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31st August 1988

Tales from an Itterant Jobber Letter 7.

Dear Reader,

Adrian returned home this morning and I've put pen to paper this evening thus accomplishing my promise to you and earning a tiny glow of self-satisfaction – but honestly I've been feeling guilty all the time he was here having received two cards from you and what happy chatty cards they were too. I'm very pleased you enjoyed such an obviously successful and happy holiday, only wish I could have been there with you!

Before I proceed with the immediate present I must relate to you my experiences and adventures in the dim and distant past of last February and March spent in Malta. I was comfortably inveigled to spend a whole month in Malta by a sweet talking neighbour who owned a flat in St Paul's Bay and I succumbed to his overtures and parted with a princely sum for the rent of the place. On a bleak, wet, winter's evening I was driven by my "kind" neighbour to Manchester airport and conveyed to Luqa airport in Malta supposedly to meet a taxi driver who would take me to my holiday home. Imagine my consternation at the exit of the airport where I was confronted with tour operators and taxi drivers all bearing placards but not one with my name. After having hung around kicking my heels for half an hour and seeing all the other passengers depart I started to get a little agitated as time, unlike myself was not standing still. Being in excess of 1am I was in a hurry to get away. But the only other occupant of the lobby was a taxi driver with a placard bearing some other's name. I approached hesitantly and gave him my name and destination. He looked puzzled as the destination tallied and he finally agreed I was his passenger. So began the epic journey to St Paul's Bay with the taxi lurching and bouncing over potholes and ruts even Detroit would be proud to boast. As the crow flies St Paul's Bay would be some nine miles from Luqa airport but the taxi took a tortuous route and I thought the journey would never end. When it did however I wished it hadn't for the taxi came to a grinding halt in some back alley reminiscent of those in Lisbon. The horror didn't end there, he picked up my suitcase and led me into a dimly lit dismal hall and up a stairwell smelling of stale cooked cabbage our footsteps emitting a hollow clatter on the stonework; just had the makings of a cheap detective novel. The front door opened into the "lounge" if you could call it that with a large refectory table and nine wooden backed chairs. The other furniture consisted of a settee which had seen better days and a rattan table with a radio that didn't work. The whole room was lit by an overhanging lamp bulb about 25Watts. There was a garish red drape covering the window. A more dreary, distressing, dismal, depressing room I have yet to encounter but I was too tired to care, I thought things would look better in the morning.

11th September 1988

That glow of self-satisfaction has been replaced by one of self-condemnation. How could I let 11 days go by without writing but you can blame a hectic weekend and four evenings of tennis coaching, Monday to Thursday 6:30 to 8:30pm so without further excuses I'll continue.

Malta – the following morning: Things in the light of day looked if anything worse. When I pulled the drapes in the lounge I found myself looking out into a small courtyard flanked by blank walls all the way to the roof, like looking down a chimney shaft so only reflected light could penetrate the gloom. The large bedroom off the lounge had a small verandah and this overlooked the street where the taxi stopped the previous evening. The bedroom I occupied had a small window which looked onto rooftops with laundry flapping in the breeze. The kitchen was primitive with the cooker attached to a rusty old gas cylinder. I suppose in the heat of a Maltese summer the flat would have a distinct advantage as a haven from sunlight but in the middle of February it was very cold and there was no heating! I weighed up the situation and decided I'd spend as little time in the flat as possible so I soon worked out a routine where I would rise early, have breakfast, pack a lunch and get out for the day, returning in the evening about 6 o'clock as it gets dark early. I'd buy some fresh fish which was plentiful, shark steak, bream or mullet which I would pan fry with a little oil and water seasoned with garlic and fish herbs. Occasionally I would make an octopus soup. Wine and fresh bread were plentiful so this accompanied the evening meal then I'd wrap a blanket around myself and read.

