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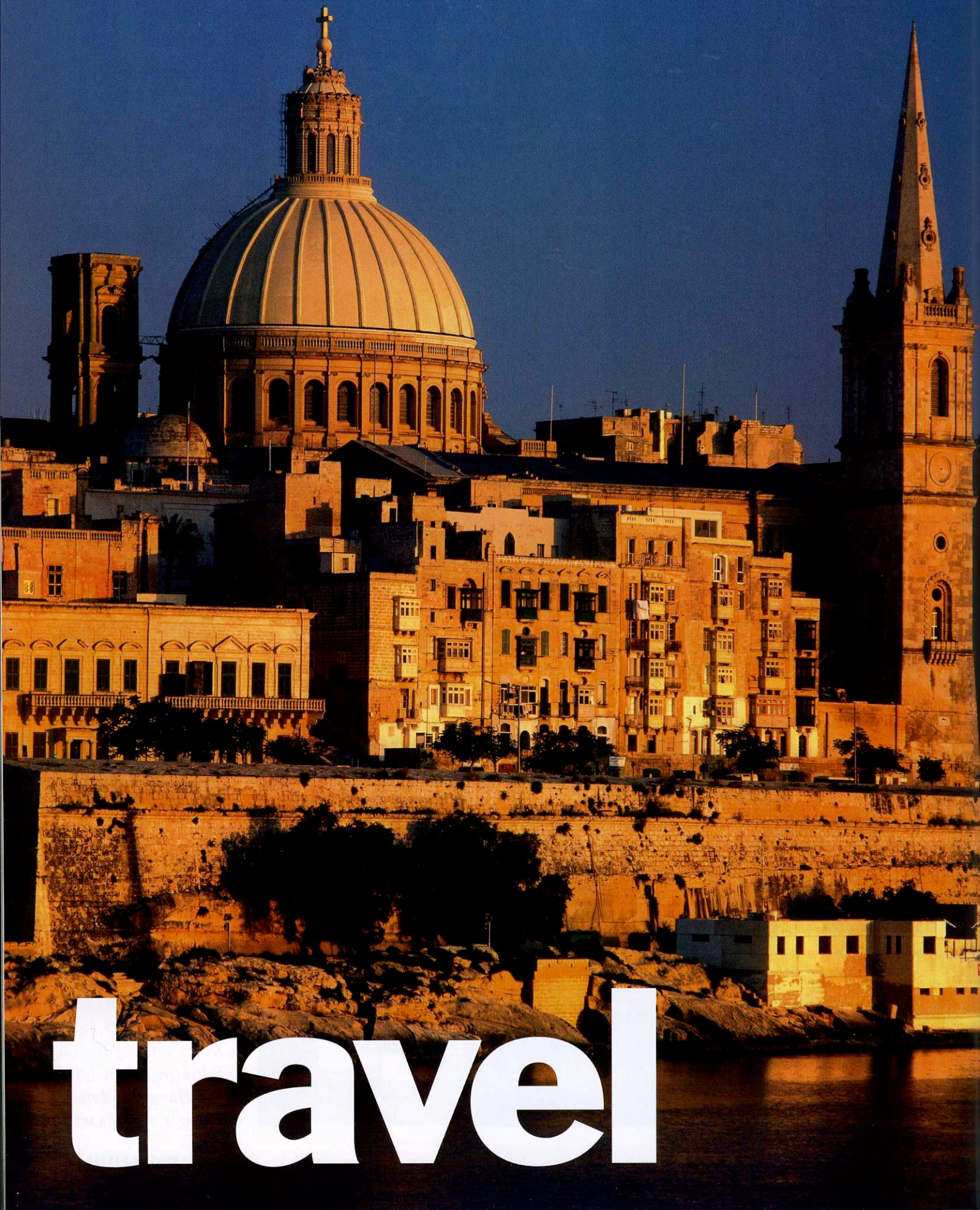
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travel | Malta



travel

CRUSADING SPIRIT

Tony Scotland finds history, art and chivalry in Malta

The Knights of St John unwittingly laid the foundations of one of the great European destinations when they built their showpiece headquarters on the rocky island of Malta. After defeating the Turks in the Great Siege of 1565, they set about securing their new home as the southernmost bastion of Christianity, and, with funds from a grateful Europe, created the ultimate in military and artistic magnificence.

