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5 NEW ADVENTURES TO TRY IN MALTA THIS SUMMER

ANNA SMITH · 23 MAY 2024

ADVENTURE NEW / PROMOS / GENERAL

Stevie from Gozo Adventures is a world class climber. He's climbed all over the globe from big walls to boulders and picked up some wild stories to tell his clients as he teaches them how to improve their technique. Without ropes or safety gear, he practically walked up the beginner routes at Mġarr ix-Xini, a stunning protected valley carved into the southwest of Gozo (Malta's second island). He looked really cool.

Glancing down, the bright blue, half-egg-shaped helmet Stevie had laid at my feet did not look very cool. Now I hope you don't think me vain, but knowing my first time climbing outdoors was going to be immortalised in this very magazine, I wanted to feel like a regular Adam Ondra (who had actually been climbing at Mġarr ix-Xini not long before I had). Instead, I felt like a toddler who'd been told to put a raincoat over their Halloween costume.

"You'll probably be okay without it on these routes but it's always better to have it," said Stevie, making sure I was properly harnessed and tied in.

I relented and started up the wall. Searching for places to to put my feet and things to grab, a new sensation flooded over me. Long gone were the bright blues and oranges of my local climbing gym telling me exactly where to place my limbs. Climbing outdoors was a mental game and I was winning. Stevie kept reminding me to use my toes and find creative ways to twist my body into the cracks of the limestone, which, in reality, had an abundance of holds, but I felt like a codebreaker finding them anyway.

I wedged myself into a very beginner friendly chimney (chimney is probably too strong a word for it) and couldn't seem to get my legs to straighten anymore. Whatever way I was trying to bend them, however much I wriggled, I couldn't seem to move. My arms were starting to shake and I felt the impending doom of a fall approaching. Long gone were the nice blue mats of my local gym too, all I could see was limestone.

"Push! Push hard!" Stevie was shouting from the ground.

With as much strength as I could muster, I pushed all of my weight into my right foot and thrust myself up, arms reaching wildly for the next hold, when my head slammed into a piece of rock above me. The impact shivered down my neck and spine and for a minute I felt like a cartoon who had had an anvil dropped on them, the sounds of an accordion playing as I shifted my neck from side to side making sure I still could.

Stevie said nothing but I could practically hear him thanking God that he told me to put on the helmet. I could also hear my mum in the distant past telling me that I'll catch a cold if I don't wear my jacket and that my pink ghost costume was still very scary. I guess some lessons you have to learn twice.

Though I wasn't in **Malta** to learn, or relearn, any of life's great lessons, it's hard not to be humbled in a place as old and storied. Peeking over the valley where I was climbing was the Rotunda of St. John the Baptist and its third biggest unsupported Cathedral dome in the world. There's nothing like the austerity of 18th Century Catholicism to remind you when you've been an idiot.

Over the next few days, I'd come to know this unique blend of history, wildlife and adventure that Malta has to offer well. My bike rides and abseils were characterised by views of Neolithic temples and stories of ancient olive trees that leant them an air of mystery and exploration. Far from the day-trippers and sun-loungers, I started to appreciate the strangeness of trying new things in very old places.

SEGWAY SCEPTIC

As soon as I was ready to dedicate my life to mastering outdoor climbing, it was time to try something else new. I met up with Kevin from Gozo Segway for a bike and, you guessed it, Segway tour of the island.

Admittedly the bike ride wasn't new for me, but swapping the greys and browns of my commute up the A46 for the fields and coastlines of Gozo was a welcome change. We cruised out of the golden streets of Victoria, the capital, past the mysterious, neolithic temples of Ġgantija and the Roman salt pans that carved up the shoreline like a chess-board. With a cool breeze and sun on my face I could've spent hours winding along the coast and listening to Gozo native Kevin tell me about life on the island.

The actual new experience for the day was the Segway tour to follow, which Kevin could sense I was not so ready to give my life over to.

"Give it a go and if you hate it, we can get back on the bikes," he generously offered.

I was only really in Malta to try new things, so I didn't have much of an excuse not to give it a go, which is how I found myself for the second time that day helmet on head, wobbling on the side of a cliff.

Kevin had done a great job steadying me as I bobbled around his garage trying to get the thing to listen to me. We practiced some emergency stops, pulled onto the streets of Victoria, almost fell off, practiced some more, and then headed out to the southern sea cliffs.

