

17 – Valletta

Republic Street

The most obvious place to start exploring Valletta is the City Gate, which opens into Republic Street (Triq ir-Repubblika), referred to historically as Strada San Giorgio, Rue de la Republique, Strada Reale and Kingsway. Today, this pedestrian thoroughfare seems redolent of history, in spite of some new buildings. But when the 26-year-old American novelist Edith Wharton visited Malta in 1888 as part of a Mediterranean cruise, her expectations were somewhat dashed, as her record in *The Cruise of the Vanadis* (2003) suggests:

The Strada Reale ... with its Opera house, its hotels and photograph shops, is provokingly British and modern; one has to wander into the side streets for picturesque effects.

The people are dressed in everyday European clothes, and in fact the reign of the prosaic has settled down upon Malta. As to the Street of the Knights, it filled me with an unreasonable disappointment. I had forgotten that the famous Auberges were probably not built until the end of the 16th or the beginning of the 17th century, and was needlessly aggrieved by their florid, late Renaissance façades, without beauty of detail or dignity of general effect.

See what you think over a century later.

Immediately on your right is the new **Parliament House** the significance of which appears in Chapter 16. Next to it is the quirky new **Royal Piazza Theatre** reconstructed from the 1866 Royal Opera House destroyed during the Second World War. Twenty-four-year-old Canadian-born **Emma Albani** (1847–1930) sang there for the 1870–71 season in *Lucia di Lammermoor* and *Il Barbiere di Siviglia*. Her next stop was a five-year contract at London's Covent Garden. In 1931, **Marion Fawcett** (1877–1957), actor and theatre director, produced there. How the Maltese felt about the destruction of their opera house is well expressed by VAD Meme Cortis in Chapter 15. Other opera singers are introduced in the Marsamxett itinerary that includes the Manoel Theatre (later in this chapter).

Opposite the new open-air theatre, on the left of the street, is the Ministry of Social Policy, Health, the Elderly and Community Care. It was formerly the **Palazzo Francia**, or Buttigieg-Francia, on the site of the Knights' foundry, hence also Palazzo Ferreria. Look out for its typically Maltese enclosed green wooden balconies. It was built in the late nineteenth century by the wealthy parents of Teresina Francia (née Buttigieg) and the coat of arms of **Giovanna Camilleri** and Giuseppe Buttigieg still decorate the façade. In June 1919, Teresina lived there with her husband, mill owner Colonel John Francia, and their four children, including daughters Malvina and Lola (Chapter 14).

But, on Sunday 8 June 1919 the Palazzo was attacked and vandalised by the *Sette Giugno* demonstrators (Chapter 13). Second only in size to the Grand Palace, it was lived in by the family, with an in-house staff of about 25, until 1947. Thereafter, they still kept the best bit as an apartment. It was sold to the government in 1979 to settle death duties.

Also on the left is the **Archaeological Museum**, what was the *Auberge de Provence* under the Knights and the Union Club under the British. As I explained in the Introduction to *Women's Places (Itineraries)*, details of its contents come at the end of the archaeological sites itinerary in Chapter 21.

One of the most obvious places to visit is **St John's Co-Cathedral**, the entrance to which for non-worshippers, and the queue for the ticket office, is on the right. Most visitors go to see the Caravaggio, the vaulted ceiling painted by Mattia Preti, and the general gilded exuberance of the place. I have other reasons to suggest. Maria de Dominici, whose life and work as a painter and sculptor are introduced in Chapter 6, helped Preti paint the ceiling, particularly the female figures. The twice I have gone to admire her work, I have found the crowds and the need to crane one's neck upwards too demanding. There is a suggestion, too, that she painted the figure of Saint Sebastian in the Auvergne Chapel, but that is not borne out by the plaque. I have also searched in vain for the fresco of 'Religion', with its connection with the Virgin Mary, mentioned by Elizabeth Schermerhorn in my Chapter 5, describing the end of the 1565 siege. I cannot think that a guided tour, as presently devised, would be helpful. But one could always ask.



40. Church of St Giovanni (St John's) by Eliza Gardner, from *A Series of Views in Malta*, courtesy of Yale Center for British Art Paul Mellon Collection (file no. 2038523-0003)

Should you feel frustrated by the crowds, think of Florence Nightingale's nurses and their visit there in 1855 (Chapter 12). Sarah Anne Terrot wrote, in *Reminiscences of Scutari Hospitals* (1898), that it looked

Very beautiful and gorgeous, but I was too tired to admire it much, and felt annoyed at being guilty of irreverence in walking about and gazing while mass was being celebrated ... We were weary with sleepless nights, and though so early, the sun was dazzling and oppressive, and there seemed a white blaze from bare rocks, and a great want of shade.

Florence Nightingale herself wrote of her 1849 visit: 'We went to St John's, which is beautiful: a row of chapels on either side, each belonging to one of the "lingue" auberges of the Knights, most of them exceedingly rich, in blue and brown and gold, very Arabian colouring.'

There is hardly a woman traveller who does not mention visiting the cathedral, often describing it in more detail than anywhere else in Valletta. Typical are Emma Roberts, who has already appeared in Chapter 10, there in 1841, **Ida Pfeiffer** (1797–1858), who was there a year later, and Lady Layard, who appeared in Chapter 12, there in 1908. Even Edith Wharton admired it in 1888, declaring that it was 'worth the voyage to Malta'. Not everyone felt the same. **Lady Elizabeth Grosvenor, Marchioness of Westminster** (née Lady Elizabeth Leveson-Gower, 1797–1891) visited Malta with her husband in their yacht in 1840/41; she was not to be overwhelmed by anything; she wrote in *Narrative of a Yacht Voyage in the Mediterranean During the Years 1840, 41* (1842):

But on the whole the building, which had not pleased us on a previous visit, did not improve upon further acquaintance. The pavement is very elaborate, and is entirely composed of the tombs of the Knights, and their squires; each forming one compartment of Pietro-dura workmanship. All, however, being different in detail, though of the same character, the whole is too much like a large piece of marble patchwork, without either grandeur or variety of effect.

