

The clear blue waters of Crete with snow-capped mountains in the background.



AMIR AND TAMRA HYSTER are active aviation travelers, flying themselves throughout the world and writing about their experiences. Currently flying their second Vision Jet which is their sixth Cirrus, they also flew their SR22N, SR22TN and SR22T on their world adventures. Visit their website for more stories and information: www.VisionJetTravel.com

Traveling the World in a Vision Jet Discovering the Islands of Crete and Malta

by Tamra and Amir Hyster

We are still sharing our adventures of traveling the world during the COVID shut-down. The following features the history and beauty we found while visiting Crete, the largest and most populous of the Greek Islands, and Malta, the largest and most populous of the three major islands that constitute the Maltese Archipelago.

Cairo, Egypt (HECA) to Heraklion, Crete (LGIR)

After spending a few months in Egypt, we once again started searching for places that were open and accepting aircrews without a COVID quarantine. The pandemic felt like it was never-ending. We received positive feedback from the FBO at Heraklion, Crete, that the island was in partial lockdown but had no restrictions for aircrews.

On a perfectly clear day (every day here is like that in the Middle East) we departed Cairo and headed back to the Mediterranean Sea on exit waypoint MENKU then to NOZ which is directly over Alexandria. After 462nm Crete island came into view.

The first sight is surreal as the 8,000-foot mountain range is covered in snow. As we continued the descent, we flew along the island's north side and could see the mountain range, which was completely terraced with vineyards and orchards of olive and citrus trees that spanned down to vivid blue sea waters.

We continued west, hugging the island's north coast for a final approach to runway 27 at Heraklion (LGIR). The strong southerly winds crossing the high mountains caused mechanical turbulence and crosswind, causing a challenging bumpy landing. We found the best hotel in the city overlooking the marina behind a very long protected seawall and an old fort. It was empty, as there were no commercial airline flights to Crete for several weeks, so we were the only tourists on the

island. Driving around the island, we stopped at a few beaches. Although it was offseason and quite cold, Amir joined the locals in their daily ritual swim in very cold, crystal-clear waters.

We found ourselves stuck in a severe cold front that passed throughout most of the Greek islands bringing snow to the mountains and near hurricane winds; we were very concerned for the Vision Jet sitting on the airport apron right on the seacoast. We could only go to the perimeter fence to check on the aircraft as the airport security operations don't allow personnel to enter the

apron unless they are preparing for a flight and the flight plan is logged. We noticed the plane had moved in the wind and several other aircraft were moving dangerously close. The FBO staff was also checking on the aircraft and had been trying to call us.

To get to the aircraft you had to go through security clearance and get a day pass issued. All this bureaucracy in the middle of a wild snow and ice storm was crazy, but finally they cleared Amir to attend to the aircraft. By this time the wheel had spun around breaking free of the chocks and the engine plugs

were gone. The FBO staff helped turn the nose into the wind and re-tie down the plane with heavier weights. There was not much else that could be done during the ice storm but hope for it to pass soon.

By the next morning it was back to blue skies. To our pleasant surprise, someone had found the engine plugs along the perimeter fence and placed them back in the engine!

The city of Heraklion became the capital in 1971. Before that, the capital was the old Venetian city and port of Chania,

The Venetian shipyard warehouses at the old port in Chania.



The old Venetian port and lighthouse in Chania, the previous capital city of Crete.

with a rich history dating back to the Byzantine era. It was an important city and fortress for both the Venetians and the Romans until it was overtaken by the Turks in 1645. The island was then declared autonomous and broke away from Greece until the Turks were overthrown by the Cretans in a revolt in 1897. They eventually reincorporated it back to Greece in 1913.

As we were the only tourists on the island, we took the time to talk to locals and gained a different perspective from that of a typical tourist. After reading about the history, we understood why the Cretans were quite different from other Grecians. They profess to have a more refined cuisine, how they grow olives and their pride in the “best olive oil.” They have adopted and mingled all their past cultures and made it their own.

