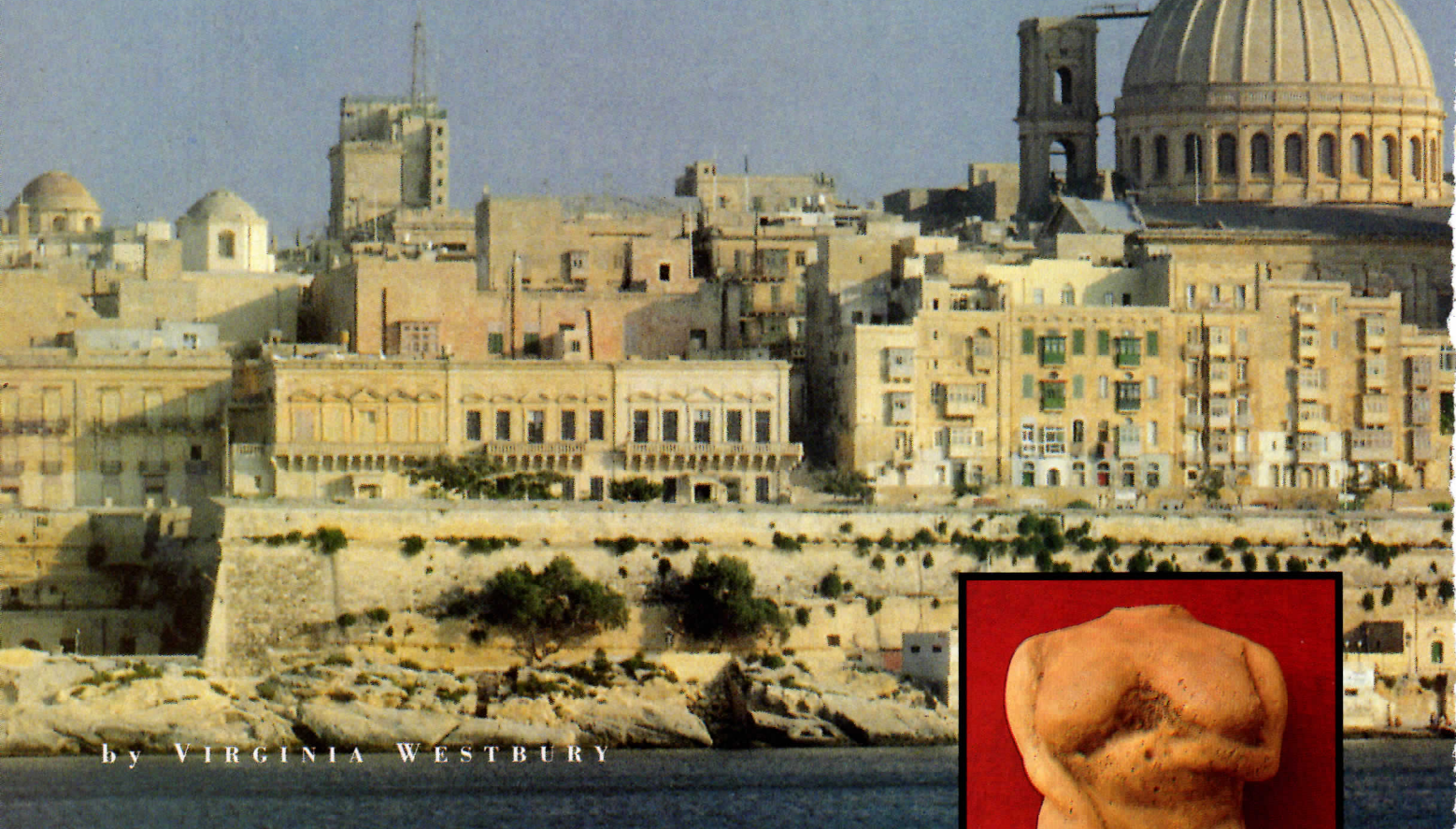


Meeting Venus

In Malta, all women are goddesses, but one plump one in particular has captivated locals and tourists alike



