

HOTELS *by* DESIGN

A guide to the most beautifully designed hotels in the world



HOUSE
GARDEN

ANCIENT AND MODERN

THE MALTESE ARE EXPERT IN FRAMING
A LUXURY EXPERIENCE WHETHER IT'S
WITHIN HISTORIC ARCHITECTURE OR
A MODERN SETTING

THIS PAGE View of Mdina and beyond from the bastion walls of the city. **OPPOSITE, FROM LEFT** The spiral staircase, a typical Maltese feature at Le Méridien St. Julians. Lobby of the Xara Palace Relais & Châteaux in Mdina. The Kempinski San Lawrenz spa, Gozo



OVER MILLENNIA THE MALTESE have refined the art of gracious living. Malta, Gozo and Comino have always had the raw ingredients of pleasure – a happy climate for vines and olives, abundant seafood, and a central Mediterranean position to trade the world's luxuries through – as the Phoenicians, Romans and Arabs found. But it was over the two-and-a-half centuries when the islands were home to the Knights of Malta, that a courtly paradise of Baroque palaces, formal gardens and refined entertainments was created. The Knights, though, were also 'hospitaliers', whose patients were served their food on silverware and tended by the knights themselves. Perhaps it is this history of mixing hospitality with luxury that has made the modern Maltese such consummate and sophisticated hosts.

Living on compact islands already packed with historic buildings, the Maltese and Gozitans have chosen to value-add their tourism infrastructure. So, rather than sprawling developments they have either recast ancient palazzos, farm manors and other historic buildings as ambience-steeped hotels and restaurants, or challenged contemporary architects to match the quality and

design of the past with new or re-envisioned materials and abstracted vernacular themes.

Whether lunching on the garden terrace of the Palazzo Parisio or silver-service dining in the Corinthia Palace Hotel, where the central courtyard has been glassed over to provide a soaring columned restaurant, the Maltese have become equally expert in framing a luxury experience within historic architecture or in modern settings.

Thus, the Relais & Châteaux Xara Palace in Mdina has mezzanine bedrooms and sitting rooms 'hung' inside the soaring height of the original seventeenth-century chambers and a roof top French restaurant that looks across the Silent City's ramparts towards the eastern coast, whilst the modern Radisson SAS Golden Sands Resort and Spa, is stepped and terraced up from a sand beach, and crowned by four suites. In Le Méridien, St Julian's designer Mark Pace has created a witty and urbane interior that flows through the Maltese merchant's house, now the hotel's Villa Brasserie, and onto a terrace overlooking the harbour.

The Maltese also do time travel. Thus the retro-jet-set can catch the 14-seater seaplane from the Grand Harbour to Gozo, or charter a boat to sail

there from one of the marinas that serve the Maltese islands' 200 miles of coastline. However one reaches Gozo the reward is immediate serenity, given expression in cheese and honey farms, narrow lanes and a 'slow' history where neolithic temples lounge next to peaceful fortified cities and stilled windmills. Capitalising on this tranquillity the most luxurious of Gozo's hotels, the Kempinski San Lawrenz Resort and the Hotel Ta'Cenc, have state-of-the-art spas and pilates and yoga sessions. For longer stays, and a more Gozitan experience, some traditional farm houses have been converted into luxurious serviced accommodation able to organise everything from chefs to dives to picnics on cliff tops and beaches.

On Malta and Gozo, luxury lies in the islanders' courtly sense of hospitality and a pride in the islands' opulent history. When Susan Zammit Tabona, owner of the Xara Palace Hotel says: 'I feel as if my clients are house guests, so I give them as much personal time as they want and as much privacy as they need!' She could be talking for all of the Maltese.

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