

ARABIC ACCENTS

A European nation with classic cobbled piazzas and a medieval Maghrebi dialect? **Sarah Khan** travels to Malta to explore its gold-tinted architecture, cosmopolitan past and lingering links to the Arab world





“IL ALLA WAHDU GLORJA.”

The phrase, chiselled into a placard on a wall in the honey-coloured Maltese city of Rabat, stopped me in my tracks. Language is a potent force; recognising syllables amid a rush of unfamiliar words instantly reminds us of how deeply connected we are. It's rare that my basic Quranic Arabic skills converge so neatly with my rudimentary grasp of Romance languages, and for once, I didn't need a translation: All glory to God alone.

The sign wasn't the only thing I found curiously familiar in Rabat, a town in northwestern Malta that neighbours the erstwhile medieval capital of Mdina. Two years ago I'd meandered through a remarkably similar sandstone maze in Kairouan, Tunisia, watching quotidian life unfold in a way that mirrored this quiet morning in Rabat: the scent of fresh bread wafting from tiny bakeries, women chatting from lofty balconies as they hung their washing out to dry, children chasing each other through narrow spirals of intersecting alleys that are a defining feature of many a Maghrebi medina.

That this persistent sense of déjà vu followed me around Rabat shouldn't have come as a surprise, of course. In a past life, Kairouan was the powerful seat of the Aghlabid dynasty, whose dominions had once stretched from Algeria to Libya to southern Italy – and Malta, which they conquered in 870.

A tiny Mediterranean archipelago 96 kilometres south of Sicily, Malta's diminutive size belies its strategic importance; Phoenicians, Romans and Byzantines vied for it before the Aghlabids moved in. It was an Arab outpost for two centuries until 1091, before successive waves of Europeans staked their claim: the Normans, the Knights of St. John, Napoleon's French army and, eventually, the British, who occupied Malta until its independence in 1964.

FOLLOWING MILLENNIA OF CONQUESTS, MALTA'S INHERITANCE IS A PASTICHE OF CULTURAL REFERENCES

Following millennia of conquests, Malta's inheritance is a singular way of life, a pastiche of unlikely cultural references. The Arabs bequeathed their language and names; the British their red phone boxes and fondness for queues; the Italians their cobbled piazzas; the Spanish their prowess in the art of filigree.

One afternoon, as I ambled through the winding lanes of Birgu, one of Malta's historic Three Cities, I encountered Charlie Bugeja, an affable gentleman who's taken it upon himself to meticulously restore a pair of dilapidated villas dating back to the 13th century. His efforts have unearthed a cross-section of Malta's layered history; a pair of intricately carved Norman-style embellished arches on an upper floor are perched above weathered sandstone walls that likely date back to Malta's medieval Arab period.

“If only stones could talk,” said Bugeja, “they would say, ‘marhaba.’”

The word “marhaba” itself, it turns out, is another relic of Arab rule – later, as I drove through the Maltese countryside, I passed village after village where signboards greeted me with “merhaba.” The welcome is only the beginning. The Maltese eat *hobż* (bread), toast to each other's *sahħa* (health), sing *ghana* (music), observe *Randan* (Lent) and *Ghid* (Easter), and count *wiehed*, *tnejn*, *tlieta*, *erbgha*, *hamsa* – numbers that ring familiar to anyone with a few Arabic lessons under their belt. A hybrid of Arabic and Italian with a dash of English, written in Latin script, reined in by constructs of Arabic grammar and animated by charming old Arabic proverbs, Maltese is officially the only Semitic language in the European Union. A European country where Alla and Akbar are part of the vernacular? This very linguistic dissonance is what had drawn me to Malta.

