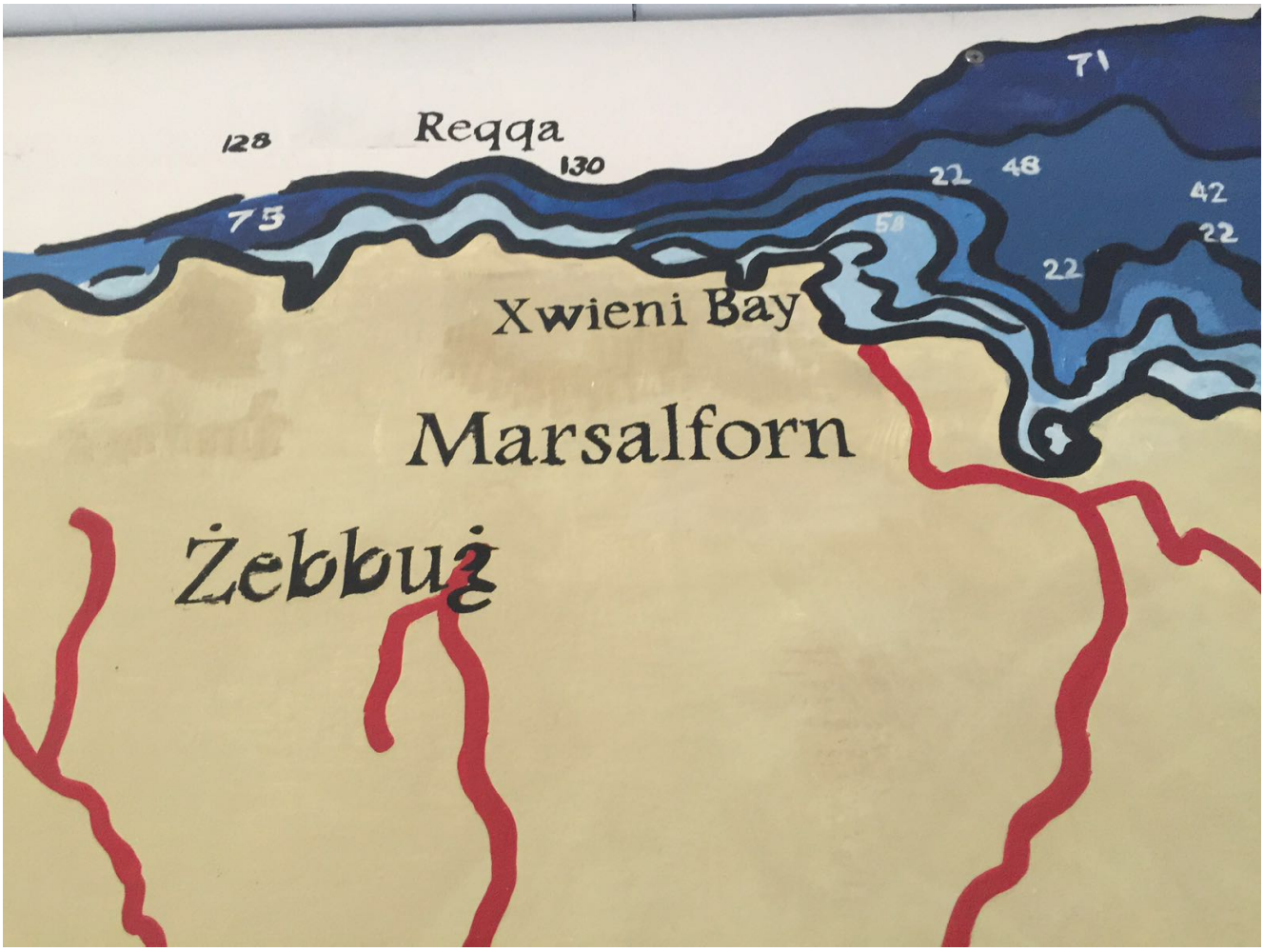
Welcome to Malta, holy land of diving



At night it is the color of ivory. Road signs have more Arabic in them than I could have imagined. The harbors are called Marsa and the roads are called Triq. I had heard lots about Malta in our circle; I cannot count on the fingers of one hand how many dive professionals from the UK have never set foot here, pardon me, never set fin here. Now that I'm here, I try to make sense of it all. The sky and the sea are shamelessly clear, and the glare of the light is that of deserts. The bays are filled with tuna traps, and breeding farms.



