

Guide Dog in Malta

By Zac

I was used to traveling on a plane between Exeter (where I was trained) and the Channel Island of Guernsey (where my new master lived) but I was not sure what he meant when he told me we were going to live abroad.

We had lived in a lovely little house with a grass lawn, great relief area and plenty of walks to parks and seaside for three years. My owners took me back to Teignmouth on Holiday where I could chat to newly trained dogs and give them a few tips but I was told off for this! My regular trips to see the girls at the Vets were great fun, lots of attention and treats, but one day I was given a couple of jabs with a needle! The shock soon wore off when I was asked to pose for a photo to be used in something called a 'Pet Passport'.

Seven months later I trotted up the steps of a plane for the short flight back to England; I was surprised to be loaded onto something called a 'Buggy' as we were steered through crowds of humans at Gatwick Airport and on to **another** plane. This one was bigger and I even had a space to myself between my 'foster parents'. The nice young ladies welcomed me and made a fuss of me throughout the flight; I slept most of the way and was ready to find a patch of grass when the jet landed. First I had to be checked out by a nice man to see if it was me on the pet passport, then we collected our bags and were heading for a car when I managed to make my needs known. What a relief after 3 hours sitting still!



1 GB Airways aircraft in BA colours in Malta.

After a one-hour trip by road we were put on a ship. I had been on one before but that didn't have a lift! I love going up and down in lifts. Soon we got into another car and eventually reached a place called 'an apartment'. This was like our home but a lot warmer.



2 First walk in Gozo with Comino in background.

During the next few days I met a lot of people like my owner. They could not see properly but they had to have help from a relative or friend in order to make their way about the place. I soon learned the reason for our visit. I was to be a sort of 'Guinea Pig' (funny – thought I was a Black Lab Cross!). I was to show visually impaired people just how better they could cope if they had one and I was also to go to Cafes, Hotels, Shops and Buses to demonstrate how a Guide Dog should behave.

Gosh! I resolved to be on my very best behaviour at all times and try to 'merge into the background' as I had been taught. This I managed very well. (All right, so my nose just happened to sniff out the occasional 'tit-bit' on the floor!).

The only thing I did not like was called ‘shopping’ where I had to guide my owner along narrow aisles which contained nasty wheeled trolleys and between the most amazing and succulent smells.



I was always rewarded after one of these trips so that made it better. I had been taught definitely NOT to accept any food from strangers and I knew that I had to keep within my working weight.

Our tour around the place we lived (called Go-zo or ‘Awdesh’) was really great fun, meeting other people and their pets. Unfortunately we could not find a park for me to have a run in but a big beach with red sand was the next best thing. My job is to use my eyes to spot hazards that my owner cannot see and to warn him. That means my eyes are 20-20 and I enjoyed going to many different places. The views across the country and sea were terrific, I am sorry I cannot show my owner what he is missing.



One day we went to see the Gozo Crafts Village and I watched men make wonderful glass objects after blowing ever so hard into a long pipe. Next we saw someone bend and shape metal into all kinds of useful and pretty objects. Then it was off to see a lady ‘plonk’ a piece of clay onto a flat wheel, set it spinning and make me a new drinking bowl. Next was a room full of smells called ‘beeswax’ where I nearly mistook a wax apple for a real one; finally I peered up at a man who was creating the most amazing miniature shapes out of pure silver. We had lots of time to

wander around and everyone accepted me. I wonder why there were no other visitors.

I stopped a number of times on this tour to have my photo taken. We were welcomed in most places but a couple of hotels and restaurants said “no”. I was very sorry for my master because it meant he could not go in, or stay there overnight, either.

At Ta’Pinu Sanctuary we both prayed for those who are disabled and visually impaired. I do hope there are more Guide Dogs here soon.

Now I have been told that this may be our home for ever. That suits me fine. I am looking forward to helping my master raise funds in Gozo and Malta so that a Guide Dog centre can be set up here. Judging by the tanks I get for helping him retain his independence that will be time well spent.

We travelled around the islands showing how a Guide Dog should help; I even appeared on something called Television. I loved to go to a big church called a cathedral because I got lots of fuss. We had to move



home because my mistress was getting ill. The new place was great, had a garden and a special place for me to poo! My master was crying one day when we came back from a place with lots of beds. I did not see my mistress again.

Soon there was a lot of fuss and we were on a plane again. This time there was a trip on one of those cars on rails, followed by a boat and another noisy thing on rails. A new home was great, with lots of lovely grass and wonderful sand for me to roll on.



I tried to find my mistress here but never saw her again, my master had a picture of her and water fell from his eyes when he looked at it... I met plenty of nice people and had a lovely time but never forgot to guide my master carefully around. We went back to places I recognized for 'holidays', I remembered some of the smells in these places.

One day a man came and took away my harness. This was a relief as I could now go where I wanted on a lead – or so I thought. One day we went on a boat to another place where dogs are trained, I was put in a car after my owner gave me a big hug. I went to be looked after in my retirement in a lovely home on a place called Exmoor. After a couple of years I had a visitor who arrived in a car I did not recognise. A man got out and my tail nearly wagged itself off, it was Roy, my previous owner. He and his new wife had tea and a cuddle before driving back to the Isle of Wight. Don't suppose I will see them again.

Transcribed and edited from comments by Zac, a qualified Guide Dog, in conversation with his owner.

Bembridge, Isle of Wight. 2016

Footnote. Zac's owner and his Maltese friends managed to 'Make a Difference' for the Visually Impaired in Malta. The Malta Guide Dogs Foundation is a member of the EGDF and will soon be affiliated to the IGDF, thanks to help from colleagues in the UK, France, Italy, Croatia and Slovakia. An arrangement was entered into with the French Rearing centre for a young brood bitch and two pups per year to be puppy-walked in Malta and trained at the Helen Keller Centre in Messina, Sicily.