

Gozo Surprise

By Gerald Barton, Kingsdown

Late February proved a good time for us to visit Malta for a week or so – pleasant weather, not too hot, not too cold, just right for wandering around sight-seeing. Although we had visited Malta for a few days some years ago, we had not been able to get to Gozo, the second largest island in the Maltese archipelago. This time, with the fast ferry from Valletta and calm seas we were able to make the trip.

The main town on Gozo is Victoria, also known as Rabat and not to be confused with the town of Rabat on the main island. The main attraction in the town is the Citadel which sits high on a hill overlooking the town and the surrounding area. However, it was down in the town itself that we came across something rather surprising and really quite unexpected.

Having descended from the Citadel we decided to wander through the back streets of Victoria, a bit away from where most tourists go. Now, those of you who have read my previous articles will be aware that ‘church crawling’ is one of our regular activities when on holiday so you will not be surprised that when we came across the Basilica of St George, we were keen to go inside to look around.

The origins of the church date back to the 4th century when a Greek missionary converted the main Roman pagan temple on Gozo to Christian use. There has, of course been much rebuilding over the centuries as the population expanded and more space was needed to accommodate the increasing number of parishioners. The present church dates from rebuilding in 1672 – 78 and is, like most churches in Malta, in the baroque style, not exactly my favourite style but not without its attractions.



Basilica of St George
interior looking east

Like most churches of the time, the basilica has a series of side chapels. Most of these contain the usual altar, painting or statue of saint etc, but there's one that came as a complete surprise.

As we headed towards the southeast corner of the church (which also contains the exit for the 'visitor' route), we were taken aback to find a Byzantine style chapel covered in mosaics – the chapel dedicated to the 'Most Holy Crucifix, the Most Holy Sacrament and Divine Mercy'.



Clockwise from top left:

- Apse:** Virgin with Christ as a boy (in the medallion) above the Apostolic Communion
- Dome:** Christ Pantocrator
- North wall:** St Clement of Alexandria, St Justin Martyr and St Augustine of Hippo

The cornerstone of the chapel was laid in 2002 and built using Maltese limestone to the designs of Vince Centorrino, an architect born in the Maltese town of Hamrun in 1955. Work started on the dome in 2004 and on completion the chapel

was blessed on 10 July 2005 by the then Archpriest Mons. Joseph Farrugia who had provided the original inspiration for the project. For many years the chapel remained undecorated but nonetheless used for worship. Finally, at the instigation of the current Archpriest Mgr Joseph Curmi, sufficient funds were raised and the planned mosaic scheme was completed in 2025 by the Romanian sacred art firm, Mosaicon.

All that said, the inevitable question in our minds was ‘why is this gorgeous chapel here?’ After some rooting around on the internet, and more than one false start, a picture began to emerge. The Archpriest Joseph Farrugia conceived the project in commemoration of the ‘Great Jubilee of the Incarnation’ (celebrating 2,000 years since the birth of Christ) and the ‘Georgian Centenary’ (the 1,700th anniversary of the martyrdom of St George in 303AD). The Neo-Byzantine style and mosaic scheme was chosen to emphasise the link between the churches of the west and of the east. As Wikipedia puts it:

‘This unusual style was chosen for its cultural association with the Christian Churches of the East. The aim was to help instil in the Catholic faithful the awareness that the universal Church breathes through two lungs, that of the Western Church as well as that of the Eastern-rite Catholic Churches in communion with Rome.’

The basilica’s website is a bit broader in its explanation referring to a desire to give a sense of union between the Western and the Eastern Orthodox churches, not just with those ‘Eastern-rite Catholic churches in communion with Rome’. Maybe, there’s history there, too. Christian worship on the site of the basilica originated in the Byzantine period and the liturgy was celebrated according to the Byzantine rite rather than the Latin rite.

This continued to be the case until 1575 when worship at St George finally transitioned to the Latin rite, St George being the last church in the Maltese islands to do so.

Whatever the history and inspiration of this chapel, it makes a remarkable contrast to the main church and a wonderful place to stop and be still, even if just for a moment.



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