

Tour Guide: Malta's Mysterious Crypts

on January 6, 2010 10:30

Emilie Harting *uncovers some of Malta's cryptic history.*



Going to Malta, an intriguing and historic isle in the center of the Mediterranean? Be sure to reserve tickets way in advance for the amazing necropolis [Hal Saflieni Hypogeum](#), an underground cemetery that'd be a shame to skip.

Around 3600 B.C., the Greeks used flint and stone tools to carve out the first level of the burial site from natural caves, and then gradually worked their way underground, creating three levels in the stone. Masons discovered an opening to the chamber in 1902 when they were laying the foundation for a house. The site was restored in the 1990s, and is now a UNESCO World Heritage site. Only eighty visitors are admitted each day, so it's necessary to sign up for one of the scheduled tours.

As I traversed a paved walk through the three levels, our lights revealed ancient pillars and arches. A few bones remain at the site, along with a number of small altars with gifts such as carved animals, beads, and other sculptures that earlier Maltese residents left behind after visiting their dead. At the peak of its use, over 7,000 bodies had been deposited in the chambers.

Passing through the second level, I noted the carved round doorways and tunnels that resembled the catacombs in Paris and Rome. The third level contains the most intricate stonework. The Oracle Room, with its ceiling of red ochre designs, has been likened to the Tree of Life pattern, a symbol of hope and longevity in many religions. The Main Chamber, with rock carved into rectangles and curves and resembling a Greek temple, may have been a room for displaying statues, or for storing the dead until they were buried in other locations. The "Holiest of Holies" chamber has an elaborate entranceway carved of rock. Adjacent is the Snake or Votive Pit, which was probably used for animal sacrifices. The "Sleeping Lady" statue, a wide-hipped woman who reclines serenely inside an oval receptacle, was discovered here. She now rests in the main hall at the [Archaeological Museum](#) in Vallarta, Malta's idyllic capital with its medieval port and Renaissance streets.

Getting there: More information about arranging a visit to the Hypogeum can be found at [Heritage Malta's website](#). (click on Sites: Hal Saflieni). To book tickets, [click here](#). No children under six will be permitted into the site.

Photo: Heiko Gorski via UNESCO World Heritage