Public transport was frequent and very cheap but wherever you were you had to change at Valetta's bus terminus, a huge square with a fountain in the middle and dozens of buses in their allotted slots but it took a few days before I was familiar with the system. Some days I wouldn't bother with the bus but walk along the coast around St Paul's Bay to Mistral Bay, around Mellieha Bay to Maffia Ridge. I can say I sure did a lot of walking on this holiday but found difficulty relating to the terrain with a small-scale map so I just relied on my compass. Often as not I would just take a bus into Valetta and then another to my chosen destination, walk the area and then return in the evening. In that way I covered most of Malta and even spent a day in Gozo, an island adjoining Malta. The principal town of Gozo is Victoria where there is a large citadel with very steep steps to the top. Many of its outbuildings have been converted into museums; the two memorable places I visited in Gozo were the Ggantije temples. These were the largest of the temples and very well preserved considering they were built nearly 5,000 years ago. The most amazing thing that struck me was how civilized man must have been even then to construct these monuments, some with ornate carvings. How they assembled the stones I just don't know but it must have taken feats of engineering skill to do it.

The other place was Calypso's cave. Calypso, according to Greek mythology was a sea-siren who had Ulysses held captive in this cave for nine years. Well Calypso must have been some attractive broad as Damon Runyan would say, for sure as hell there weren't many attractions about the cave. The entrance to the cave was gained through a crack in the earth as though split by an earthquake and you worked your way down a narrow and by no means easy path which was all enclosed and eventually you would come into the upper chamber quite large and high enough to stand then another entrance and a steep ravine down to the bowels of the earth, ducking below low ceilings, scrambling and crawling until you emerged into another cavern with a large opening and a panoramic view of the sea and surrounding cliffs. I must say that however magnificent a vista it was it sure wouldn't have held me enraptured for nine years! I say again that Calypso must have been some dame.

16th September 1988

Malta was first inhabited by Neolithic settlers from Sicily about 5000BC and on one of my walks I visited a cave at Ghar Dalam where many Mammoth fossils were found but the cave was a big disappointment as everything has been removed and housed in a museum so all you saw was an empty cave and drawers and racks of bones badly catalogued. All sense of history and the flavour of the period were lost. From Ghar Dalam I walked around the coast to Marsaxlokh, a very pretty harbour but the town, like most others in the region, was a bit

primitive and usually dominated by the church. Large shops were non-existent very similar to some of the places we visited in the Algarve. The few shops there were, were usually single family units selling the necessities of life. Even the capital city Valetta doesn't boast any large department stores although there are many touristy shops and the city itself impressive, fully enclosed by walls and impregnable to attacks from the sea. The whole town can be described as a fortress with narrow streets some of which are very steep. The town was built after the defeat of the Turks in 1565 by the Grand Master of the Knights of St John La Valetta. The Grand Master's palace is a sumptuous affair with magnificent tapestries; marble floors all inlaid and marble columns. The marble was mined from Malta and Italy. There are chandeliers and works of art, some of the rooms looking like the casino at Baden-Baden. The palace is now reserved for diplomatic functions and visiting dignitaries.

Historically, Medina and Rabat were the most interesting. Medina being the capital of Malta during the Roman occupation 218 BC – 395 AD and there is a Roman villa just outside the walled city and now a museum with many Roman artefacts; mosaics, busts and columns. This was easily the best of many museums I visited as I was able to walk in the actual rooms of the villa and imagine myself back in that era. Medina itself seemed like a lost city frozen in time, many of the buildings are probably 15th century. The city is built on a hill surrounded by a large moat and presently converted into gardens and orange groves. The city gate is approached via a bridge over the moat. The place strikes one as a little eerie even though some of the buildings are inhabited and there are one or two fine restaurants. It was nice to look over the walls of the city as it affords magnificent views of the surrounding countryside. The walls themselves are as thick as 20ft in places.

Rabat to the South and on the outskirts of Medina is interesting for the Roman villa already mentioned and their catacombs, ancient burial ground of the early Christians and dug out of solid rock even headrests and grooves for the bodies. It looked like a large rabbit warren with passageways at various levels and of course they had to be very secretive about it all although the guide did say that the Romans were more lenient in Malta and didn't persecute the Christians there. There is also St Paul's grotto, a small cave where St Paul spent some time after being shipwrecked on the island. This is now a shrine and part of the church built around it.

