Gearing up

Seek treasure stylishly

Beachcombers, unpack that cumbersome metal-detecting equipment you take with you to look for buried treasure. Instead, Treasure Seekers' Metal Detecting Sandals fit in your beach bag or suitcase and are a cinch to use. Strap the small battery pack, powered by a 9-volt battery, to your right leg and attach its cord to the sandal via a USB plug. Then head out for a stroll. A copper coil built into the sandal helps locate metal that's up to 2 feet underground. These comfy rubber sandals, which have polyurethane foam footbeds and non-skid soles, come in two sizes: medium (men's 7-9, women's 8-10) and large (men's 9-12, women's 10-13). They sell for $59.99 at www.hammacher.com (800-321-1484).

KARI BODNARCHUK

Destinations

EVENTS

Fireworks, fairs, fests, and Fisher Cats

SEPT. 6
KNOXVILLE, TENN.
Boomsday Festival: How do you draw people to your city for Labor Day Weekend? If you're Knoxville, the answer is fireworks, and lots of them. Boomsday — not to be confused with Bloomsday (or anything else to do with James Joyce) — is basically a big bang for the masses. The event draws about 400,000 people every year who "oooh" and "aaah" over a grand, expensive light show after a day of partying in the streets. It's not just fireworks, of course; this year's schedule includes fly-bys, a petting zoo, and an appearance by R&B star Keri Hilson. But really, most people come for the booms, which start at about 9:30 p.m. *Noon-10. Volunteer Landing and Neyland Drive, www.boomsday.org.*

AUG. 21-24
TRENTON, N.J.
Trenton Thunder: Is a Double-A game worth a drive to Jersey? Sure, especially when you can root on a New England team. The New Hampshire Fisher Cats are in Trenton for four days in August, and while rooting for the Cats doesn't mean you're rooting for the Red Sox (the Fisher Cats are an affiliate of the Toronto Blue Jays), it's still better than rooting for Trenton, which is the Yankees' Class AA team. It's best to go Saturday, when there will be fireworks, or on Monday, when the team gives out free tote bags. *Friday, Saturday, Monday games at 7:05 p.m., Sunday at 1:05. $9-$11. Waterfront Park, 1 Thunder Road, www.trentonthunder.com.*

WES CATE

Knoxville calls its show the nation's largest Labor Day fireworks display.

AUG. 19-23
DE PERE, WIS.
Brown County Fair: All county fairs are not created equal. This one, for instance, boasts a horse pull, a tractor pull, and an appearance by Styx (as in "Come Sail Away") on Aug. 20. Those first two attractions are actually pretty common for a county fair, but did we mention Styx will be there? The only thing more exciting than Styx is the swine racing, which happens daily. *$10, $15. 1500 Fort Howard Ave., www.browncountyfair.com.*

SEPT. 6
SACRAMENTO
Tejano Conjunto Festival: You don't have to go to Texas to hear good Tejano music. Sacramento hosts this annual festival to prove that it can hold its own when it comes to the genre that features Mexican rhythms and lots of accordion. The lineup isn't set, but so far it includes the Hometown Boys, an act straight out of Lubbock. *1 p.m. Cesar Chavez Plaza, 915 I St., www.letspolka.com.*

PLAN AHEAD
OCT. 24
LOS ANGELES
Dia de Los Muertos Festival: Salem is scary on Halloween, but in many ways, Los Angeles is creepier. While we celebrate with Puritan-centered tourist stuff, la-la land goes for costumes and shock. At this dark party at the Hollywood Forever Cemetery, you'll be surrounded by skulls, little altars everywhere, and tasty Mexican food to calm your nerves. If you can, stay in town for West Hollywood people-watching on the 31st. *$10. Hollywood Forever Cemetery, 6000 Santa Monica Blvd., www.ladayofthedead.com.*

MEREDITH GOLDSTEIN

Events are sometimes canceled, rescheduled, or sold out; check online. Meredith Goldstein can be reached at mgoldstein@globe.com.

Discover ancient salt pans and the stuff of legends

If you go . . .

Where to stay

Calypso Hotel
Marsalforn
011-356-2156 2000
www.hotelcalypsogozo.com
A 100-room hotel on the bay.
Doubles $66-$106 per person.

Hotel Ta Cenc
Sannat, Gozo
011-356-2155 6819
www.vjborg.com/tacenc
Built on Calypso's highest point.
Doubles $131-$171 per person.

Gozo Farmhouses
www.gozofarmhouses.com
For one bedroom the daily price starts at $78 in January to around $113 in summer.

Where to eat

Maxokk Bakery
St. James St., Nadur
011-356-2155 0014
www.gozoservices.com/maxokk
Pizza and 16 varieties of ftira, a flat, crusty Maltese bread, in which a tomato paste spread is blended with tuna, vegetables, onions, and salad, $4-$7.

Il-Kartell Bar & Restaurant
Marina Street, Marsalforn
011-356-2155 6918
www.il-kartellrestaurant.com
Housed in an old boathouse.
Entrees $20-$35.

It-Tmun
Europe Street, Victoria
011-356-2156 6667
www.tmun.victoria.com
Romantic with French, Italian, and Mediterranean menu. Dinner for two $57-$226.

