

MALTA INVADED AGAIN!

For many of us, international trips begin with a leisurely coffee in an airport departure lounge. That's until you plan a training trip to Malta. Enjoying a well-earned deep sleep after a long drive back from the Focus exhibition, dreaming sweetly about the coming weekend in sunny Malta, I was shocked into reality with all the joys of a defibrillator by the dulcet tones of 'Scotland the Brave' emanating from my mobile phone. Struggling to fumble for my glasses to silence the offending beast, I was greeted by the effervescent Kevin Casha, FSWPP & FMIPP, and President of the Maltese Institute of Professional Photographers....

"Martin, where the hell are you? It's Kevin, I'm at the airport and it's nearly two in the morning... Oh my God! I'm supposed to be picking you up tomorrow! Did I wake you?" This was clearly going to be a stunning and eventful weekend!

On time and on schedule, I headed off to Manchester airport ably chauffeured by my friend and colleague, Damian McGillicuddy, through hail, sleet and snow to meet our distinguished editor and Photoshop guru, Mike McNamee with his charming wife Jill, in tow, laden with bags, cameras, laptops and all sorts of technical dooberrys (you can see I'm well up with terminology) for our spring training programme. Three busy days involving a calibration visit to the largest photolab on the island, Agfa Lab in Floriana, a suburb of Valetta, a full day presentation by Mike on just about everything digital including calibration, colour spaces and the great image capture debate, and finally an interactive hands-on photoshoot in the famous 'Silent City' of M'dina, Malta's ancient capital. Not much really, just a quiet weekend jolly!

We eventually landed at Malta International Airport after a half-hour delay at Manchester while we waited for someone's sandwiches to turn up, at around 1.30 in the morning. Greeted by Kevin Casha and a few of his Executive, grinning from ear to ear after the previous night's phone antics, we clambered drowsily into the cars and headed off for an apartment in Sliema.

The following morning, rested and refreshed, we opened the shutters to see a glorious blue sky heralding our arrival. The door phone rang at just after 9 am as the MIPP's Chief Executive, the ever-smiling Stephen Bussutil, accompanied by fellow committee member, Charles Calleja, had arrived to take us on a whistle-stop tour of the island's coast in the hunt for suitable locations for the Maltese Institute's 10th Anniversary celebration seminar programme, to be held in early November (more about that later). Centuries of history embodied in spectacular buildings, sleepy villages and picturesque fishing ports with almost unpronounceable names, Marsa'Xlokk as an example, added to the magic of the morning.

The afternoon featured the scheduled visit by 'SuperMac' to the Agfa processing laboratory in downtown Floriana. Quite a sophisticated business which would put many British labs to shame, including a new book binding facility. In fact they boasted several UK customers who were delighted with their output. Speaks volumes really. In fact Mike's calibration exercise demonstrated that they were pretty darn close to the mark.

Having seen Mike safely ensconced in the lab (I didn't stay as it was rocket science to me and I'm certainly no digital astronaut!) I headed off to visit three of the island's prominent studios on a fact-finding mission for some future articles, to be followed by a meeting with the MIPP's management team to discuss the November spectacular.

Meanwhile, the intrepid Mrs Mac, fully kitted out for all weathers and with the determination and energy of a Tibetan Sherpa, set off to explore the island by foot, yellow bus and sea. The phrase 'I may be gone for some time' sprang to mind. Jill clearly has amazing navigational skills as she actually found her way back to the apartment with great dexterity. If it had been Mike or I on the other hand, we would probably have ended up in Sicily!



Martin Grahame-Dunn follows the Knights

Kevin Casha and his team outlined their plans for their celebrations and I had the opportunity to put forward two of the UK's leading photographic partnerships as the training offering on behalf of the SWPP & BPPA to complement their 'home-grown' talent, in what promises to be an exciting joint initiative. The SWPP & BPPA master plan is to take a sizeable contingent of enthusiastic members to share in a long weekend of education, culture and celebration. Further details will be available from Head Office and on the website in due course. I believe it will be an opportunity not to be missed.