Tangible tokens of Malta's time under Islamic rule are scarce today. →

Opposite page, clockwise from top: A boat sails in front of Fort St. Angelo in Birgu; jewel-toned Maltese gallarijas; Valletta's red phone boxes are a relic of English rule; one of Mdina's winding lanes; a home in Mdina; in a cave in Comino; overlooking Malta's historic Three Cities; exploring Valletta; a traditional Maltese ghonnella, reimagined by fashion designer Luke Azzopardi. **Previous pages:** Valletta, Malta's honey-coloured capital





At the ruins of a Roman-era mansion in Rabat I saw what was left of some later-period Islamic graves that had been unearthed during the site's archaeological excavations; another morning, I sailed to neighbouring Gozo to marvel at the Majmuna tombstone, a preserved 12th-century marble monolith that memorialises a father's love for his deceased daughter in Kufic script.

"Very paradoxically in Malta, there is no declared construction or monument relating to the Arab period even though the place names are – and this fact is striking for tourists – mostly Arab," said Abdellatif Taboubi, a Tunisian expert in Mediterranean heritage and cultural tourism. "No language has shaped the Maltese language more than the Tunisian, from which it inherited essential features between the ninth and 13th centuries. Malta preserves an intangible cultural heritage." Physical reminders may be elusive, but the impact of the Arab period lingers on the Maltese tongue: in the language, in the names of towns like Mdina, Rabat and Sliema, and in surnames such as Abela, Said, Zammit, Cassar and Abdilla.

Though Arabs prevailed in Spain and Italy for longer than they did in Malta, Arabic isn't as dominant a force in Spanish or Italian as it is in modern-day Maltese. "The Arabs left their language," said Kamal Chaouachi, a researcher based in France who focuses on the anthropology of the material and immaterial culture of the Mediterranean. "However, because the relations were halted by the 13th century, and definitely severed by the end of the 15th century, a dialectic form of the language, relatively pidginised or creolised, found itself isolated because of its lack of contact with the Arab world. For this reason, some linguists called Maltese an Arabic orphan dialect."

THE WORD "MARHABA" IS ANOTHER RELIC OF ARAB RULE – IN VILLAGE AFTER VILLAGE, SIGNBOARDS GREETED ME WITH "MERHABA"

While more material vestiges of Arab influence may be few and far between, you'll occasionally stumble across lasting reminders in unexpected places. Photographs and paintings of 18th- and 19th-century Maltese women depict them wearing the ghonnella, a garment that might seem startlingly familiar. "To an untrained eye, it looks a bit like a burqa," said fashion designer Luke Azzopardi, who has spent the last three years examining the garment in its sartorial, cultural and historical contexts. I joined him at his studio to learn about the result of his labours, the book *Ghonnella: Deconstructing the Garment*, out this November. In it, he painstakingly documents this virtually extinct folk dress and re-imagines it for the modern era.

"We can't pinpoint a date or a century from when it originated, it's almost as if it's always been around," he said. But Azzopardi suggests that clues to its provenance lie in its silhouette. "It seems like it has originated from the years of the Arab rule in Malta," he continued. "We have to remember that Malta has always been the European country with the most Arab influence."

A quick consultation with a map confirms why. Malta is where Europe melts into North Africa, where the architecture, cuisine and religion of the north commingle with sunshine, produce and vocabulary more often associated with the south. In fact, the Maltese islands owe their very existence to this irrepressible magnetism between the two continents: African tectonic plates pushed up against Europe's so persistently 25 million years ago that they sent the seabed soaring into the sky, forming the rocky isles of Malta, Gozo and Comino. Today, Malta remains so intrinsically linked to North Africa that even the skies often bear mementos from deserts to the south. Xita tal-hamrija, or →

Opposite page: A carriage awaits in the medieval capital of Mdina. **Next page, clockwise from top left:** Riding down a street in Mdina; a door to a Maltese home; a traditional fishing boat; the Red Tower in Mellieħa; horseback riding to Mellieħa's Ghajn Tuffieħa; turquoise gallarijas at Injala Harbour House; Lower Barrakka Gardens in Valletta; saffron risotto with veal and silver leaf at Michelin-starred Noni in Valletta; Upper Barrakka Gardens

“blood rains” laced with Moroccan sands, shroud Maltese cars and windows with a vivid orange tint, while showers originating from Egypt carry ivory dust.

