

Al Bizzilla

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Discover our top ten winter activities.

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Natalis Notablis: Take a stroll through Malta's Christmas street market.

88Malta's festive drink, *Imbuljuta tal-Qastan*.45 YEARS 

AIR MALTA CONNECTING PEOPLE

MALTA IS NICKNAMED THE 'ISLAND OF CATS' – AND IF YOU HOP TO ST JULIAN'S, IT'S A PURR-FECT EXAMPLE TO SEE WHY.

WORDS ALICE BARNES-BROWN

THE HIDDEN CAT SANCTUARY



MALTA'S VIBRANT VILLAGE OF ST JULIAN'S, SEEMS AN UNLIKELY PLACE TO FIND A HIDDEN ANIMAL SANCTUARY. YET, TUCKED AWAY IN ITS NARROW ALLEYWAYS IS A CAT LOVER'S PARADISE.

Follow the sounds of meowing and purring to a street corner between Triq Spinola and Vjal Portomaso, and you'll find Malta's very own 'Cat Village', a colourful makeshift home for stray and abandoned cats. Set up by Roza Zammit Salinos, a force of nature in the local community, up to 30 cats call this little place home.

And what a place it is. With lots of outdoor space, palm fronds lazily hanging over the concrete, and bougainvillea bushes providing plenty of shade (not to

mention the sea view), it's a prime piece of real estate for these cats.

The story of Cat Village began in the 1970s, when Malta's tourist industry was experiencing a boom. Roza was staying in St Julian's Hilton Hotel, and discovered a small colony of strays living around the corner. She had found her calling – a ragtag bunch of cats that needed her care. It was by no means an easy path, though. Roza was feeding and looking after the cats all by herself, which came

at a significant cost. The pet food and vet bills couldn't pay for themselves, after all.

But, as we say here in Malta, every cloud has a silver lining. Roza's hard work started to pay off. Cat lovers from all over the island came to St Julian's to see the village in action, offering donations of food, medicine, and assistance. And thanks to social media, international visitors began to trickle in, attracted by the promise of friendly, adorable cats and a taste of kind Maltese hospitality.

A tour coach has even been known to stop by the village, navigating the labyrinthine streets of St Julian's just to show off this quirky, feline-themed attraction.

Part of Cat Village's appeal is its wholesomeness. What was once a drab, grey slab of concrete has been transformed into a vibrant street corner, drowning in stuffed toys, plants, and more impromptu kennels than you can count. Local children come to play here, while adults take a break from their busy urban lives by enjoying a mindful moment with the cats.

As for Roza, she still goes to Cat Village every day, to feed her cats and make sure they are all well. If you see her there on her morning or evening visit, be sure to talk to her – she's always chatting to people who come to see the cats. From ginger toms, to tabby kittens, to lucky black cats, felines of all shapes and sizes will find a good meal and a warm bed at Cat Village. Should you wish to contribute to Roza's work, there's a cash donation box, a place to leave cat food and toys, plus an information board that tells you how your spare change feeds, neuters, and even rehomes some of St. Julian's finest feline residents.

For all its good work, Cat Village is just one shining example of Malta's animal-loving spirit. In every town or village on Malta and Gozo, there will always be one generous soul who trudges out each morning and evening (rain or shine) to feed, water and pet the local strays.

With so many of its residents living in complete harmony with our feline friends, it's no wonder Malta is known as the 'Island of Cats'. *



HERE'S A CLOSER LOOK AT THE WOMAN HERSELF

WHAT INSPIRED YOU TO TAKE CARE OF STREET CATS?

My love for nature explodes when cats come into the picture. Cats not only enhance the beauty of a place, but also bring joy to the people who frequent it. I started helping strays 44 years ago when this mother cat brought her kittens to my doorstep in Valletta. Since then, I never looked back. I started building a cat house and feeding and neutering the cat population.

HOW HAVE MALTESE PEOPLE REACTED TO THE VILLAGE?

Maltese people appreciate the work being done at Cat Village and often provide tins of food. I love to see the astonished faces of people when they discover Cat Village, and hear the many stories about lost, loved and others that have passed on.

WHY DO YOU THINK CAT VILLAGE HAS BECOME A TOURIST ATTRACTION?

Over the years it has been filmed by Japanese, Portuguese and other film companies. Tourists flock to this place and I rejoice to see their expression, their faces and their love for our beloved felines. I call it a therapeutic place where people talk about their pets. Children draw pictures of cats and others relate stories of their past or present loved ones.

DO YOU TRY TO REHOME THE CATS?

I normally take kittens home to go through my behaviour academy, with the hope of finding them a home. *