

Laidlaw Scholars Undergraduate Leadership and Research Programme
Experience Abroad Reflection

Malta: Fireworks, Beaches and Organized Crime

Six weeks with the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime

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Introduction

I have travelled a fair bit before but I had never actually lived somewhere on my own where I did not know a single person. That turned out to be the big difference this summer. This is my attempt to write about it.

Arriving

The first thing I noticed about Malta was the heat. You walk out of the airport and it just hits you all at once. I was standing there with my rucksack and my laptop bag an address in Sliema, and I remember thinking that nobody on this island knew who I was. It was a weird feeling but not a bad one.

At home I am a student and a co founder and someone with a calendar full of things other people are waiting on. In Malta I was just a guy waiting for a bus. The bus was full when it came and it was full every single day after that. The timetables are more of a suggestion than an actual schedule. I also figured out pretty quickly that if you look confused enough on a Maltese bus, someone will tell you where to get off. Someone always did.



The morning commute

I want to be honest about the first few days because leaving them out would make this a nicer story than it actually was. I was lonely. I ate dinner by myself every night. I called home at strange hours because of the time difference and I would say the connection was bad so nobody could tell how I sounded. Being in a flat at nine at night in a city where you do not know anyone is quiet in a way I was not ready for. It took me about a week to stop minding it.

Finding a Rhythm

What helped was getting into a routine. The ferry from Sliema to Valletta takes about ten minutes and costs almost nothing, and every morning the city would appear across the water with the big dome and the spire above the old walls. Honestly it was the best part of my day, both ways. On my last morning I took it even though I did not need to go anywhere, just to do it one more time.



The Sliema to Valletta crossing

Valletta is on a hill so a lot of it is stairs. I climbed way more of them than I had to, mostly because walking around was free and I had nothing else to do in the evenings. The buildings are all this yellow limestone that turns gold in the afternoon and the balconies are painted green and red and blue. After a while I started noticing small stuff. Shops closing at noon. The same old men playing cards in the same doorway every day. One time a grocer handed me a bottle of water because I clearly needed it and then would not let me pay for it.



Valletta

Food was a big part of it too. I ate a lot of pizza at first because pizza is easy to order when you are eating alone and a bit self conscious about it. Then I got braver. Pastizzi from a tiny shop for under a euro, so hot they burn your mouth. Somewhere in all of that I stopped finding it awkward to eat by myself. That sounds like a small thing to put in a report but it was actually one of the real changes in me.



A side street in Valletta

The People

I learned maybe twelve words of Maltese and I got all of them slightly wrong. The one I used most was grazzi, which is thank you. Every time I said it badly someone would smile. I think saying thank you in someone else's language is not really about the words. It is more about showing that you know you are a guest.

Probably the best hour of my whole summer happened in Mdina, which is the old walled city. I got talking to a local historian and what I thought would be a quick five minute chat turned into something much longer. He walked me down one street and used it to explain about six hundred years of Maltese history around people arriving on the island. Who came, who stayed, who got fought and who got welcomed, and how the same group was often both depending on the century. He was very matter of fact about all of it. At one point he said that every generation here thinks it is the first one dealing with this question and every generation is wrong. I have thought about that a lot since.



Mdina

I had shorter versions of that conversation in other places too. With a guide at Fort St Elmo. With people in cafes who had strong opinions about migration that did not agree with each other at all. And with people at the office who gave me a lot of time they did not have to give me. Malta is small enough that you start recognising faces after about a week, and being recognised even a little bit felt really good when I had been feeling invisible.

The Islands

On my days off I tried to get out and see things. I went to Gozo and climbed up to the Cittadella, where you can see Victoria below you and pretty much the whole island past that. I also went to Comino. The Blue Lagoon there is exactly as unreal as it looks in photos and it is also absolutely packed with people. I had planned to be a bit snobby about the crowds and then I bought a juice served inside a pineapple and had a great time instead.



That afternoon taught me something I was not expecting. I had shown up in Malta really wanting to be someone doing serious important work, and I think I had been acting serious for weeks because of that. Sitting on a hot rock next to unbelievably blue water, it occurred to me that being twenty and in the Mediterranean and enjoying yourself does not actually stop you from doing the work well.

The last place I want to mention is Dingli Cliffs on the southwest coast. I went out there one evening about a week before I flew home.



Dingli Cliffs at sunset

After that I sat down on a rock and called my parents and told them about the office and the ferry and the historian and the rabbit. My mum asked if I was eating properly. I said yes, which was mostly true.

Where the Work Met the Place

One more thing I should mention. One evening I was standing on the old walls at the tip of Valletta looking out at the sea. My whole project this summer was about smuggling routes across the Mediterranean and I had been reading the numbers for weeks, but I had been treating it like a technical problem, sort of at arm's length. Standing there it felt closer. The route I had been building software about crosses the water that was right in front of me. That is really all it was. It did not change what I built but I think it changed how carefully I built it.

What I Learned

If I try to name what I actually learned, rather than just listing nice afternoons, I think there are three things.

First, I am a lot more comfortable not understanding things. For three weeks I was surrounded by a language I could not speak, a bus system I could not predict and a history I knew nothing

about. My first instinct was to go and read about all of it. What actually worked better was sitting in the confusion for long enough to just ask someone. Not knowing something is normal and not an emergency, and I think people who are okay with that ask better questions.

Second, I understand a place much faster through its people than through data. I had read a lot about Malta before I got there and none of it helped me as much as one historian, one grocer, one guide and a few arguments in cafes. Data can tell you what is happening somewhere. People tell you what it is like to actually live there.

Third, I am more careful about being a guest somewhere. There is a way of showing up in a place that basically treats it as a resource with nice weather, and I caught myself doing that in my first week and I did not like it. So I tried to ask before assuming things, and to remember that everyone around me had been living with this subject their entire lives while I had only been reading about it for a few months.

Home

On my last evening I went up to Golden Bay and sat above the sand while the sun went down and everything turned orange. I ate a gelato and did not think about the project once.



Golden Bay, the last evening.

I went to Malta to build software and I did build it. But when I think about what I am actually bringing home, none of it is code. It is a ten minute ferry ride. It is saying grazzi badly and getting a smile anyway. It is an hour in Mdina with a man who had no reason to give me his time. And it is finding out that I am much better company for myself than I thought I was. I would really like to do something like this again, and soon, and for longer next time.

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