Despite my early scepticism, I had a lot of fun zooming around the little trails leading to our destination. With gyroscopic wheels, the Segway is a pretty sturdy off-roader and got us where we wanted to be in no time. It struck me as an amazing way to make harder to reach places more accessible to everyone who wants to see them.

Looking out to sea, the coast folded over itself in dramatic white cliffs, with the islands of Comino and Malta poking out from behind them. Yet again, I found the Segways parked just out of camera-shot at odds with the 17th century Santa Marija Tower standing sure on Comino.

Once I'd soaked it all in, Kevin decided it was time to have some "real fun" on anuneven off-road trail near Mġarr ix-Xini bay. This was a bold move for a first-time Segway sceptic with a penchant for minor head injuries but I was in as safe a hands as I'd ever be.

If I thought my helmet made me look dorky, jack knifing by the side of a cliff on a Segway while Kevin tried to steady the handlebars didn't improve the situation, but I made it back to Victoria in one piece having thoroughly enjoyed our little off-road excursion. Realising how much I'd managed to see and learn about Gozo in just half a day dissolved any remaining scepticism I had about the Segways. Perhaps they are the new frontier of adventure travelling after all.

SOMETHING BLUE

Malta isn't always appreciated for its potential as an adventure travel destination, except for its water sports. It has been repeatedly voted as the world's second best diving destination by Diver Magazine, has famously blue water and stunning coastal features. By day two of my trip, I was raring to see what all of the fuss was about.

I met up with Massimiliano from MC Adventure on the main island and headed to Mistra Bay for my first sea kayaking adventure. On the archipelago it's impossible to ignore the bright blue of the sea no matter where you are. It colours everything about the islands and was even more beautiful from the cockpit of the kayak.

As we dipped in and out of caves I kept looking through the clear turquoise right down to the sea bed. When Massimiliano started pointing out a deep-water solo route (climbing without ropes on sea cliffs above suitably deep water for a fall) I couldn't believe how far down the seafloor actually was; the clarity of the water making me assume we were still in the shallows.

We spent some time exploring the limestone cliffs before stopping off at St. Paul's island. With a big statue of its namesake right in the centre, it was believed that St Paul chased the snakes off of the island and out of Malta all together (though there has never been any evidence of snakes in Malta at all). Accessible only by small boat, the little islet is dotted with rock pools, World War Two shelters, and memorials all being battered by the sea winds. On this day, we only had these sounds of the sea for company. It was a rare moment of quiet in nature that doesn't present itself much nowadays.

Heading away from the island, its rocky cliffs and caves were no longer protecting us from the wind and I remembered why I'd only ever kayaked on rivers to this point. The waves tipped us to and fro and I started yawning – the beginning of the end. Sea sickness was coming for me. I was determined to keep paddling even though Massimiliano was doing most of the work. I desperately tried to unzip my jacket to get some cool air in and in doing so let the sea soak everything I'd been trying so desperately to keep dry. At least it cooled me down.

"Did you bring spare clothes?" Massimiliano asked.

No. No I didn't.

THE HONEY VALLEY

It isn't so bad being sodden in a country with 300 days of sun a year. I was drying off even as we paddled back to Mistra Bay and by the time we had driven to the Mosta Valley I couldn't care less if I was a bit damp anyway. In the centre of Malta, this rift will take your breath away. It's as if out of nowhere the ground decided to swallow itself up, leaving a river of wildflowers running between two great walls of limestone. I could've been drenched and wouldn't have noticed as we bushwhacked our way to the starting point of the Via Ferrata that has been bolted to the side of the cliff.

I put all of my newly acquired climbing skills into my first Via Ferrata and am happy to report that I didn't hit my head on anything this time. The course had scrambles, climbs, zip lines and was topped off with an abseil, all with increasingly better views of the valley. Massimiliano told me about a mountain goat that lives on the cliff and likes to get in the way of climbers on the southern wall but he kindly let us go about our business that day without any extra obstacles. Perhaps he could sense I was a liability on a harness.

