But my father said, ‘No. Maria must go to school first.’”

Maria’s mother gave birth to six children, but only two,