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Malta and Gozo have all the flavour and warmth of the Mediterranean but with a British accent. Belinda Cole reports



The Mediterranean Conference Centre in Valletta

For an island which covers just 122 square miles, Malta has an impressive array of event locations.

Its rich, if somewhat bloody, history has left a unique architectural and cultural legacy. From the tranquil walled city of Mdina and the UNESCO world heritage centre of Valletta, to the contemporary hotels of St Julian's Bay, organisers will find venues to suit every kind of event.

And as a former British colony, delegates will feel surprisingly at home.

Last September Malta Tourism Authority set up a Quality Assurance scheme for destination management companies (DMCs) to give organisers further confidence in the destination. Says Suzanne Dimech, MICE segment head MTA: "Malta offers good value compared with other European cities

Islands in the sun

and DMCs can open doors that would otherwise remain closed."

Elena Micallef-Borg, sales manager with DMC On Site Malta, agrees: "Not many people know Malta as an ideal MICE destination but people are surprised when they come here;

they don't expect it to be so diverse. I don't think there's anywhere else where you can privatise a beach, a museum, a town square."

Thanks to this flexibility, On Site has recently confirmed a 5,000 delegate cosmetic conference in

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MALTA

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August 2010 – the largest ever. The island will welcome another huge event in 2011, the International Council of Nurses annual conference with 4,000 delegates.

Despite these major wins, times remain tough and many venues are offering some excellent rates. The four-star Dolmen Resort Hotel in St Paul's Bay has a superb 1,200 capacity auditorium and offers single rooms from just €40 off-peak. It has just refurbished 200 rooms.

The eccentric and sprawling MonteKristo Estates also promises good value for money with its multiple event spaces, and corporate groups are welcomed to its 'spectacular' live dinner shows. The Romanesque development will open a dedicated conference centre next year.

The island's most popular venue for larger events is the Mediterranean Conference Centre in Valletta. A former hospital built by the famous Knights of St John, it's a favourite with Pharma companies and offers a dramatic vaulted hall seating 900 and a 1,400 capacity theatre.

Close by is the 439-room, five-star Grand Hotel Excelsior, which opened in 2007. Positioned in the Marsamxett Harbour, it has quality conference facilities for up to 1,000.

For something completely different check out Casa Rocca Piccola, the lived-in home of an aristocratic Maltese family. Even more opulent is Palazzo Parisio & Gardens in Naxxar, with dining for up to 200 guests.

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casestudy

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2,000 Thomas Cook sales managers enjoyed the island

That's entertainment

Thomas Cook asked us to organise a three-day programme for 2,000 sales managers with less than two months notice. The brief was to experience the island and have fun.

The event kicked off with an exhibition at the Malta Fairs and Convention Centre, which is a big free-standing structure.

The following day we held a cocktail party at Upper Barracca Gardens in Valletta, where we closed off half the roads in the city for 25 coaches to come through. We created a Maltese folk village scene where the guests disembarked and

a red carpet led the way.

The entertainment was spectacular with a laser show projected on the Fort St Angelo, jet bikes in the harbour with flares coming out synchronised to music and a barge with fireworks. We even got the Maltese guard out in full uniform to fire the cannons.

For the final gala dinner we transformed the MFCC with LED lighting and beautifully dressed tables. Island Caterers served a five-course meal while a famous Maltese violinist and concert singers performed.