There may be one woman buried in St John's, **Mademoiselle de Mignie**. Her mother was said to be the **Countess Mignie Rohan**, as George Whitmore, a contemporary, says, 'Widow of the *Cardinal de Rohan*'. She may, though, have been a masquerading Englishwoman – Whitmore tells the elaborate tale in his memoirs, *The General* (1987). Whatever the truth, her daughter apparently died during their stay in Malta some time between 1811 and 1813 and, as 'a descendant of the Princes de Rohan, one of whom had been Grand Master ... [the corpse] was carried with great pomp to St John's church exhibited in a chapelle ardente and consigned by the bishop to the vaults of the Grand Master'. In the same crypt Sulpitia de Lango attempted to practise witchcraft in 1617 (Chapter 6).

The clearly signed but apparently insignificant **Regency House** further up on your left, is deceptive. That site has been occupied by several women. In 1644, the building there was a palazzo owned by the merchant Ignazio Ribera and his family. Sultana Basseba, captured by Corsair Knights that year, was taken there to stay (Chapter 5). There, too, three of the women captured with her were taken, perhaps after her death, while they waited to be ransomed from Constantinople.

Fast forward two centuries and the Hotel Clarence, owned by Madame Goubau, was on this site; indeed there were several hotels and lodging houses in the Strada Reale, as related in Chapter 10. Grace Dunsford took over the Clarence in 1846, renaming it Dunsford's. The current building is reconstructed from damage done during the Second World War.

A bit further up on your right is the National Library in front of which, almost obscured by the two outdoor cafés, is the 1891 statue of Queen Victoria, also mentioned in Chapter 10. You cannot help but enjoy American Elizabeth Schermerhorn's description of 'a painfully white statue of Queen Victoria, looking very small and complacent in her voluminous veil of Maltese lace as she sits in the dusty square beside the Grand Master's palace'. I suspect that she researched her history of the Knights in the library behind.

Complacent Victoria may have been but, as this extraordinary photograph shows, she was still sitting there when the Grand Palace to her right, the square in front of her, and the building opposite were bombed on Sunday 15 February 1942, and rubble strewn at her feet (Chapter 15). The long-established Caffè Cordina is a good place for people-watching and for the less nimble to settle with a book and a mini bottle of prosecco.



41. Queen Victoria statue, from Manduca,
The Bonham-Carter Diaries

The Grand Palace is full of grand paintings of Knights and Grand Masters, scenes of battle and siege, splendid tapestries and hundreds of arms and suits of armour. But there are also odd sightings of women. There are also

several accounts of visits by women travellers: once again, Emma Roberts, Ida Pfeiffer, Elizabeth Grosvenor and Enid Layard.

A newcomer's account is contained in Nicholas de Piro's *Sovereign Palaces of Malta* (2001). Major General Sir Henry Bouverie arrived as governor in October 1836. In June that year, his wife, whom he had married in 1826 as a widow, **Julia Bouverie** (née Montolieu, 1785–1836), had died. He was accompanied in his posting by their two children, her four children by her previous marriage and a governess. It is that nameless governess whose account includes a rather poignant passage as she arrives at the palace to look around:

We ascended a winding stairs of 98 steps which sounds a formidable ascent, but, not long after we reached the summit we found Sir Henry and his children, awaiting our arrival. The latter sprang forward to embrace their sisters, but, all our hearts were too full for utterance at the first moment! ... and Sir Henry showed he felt the vacancy in our party as much as we did.

I wonder if, in fact, the writer wasn't a close relative of Julia's, as she compares her grief to his.

Two paintings concerning women are worth noting: in the minstrels' gallery of the Supreme Council, Adam and Eve, in *The Fall of Man*, are tempted by the head and torso of a woman emerging from the tail of a snake. In the Ambassador's Hall, as Lyudmila Markina tells the story in Elizaveta Zolina, *Malta and Russia* (2002), is a large 1787 portrait of Catherine the Great of Russia as Minerva which was presented in 1790 to Grand Master De Rohan as a gesture of friendship between Russia and the Order.

During the French occupation, 1798–1800, when General Claude-Henri Vaubois had his headquarters at the palace, a young Maltese woman, Clara Decelis, was brought as a 'prostitute' to Vaubois' rooms. She had earlier, as part of the grand occasion in the Place de la Liberté (Palace Square), been married in St John's (Chapter 8). And it is in the palace, perhaps in the chapel, that Vaubois held the secret marriage ceremony of pregnant rich widow Giovanna Fontani to a French officer (Chapter 8).

For more recent women, there is Sybil Dobbie's account of her wartime work in her father's office there, and my favourite image connected with the palace: of the extra-tall threesome – Josephine Debono, Hélène Buhagiar and Mabel Strickland – striding into the 1947 National Assembly meeting held in the Hall of St Michael and St George, also known as the Throne Room (Chapter 16). Until the completion of the new Parliament building, the palace contained the House of Representatives.

Through **Palace Square**, Republic Street narrows and slopes down towards Fort S Elmo. On the left you come to **St Catherine's Nunnery** (Monasteru Santa Katerina on the large plaque outside), founded in 1575 as a home to protect orphan girls from the perils of the world. In 1776, Angela Moscati Xeberras, daughter of Bettina Dorell and Diego Moscati Xeberras, became

involved in the tug of war between her parents, as Chapter 7 describes. First her mother placed her in the St Scholastica Nunnery in Birgu, then her father placed her in St Catherine's, then her mother placed her in St Ursola's. Nunneries were a useful depository for families, during disputes, or otherwise.

