

The Maltese Islands

Megaliths, medieval dungeons and Calypso's Cave – The Maltese islands are positively mythic. The narrow meandering streets of their towns and villages are crowded with Renaissance cathedrals and Baroque palaces. As the countryside is dotted with the oldest known human structures in the world, the Islands have rightly been described as an open-air museum.

The Maltese archipelago lies virtually at the centre of the Mediterranean, with Malta 93km south of Sicily and 288km north of Africa. The archipelago consists of three islands: Malta, Gozo and Comino with a total population of 400,000 inhabitants over an area of 316sq km and a coastline of 196.8km (not including 56.01 km for the island of Gozo). Malta is the largest island and the cultural, commercial and administrative centre. Gozo is the second largest island and is more rural, characterised by fishing, tourism, crafts and agriculture while Comino is largely uninhabited.

With superbly sunny weather, expansive beaches, a thriving nightlife and 7,000 years of intriguing history, there is a great deal to see and do. With a little help from any guidebook, captivating places of interest are immediately identified – the world famous Hypogeum selected as a place of World Heritage by UNESCO, prehistoric temples and grand palaces are but a few.

We are not short of churches either—baroque, neo-gothic and medieval chapels—we have them all: one for every day of the year! But pride of place must go to the stunning St. John's Co-Cathedral, where Caravaggio's masterpiece, The Beheading of St. John, has finally made its home.

Our architecture and archaeology were bequeathed to us by the various peoples who chose to make Malta their home over thousands of years. The long relationship between the Islanders and the various nationalities that occupied Malta over the centuries has created a marriage of styles and traditions, giving the Islands a fascinating eclectic culture.

True to the melting pot of cultural influences, the national languages are English and Maltese. The unit of currency is currently the Maltese Lira (Lm), with a central parity rate against the euro of 0.429300. As from 1st January 2008 the currency will be the Euro.

Malta is so compact that you could quite possibly find yourself walking the beaches in the morning, having lunch at a fishing village at midday, wandering through the temples in the afternoon, and clubbing the night away until the small hours. The entire island takes no more than 45 minutes to cross from north to south (by car of course!). Think of it as travel finger food: a hundred different flavours in less than 24 hours.

Our capital city Valletta boasts several glorious Auberges. Once the headquarters of the different ethnic groups into which the Knights of St. John were divided, today they have been beautifully restored and house various government offices and museums.

Everywhere you look, you will find something new. Perhaps that's why many choose to lose themselves in the grid-formation streets and simply stare at the wooden balconies, old palaces, tiny formal gardens and open-air restaurants which characterise the city. The more culturally inclined prefer to take a seat at the Manoel Theatre, commissioned by Grand Master Antonio Manuel de Vilhena 300 years ago, and gape at its magnificent ceilings, gilded in 22-carat gold.

Visit Antonio Sciortino's Les Gavroches at the Upper Barrakka Gardens where you can also admire the incredible view of our Three Cities and Grand Harbour, one of the largest of its kind in Europe.

Even older than Valletta is Mdina, the city in the central north area of the island. Fortified by bastions which no invader ever managed to breach, Mdina is the Silent City, where modernity and its accompanying hustle and bustle are somewhat kept at bay. The views from its ramparts are breathtaking.

We are fond of our food too. For days you can be sure you'll never have to eat the same thing twice: there's plenty of mouth watering Maltese fare together with continental and international cuisine from

regions as far flung as India, China and the Far East.

We grow olives to make velvety olive oil and the powerful sun also bakes our grapes - for international award-winning local wines – our figs, plums and our oranges and lemons. You can go wherever you like to find them, but you will most definitely never go hungry, whether for culture or food.

This coast is also a home away from home to the thousands of divers who choose Malta because of its excellent underwater visibility. You can let your mind rest and your eyes wander for as far as thirty six metres, safe in the knowledge that no matter what time of year you book, the temperature of the water will never dip below the 14°C mark.

You may be fooled into thinking that you can take it all in within a few hours, but may we suggest you take it a little slower. Let it soak in and spend some more time relaxing and discovering Malta's delightful secrets.

After all, that is what Malta's about.

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