If Sicily seems woven in a pattern of gold and shade, Malta seems entirely carved out of its pale rock: a mild sandstone, rich in limestone. From above, the plots of land are all very small, cut out by dry stone walls marking the baselines. Roads are immaculate, cars are new, the island is terribly urbanized. Yet something tells me that, no, we're not in Europe. And it's not only a matter of language. Architectural influences, in order of stratification, go from Neolithic to Moorish, to Norman, Suevian, Spanish, Georgian... no, it's not a question of architecture. It's a question of light, of desert colors scheming against white, just like the sand deposits in the cracks of the whitewashed facades. It's a matter of soul. I didn't know what to expect from Malta, if some kind of Gibraltar or a more ancient, more historical and austere Lanzarote, but now that I'm here I realize that there's only one place like it. That place is Israel. Seminal history and modernity, Europe and the Middle East, a mix of cultures, time flowing in parallel layers, like the double clocks on the facades of the churches in Malta that are said to cheat the devil. Even though, according to a Maltese adage, the only one who ever succeeded in cheating the devil was a woman.



It’s time to meet the guys from the dive centers. Despite my GPS updated to the time of the crusades, looking for them is unreal; it means taking the wrong turn and ending up in the midst of medieval monuments, parking under towers made of the usual sandstone, and hiking down tiny streets that take to a cove, or a bay of emerald and turquoise; artificial pools that seem to have been dug out with a pickaxe.



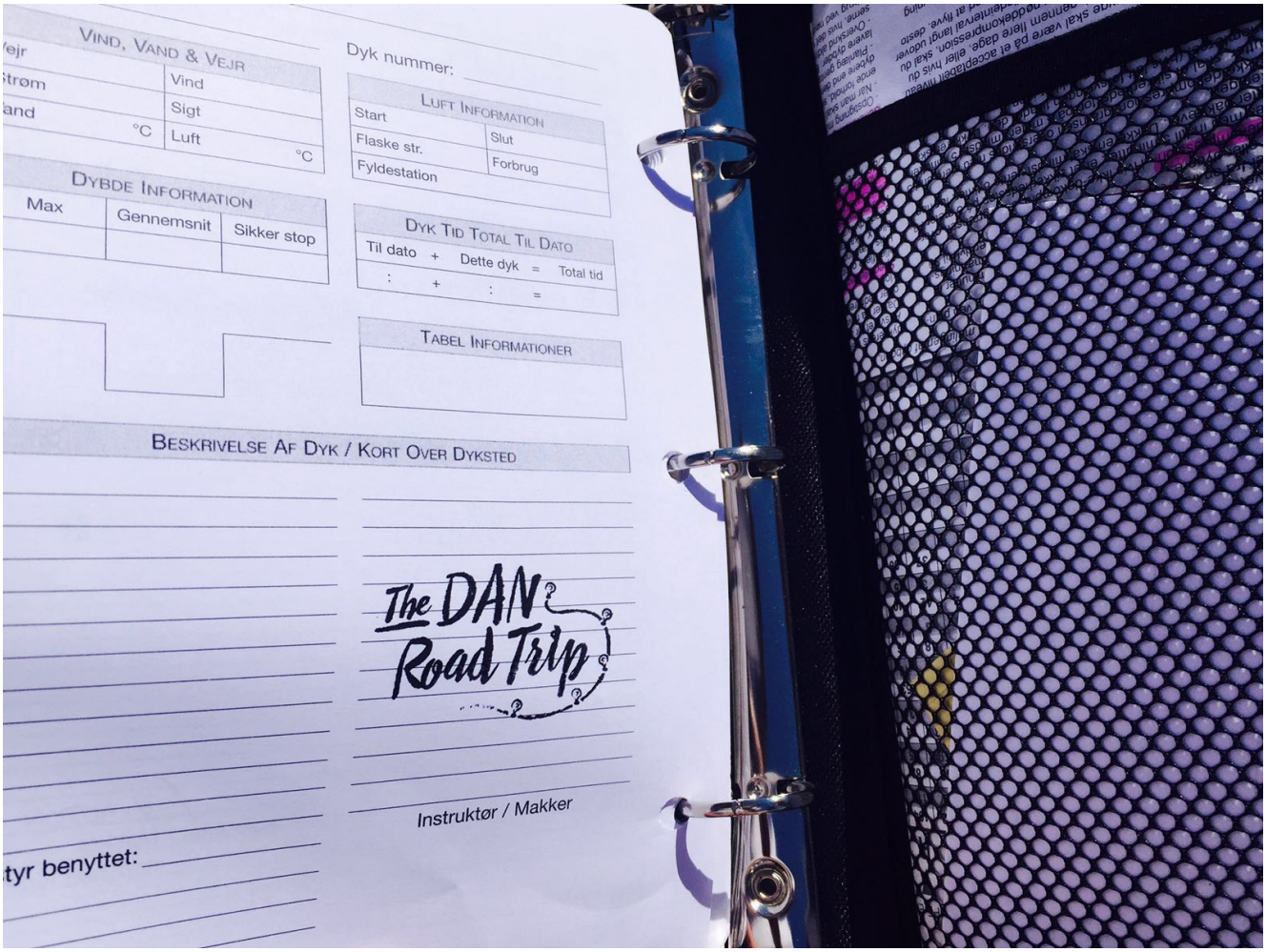
We get lost near Mellieha, among red towers (Ahmar in Arabic) and rare olive trees, while trying to reach an extraordinary beach. St. Paul's Bay, on the other hand, where Paul the Evangelist is said to have landed, is a little gem with the usual tower watching over it. Overlooking the stretch of water, there are a German dive center, a British, and a Spanish one, just like in old jokes. In the light of early afternoon, a few sailors, with their paint brushes, are patiently polishing up two Luzzi aground; these are the typical Maltese fishing boats with a pair of eyes painted on the bow.