In 1798, St Catherine's took in nuns hounded out of the Maddalena by the French (Chapter 8). In 1851, it became affiliated with the Augustine Order, so is not open to the public. Nevertheless, if you have strings to pull, as I did, or perhaps even by writing to the Abbess, it is possible to be taken down to the crypt, where generations of nuns have been interred, to see the lavishly decorated statue of the Virgin Mary by Maria de Dominici (Chapter 6).

A little further down on the left, I tried to fathom **Mrs Watson's bookshop** at No. 241 (Chapter 10). It seems to have been overtaken by the Teachers' Union.

Cross over now to the **Casa Rocca Piccola** (74 Republic Street), the only private palazzo open to the public, and home to historian Nicholas de Piro and his wife, Frances de Piro. In his other life he is Nicholas de Piro d'Amico Inguanez, 9th Baron of Budach and 9th Marquis de Piro, and she is the Marchesa. There is a nice story of the occasion when the couple were introduced by a flustered host as 'The most noble Marquis and Mrs de Piro'. And, although he usually eschews the title, he was once told, 'We call you Marquis because it's cool.' That is today's Malta.

To visit the Casa Rocca Piccola is to open a treasure trove of both upper-class Maltese and family history. The palazzo dates back over 400 years to the time of the Knights and contains records and artefacts from then, as well as de Piro family heirlooms and archives. It was acquired, as Chapter 13 tells the story, by Antonio and Marguerita (Maggie) Cassar Torreggiani in 1919, and she died in childbirth there in 1923. Their daughter, Phyllis, inherited the property and married Jerome de Piro.

Two halves of the palazzo were joined together in the 1990s, and the whole opened to the public in 2000. There are tours between 10 and 4 every day except Sunday and public holidays by specialised guides but, if you are lucky, you may be shown round by a family member and experience that extra intimacy. Among antique furniture, china, silver, glass and paintings displayed in many of the 50 rooms, are some items particularly connected with women.

There is a large collection of costumes from the eighteenth to the twentieth century, though because of their delicacy they are only ever on temporary display. The same applies to a fine collection of lace. The history of Maltese lacemaking is told in Chapter 10, and the glory and wide variety of Maltese lace can be well viewed in Nicholas de Piro's *Ladies of Malta* (2013). Part of the de Piro lace collection was accumulated over the years by Cecilia (Aunt Cissie) de Piro who interpreted at the surrender of the Italian Navy in 1943 (Chapter 15).

Among the papers dating from the time of the Knights is the letter Maria Teresa Bologna wrote to her husband in 1753 (Chapter 7).

In the Green Room, the portrait of **Antonia Moscati Gatto Xara**, 3rd Baroness of Benwarrad (1783–1856), by Charles Allingham hangs below that of her second husband, Sir Giuseppe (Joseph) Maria de Piro GCMG, 4th Baron of Budach. It is not surprising that the portrait shows her wearing Maltese lace. They lived in the Palazzo Parisio in Merchant Street which features in due course. Although the Casa Rocca Piccola did not come into the de Piro family until the nineteenth century, it exudes timeless Maltese nobility.



42. Baroness Antonia Moscati Gatto Xara, by Charles Allingham, courtesy of Casa Rocca Piccola Trust

More down to earth is La Giara, a little restaurant, also in the palazzo precincts, serving Sicilian cuisine. Anna Mammino is front of house, her husband the chef.

Walk on down now to **Fort S Elmo** though, since it is a large edifice sprawling over the end of the Sciberras Peninsula, you might view it more rewardingly from the little electric train that you pick up in St John Square and which trundles round the outer walls of the city. But it was in the fortress that Pulcheria (Pulcra) Testaferrata, Baroness Castel Cicciano, was detained when, in 1738, she slapped Francesca Portuguese (Chapter 7 and later part-itinerary in this). In 1751, she was detained there again, this time

as a result of political manoeuvring by the Grand Master and the Inquisitor. The fort now houses the Military Museum. Among the displays is Christina Ratcliffe's British Empire Medal (Chapter 15, and following itineraries in this chapter as well as Chapter 22 itinerary).

From Republic Street to Marsamxett Harbour

It is not easy to decide how to explore Valletta, based as it is on a grid system. I have devised four part-itineraries to cover it, but so much depends on your inclination – they easily merge or mix and match.

If you start at the City Gate, as the Republic Street part-itinerary does, do you forge straight ahead, or do you best use time and energy by almost immediately turning left into Ordnance Street, and then up the incline on your left to the **Hastings Gardens**? From there you have a fine view over Marsamxett Harbour to Manoel Island and the whole area stretching to Sliema. There, too, as you turn right, is the elaborate monument erected in 1827 by the Marchioness of Hastings over her husband's grave, for which she was criticised by George Whitmore who usually dealt with such matters (Chapter 9). There, too, 26-year-old Aida Kelly used to go and watch the bombardment of Valletta by the Luftwaffe before, on 24 February 1942, she was killed nearby after one of those ill-advised sorties (Chapter 15).

Now turn right into the end of Strait Street to reach South Street or, having avoided Hastings Gardens, turn second left off Republic Street into South Street. On your right is **St Andrew's Church** erected in 1857 by both Scottish Jessie Tod Wisely and her husband, George, as the bold plaque on the outside clearly indicates (Chapter 11). For six months during the First World War, the Reverend Albert Mackinnon was senior Presbyterian Chaplain to the forces based there; Chapter 13 describes Mrs Mackinnon's activities. Aida Kelly was due to meet Tamara Marks outside the church on that fateful day.

