

A South African's guide to moving to and making it in Malta: East of the sun (Part 1)

 By Marcus 'The Maltese Falcon' Brewster

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One cannot write about Maltese lifestyle without weighing in about the Maltese obsession with cars. So, this column is long overdue. But the ensuing topic of Maltese driving is like the gift wrap on a pass-the-parcel box: once you've unwrapped the top layer, it reveals other wrappings: the environment, architecture, politics, society, roads, etc. before you get to fully understand the Maltese identity.



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The 10-minute rule

At this point, it's necessary to make an observation about the Maltese national character as it relates to the perception of distance. There are only two settings for the Maltese: Near and 10 minutes. Anything further than that is far, despite living on a small island. The 10-minute rule affects everything from where you choose to live in relation to your workplace (or more accurately where you choose to work in relation to your home) to how far you are prepared to go to the shops. This probably explains why there are so many duplicate retailers in close proximity. In our largish village of Zejtun (population of 12,000), there are four pharmacies as well as innumerable beauticians and multiple pet shops, stationers, butchers, ironmongers (hardware stores), etc. The preponderance of parity trades may be less a case of supply and demand and more an indication that nobody is prepared to travel more than 10 minutes to their local shop.



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But let's get back to car ownership. I don't need to quote Eurostat statistics to affirm that Malta has one of the highest car ownership ratios in the EU, if not the world. It's a given that if you are a family of four – two parents and two adult children with failure-to-launch syndrome – you will likely have four cars, one for every family member of driving license age. The number of registered cars in Malta is only slightly less than the overall population, but when you adjust for children under driving age, it's clear that some adults have more than one vehicle. So, just like many South Africans have more than one mobile and more than one sim card, cars are to the Maltese what cellular telephony is to South Africans – an essential part of the national character.

An impressive passion

In his monthly column in the *Sunday Times of Malta* motoring supplement 'PaqPaq' ((*paqpaq* is one of the many onomatopoeic Maltese verbs, in this instance meaning to honk a car horn), editor Tonio Darmanin has this to say: "The passion for cars and bikes in Malta is impressive to say the least." He goes on to note the ever-increasing volume of vehicles on the roads and the unreal number of supercars and classics that are imported and sold locally. "We often hear that in Malta, there are per capita more Ferraris than anywhere else in the world." Darmanin professes himself unsurprised and believes it applies to other exotic brands such as Lamborghini, Aston Martin and Porsche as well.

Darmanin wouldn't be the first to note the curious illogic of supercars on the Maltese islands: the road infrastructure and fast, beautiful cars are simply not compatible.

Wet paint

As an anecdotal aside, when we arrived on the island a year ago, we found a diversity of roads, from gravel tracks in the countryside to lumpy middle-aged suburban streets to glistening new asphalt. The latter, we were informed, were the roads that the Queen of England's state car would be travelling on during the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting which Malta hosted in 2017. The flurry of maintenance that precedes her arrival anywhere: pavements swept, cracks plastered, fresh coats applied to buildings, led one observer to note that the Queen must think the whole world smells of wet paint.

Maybe as a result of Malta's economic surplus, maybe because of our access to a rich vein of EU development funds or maybe because of a hypothetical supercar lobby, Malta has just embarked on a €700 million roads upgrading/infrastructure programme. There has already been significant construction crew activity of the road-widening and traffic-circle enlarging variety, and any and every tree that is cut down in the name of progress in general and vehicular access in particular brings forth howls of armchair protest and letters to the editor. The Maltese may have conveniently lost count of the number

of cars in their basement garages, but they know exactly the number of Aleppo pines threatened on the road to Rabat. The irony is high-octane: everyone wants less cars on the roads, but nobody is prepared to take the bus!



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This is part one of a two-part article about Maltese driving. Look out for 'West of the moon' (Part 2) next Friday at 1:30pm.

ABOUT MARCUS 'THE MALTESE FALCON' BREWSTER

marcusbrewster is a brand synonymous with PR excellence in SA. An industry innovator, leader, and inspiration, Brewster affiliated his multi-award winning boutique firm with larger Level 1 BBBEE marketing/comms agency MediaRevolution for scale in 2016 and went on to launch Marcus Brewster International in Europe the following year. Marcus currently lives on - and actively promotes - the Mediterranean island of Malta. For African, S. African and European PR enquiries, contact marcus@marcusbrewster.com or WhatsApp on (+356) 9931 3322

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