Max Valli of PDSA, the association of dive centers in Malta, has done an amazing job; everyone has read his e-mail, and wherever he goes, he earns people's respect. Everyone's ready. Yet, there is something here that goes beyond the mere pleasure of meeting one another. Instructors, managers, and counter girls are more than enthusiastic. They are thrilled. Cristian is the only handsome one of the two, so I have no trouble understanding that the commotion is not about how we look, but what we represent. They're all so goddamn happy to welcome us, even when all they need is some clarification on insurance issues. That we are Santa Clauses in disguise, bearing all those brochures, display stands, strobe lights, and flags to give away, everybody finds out only at the end of our visit. They ask us for flags, a lot of flags. Everyone wants one.



All of a sudden, I have a strong wave of nostalgia: I know this breed of ‘salty dogs’ – only the English language can do them justice – and this attitude, this sense of belonging, of community. These are the people I call ‘mate’. Their wish-list goes beyond profit, to the heart of the matter: the environment, and safety. I was part of communities exactly like this one at the Cayman Islands and in the old days in Sharm el Sheikh, described in “Shamandura Generation”. Here too, there’s an elite of professionals, all of them knowledgeable in all possible areas of application of diving and diving safety. No one is alone against the world, and everyone is part of a community that wants to have rules, and standards, that wishes to promote a common destination as a global example of safety.



I see myself twenty years ago, full of enthusiasm, with the sense of belonging of a samurai to the tribes, the places. Here too we talk of salaries and quality of life, the sea, the sun, and mild winters versus cold, grayness and frightful bills. Those who want to become rich in money try different paths. For a diver wealth is an encounter at the bottom of the sea, a day on the boat, the light and the wind beating fragments of the sea that, just outside the succession of hotels, do nothing but call to mind the ancient soul of a faraway place.



We invite everyone to the weekend’s events: diving for scientific research in Gozo and Cirkewwa, and the Diving Safety Workshop that DAN will host at the Malta National Aquarium. I know it will be an amazing party, truly a special event. And everyone is so thrilled. But I have to go. The plane goes up on a day by no means sunny. From above, I see the coast with its rugged outline, on the side of the island that is less populated. I think of my friends in Sharm, almost completely unemployed. For the first time during my stay, the boundary between light and shadow is not carved with a knife. I think that it’s strange how much an island in the middle of the sea can resemble the holy land.


DAN
DV