Down on your right, on the corner of Strait Street, is, as I write, the **National Museum of Fine Arts**, established in 1974 (though I understand that it is to move). It is a bit disappointing as far as women artists are concerned: whatever they have in the vaults was not on display when I visited. You may be lucky and find a special exhibition. The palazzo was first re-built in the 1760s but, after the arrival of the British, it became **Admiralty House** where the Commander-in-Chief of the Mediterranean fleet and his family lived. The behaviour there of both Lady Codrington in 1828 and, between 1857 and 1863, her daughter-in-law is criticised in Chapter 9.

From 1952 to 1954, Lord and Lady Mountbatten lived there when he was Commander-in-Chief. They had lived in Malta for periods before the War (see Chapter 19 itinerary), and were involved in its politics afterwards (Chapter 16). Edwina complained to Prime Minister Nehru of India, recorded in Janet Morgan's biography *Edwina Mountbatten* (1991), that it was not a patch on the Villa Guardamangia (Gwardamanga): 'Absolutely no view at all, not an inch of garden and the racket day and night is deafening – endless clanging peals of church bells and hooting cars and heavy lorries changing gear,

chattering and screaming voices, wirelesses.’ An empty bombsite opposite her bedroom window was used by workmen to chisel stone. The house had large rooms for entertaining but in summer they were ‘utterly *airless*, only two ceiling fans and no air conditioning’.

The husband of **Juliet Bingley** (née Vick, 1925–2005), Admiral Sir Alexander Bingley, was Commander-in-Chief from 1959, and they, too, lived in Admiralty House. Her *ODNB* entry records that she was closely involved in reform of aspects of the Maltese health and social care system for which she was awarded the Maltese Companion of Honour in 1976. She was another of those women, described in Chapter 16, who was part of a circle round Dom Mintoff and, when he was at odds with the British government, she became an unofficial envoy and messenger between them – a role which continued after she left Malta. She was also a poet, and some of the poems, for example ‘Gift from a Queen’, contained in *What it Was and What it Was Not* (2002) allude to Malta: ‘For her I gave/Antiques from Malta,/Silver buttons/Bent and bruised,/Worn for two hundred years.’

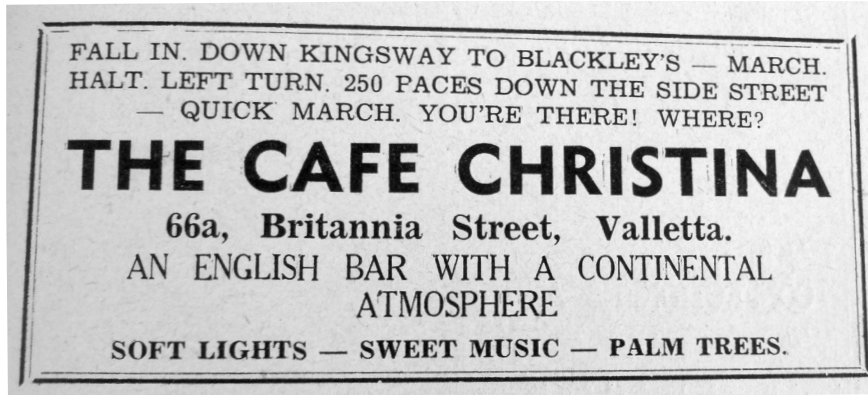
On the corner of South Street and Old Bakery Street stands the **Workers’ Memorial Building**, with its plaque commemorating the war workers who were killed there when the building was destroyed in an air raid on 8 April 1942. Today it houses the General Workers Union. In the time of the Knights it was the French *Auberge* but, in 1810, when Lady Hester Stanhope and her entourage moved in, it was the home of Sarah Fernandes and her family (Chapter 9).

In 1891, as Chapter 12 recounts, the newly arrived Hughes family moved into the old *auberge* and, when Dr Louis Hughes married Katherine Simpson in 1894, the reception was held there after what the *Malta Chronicle* called the ‘Fashionable wedding at St Paul’s’ and listed all the presents. By 1896, when they both contracted brucellosis, about which he was to write an important monograph, Katherine and Louis were living at 9 Strada Scozzese (now Vassalli Street) which cuts across South Street, and which had earlier been William Watson’s Malta Infant School under the patronage of Queen Adelaide (Chapter 10).

You can now turn into Strait Street, or Old Bakery Street. Let’s assume it is the former. Don’t go far, because there will be occasion to turn down there later from Republic Street. Just get an impression: it is called **Strait Street** (Strada Stretta) because it is so narrow. It is said that the Knights fought duels here – it was just wide enough for two wielded swords – and it may well have been over women. But in British times Margaret MacGill and her family lived at No. 27, perhaps as early as 1806 (Chapter 10). Probably in the 1830s, Jane Vere ran a school there (Chapter 10).

From Strait Street or Old Bakery Street turn left down **Melita Street** (formerly Britannia Street) and stop on the corner of it and Mint Street in front of a green door, or *remissa*, the sort of portal through which you could drive a cart, next to a smart law firm and opposite another. After the Second World War, artiste Christina Ratcliffe (Chapters 14 and 15) stayed on in Malta. As Frederick Galea discovered for a postscript to *Women of*

Malta that contains what she wrote about Malta, she was a civilian secretary to successive RAF station commanders at Luqa. On the side, she ran an intimate bar – **Café Christina**. And it was here. No one but Christina could have devised this enticing advertisement.



43. Christina's Café advertisement, courtesy of Frederick Galea

Christina never found anyone to match the mysteriously missing wartime ace Adrian Warburton and became something of a recluse, particularly where journalists were concerned, though she did write part of her story and provided material for the film *Malta Story*, shot in Malta in 1952. She died alone in her Floriana apartment in 1988 and her grave is in the Addolorata Cemetery at Paola (see Chapter 22 itinerary). Warburton's remains were found at a crash site in Bavaria after her death and interred with military honours. The Lascaris War Rooms where Christina worked during the War feature in a later part-itinerary in this chapter.

