

A South African's guide to moving to and making it in Malta: Lady Harriet's consternation

 By Marcus 'The Maltese Falcon' Brewster

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After she had dropped us off in the village of Tarxien, Lady Harriet called later that evening to offer her advice. "Marcus, I want to tell you something that I don't think any other Maltese person would tell you." If she had revealed that she had been sheltering Lord Lucan in her guest suite for the past thirty years, I could not have been more taken aback by her secret...

Formerly married to a member of the House of Lords, Lady Harriet is one of the island's larger-than-life personalities and from one of Malta's most important double-barrelled families. On first acquaintance, she proposed immediately going out for a drive. Does one say no to a member of the English aristocracy? Besides we had no plans for the afternoon so readily acquiesced to the suggestion as much to humour her eccentricity as for the opportunity to see more of the archipelago.



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Ensnared in her gleaming classic car, we visited wind-swept bays and coves on the island's untrafficked North West coast and finally landed up at the Radisson Golden Sands for tea. The choice of venue was not inappropriate as it turns out, since the Queen and Prince Phillip stayed at the property during their last official visit to the island for the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in 2015. (Viewers of season one of *The Crown* may recall that Malta is the only country in the world outside the UK where HRH has ever lived, which she did in the pre-coronation days of her marriage to Prince Philip who served in the Navy and was stationed on the islands).

Over tea, Lady Harriet regaled us with stories from her life which would have beggared Jeffrey Archer. I left wanting to write her biography – something I may yet do – especially since her husband's diaries reveal a secret revisionist history of British 20th century statecraft.

After high tea in the North of the island, we were due for an evening third viewing on a bijou little double story on the piazza of Tarxien, a village in the South of the island. The property was opposite a band club (effectively a social club) so we were wary of noise levels and wanted to visit the location after dusk.

The neat little house had a history whose significance I misunderstood. One of Malta's most famous prime ministers (in fact the only one from the twentieth century we had ever heard of before) was Dom Mintoff. In his pre-political days, it turns out he had been an architect and the Tarxien house was one of his early projects. I quite liked the bragging rights of owning a home by Malta's most famous son. Our Maltese architect was less star-struck calling it an undistinguished build and had proposed dropping the structure to take advantage of the extraordinary location on the village square to construct something more interesting.

Despite having lived on the island for most of her life, Lady Harriet was unfamiliar with the town and was discomfited about having to navigate her way out of the village after dropping us off.

When she called later that evening, she revealed the secret: she had never been to Tarxien in her life because it was Mintoff's hometown. Mintoff's Labour government had been very hard on her family – he was persona non grata to her – and she would find it very difficult to ever visit us if we landed up purchasing property in Tarxien.

I thought about Lady Harriet and how political discrimination had coloured her world view, when the latest European Commission survey was published this year. In it, the Maltese are the most likely EU citizens to complain about harassment or discrimination based on their political opinions.

The survey, which was partly about fairness and inequality, found that 2% of all EU citizens mentioned political harassment or discrimination. In Malta, however, that figure stood at 8%.

Respondents were also asked to rank the most important factors for getting ahead in life. In the EU, being in good health topped the list (48%), followed by good education (33%), hard work (27%), knowing the right people (22%) and being lucky (21%).

As for Malta, the most striking finding was that only 17% believed that working hard would affect their chance of getting ahead in life. The figure is slightly below the 20% who said that knowing the right people in Malta is a crucial factor.



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However, when the interviewers were more specific and asked if having political connections was crucial, 9% replied in the affirmative, which was 1% below the EU average.

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