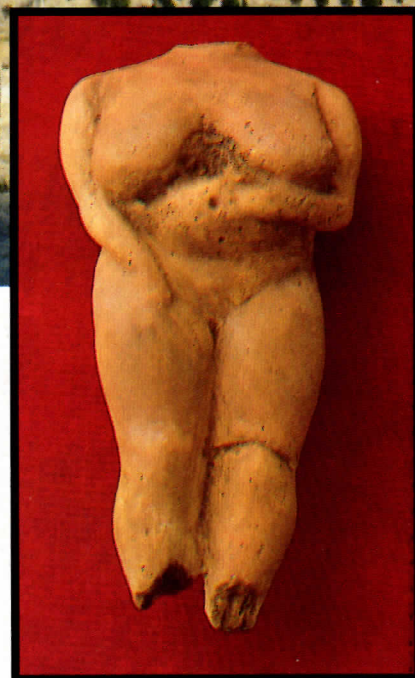
By VIRGINIA WESTBURY

EARLY THIS CENTURY, ON THE tiny Mediterranean island of Malta, a man digging in the basement of his house uncovered what appeared to be the entrance to an underground chamber. Climbing down into the hole, he found not a single chamber but a whole network of them. Tunnels led to rooms that appeared to have been hewn out of solid rock.

Then, all at once, he stumbled across something astounding: a huge central mausoleum, elaborately carved to resemble a temple and decorated with paintings. All around him, glinting dully in the light of his lamp,

were thousands of human bones. What he had uncovered was one of the greatest archaeological finds of the century — Malta's famous Hypogeum, a vast underground complex of temples and tombs dating back 5000 years.

Mystery shrouded its purpose. A tomb it certainly was — in all, 7000 skeletons were unearthed — but why was it built to resemble a temple? And what was the purpose of the rooms in which no bones were found? Deep down, in the chamber known as the “holy of holies”, scientists found a clue in two remarkable statues: a



The Venus of Malta, part of one of the great archaeological finds of the century. Top, Malta's port capital, Valletta.



PHOTOS: VIRGINIA WESTBURY

small, plump figurine with no head and an exquisite “sleeping lady”, shown reclining on her side, hands cupped delicately under her head, her generous hips curving upwards in a graceful arc.

Immediately they recognised the headless figure as the “Venus of Malta”, a goddess whose images had been uncovered at several other sites around the island. The Hypogeum then, like all of Malta’s Stone Age temples, was presumably dedicated to her worship. Probably people went there not merely to bury their dead but to practise rituals of regeneration

and rebirth and to hear the goddess’s prophecies as spoken by her priestesses, the scientists suggested. The “sleeping lady” may have been one of these prophets, a Maltese sibyl who lay in a trance as she uttered her pronouncements.

Today, the temples and their rotund goddess continue to provoke speculation. The Maltese call her the “fat lady” — not out of disrespect, but with affection, even awe. While most of Europe’s goddesses are robust, Malta’s is downright plump. Her temples mimic her shape, circular apses forming the large round thighs,

breasts and head. But, like the statues of Easter Island or the pyramids of Egypt, the temples, which lie burrowed into the stony surface of the island like sleeping giantesses, remain archaeological riddles. No-one knows precisely how they were used or who created them.

Barring Stonehenge in England, they are the oldest and best preserved megalithic ruins in Europe and, surprisingly, the least known. Surviving countless wars, earthquakes and invaders, they’ve outlasted everyone from the Romans to the British. Even the combined fury of Hitler and Mus-



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Travel

solini couldn't shift them. Unlike many of Malta's elegant baroque buildings, they survived the worst bombardments of the Second World War.

Today, Malta comes upon you as a surprise, a dazzling lump of white rock looming suddenly out of the blue Mediterranean. You don't expect it to be so bare and white, a ghost of a landscape, full of architecture. In fact, the island has buildings the way other places have hills, forests and fields. Its temples are clustered to the south-east, as if huddling from the blasting winds from Africa.

The men of Malta have no doubt in whose honour they were built. "Women have always been goddesses here," one of them told me wryly. "We may look as if we're in charge, but they run the show. I've no doubt it was the same when the temples were built."