Arab dynasties were once a major force throughout the region, as evidenced by the names of coastal cities across the Mediterranean basin: Marseille, France; Marsala, Italy; La Marsa, Tunisia – all derived from the Arabic *marsa*, for port. On a Sunday afternoon in the Maltese fishing village of Marsaxlokk, I nibbled on an *imqaret* and watched a cavalcade of *luzzi* – reminiscent of traditional Tunisian fishing boats – bobbing in the water. While the *imqaret*, a diamond-shaped date pastry that’s a not-so-distant relative of the Maghrebi *makroudh*, may be the most ubiquitous culinary souvenir of the Arab era, other attributes endure through the presence of ingredients like almonds, figs and cinnamon. At the patio at Ta’ Victor in Marsaxlokk, I settled in for a seafood feast preceded by a *mezze* platter featuring a broad bean paste called *bigilla*, the Maltese answer to hummus.

“The purest links with Malta and the Middle East are the ingredients,” said chef Jonathan Brincat of Noni, a Michelin-starred restaurant in the heart of Valletta. At the site of a centuries-old bakery in the capital, Brincat deftly devises elevated takes on Maltese dishes, some with inevitable Arab touches: a risotto that’s steeped with saffron and draped with silver leaf; an octopus tagine with preserved lemon, cinnamon, *ras el hanout* and couscous; tahini enrobed in dark chocolate; olives that evanesce on the tongue. “Honey, olive oil, orange blossom – you share the same ingredients,” he said. “It’s second nature.”

Given the waves of cultures that have cascaded over the islands for centuries, some Maltese think of themselves the most European nation in Europe – and like everything else in Malta, its architecture is an eclectic *mélange* of styles. The creamy sandstone expanse of Valletta’s fortified city is a heady vinaigrette of Norman arches, neo-Gothic gargoyles, Victorian villas, Baroque churches and Renzo Piano’s modern gates piercing the citadel walls.

But what entrances first-time visitors the most are the jewel-like *gallarijas*, or Maltese balconies, that jut out of sun-blached façades. It’s from a perch inside one of these *gallarijas* – a turquoise confection at Iniala Harbour House, an elegant new hotel spread over four lovingly restored Maltese villas – that I surveyed my surroundings. I counted dozens of *gallarijas* punctuating the sepia-tinted skyline, glinting in the sun like emeralds, sapphires and rubies woven into unfurled bolts of ivory silk, before I lost track.

Could their provenance be Andalusian? Italian? Turkish? A descendant of the Arab *mashrabiya*? No one I asked knew for certain. As is often the case in Malta, the answer likely encompasses all of the above – and more. **ENT**

GETTING THERE

Emirates flies to Malta from Dubai three times a week. emirates.com

WHERE TO STAY

Iniala Harbour House and Residences has 23 design-forward suites conceived by Turkish studio Autoban, housed in a row of traditional Maltese townhouses facing the Grand Harbour. Highlights include a striking contemporary art collection by area artists and a two-level subterranean spa with indoor pool. *From AED 1078; inialamalta.com*

WHERE TO EAT

Ion This year-old restaurant crowning the fourth floor of Iniala Harbour House already earned its first Michelin star this spring. iontheharbour.com

Noni Try chef Jonathan Brincat’s spin on *hobż biż-żejt*, bread with olive oil and tuna, made with tuna belly, *dashi*, sea urchin and coffee. noni.com.mt

Farmer’s Deli This chic organic bistro is on the gardens of Villa Bologna, a stately mansion dating back more than 400 years. farmersdelimalta.com

Ta’ Victor Let the owner order for you at this traditional Maltese seafood restaurant opposite Marsaxlokk’s lively Sunday fish market.