During World War II, Crete was of strategic importance for Germany, which won a fierce, bloody battle against the devastated Greeks, who were supported by the Australian and New Zealand armies. A war memorial sits solemnly at the Bay of Souda with around 1,500 gravestones from the Commonwealth ANZAC and the British.



The World War II memorial at the Bay of Souda holds close to 1,500 gravestones.

» **Amir walking** along one of the rock grottos that line the coast of Malta.

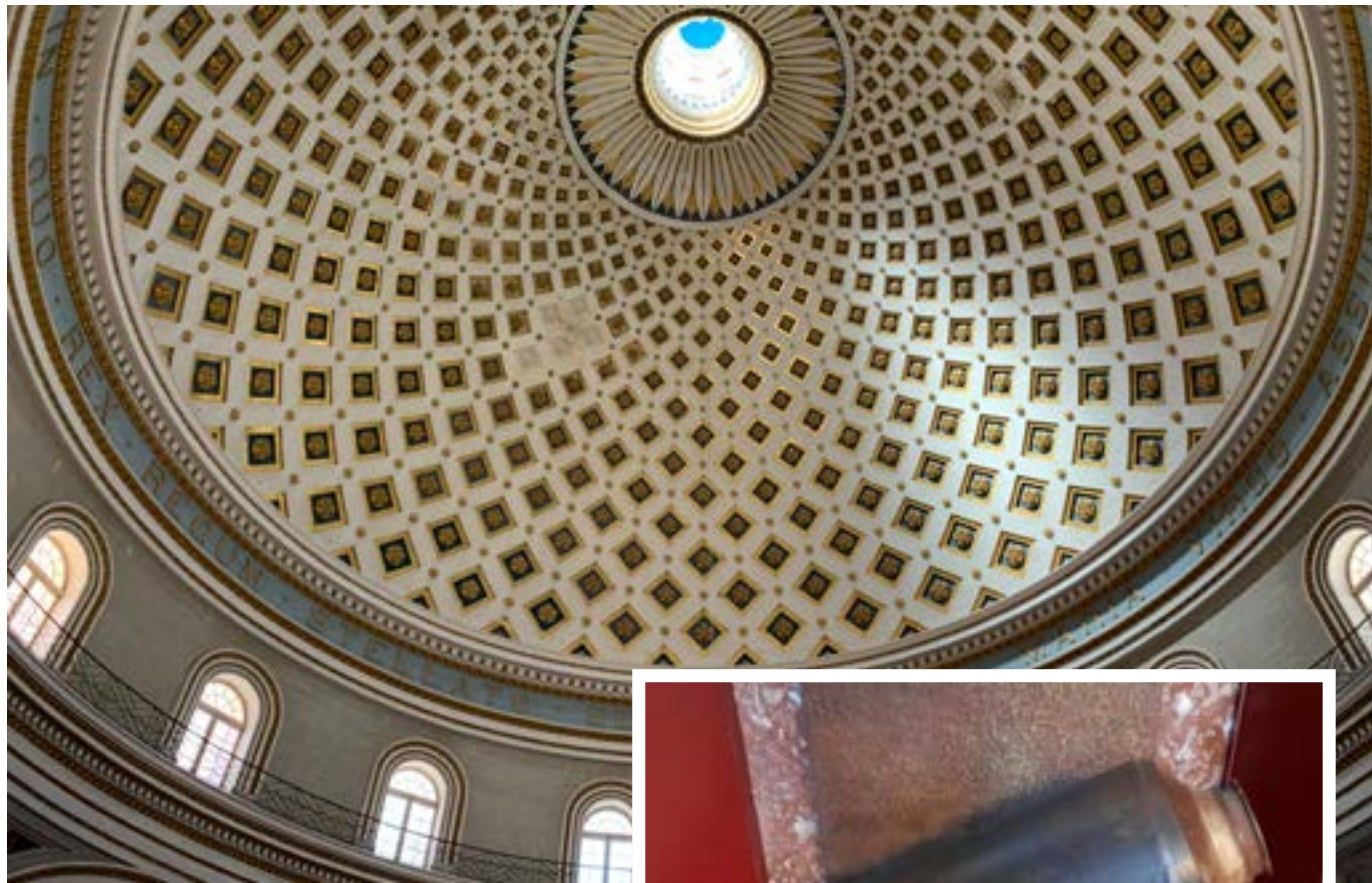
Crete (LGIR) to Luqa, Malta (LMML)