Inspired by the hero of the siege, Grand Master Jean de la Vallette, they built a new city on a hilly spur between two great harbours, and packed it with forts, quays and barracks, churches, palaces, hospitals, libraries and auberges. This city was built in the flamboyant style of Sicilian baroque, and furnished lavishly with marble, silver and gold, priceless furniture, tapestries and paintings - including two masterpieces by Caravaggio, a Knight of the Order himself. The knights also created wonderful gardens - including the park at San Anton Palace, and the woods around Verdala Palace - as well as encouraging music, literature and theatre, and founding one of Europe's first universities.

The knights held Malta until Napoleon conquered the island in 1798, but their golden age was still so much in evidence a generation later that Disraeli described Valletta as 'a city of palaces, built by gentlemen for gentlemen'. And, despite the air raids of the Second World War, most of it is still there, restored by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site.

But the Knights of Malta, as they came to be known, bequeathed more than buildings. On the rock where Christianity was introduced by St Paul himself - when he was shipwrecked there on his way to face trial in Rome - they established a tradition of courtly refinement, gallantry, hospitality and charity that's now part of the national character.

Sun and sea are there if you want, but the real fascination of Malta lies in the relics of its extraordinary history. Some 5,000 years of human occupation have left vivid evidence of a people conquered and influenced by Phoenicians, Arabs, Romans, Normans, Sicilians, French and British, yet still defiantly, charmingly, Maltese.

The islands are friendly, unhurried and easy to explore. Start in Vittoriosa, one of the Three Cities that face Valletta

across the Grand Harbour. For the best views, hire a boat or walk round the point of Fort St Angelo. Above it lives the only remaining 'monk' knight on the island, scholar and connoisseur Frà John Critien, Knight Resident of the Order's last and sovereign foothold in Malta, and guardian of its fifteenth-century chapel and first Grand Master's palace.

Then plunge into Valletta for a feast of baroque, starting, perhaps, with a private palazzo, the Casa Rocca Piccola; catch the first or last of the daily tours and meet the owner, Nicholas de Piro d'Amico-Inguanez, Baron of Budach and Marquis de Piro. He'll show you through 12 charming rooms full of treasures, including a portable bureau that opens to become a chapel for the sick, an early Maltese clock that has to be wound three times a day, a collection of babies' caps, and some grisly surgical instruments used by the knights in their role as hospitalers.

Don't miss the Manoel Theatre (built 1731), or St John's Cathedral where the knights are buried in gorgeous splendour. To avoid the crowds, retreat to the nearby St Paul's Shipwreck Church: rich and dark, and full of exotic relics, including a fragment of St Paul's wrist bone, and part of the pillar on which he was beheaded. Or just wander, marvelling at the broad steps levelling the streets, and the enclosed balconies above; noticing the familiar red phone booths - dating from British rule (1800-1964); stopping for a *pastizzo* (a pasty of ricotta and egg) or an *imqaret* (dates in deep-fried pastry); and shopping for lace, silver or blown glass.

Other places to visit include the colourful fishing town of Marsaxlokk; the rural island of Gozo, which is reachable by seaplane, and worth a night away; the awesome Hypogeum, an underground shrine where Neolithic settlers buried their dead - entry is strictly limited though, so book in advance; and the medieval city of Mdina, perched on fortified walls. Visit at night when the tour parties have gone, or book into the Xara Palace Hotel and have the city to yourself. The Xara is so comfortable, quiet and beautiful, the service so sympathetic, and the restaurant so exceptional, that it alone is reason enough to visit Malta. Needless to say, the owner, Justin Zammit Tabona, is a Knight of Malta □

OPPOSITE The dome of the reconstructed Carmelite Church dominates the Valletta skyline. THIS PAGE CLOCKWISE FROM TOP The Hypogeum, an underground Neolithic shrine, and the Casa Rocca Piccola are fascinating and diverse places to visit. The woods around Verdala Palace were planted by Malta's knights in the seventeenth century. St Paul's Shipwreck Church has a richly painted ceiling. Gozo's beaches are a seaplane ride away



Ways & means

Tony Scotland travelled to Malta as a guest of **Malta Tourism Authority** (020-8877 6990; www.visitmalta.com), **Air Malta** (0906-1030012; www.airmalta.com) and the **Xara Palace Relais & Châteaux Hotel** (00-356-21 450560; www.xarapalace.com.mt). Air Malta operates two daily flights from both Heathrow and London Gatwick, as well as flights from Birmingham, Manchester and Glasgow. The Xara Palace Hotel has 17 rooms, costing from €125 per room per night.