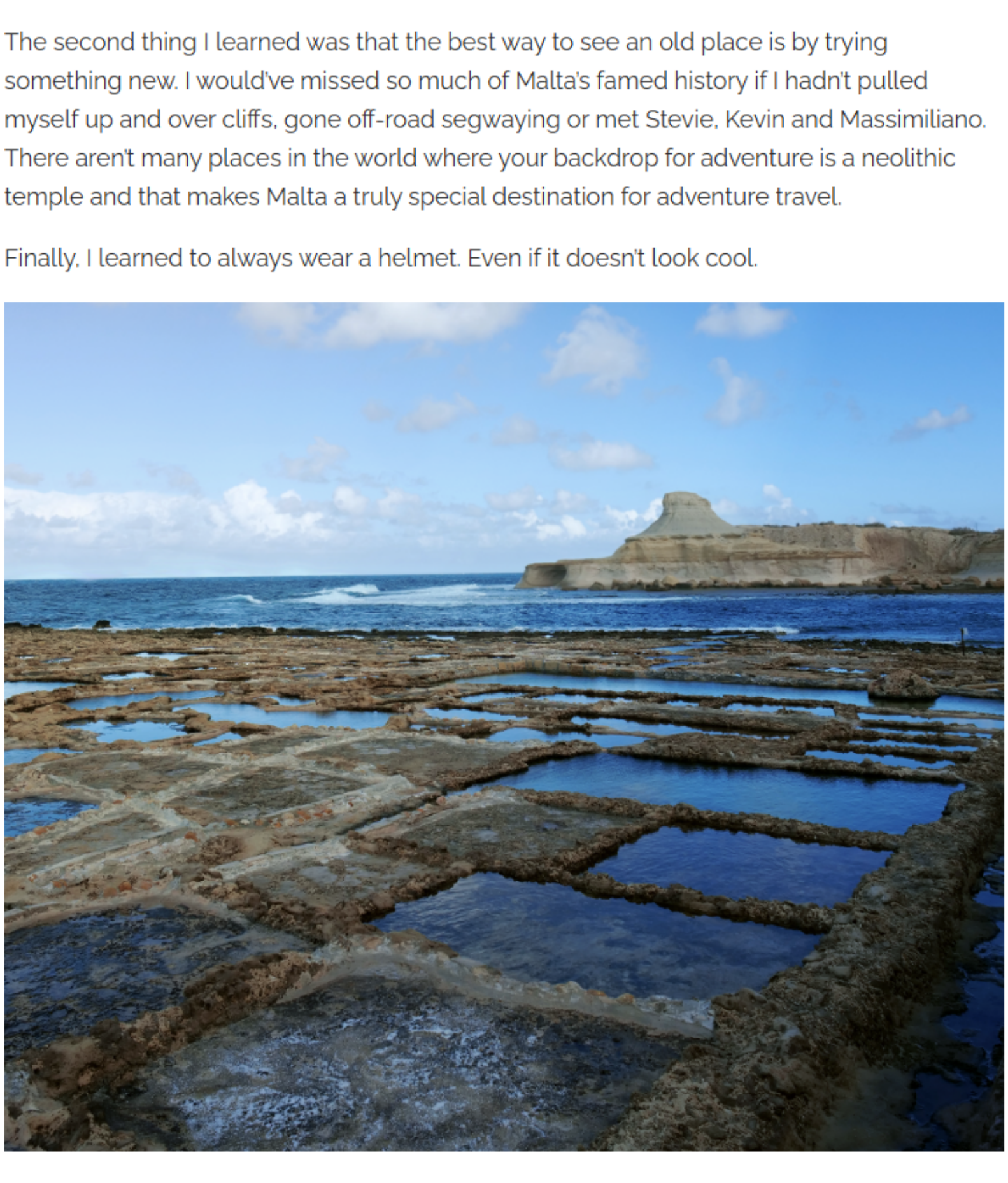
LESSONS LEARNED

With my feet back on solid ground I had completed the last of my new adventures for the trip and my time in Malta was coming to a close. Since my first outing with Stevie I had indeed learned a lot. I guess that's the beauty of travelling at the best of times, but with the physical accomplishments of adventure travel and such a mix of culture and history, Malta serves lessons up on a platter.

The first thing I learned might be obvious to divers, but Malta is an underrated adventure destination. Before this trip, I knew it was great for families, beach-goers and history buffs (and Ancient Aliens fans, as the man next to me on my flight home informed me at length), but I can't believe that climbing, biking and the Mosta Valley Via Ferrata aren't higher on the list.