You can see the lower half of a four-metre-high statue of the goddess in the forecourt of what is regarded by archaeologists as the queen of Malta's temples, Tarxien (pronounced tar-shien), begun around 3000BC. It pokes up incongruously in the centre of a modern suburb of Valletta on a hill overlooking the baroque city built by the Knights of Malta. The famous Hypogeum is nearby. Tarxien is the most elaborate and sophisticated of the island's temples. Its corbel-

led walls enclose carved and decorated altars, a large cauldron hewn out of limestone (maybe to contain sacrificial offerings or a sacred fire) and reliefs of a bull as well as a sow and piglets, ancient symbols connected with goddess worship and fertility.

To see what the ancient goddess of Malta looked like, you have to go to the archaeological museum in Valetta which is brimful of chubby stone goddesses as well as the beautifully decorated altars found at the temples. Many of these feature magical double spirals, closely associated with goddess worship around the Mediterranean. No-one knows what they represent — perhaps the cycle of death and rebirth or maybe the deity's eyes.

PROPHECY was a major function of priests and priestesses in the ancient world. At Hagar Qim (Hajar-im) on the island's southern shore, you can see the hole through which the oracle issued her statements, and stand in the chamber where people would have gathered to hear her thousands of years ago.

My favourite temple, though, is Mnajdra (nidra), whose vast, friendly stones overlook the sea not far from Malta's famous Blue Grotto. The southern section of the temple is said to be aligned with the rising sun at the equinoxes.

At Ggantija (gigantia) on the neighbouring island of Gozo, you can





The Ta Pinu church on the island of Gozo, where pilgrims come to pray for healing. Opposite, the curvaceous "sleeping lady".

see Mother Nature's footsteps, so it is said. Legend has it that a giantess moved the massive 30-tonne rocks into place to build the temple, the oldest on the islands. In one of the rocks are some oval-shaped depressions, just about the right size for a large foot. Ggantija is the "old woman" of temples, her battered, wind-pitted face turned seawards as if anticipating new waves of invaders — not Arabs or Greeks this time, but tourists. They swarm around the temple like ants, "expert" guides confidently explaining in several languages what archaeologists have failed to explain: how the buildings were used. Amazing stories, for which there's not a shred of evidence, abound: of human and animal sacrifice, of "high priests" conducting fantastic rituals.

Gozo, a pretty island, dominated by a massive 15th-century fortress and fringed by turquoise waters and dramatic cliffs, is known as Calypso's

Isle, for legend has it that a cave there was the home of the beautiful seer Calypso, who held the Greek hero Ulysses captive for seven years. You can still visit her cave and see the beach where the hero's ship supposedly pulled in.

The island also produces some of the most beautiful handmade glass in the Mediterranean, much of it in the form of elegant vases that are round in shape, like the Maltese goddess herself, and swirling with the colours of the encircling blue and green sea.

Just as the goddess was worshipped in ancient times, devotion to the Virgin Mary is prominent in modern-day Malta. There are often festivals and parades in her honour — gaudy, brilliant affairs with fireworks, colourful street decorations, music and dancing.

More sedate is the Virgin's church of Ta Pinu on Gozo where, about 70 years ago, a peasant woman claimed she heard the voice of the Madonna telling her to build a church. These days pilgrims come from all over the world to pray for healing. In a small chapel adjacent to the church are letters of thanks and offerings including

crutches and prosthetic devices, an entire lower body cast for a baby, bandages, eyeglasses and photographs of the miraculously healed.

Malta these days is a peaceful place. Violence, especially towards women, is rare. And when it comes to family matters, the women like to take charge. "Maltese women are very proud," I was told. "They expect to be treated like queens." Perhaps it's no accident that these islands, with their determined women, preserve the best of Europe's ancient goddess temples. →

KNOW-HOW

Air Malta is operating a direct service from Australia to Malta from May 26 to August 4, and from Malta to Australia from August 23 to October 11. It also offers flights from most Australian capital cities to Malta via London and other European ports (return fares start from around \$2200). Special hotel packages start from \$27 per person per day (twin-share). For more information, contact Air Malta agents in your capital city or in Sydney on (02) 239 1722.