20th September 1988

One day I took the bus to Mosta whose cathedral has one of the world's largest unsupported domes. Very beautiful and ornate – hundreds of roses embossed and covered with gold leaf. From Mosta I walked to Medina and Rabat by way of Ta Qali which was an old airfield and now a craft centre given to small crafts and art shops i.e. lace making, pottery, glass blowing, metal work and jewellery etc. I must say that 80% of my walks were on main roads made dusty by the traffic so that walking isn't the joy it is in England. It was only on coastal walks that I was able to get away from main roads. It was on such a walk when I sheltered from the cold wind and had lunch in the shrine where I discovered those skulls. Another interesting sight or site was the temple of Tarxien with altars and chambers ornate carvings which are meant to depict regeneration and continuity in the scrolls all joined together. I felt a real thrill and in absolute awe to touch an altar and to know that here was civilization before Christ set foot on earth (2000 to 3000 years before), before Paul was shipwrecked there, before the discovery of America, before all the kings of England, before the children of Israel, before the grandeur of Greece or the might of the Roman Empire, before the Pharaohs of Egypt or any thing else that Cecil B de Mille could throw at you – so in the basics and fundamentals of civilisation how far has man progressed? Don't forget I'm looking at these temples 5000 years later so you can imagine how impressive they were originally and must have had roofs too! Not far from the Tarxien temples is the Hypogeum an underground temple with many passageways and levels but quite scary as the lighting was

poor and you had to let your eyes become accustomed to the dark, then you would discover wall-paintings and even an echo chamber – a hole where the priest would lower their voices and speak into and it would reverberate all around the walls of the chamber and thus keep the multitude under control. I know I made a little old lady jump out of her skin when I tried it.

24th September 1988

I also visited some gardens on my travels. Two of note were the St Anton's palace and gardens, the residence of the governor of Malta and Busket gardens. The St Anton's gardens were a quiet haven of gentil respectability but sadly gone to seed and not kept up to scratch. Everything about Malta had this feeling about it as though it had seen better days and had just been left to retire gracefully like some old dowager in a bath chair waiting for the inevitable. Busket gardens was part of a walk I went on to Dingli cliffs. I took the bus to Zurieq where I alighted and then walked down to the Blue Grotto – a beautiful spot with very clear blue waters and large underwater caverns. Here on another day I had a trip round the bay in one of those picturesque Maltese boats. From the Blue Grotto I walked on past Hagar Quim and Mnajdra, two more prehistoric temples which I did visit on another occasion. These two temples were very impressive too and then after a couple of miles I was onto the foot of the Cliffs. After a stiffish climb past cave dwellings I was onto the summit. Only 830ft not very high by other summits I have climbed but quite a view over the sea and then I joined a minor road and soon rejoined the road due North to Rabat and through Busket Gardens, a rather large garden with orange groves and other fruits but very old arid looking run down. In the month I was at Malta I visited many places more than once so by the time the holiday was over I was more than familiar with the island and have no wish to return there when there are still so many places to see.

Well dear reader, that just about sums up my Maltese holiday except to say I caught a severe cold on the first week I was there and never got rid of it till I returned to England. I've got to mention one other thing – the water is undrinkable, very salty so I had to drink bottled water all the time.

I had meant to tell you about Leningrad but I think I'll leave it till my next letter together with my own holiday spent in Airton and Windsor and Epsom and how happy I was to have spent some time with Adrian.

My contract here in Finland terminates on the 20th October and I'll be back in England on 22nd October. I'll stay a couple of days with Deborah so that I'll be able to attend that luncheon for ex-POW and then I'm in the hands of fate. Que sera sera! "The moving finger writes" etc. so we must wait and see. If you write me please address it to Airton and I hope your letter to me won't take as long as this one to you but if you want to call me direct my number is 358-221525709 but we are now only six hours ahead of you since the clocks went back to winter time in Finland.

I hope you won't find this letter too tedious, I know it sounds more like a travelogue of Malta but those are my impressions for what they are worth. I truly wish that some day we may spend some time together again whether on holiday or otherwise because of all the people I have ever met (and they are legion) in all the dives in all the world you come closest to my ideal.