► **MALTA**
Continued from Page M1

As I made my way around Gozo (with Malta and Comino, the three inhabited islands of the archipelago's seven) I savored each instant. The isle's brilliant colors and odd geometry, both natural and man-made, kept me fully absorbed in the here and now. The names of the places I visited had a Lear-like lyrical quality: Xwejni, Calypso's Cave, and Ggantija.

Moments off the 20-minute ferry from Malta, my companions and I rolled along a dirt road through someone's farm. We plowed through a field ablaze in shades of gold, with wild fennel, cape sorrel, marigolds, and mimosas all waving their yellow blooms.

Rattling down the steep side of a glacial gash in the earth, I saw the remains of a Roman aqueduct far below, cushioned by velvety green foliage. The end of the road was a turquoise slit of Mediterranean in the cliff face, in which a lone boat was anchored, with a single swimmer slicing through the water.

Gozo's fiord-like ravines are but one of the landscape's distinctive geological features. Others include a dramatic, massive natural arch, known as the Azure Window, an "inland sea" that is connected to the Mediterranean by a natural passage, and a vast network of caves. John Schembri, head of geography at the University of Malta, later told me that these are the result of Gozo's unique ground surface, a combination of limestone above blue clay, riddled with fault lines, and the effects of erosion.

The Azure Window is a monument to the forces of nature and time. The rock arch reaches more than 150 feet high. Each of its two supporting columns is a hefty 120 feet wide, mounted by a 300-foot ledge. Its "window" is almost the size of a football field.

Winding our way north along Gozo's coastline we turned a corner and collectively drew in our breath at an eerily beautiful sight. Amid mounds of perfectly sculpted sand on the sea's edge was what appeared to be another window of sorts. Lying side by side and row by row were liquid panes of a glass-like surface, disjointedly mirroring the clouds above.

We were witnessing a Xwejni Bay tradition. On a two-acre stretch of shore outside the tiny resort town of Marsalforn, there are about 300 salt pans, from which eight families harvest the mineral from the sea.

Josephine Xuereb's family owns just shy of an acre of salt pans, which she says were dug about 160 years ago by her mother's family.

"My father, who is more than 60 years old, tends the salt pans lovingly and with great dedication. The whole family is involved, and although it's very hard and laborious work, it gives us great satisfaction," Xuereb said. "The salt process is done only in summer, from May until September.

"Our salt is mainly distributed in supermarkets, green grocers, and vegetable vendors," she said. "But we have other customers who come directly to us, especially those preserving capers, local olives, and for cottage cheese. It's perfectly ideal for cooking as it dissolves quickly and leaves the perfect taste."

Emmanuel Cini, Xuereb's father, is also known as Leli talmelh, Leli for short. "Melh" means "salt" in Maltese.

"Every morning I am eager to go down to the salt pans," Cini said. "As soon as I start down the steep road and get a glimpse of them from the top of the cliff, I am fulfilled. At sunrise, the pans compare with a piece of woven lace, particularly when the first salt crystals start to appear.

"During the harvest season I am always attentive for the weather forecast," he continued. "Throughout 40 years in this trade, I learned from my mistakes. As soon as it is ready to be collected, I make sure to sweep it. There have been occasions when the white crystal salt is collected in a large heap and the wind suddenly changes from the south, bringing dust and sand. That white heap is changed to yellow as it's covered with a layer of dust — too much work in vain."

Futility, in fact, was at the very heart of lore surrounding our next visit, around the corner from Xwejni and up a steep hill atop Ramla Bay, to Calypso's Cave. According to legend and quite a few scholars, this was the abode of Homer's nymph, where she held Odysseus captive for seven years. Ultimately, despite the magnificent setting and all her magic powers, Calypso could not change the fact Odysseus wanted to go home, a reminder that one's will and desire can't change destiny.

George Azzopardi of Heritage Malta says Gozo's caves have been a boon to archeologists. The cave at Ghajn Abdul in the western part of the island yielded the earliest evidence of human presence in Gozo: pottery shards dating to 5000 BC. Other nearby caves also show evidence of human occupation and some are said to have been inhabited as late as the 1950s.

The shelter of caves may have been a deciding factor in the location of one of Gozo's most significant claims to fame, the Ggantija temples, believed by many to be the world's oldest freestanding structures. The temples, which are set on a hill overlooking verdant Ramla Valley, date to 3600 BC, nearly a millennium before the pyramids.

"It was fundamental for the prehistoric community here to build their temples in areas abundant in caves, which could be easily turned into dwelling places," said Azzopardi. "In fact, the village of Xaghra, where the Ggantija Temples are found, contains perhaps the largest concentration of natural caves on the island of Gozo."

While archeologists can comfortably deduce why the site was chosen, explanations of how the temples were erected have proven less facile. Ggantija's name is inspired by long-held local legend that only giants could have moved the megalithic boulders with which they are built. No consensus any more definitive has been reached.

Like Ggantija's genesis, or why illness sometimes strikes those we love, some mysteries are just impossible to solve.

MEG PIER FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

The remains of a Roman aqueduct sit at the foot of a spectacular ravine on Gozo, one of Malta's seven islands.

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