Walk up now to **Old Bakery Street** (Strada Forni) and along towards St John Street where, on your left, is St Augustine's Church. Walk a little way beyond and, on your right, is clearly marked **No. 191**, with its green door and balconies. Here the Cassar Torreggiani house was attacked and ransacked on the first day of the *Sette Giugno* riots of 1919, as described in Chapter 13.

Go back now to St John Street and go down it towards Marsamxett Harbour. Laudonia Moroni was fatally injured in 1799 during the insurrection against French occupation at No. 56. The house no longer appears to exist and I deduce that it has been subsumed into the social housing in Mattia Preti Square.

Reverse a little way up St John Street and turn left into West Street (formerly Strada Ponente), and walk towards Independence Square. Just before you get to St Paul's Anglican Church, and on your left overlooking the harbour, is what was Palazzo Britto and then, under the British, **Beverley's Hotel**, where Mrs Beverley played a prominent part. Many British visitors stayed there (Chapter 10), including Anne Scott and her father; indeed, there is a plaque commemorating Sir Walter Scott's stay in 1831. Across the street

was the house of his doctor, John Davy, and his wife Margaret whose diary recorded the Scott's visit, described in Chapter 9.

Then you are upon **St Paul's Church**, the entrance to which is in West Street, though it fronts on to Independence Square (formerly Piazza Celsi). As Chapter 11 recounts, the church was funded by Queen Adelaide who laid the foundation stone during her stay in 1839. Its construction meant the demolition of the *Auberge d'Allemagne*, pretty much over the head of Chief Justice Sir John Stoddart and Lady Stoddart who used to glower across the square at Chief Secretary Sir Frederick Hankey and his wife in the *Auberge d'Aragon*, now a government ministry (Chapter 9). Two governors' wives died in Malta within a year of each other, which I think is odd. In the church, on the wall on your right, are plaques commemorating the lives of **Maye Fremantle** (née Hall, d.1898) and (Evelyn) **Emily Mary Grenfell** (née Wood, d.1899). A little more is known about Maye: Charles Savona-Ventura notes in *The History of Midwifery Education in the Maltese Islands* (2009):

Prof Guiseppa Batta Schembri, following the endeavours of Lady Sym Fremantle, in 1896 initiated the Military Midwives Classes held for English speaking women to provide ... midwives for the women of the military personnel stationed in Malta.

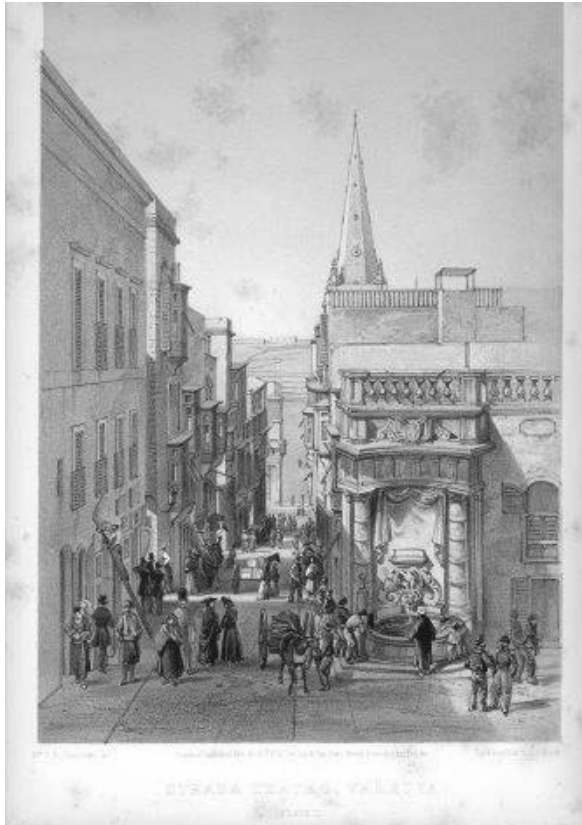
Go back a little way along West Street and turn up **Old Theatre Street**. On your left, unmistakably, is the domed **Carmelite Church**. It was severely damaged during the Second World War and re-built to compete successfully with its nearby Anglican rival. Fortunately, much of the contents of the 1570 original survived. These include Maria de Dominici's late 1670s *Beato Franco*, high up in the middle on your left, and hardly discernible because of the infiltration of light and, possibly, neglect.

Here, too, are the graves of Caterina Scappi and Caterina Vitale (Chapter 6), commemorated in both cases by large, ornate plaques, or tomb slabs – Caterina Vitale's, a little hidden but immediately to your right, low down on the wall as you enter; Caterina Scappi's, more obvious, almost opposite on the left wall.

Further up the street, on the same side, is the bijou **Manoel Theatre**, opened in 1732. Previous to that, entertainments had been performed in the various *auberges* but, following a disturbance during the Carnival of 1639, women were debarred from attending them. By at least 1752, opera and ballet were performed at the Manoel. Italian visitor, Princess Maria Felice Colonna, describes ballet there with a Dutch ballerina (Chapter 7).

The oddest line quoted in the many copycat internet histories of the Manoel is that between 1768 and 1770, the impresario 'was a woman, a certain **Natala Farrugia**'. But nowhere can I find any more about this rather advanced woman.

Women opera singers were not uncommon. Saveria Moscati, natural daughter of Bettina Dorell's husband (Chapter 7), had borne a son by 1774 to the Marquis de Piro but, some time between then and 1780 when she



44. *Strada Teatro* by Mary Baillie-Hamilton, from *Twelve Views of the Mediterranean*, courtesy of The National Trust

temporarily left Malta for Naples, she continued to perform ‘at the famous Maltese opera’.

