

Mellieħa Festa and The Imperial Band Club: an Expatriate's Perspective

Rob Parry

BA(Hons) (Hull), MA (Melit), PGCE, FHEA.



The allure of Malta, and for me in particular, Mellieħa, with its rich history, vibrant culture, and Mediterranean climate, has made it a popular destination for expatriates seeking new opportunities or a change of scenery. However, the transition to a new life in Malta often comes with significant trials, particularly the sense of disconnection from family, culture, and the familiar rhythms of normality. In Malta, ex-pats must navigate new systems for healthcare, banking, and daily living, which can be complicated and frustrating. Simple tasks, once taken for granted, may become time-consuming endeavours. The novelty of the new environment can quickly wear off, replaced by the stress of adaptation. The loss of familiar foods, brands, and services can also contribute to a sense of displacement. Moreover, the challenge of building new social networks from scratch can leave expatriates feeling lonely and disconnected from the sense of community they once enjoyed.

Leaving family behind was and is the hardest trial for me, and indeed for most ex-pats. The physical distance from loved ones can create a profound sense of longing. While technology has made communication easier, video calls and social media can only partially bridge the emotional gap. Important family events and milestones and even events as trivial as taking mum and the family out for a meal, or my boys to a football match, or a game of golf, have to be foregone, which can exacerbate feelings of guilt and detachment, and often isolation. The life of an ex-pat anywhere can be daunting, but in Malta where we find a confusing blend of the familiar and vastly different, it can be disconcerting. The language similarities we share are both a barrier and a comforter. It is possible to be understood in English, though not as universally as most would think, whilst at the same time, getting to grips with Maltese can be very difficult, regardless of education level and can result in ostracisation.

Culture and society are profoundly different, and getting used to this when you are from a secular country can also be a testing experience. Though the first thing I noticed about Malta's and particularly Mellieħa's culture and society, is the people's devotion to the Church and the associated religious celebrations. A profound

sense of faith exudes from the towns-folk and it can be oddly comforting for the secular expat. If we are not actually part of the family, it feels like we could be welcomed.

Luckily, having been a Mellieħa resident for almost 13 years, and having made it my spiritual home some 43 years ago, I am fortunate enough to be able to call on very close circle of friends during times of personal crisis or celebration. Without this lifeline many ex-pats can find emotional well-being a challenge. Life as an ex-pat is not easy, regardless of whether that was by personal choice or not.

Social scientists tell us that a sense of belonging is one of the biggest contributors to ex-pat settlement and happy integration and this is where the Imperial and the Mellieħa Festa more generally, has played an important and much appreciated part of my successful integration, that I will be forever grateful for. To my mind, as an ex-pat, one has to adapt, accept, assimilate and extend yourself beyond your comfort zone so that the acceptance into said community is achieved. In other words, if you become involved in the community you desire to be a part of, then you will belong in that community. This is never more true than in my perspective of the village festa and particularly, the Imperial Band Club. From the President, to the staff, from the colourful characters that occupy familiar seats on a Sunday post church, to the exciting and exhilarating celebrations during the Festa, the Club and the Village invite you in, to become one of their own. To be counted, to be recognised as one of their own. From the wonderful musicians and their dedication, to their incredible performances, the Imperial welcomes us as ex-pats. It invites us to come in, shake off the shackles of ex-pat difference and to fully integrate and enjoy. The Festa is a special time granted, but the Imperial opens its doors and it welcomes us throughout the year, leading to a feeling of acceptance, of belonging, a place of sanctuary for us to rest from our trials whilst in full knowledge that we are one, we are the Imperial.