The second thing I learned was that the best way to see an old place is by trying something new. I would've missed so much of Malta's famed history if I hadn't pulled myself up and over cliffs, gone off-road segwaying or met Stevie, Kevin and Massimiliano. There aren't many places in the world where your backdrop for adventure is a neolithic temple and that makes Malta a truly special destination for adventure travel.

Finally, I learned to always wear a helmet. Even if it doesn't look cool.



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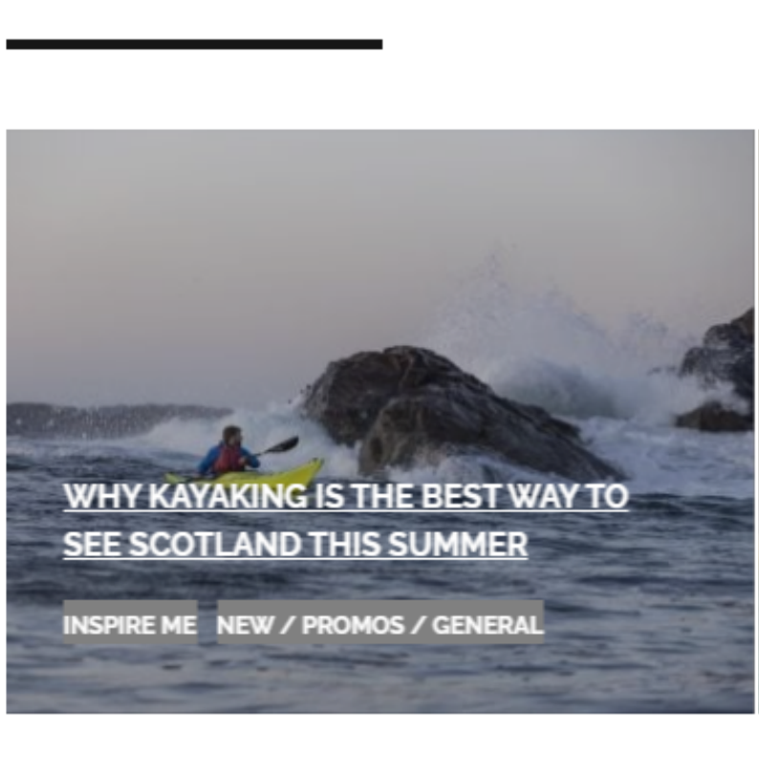

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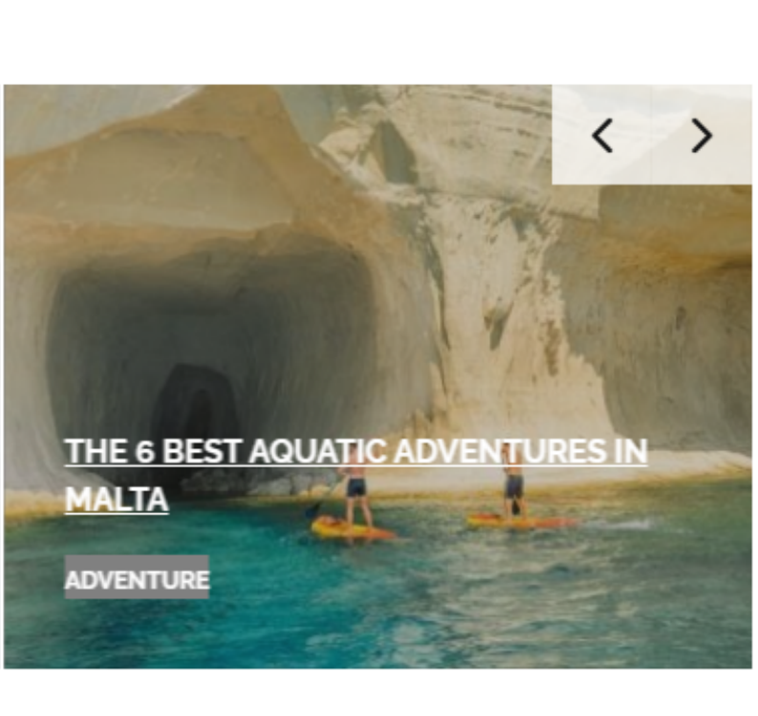

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