The best known diva was Marseilles-born **Camilla Darbois** (1804–1878). Having studied at the Paris *Conservatoire*, she married merchant Filippo Darbois in 1820, but was widowed by 1829 with three children, including Anetta who became philanthropist the Marquesa Bugeja (Chapter 11). That same year, Camilla made her debut at the Manoel in Donizetti’s *L’Esule di Roma*. Her contract was renewed for 12 years which meant that she was still there to perform twice before Queen Adelaide in 1839 (Chapter 11), and retired in 1841.

Italian mezzo **Adelaide Borghi-Mamo** (1826–1901) sang during the Manoel’s 1848–50 seasons and married an Italian tenor in Malta in 1849. Scottish-born **Euphrosyne Parepa-Rosa** (née Parepa de Boyesku, 1836–1874), made her debut at the Manoel, aged 19, as Amina in *La Sonnambula*. During a tour of the United States in 1866, she met and married Carl Rosa and, with him, formed the Parepa-Rosa English Opera Company. She died in childbirth aged 37 and is buried in Highgate Cemetery, London.

The Royal Opera House in the Strada Reale opened in 1866, bringing about the demise of the Manoel as the premier opera house until 1960; indeed, thereafter, it had a rather chequered career. However, Lady Layard who was staying at San Anton with the Duke and Duchess of Connaught (Chapter 12), went there twice to the opera in 1908. She wrote in her journal on 11 November:

In the eveng we went to the theatre at Valletta & saw the opera ‘Andre Chenier’ by Giordano in the Manoel theatre. It was well given & the prima donna has a very fresh if untrained voice [Giuseppina] Ravaglia is her name. The theatre is the oldest one existing in the world, never having been burned down or rebuilt. It is small & clean looking – elliptical in shape – & the stage is so small that the scenery has to be brought in from the street & nailed into place between the acts. The house was not very full – there being another opera going on at the Theatre Royal – & Malta is too small a place to make them both pay.

She says that the Manoel is the oldest theatre; other sources say the second or third oldest. She wrote less happily on 28 November:

After dinner we went off to Valletta to the Manoel Theatre to see the opera ‘Siberia’ which was very badly sung & a very dismal subject. The music also was unpleasing & full of discords & minor keys. It was a short opera and we got back to San Antonio soon after 11. Had hot soup wh was ready prepared for us in the Duchess’ sitting room & then to bed.

You can find details of Giordano’s *Siberia*, premiered at La Scala, Milan in 1903, on the internet. The Russian refugee ballerina, Nathalie Poutiatine, danced at the Manoel in the 1930s.

Malta has produced several home-grown women opera singers: Sliema-born Antoinette Miggiani (b.1937) sang first at Covent Garden but made her Manoel debut as Leonora in *La Forza del Destino* in 1963. Among her pupils was Lydia Caruana who made her Manoel debut as Musetta in *La Bohème* in 1995. The soprano Hilda Mallia Tabone appears in the Floriana itinerary in Chapter 19.

If you are treating yourself to a performance at the Manoel, you will also want a good place to eat. One of our favourite restaurants is the Palazzo Preca which, neatly, takes the itinerary back to Strait Street. We usually approach it via Republic Street, turning down St Lucia Street by the Law Courts towards Marsamxett Harbour. You could, just as well, do it via Old Theatre Street. But in St Lucia Street you pass, on your right, the Embassy Cinema. On that site, in 1864, was the Imperial Hotel, at No. 184. There Baroness Angelica Testaferrata Abela and Jessie Tod Wisely called upon Garibaldi (Chapter 11). His stay is marked by a plaque. Suzanne Layton Parlbly was staying there when, as St James’s Hotel, it was bombed in 1941.

Turn right where St Lucia Street meets Strait Street and you will find Palazzo Preca at No. 54 of what is hardly more than an alley. It was started by the Preca sisters, Ramona, executive chef, and Roberta, who had learned their craft in a family restaurant. It has a womanly feel about it and serves first-rate Maltese food.

The palazzo itself dates from the sixteenth century but is in a thoroughfare which, in the twentieth century, known as the Gut by British service personnel, had its own particular reputation. Its place in Valletta's history is best introduced by artiste Christina Ratcliffe in Chapter 14. Today, butter wouldn't melt in its mouth.

Archbishop and Merchant Streets

Both streets contain strong whiffs of both Caterina Scappi and Caterina Vitale, and Merchant Street is second to Republic Street as a main Valletta thoroughfare. But this part-itinerary could start towards the end of **Old Bakery Street**, just before it meets Archbishop Street, because Caterina Scappi owned No. 74; it was her house but it also appears to be one of the first sites for the *Casetta* – hospital for incurable women – which she set up in 1625 (Chapter 6). Next to the post office, when I reconnoitred it, it was the Johann Strauss School of Music. But Giovanni Bonello's 'Memories of Caterina Scappi' (awaiting publication) has 'until recently'.

Turn into Archbishop Street which has been in its day Strada del Popolo, Strada dei Greci and Strada Vescovo, though there is nothing womanly to note yet, so you could approach the street from Palace Square. Walk until you hit **Frederick Street** on your left. On the corner, as I write, is the D'Office Bistro. That whole block into the narrow Frederick Street, full of atmosphere, was rich widow Giovanna Fontani's house (Nos 1 and 2), at the time of French occupation (Chapter 8). There she spent her short married life with her new French husband, and there she died in childbirth.

Back on Archbishop Street, on the other side of Frederick Street, at No. 132A, is **Our Lady of Damascus** Greek Orthodox Church with its association with Greek-born Caterina Vitale (Chapter 6). She both worshipped there and donated to it. Displayed on a lectern at the front of this bijoux church is the precious icon Our Lady of Damascus, brought by the Order of St John when they arrived in 1530 (Chapter 5). There is a pleasing link with this icon and Maltese-born Rosanne Dingli's *According to St Luke* which I mentioned in Chapter 2. It is a tautly written art history thriller connected with the Roman Catholic hierarchy over the centuries and will get you thinking. Its main protagonist, the Australian art-restorer Jana Hayes working in Italy, is a determined and skilled woman whose adventures lead her from Italy to Malta and Damascus. There is another icon of the Virgin with the crucified Christ in her arms on a pillar as you enter. Although the church was badly bombed on 24 March 1942, it was faithfully reconstructed.