Saturday morning, another glorious day and it's off to the palatial 'Victoria' Hotel in Sliema for Mike's illuminating seminar programme presented to an information-hungry crowd of photographers who had 'to a man' taken the digital plunge. I rarely have the opportunity to sit and listen to seminars as I spend most of my time on the other side of the fence but I really wouldn't have missed this one for all the tea in China. I suppose as a self-confessed ignoramus who would love a 'Function 1, do it all and make it fly' key, I felt myself hanging on virtually every word. My colleagues and I found ourselves captivated by his 'plain English' presentation and laudable explanations. I am all too aware that there are those who know little but shout loud, who turn all the tech bits of digital imaging into some kind of mystic cult, shrouded in mystery and illustrated by short-cuts. Not Mike, just the 'KISS' principal of 'Keep it simple... Stupid!' that's my kind of teacher! And just for the record, it's RAW or nothing. Long live the digi king!

Sunday morning and it's showdown time. The plan was to arrive early at M'dina, scout locations, have a coffee and catch a few morning rays before the onslaught. What is it that they say about the best-laid plans? I hadn't accounted for 'Malta time'. And I thought the Spanish could be 'mañana'. Just a few hundred metres short of the city we were greeted by a horrendous traffic jam and couldn't immediately ascertain the cause.

The Maltese Marathon is always traditionally held in the last week of February, well that's according to the guidebooks! The entrance to M'dina was flanked by spectators as the decimated athletes made their last painful strides to the finish line, to the strains of a typical Mediterranean brass band, bellowing out what sounded like the 'March of the Toreadors'. So much for the 'Silent City'!

Moving from location to location I had the pleasure of art directing the shoots giving the large group of camera-wielders ample opportunities to capture countless images of our stunning model, Anabel. I even managed to rope in the make-up artist, Clare, as an additional model to sate their thirst. As a teacher I have to say that it is phenomenally gratifying to see the capture of my conceptualised images appear on the backs of a legion of digital cameras, more or less as I had imagined them, had I been the photographer. Quite honestly, there is nothing like a totally 'hand's on' masterclass, witnessing immediate achievement and in glorious Mediterranean weather. A real soul stirrer.

Clothes, cameras, laptops, completed membership application forms (thanks to all our new members) and the big silver box full of Mike's digital potions all safely packed and stowed, it was off to Birgu Victoriana for a fantastic 'farewell' meal in the company of over 20 of the weekend's delegates to round off another magical Maltese experience.

Monday morning, 4.30am and it's off to the airport chauffeured again by our Maltese hosts whose hospitality seems to have no bounds. Heartfelt goodbye's exchanged, tired but satisfied we all knew we were leaving an unforgettable experience behind. So, side by side on Air Malta flight 138, Mike and I shared our recent reminiscences and anecdotes of the trip and put pens to paper recording this adventure for posterity while Mrs Mac tried to grab forty winks,



no doubt dreaming of her own Maltese adventures. Happy thoughts and happy memories motivate us all. I have left a special part of my heart in the careful custody of my Maltese friends. I don't know when I will return, but what I do know is that the members of the SWPP & BPPA will have a fantastic opportunity to participate in the Maltese Institute of Professional Photographer's 10th anniversary celebrations later this year.

Phil and Juliet are determined to take a substantial delegation to enjoy a long weekend of photography, fellowship, culture and celebrations as they export a few of their best lecturers to educate and entertain. The Maltese have some tremendous talent of their own who they are equally anxious to showcase and share. A Gala Awards dinner, print competitions, seminars in stunning locations and cultural visits to a few of the island's historic sites being a recipe for a wonderful event. All I can do is encourage you to contact Head Office or scan the website to book your place on this very special event. Perhaps you too can then share in the magic that is Malta.

