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Malta

THE HEART



OF THE MEDITERRANEAN

A visit to Malta during the 2008 Grand Prix of the Sea this past June revealed that the annual offshore racing event is only one of the facets of the growing island's boating culture. A historic sailing venue and a well-known stopover at the heart of the Mediterranean, Malta increasingly is a favorite destination for superyachts.

Story Marilyn DeMartini photos Courtesy of the Malta Tourism Authority, Camper & Nicholsons and Robert Orunza

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LIKE A TOUGH GUY with a soft heart, Malta looks ominous, surrounded by its limestone fortress walls. Beneath the surface, however, its warmth exudes from the sun, the ancient golden stone and most of all, from its people. Yachting enthusiasts have come to recognize Malta, the “Heart of the Mediterranean,” not just as a stopover on the way to somewhere else, but as a great destination worth exploring, as I found out on a recent trip there during a weekend celebrating boating.

I returned to Malta for its fifth Powerboat P1 Grand Prix of the Sea, one of the stops on the international race circuit. Organizers choose destinations with challenging waters and desirable tourist venues, and the tiny archipelago answers these criteria. With a rich maritime history and the sea as its blood, Malta thrives on marine industries, a nice complement to its healthy tourism sector. But until recently many perceived Malta’s safe harbors and services as a convenience on their way to other Mediterranean destinations, such as Sicily 59 miles away or Sardinia, 230 miles to the northwest. “I think it’s changing a lot,” says Reg Corbett of Christensen Yachts, “Malta is becoming more of a destination—not just a stop-off point. There is more buzz around the megayacht circles these days.”

One visit to Malta and you understand why—it oozes charm and exudes multi-cultural flavors. Since Malta was a strategic occupation point for each empire that dominated Europe and Asia over the centuries, the influence

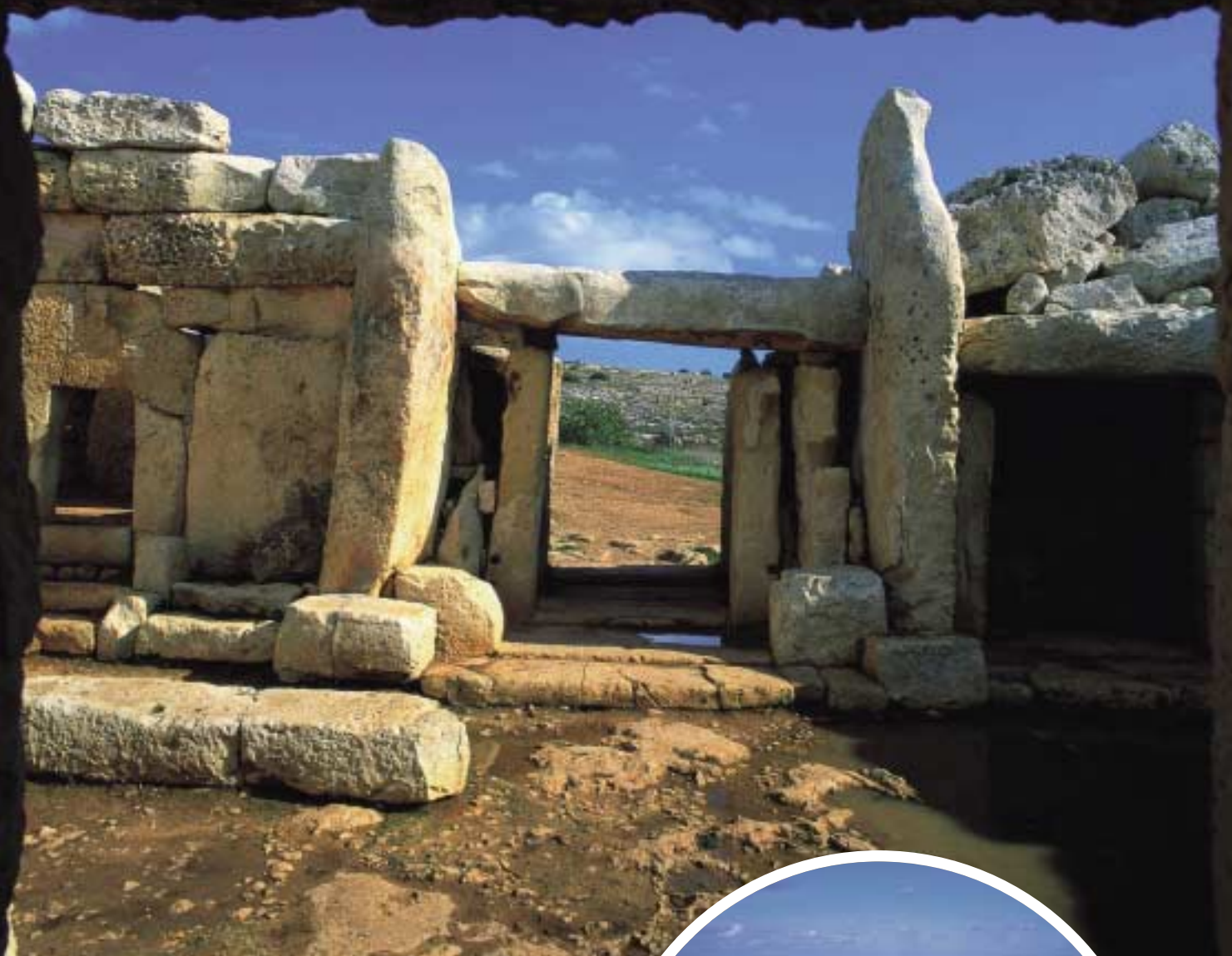
Megayachts come calling at the newly open Grand Harbour Marina in the capital city of Valletta

of civilizations from the Phoenicians to the French created a diverse culture, evident in Maltese architecture, food and language. It helps visitors and transplants feel at home here, including many in the yachting industry who have both homes and businesses on the island. Edward Wood, who manages the Sunseeker Sales Group in Malta, is surprised just how many. "I meet people at boat shows from London, South Hampton and Genoa and find they have property on the islands or plan to bring their boat here," he says. He estimates that about 2,000 yachts currently call Malta home. "There are many dry docks and the services are top-notch and affordable."