No. 135, one to the right of the Bistro Angelica, was owned by Caterina Vitale and bequeathed to her niece Annica Faienza. No. 138 was also owned

by Caterina and bequeathed in 1618 to the *Monte di Redenzione degli Schiavi*. This is to the right of the Ambrosia Restaurant at 137 – another pleasing place to eat run by a wife and husband team. Nos 135–138 are really one building destroyed during the war and reconstructed. No. 138 is now Agius Leli Funeral Service. All these current landmarks may of course change over time.

Cross over Merchant Street and St Paul's Street, with a church on your left, and continue down Archbishop Street. No. 143 is marked but of **No. 144** only an old, bleached *remissa* indicates the property Caterina Scappi purchased from **Cecilia Xiblia** of Syracuse and bequeathed to the *Casetta*.

Return now to Merchant Street and turn right until you almost reach the Fort S Elmo end, then start back up. Almost immediately on your left is a road, apparently nameless, running down towards the Grand Harbour. On your left, fenced in, marked by the sign The Chapel of Bones (Ta'Nibbia), are the remains of the **Annunciation Church** and crypt of the *Casetta*. It, too, was destroyed during the War and only some rubble is left.

Opposite, reconstructed from its bombed predecessor, is the **Mediterranean Conference Centre**, what used to be the Order's 1574 *Sacra Infermeria*, and then the British Station Hospital. There Dr David Bruce and his wife Mary did the work that identified the organism that caused Malta Fever, Brucellosis (Chapter 12). During the First World War, it was the Valletta Military Hospital where the wounded from Gallipoli arrived in 1915, where doctors such as Alice Hutchison treated them (Chapter 13).

Go back to Merchant Street. Where there is now an undistinguished modern building with wide steps was the *Casetta* itself. No sign of it remains. Almost opposite is an unmarked church, until recently in sad repair. This was the 1609 **Church of Mary Magdalene**, and the modern school building beside it the **Maddalena Nunnery** (Chapter 6). Caterina Vitale's daughter, Isabella, spent time here (Chapter 6), and Caterina left one-fifth of her property to it, though not voluntarily. Caterina Scappi also left it a bequest. Rosenda Paulichi entered in 1705 (Chapter 7) and Flaminia Valenti in 1636 (Chapter 6), both one-time mistresses of Grand Masters. Elena Dodsworth, her two daughters and her mother-in-law were sent here in 1763 (Chapter 9). This is the place to make full use of Christine Muscat's wonderful *Magdalene Nuns and Penitent Prostitutes*, with its architectural drawings, photographs, paintings, determined women characters and intricate detail of processes. It is supplemented by her article 'The Magdalene Church, Valletta'.

You need to stand here and cast your mind back not just to the women but also to this complex as it was, including the *Sacra Infermeria*, with the longest ward ever built, where patients, but, at one time, no women, ate off silver served by the knights who nursed them, and the Annunciation Church. It must have been truly grand. Some of Valletta is still grand, but not here.

Continue up Merchant Street, weaving your way through the market stalls in the middle of the road until you almost reach the eating-out places, also in the middle. Opposite the Ministry of Economy, Investment and Small Business on your right is **No. 46** on your left. It is now the Inland

Revenue offices, in spite of the faded signage for the Office of the Census for Goldsmiths and Silversmiths. In Caterina Vitale's day it was the *Monte di Pietà e Redenzione degli Schiavi* to which, as described in Chapter 6, she bequeathed much of her fortune.

I found more to it than tax offices when I ventured up steps that probably date back centuries. As I waited to talk to someone who could confirm that I had found the right historical place, I examined the notice board and was delighted to see a notice reading 'Gender Mainstreaming in Practice', and to be told that it is taken seriously. What it means in detail, as I found on the internet, is laid out in 'Gender Mainstreaming in the Malta Public Service: A Manual for Action' (2000), prepared by Angela Callus and Miriam Camilleri, and issued by the Commission for the Advancement of Women. This ties in with what I have briefly noted in my Preface and Chapter 16. It is instructive to link it to Caterina Vitale and her life, times and determination.

If it is Maltese silver filigree jewellery you are after, you will want to turn right into St Lucia Street. There are dizzying displays to choose from. And in this street full of jewellery shops the family of the mysterious and erratic Tiana have theirs in Rosanne Dingli's *The Hidden Auditorium* (2013), another art history thriller that starts in Italy and chases through Malta. But what is the connection between Grixti's jewellers, a wonderful nineteenth-century pendant hidden in a book and the composer Wagner? It is worth finding out.

Further on up Merchant Street on the left, on the corner of St John Street, is the building that was the *Castellania* (the Grand Master's Law Courts), where the portrait of Caterina Scappi shown in Chapter 6 is located but inaccessible. Through the *Castellania* Caterina Vitale regained possession of her dowry and her late husband's property. What is more, in spite of the men-only nature of the *Sacra Infermeria*, she also took over Ettore Vitale's pharmacy providing the Order's hospital with medicines. In due course, her daughter was also to take her case against Caterina there.

A court continued here under the French and the British until 1853, the building later becoming a girls' secondary school. Today it houses various offices under the Ministry of Health. Allegorical female statues of Justice and Truth still stand either side of the central concave bay.