It was a spectacular departure out of Heraklion taking a quick right turn straight over the aqua blue water of the Sea of Crete, followed by sharp left and right turns that guided us over the snow-covered Mount Ida and the entire mountain range. Crete is a very scenic island and the cold air took us quickly to FL300 for the 578nm flight.

Our path to the Republic of Malta, took us along the Mediterranean Sea north of Libya directly under the entire length of the southern part of the boot of Italy and south of Sicily, staying well clear of the volcano Mount Etna that had been active during the past few days. There were numerous NOTAMs with warnings not to fly below certain altitudes and the restricted area northeast of Mount Etna. We could see the volcano and the plume of dark, smoggy volcanic ash. It was a clear day, but there was a slight shudder of the aircraft every now and then from the sheer energy of the volcano.

The approach we were given for ILS RWY13, gave us wonderful views of the north part of the Maltese Archipelago. We then turned back to the east over the islands of Gozo and Comino with a population of just two people – once the old stronghold of the Knights of Malta. The Blue Lagoon is beautiful from the air surrounded by white sand, rich in marine life and large grottos. We backtracked on RWY31 as there were no taxiways at Luqa Valletta International Airport.





⏪ **The 187-foot diameter dome** of the Miracle Church of Mosta in Malta and bomb head (inset) of one of the 500-pound German bombs that crashed through it during World War II, but miraculously didn't detonate.

Our handler, Executive Aviation, greeted us on the ground and provided friendly and quick service from the airport to our rental car. They recommended we stay at the Hilton at the marina of St Julians, near the nightlife and restaurants. The modern hotel has large rooms with views of both the sea and the marina and is just a short drive to the old city of Valletta. It is not difficult to find a sea view anywhere on the island because it is only 196 square miles. The island is easy to drive and explore by car or you can take the ferry across to the smaller islands.

Malta's history is interesting. In the early 1500s it was the escape and safe haven for the Knights of St. John of Jerusalem who moved their headquarters from Rhodes to build the new

city of Valletta. They established the language and fortified the island. The Knights of Rhodes and Malta are the same as the Knights of St. John, originating from the 11th century A.D. Crusades period in the holy land of Jerusalem. They were the Hospitallers and eventually took up arms to keep the Christian communities safe. Escaping Jerusalem after it was taken over by Saladin, who defeated the Crusades, they dispersed to Cyprus, Rhodes and then Malta where they were overthrown by the French army of Napoleon in 1798.

