

# The best of both worlds

By **ANTON REFALO**

MINISTER FOR GOZO, MALTA



**ANTON REFALO** graduated as a lawyer in 1980 at the age of 24, and first ran for office in the general election of 1987. He was the youngest candidate within the the Labour Party and was successfully elected. From then onwards, Mr Refalo has always garnered the highest level of Labour first preference votes within the 13th district. He became Minister for Gozo in 2013.

The island of Gozo, part of the Maltese archipelago, stands for culture, history, identity, tranquility and beauty. This 67 square kilometre island in the Mediterranean, with 7000 years of history, boasts the world's oldest free-standing megalithic temples the Ggantija Temples in Xaghra – a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Anyone who sets foot here is captivated by a raw beauty and the authenticity that places elsewhere have lost. The island is connected to mainland Malta by a scenic 25 minute ferry ride that runs every hour. The Malta International Airport is itself connected to 96 European airports.

Gozitans are very proud of their identity. The religious imprint can be felt all around the island, as wonderful and enormous baroque churches spring from the hearts of its villages. Religion was also the cause that first helped to define and forge Gozitans' identity. Between 1798 and 1864, the Gozitans, spurred by the difficulties caused by their insularity, endlessly petitioned the Pope for the granting of a separate diocese which could cater for their needs. Gozitans achieved their objective despite various setbacks, forging a character which would mark their entrepreneurial and independent spirit through the years. Overall, the Church has played a very important part in the social and cultural life of the island, and contributed to the now thriving cultural life which is characteristic of Gozo.

The small townsfolk bands created to celebrate social occasions and the feasts of patron saints have been the source of numerous musicians throughout the decades. Despite its minute size, the island offers an active all-year round cultural calendar. Indeed, the islanders' passion for cultural activities is insatiable, and spurred by an active voluntary sector. Each year is rich with cultural festivals of international acclaim, such as the Mediterranean, the Victoria International Arts Festival and the Gaultana Music Festival. Indeed, opera and classic music lovers are always in for a treat in Gozo as the two main opera theatres in the main city Victoria, the Astra and the Aurora, stage two operas every October. In 2016, Carmen and Aida will be performed. Gozo is indeed a cradle for a number of artists who have ventured internationally, with exhibitions all around the world.

Similar to the difficulties faced by other islands, people

in Gozo know that sustainable development is necessary for the island to continue to conserve and enrich its already thriving cultural heritage. When the Ministry for Gozo first launched its Eco-Gozo action plan a few years back, few would have predicted the huge strides this island would make in a relatively short period. This vision is not based merely on thinking green but on achieving the right balance, for a better quality of life. Projects have focused on water conservation, education, culture, the promotion of renewable forms of energy and sustainable agricultural practices. Educational campaigns have been at the core of all these activities, and the Eco-Gozo vision has served to launch or to put a label to sustainable activities. These efforts have not gone unnoticed. Eco-Gozo was named as a national champion in this year's European Business Awards, for its environmental and corporate sustainability.

Sustainability has also been at the core of the island's efforts in tourism, a sector that contributes extensively to economic life in Gozo. Government policy addresses the demand and the supply sides of the tourism equation to ensure sustainable development throughout. The two five star hotels in Gozo are already eco-certified. There are also seven refurbished farmhouses in the self-catering sector which are eco-certified.

Gozo is focusing its efforts on promoting small and sustainable niches for a better visitor spread throughout the year, hence moving away from excessive dependency on the peak season when thousands of tourists visit the island, putting considerable pressure on its infrastructure. Such niches include adventure sports, comprising diving, kayaking and climbing, rambling and cultural tourism. Culture is an area with great potential for Gozo and history attests to an island that has gained a reputation of its own in this field.

Sustainability is also about rightly earmarking the island's potential to attract the right investment opportunities, providing a future for younger generations. Recent announcements on investment projects, such as the agreement signed with Barts, a faculty within Queen Mary University of London, to open a medical school in Gozo, show that the island offers the right setting for appropriate investment opportunities which are sustainable and in line with what Gozo wants to achieve. The government has also issued a call for expressions of interest for the development of a new acute general hospital and a

geriatric hospital in Gozo, which should accompany the investment by Barts medical school.

Indeed Gozo has a lot of potential in this area. Gozo's rurality and idyllic scenery still provide the ideal getaway from the noise of daily life. Its coastline, marked by such beauties as the Azure Window, and Mgarr ix-Xini have provided the setting for a number of illustrious film productions, the last of which, *By the Sea* by Angelina Joe and Brad Pitt, was shot in Gozo in 2014.

Gozo also has some of the most stunning diving locations in the Mediterranean. The Blue Hole is one of the most popular shore diving sites on the island. The government has invested heavily in this important niche, with the scuttling of a number of wrecks along the island's shore and the development of ancillary facilities, such as the hyperbaric chamber at the Gozo General Hospital. The private sector has moved alongside this development with the establishment of a number of professional diving schools in Gozo, run by both locals and foreigners.


Apart from diving, Gozo is also generating considerable interest among other sports enthusiasts. A number of climbing routes have been established, and have also been scaled by some world renowned climbers. Gozo's rock formations, especially along its coastline, provide a fascinating landscape for enthusiasts of this sport.

The government is intent on developing other niches, such as the hosting of high level meetings, conferences and events and is aware of the island's potential, spurred by the island's deep-rooted culture of hospitality. Other potential areas for further development are also being explored. The government is presently reviewing the response for an international call for expression for interest for the development of a cruise liner terminal and yacht marina, and investing in a new mooring system, outside the picturesque bay in Xlendi, especially targeted at boutique liners. Possibilities are also being examined to create a sustainable air link between Malta and Gozo, and to ensure more accessibility through an extension of sea passenger services.

The success of the national educational strategy has translated itself in the availability of the required human resources for new

ventures to be set up in Gozo. The recent signing of an agreement for the setting up of an established software company specialising in payment systems in Gozo is evidence of the fact that today's globalised and interconnected world has provided renewed opportunities for locations such as ours. Companies, taking advantage also of Malta Enterprise's specific investment benefits, can invest and work from Gozo whilst savouring the tranquil lifestyle that this Mediterranean island has to offer. This has been accompanied by several exclusive developments, which have relaunched Gozo's profile among international visitors looking not only for a place to retreat but to work and do business.

Gozo is indeed budding with life and interesting projects, one of which has seen the extensive restoration of the Gozo Citadel which dominates the Gozo skyline, and the Banca Giuratale which was once the seat of Gozo's government. The Citadel, which was once the bulwark against adventurous corsairs looking to ransack and plunder everything they could find, has been uplifted to deserving glory with a €14m EU-funded restoration project. This will include the transformation of a mid-19th century water reservoir into a visitor centre.

For such a small island, the amount of activity going on, whether economic or cultural, is indeed incredible and visitors attest to the dynamic environment and the array of services available that makes life here comfortable for both body and soul. It truly is an island of opportunity, waiting to be discovered. 

**Gozo's rurality, combined with Malta's connectivity, provide the ideal location for both doing business and getting away from it all**

The Citadella in Gozo is on the tentative list of UNESCO World Heritage Sites



Photograph: Clive Vella