Towards the top of Merchant Street, on the left, is the solid block of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs, what was the Palazzo Parisio, the last site in this part-itinerary. Napoleon stayed here for a few days in 1798 on his way to Egypt, at the beginning of French occupation. The palazzo is connected with that of the same name in Naxxar once owned by Anna Muscati Parisio (Chapter 7). She died the year before the French arrived, but her son Paolo Parisio joined the Maltese people's army at the head of the Naxxar battalion which fought against the French and was knighted by the British. Following his death in 1841, his widow Antonia Moscati Gatto Xara, whom he had married when she was 14, inherited the palazzo – they had no children. She then married Sir Giuseppe Maria de Piro and you may already have seen the couple's portraits in the Casa Rocca Piccola. He donated the Majmuna

stone to the nation (Chapter 2 and Chapter 23 itinerary) and, when he died in 1870, his unmarried sister, **Francesca de Piro** (d.1877) became the 5th Baroness of Budach. Antonia may have owned the Villa Bigli on the Kalkara Peninsula, but the description of 'Baroness Zara's' villa contained in Thomas Freller's *Malta and the Grand Tour* was from 1797 when Antonia was only 14. It may, therefore, refer to her mother, though Antonia was married then.

From Merchant Street to the Grand Harbour

You could start this part-itinerary from the Palazzo Parisio end of Merchant Street. But historically it is going to start at the other end, where Archbishop Street crosses over Merchant Street, and over St Paul Street to St Ursula Street. Immediately on your left, on the corner, is **St Ursula Church** with a plaque saying that it is part of the **St Ursula Nunnery** next door. Here the nuns of the Order of Malta – the Ursulines – had their being from 1595 (Chapter 6). And it was to here that poor Angela Moscati Xeberras, moved from nunnery to nunnery by her warring parents, was dispatched by Bettina Dorell from St Catherine's. In the church is a painting by Preti depicting the **Martyrdom of St Ursula**. I have nowhere seen it suggested that Maria de Dominici was involved, given her superior depiction of women; it was painted between 1680 and 1685; she left Malta in 1682.

Continue down St Ursula Street and up a short flight of steps in the street. On the corner of St Ursula and at the bottom of a long flight of St John steps, on the right is the Franciscan church of **St Mary of Jesus**, known as the **Ta' Giesu**. Here Pulcra Testaferatta and Francesca Portughes had their fracas in 1738 (Chapter 7 and Fort S Elmo – see Republic Street part-itinerary earlier in this chapter). Because the door was closed as I arrived at noon on a Sunday I could not determine where the Portughes tombs are.

In 1846, a rather worse incident took place, as Albert Abela describes in *A Nation's Praise, Malta: People, Places and Events* (1994) – a book more accessible than his other collection of articles with the same sub-title, *Grace and Glory* (1997). It was the custom for poor boys to be sent to the Franciscans to keep them out of the confusion on the streets during the last days of Carnival. They were given bread and fruit at a time, under the British, of great poverty. But that Monday 10 February, as the boys trooped to get their food within the church complex, the wrong door was locked; pushing started on the unlit stone steps; pressure built up and boys started to tumble onto each other. One hundred and ten boys were smothered or trampled to death. A British soldier was an eyewitness and wrote home:

When the place was cleared and the doors were opened, the dead and dying were brought out into the streets ... for thirty yards each side of the door [was] strewn with children, some dead, others dying, and others showing symptoms of recovering. Women running up and down, mad with despair seeing their little ones, and to add to the misery of the scene it was dark ...

When a woman would examine her supposed child she would find it was not her own, it was then laid on the ground and the poor disconsolate mother would rush again amongst the little unfortunates to seek her own. I shall never forget this night, cries of despair were uttered by thousands and [were] heard distinctly at Fort Ricasoli and Cottonera.

Now cross back over St Ursula Street and work your way down, via steps towards the Grand Harbour, to the **Victoria Gate**, in an earlier form, the Marina Gate (also *Porta del Monte*). The other side of the Marina Gate was the market depicted by traveller, artist and writer **Constance Gordon Cumming** (1837–1924) on the cover of this book. She visited Malta twice in 1870 and stayed at the Grand Palace with the governor Sir Patrick Grant and his wife since 1844 **Frances Grant** (née Gough, d.1892). Constance wrote briefly of Malta in *Memories* (1904).

Go through the gate and you are on Liesse Hill, running down to Our Lady of Liesse (opposite the Harbour Club Café). Before you get to the church on your right, turn sharply left into a narrow street clearly marked **Triq il-Gdida**. Here Paula and Etienne Eynaud lived; and it was here in 1798 that tragedy overtook the family, and the other families sheltering with them, as French forces started to occupy Malta (Chapter 8). You could also approach it by turning left a bit earlier after Victoria Gate, descending some wide steps down towards the harbour, and turning right down narrower steps into Triq il-Gdida. This would match the photograph in the late Carmel Testa's *The French in Malta*. The house I decided belonged to the Eynauds has the typical green *remissa* door.

Go back now through Victoria Gate and up the steps you descended until you see signs for the **Lascaris War Rooms**. You are searching there, in this maze of tunnels dug into the cliff as bombs started to fall during the Second World War, for where Christina Ratcliffe worked from June 1941 (Chapter 15). If the War in general interests you, take the full tour; beware, though, it is long, hot and airless, as I found to my cost. If you are just after the women civilian plotters, particularly Christina, nip in with earphones to the RAF Operations Room. Looking down, it is an impressive sight and you really can imagine them moving the planes across the vast map. There is also a room full of photographs, some of them showing Christina.

The Lascaris War Rooms can also be reached by turning left just before you reach the **Upper Barracca Gardens**. These are full of monuments to men, though no doubt women went there to catch the air and admire the stupendous view across the Grand Harbour to the Three Cities. On the far right of the Gardens is the lift that will take you down to the water's edge from where you can get a boat over to start the next itinerary – see Chapter 18.