From his office located in the 1,000-year-old Vittoriosa Harbour, Woods has seen yachts calling on Malta get bigger. "The 164' to 230' boats have been the most popular," he says, "but since we opened an office in the Grand Harbour Marina, we are seeing significantly more boats in the superyacht section." The newly constructed Grand Harbour Marina, developed by Camper & Nicholsons Marina Ltd. and a group of Maltese entrepreneurs is one of the most recent additions to a growing infrastructure catering to large yachts. Three to four more new marinas are in the planning stages to answer to the growing demand for dockage. They will complement existing facilities in Msida, Manoel Island, home to the historic Royal Malta Yacht Club, and Mgarr Harbour on Gozo Island, the second largest island in the Maltese archipelago. The fashionable St. Julian district in Malta's capital city of Valletta, where Grand Harbour Marina is also located, is home to the private man-made Portomaso Marina. It is set against a backdrop of new high-rise apartments that include the Portomaso Tower, a mirrored-glass monolith structure, that stand tall amid the Romanesque and Byzantine architecture. They are part of the changing landscape in Malta.

Malta has a mix of cultures reflected in its architecture and monuments scattered throughout the island, including at Marsamxett Harbour below





The Mnajdra megalithic temple complex and capital city of Valletta offer sea views

An extensive renovation has given new luster to Grand Harbour, a historic port of entry into the Maltese island. With naturally deep and protected water, it was the base for the Knights of St. John for some 268 years and a hotly contested military outpost during its long history, eventually becoming a sleepy commercial harbor. Camper & Nicholsons' sizable investment in the marina development there includes new docks with Wi-Fi, state-of-the-art fuel

facilities and for passengers and crew disembarking there modern baths, showers, laundry facilities and conference rooms. Adjacent restaurants, nearby yacht brokerages and service yards are helping transform this historic location into a real destination for yachters.

The marina has 25-year dock lease available for superyachts ranging from 100' to 400' in addition to transient dock space. There is no rule as to length of stay. "People come here from



YACHTS



Some of Malta's best beaches require a bit of a hike over rocks, but the sea is never far from sight



The countryside remained unscathed by the excitement of the Powerboat P1 championship taking place just off shore



France or the Red Sea, for the weekend, a week, or longer—it all depends on the rhythm of the traveler,” says Ben Stuart, Grand Harbour’s general manager. One claim to fame here is *The Maltese Falcon*, Tom Perkins’ 289’ custom-built sailing yacht, which has a permanent berth in Grand Harbour. Some credit the spectacular Perini Navi and his skipper’s fondness for Maltese history with spurring an increased interest in the destination. The *Maltese Falcon* is at home here, as Malta has a long-standing sailing tradition and hosts a number of races and regattas. While visiting there in June I caught the start of a sailing yacht race launched from the historic Royal Malta Yacht Club. But the sailing race was one just one of many events that June weekend. I joined a crowd watching the Powerboat P1 offshore racing teams roar by the historic citadel, as they competed for the International World Championship, while a more subdued radio-controlled model race boat competition went on at the Grand Harbour Boat Show, which coincided with the Maltese Grand Prix of the Sea. The Powerboat P1 is supported by an enthusiastic home crowd who roots for local hero and P1 offshore co-pilot Aaron Ciantar, but also attracts many international visitors from what I could see. Luxury private and charter yachts filled the Grand Harbour, and a big offshore spectator fleet afforded racing fans the opportunity to see the hotly contested race in full view of the finish line. On shore the P1 Race Village transformed the waterfront in Valletta, which has been designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Pre-race Thunder Cat and Jet Ski races competed with fashion shows, live music and parties for spectators’ attention. Racing pilots mingled with the curious and fans visited race pits to see the competing boats, including hometown favorite and Malta-built Roman #44 Conam Yachts. After a full weekend of racing the celebratory podium champagne flowed for Ciantar having clenched the SuperSport class championship onboard the Mercury-powered Chaudron Powerboat, and for the popular Italian Kition Outerlimits team that took the Evolution class victory. Fans lingered in the Race Village for the festive post-race parties or scattered to pursue other activities. They may have boarded boats to go snorkeling and diving among ship wrecks, reefs and lagoons or boarded seaplanes for jaunts to nearby Sicily or Tunisia. The charm of this island country, rimmed by golden stone walls, the sea and magnificent boats, lingers. Perhaps it is the centuries of battle-filled history that have created a fiercely independent, yet warm and welcoming people. Or is it the fortresses, cathedrals and gardens that provide a mythical perspective? Maybe it is the fresh seafood, served in hospitable, intimate restaurants—Malta beckons, and it seems more are answering her call. —



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FEADSHIP

ROYAL DUTCH SHIPYARDS



There are yachts and there are Feadships

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