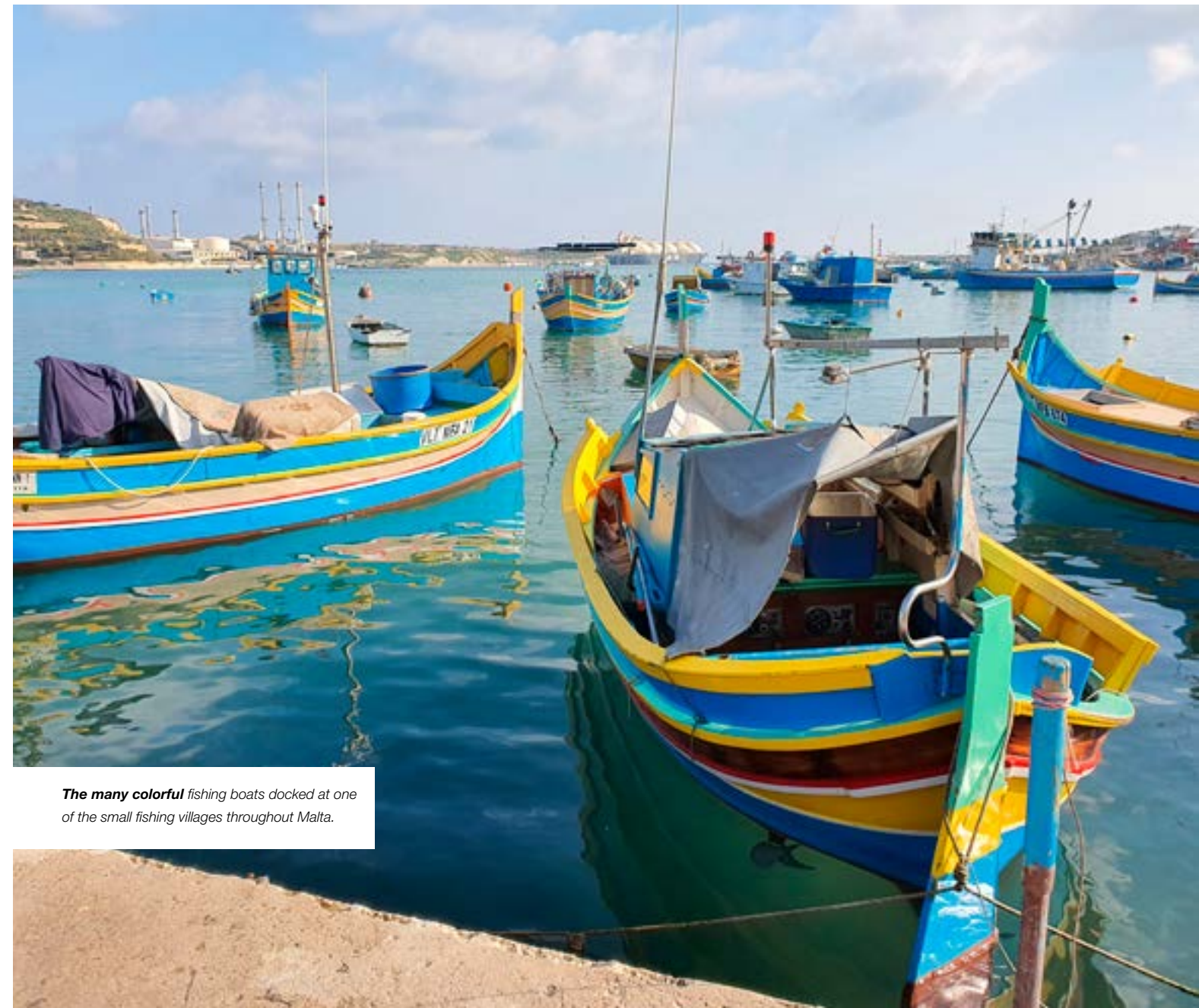
The St. John Cathedral is a magnificent Roman Catholic Church in the heart of the city, surrounded by the fortifications of the secure old harbor. Around the island there are many more churches including the Miracle Church of Mosta with a

187-foot diameter dome, one of the world's largest unsupported domes. In World War II, two 500-pound German bombs crashed through it and another bomb landed next to the left side of the church façade; miraculously the bombs didn't detonate on impact and none of the 250 parishioners in the church were hurt.

The coastline is dotted with rock grottos where you can take boat rides through to discover hidden bays and deep blue swimming holes. They have many small fishing villages where they paint their boats bright colors, and the traditional restaurants serve the fish caught that day.

We next continued to Venice, Italy, Switzerland and Slovenia as we continued to work our way through the world during the pandemic, exploring countries accepting aircrews. ⊕

"It is not difficult to find a sea view anywhere on the island because it is only 196 square miles."



The many colorful fishing boats docked at one of the small fishing villages throughout Malta.