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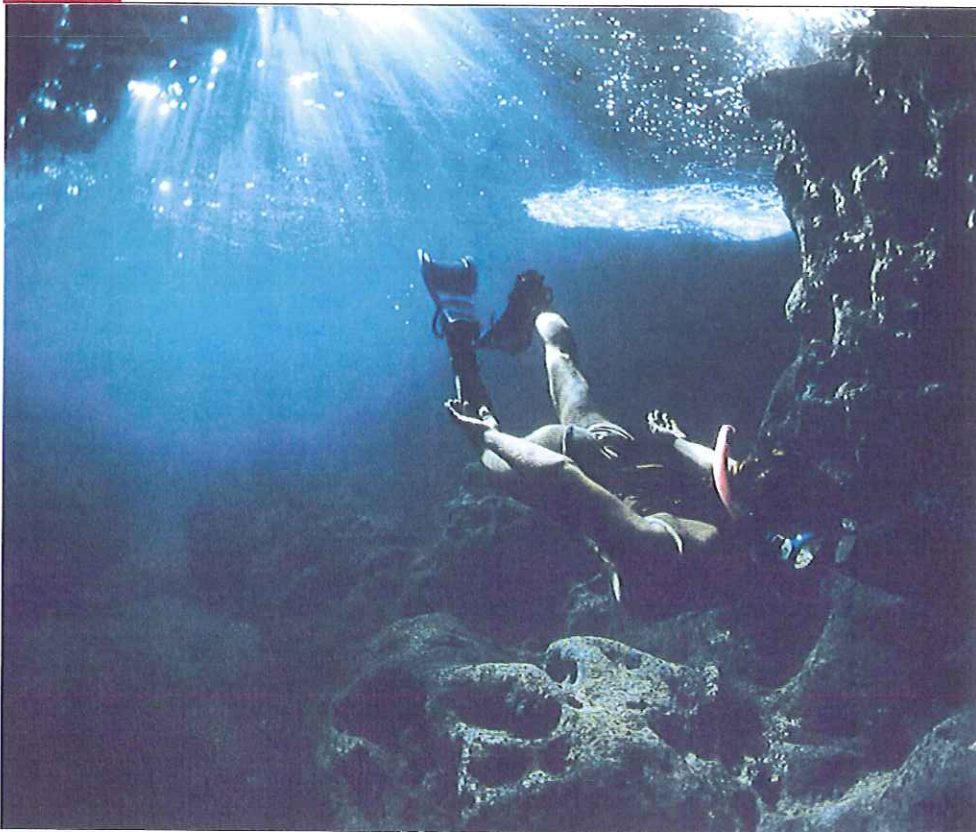
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Explore Gozo's underwater caves

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Gozo's hidden depths

Malta's neighbouring island of Gozo is often overlooked by corporate planners, but the MTA is keen to promote it as a useful destination for high level incentives and team-building.

"It's ideal for outdoor activities such as abseiling because of its cliffs and for diving because of its underwater caves," says the MTA's Suzanne Dimech. "Groups can take a Turkish gulet or a speedboat from the pier of their hotel in Malta and enjoy entertainment and a buffet on board as they sail across. The farm houses on Gozo are ideal for groups of less than 25," she adds.

Bella Vista Farmhouses offers 20 two to four-bedroom fully-equipped traditional houses all with pools. Low season, a two-bedroom house costs as little as €72 a night.

Delegates will love the Kempinski Hotel San Lawrenz's refurbished Ayurveda spa with its ancient Indian holistic treatments. The 122-room hotel also boasts an impressive medieval-style banqueting hall, seating 220 for dinner or 300 theatre-style.

Another attractive location for a conference or dinner is the 16th century palace at the Hotel Ta' Cenc, which is set in 160 acres of wilderness. When the hotel opened in 1971 it was the only five-star on Gozo. It's not been updated much since, but what it lacks in mod-cons it makes up for in charm. Footballers Gary Neville and David Beckham are among those who have stayed in its beehive-style rooms.

Meanwhile, the Grand Hotel in Magarr Harbour is just about to unveil a new 600-capacity conference hall and 60 additional bedrooms.

Don't forget to indulge in some delicious local cuisine; historic bakery Ta' Furnar can accommodate up to 120 at pavement side tables and specialities include suckling pig, rabbit, sheep's cheese, ravioli and Gozitan pizza.

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ASK the expert

ELENA MICALLEF-BORG,
ON SITE MALTA,
RECOMMENDS:

CONFERENCE FOR 500

The Hilton, the Westin and the Corinthia Palace Hotel and Spa in St Julian's Bay are all five-star and offer excellent facilities.

GALA DINNER FOR 10

A themed event at the Palazzo Parisio & Gardens, where guests are dressed in 17th century costume and arrive in horse-drawn carriages.

HIGH LEVEL TEAM-BUILDING FOR 10

A 'Sex in the City' Valletta treasure hunt, where characters help guests to discover the secret lives of the Knights of St John.