

LIFE TRAVEL

Music on the island of Malta

KATHY CARTER visits Malta, the Med's hippest destination

IT CAN be pretty hard to find guaranteed sunshine. English-speaking locals and a culturally-diverse destination; especially if you are looking to get there in under three hours, from Manchester.

But one country has it all – Malta, a one-stop shop for music-based holidays, spa breaks and relaxing family trips.

'Ah, Malta; the island loved by pensioners', I hear you cry. Well, this may be true, but Malta also has a lot to offer younger people. "It is safe and fun, and ideal for younger families and holiday-makers," the Malta Tourism Authority's Chief Executive, Josef Formosa Gauci, said. "It may have formerly had the image of being a destination for OAPs, but we are currently trying to project Malta as the ideal destination for younger people."

Ibiza isn't the only country that is currently attracting music-loving travellers. If music-based holidays float your boat, Malta could be your ideal destination – from Michael Bolton to Moby, and from soprano to salsa, Malta's tourism authority is focusing heavily on its musical offering. 2009 saw the biggest and best Malta Music Week (a special week of concerts and events in July), to date. It included the much-anticipated Isle of MTV Malta Special, a massive, free concert in Floriana's Il-Fosos Square featuring Lady Gaga and the Black Eyed Peas. But fortunately, you don't have to wait until the summer months to find great live music, friendly bars and popular nightclubs; Saint Julian's Paceville area especially is a year-round haven for

younger revellers.

Malta has clearly become more 'tourist concious' in recent years, and several top-of-the-range spa hotels have sprung up along the coast. One such hotel is Malta's Fortina Spa Hotel in the harbour town of Sliema, an imposing building on the water's edge that opens up to reveal a multitude of leisure facilities, restaurants and spa activities. One of a small number of five star hotels in Malta, the Fortina is renowned for its spa facilities; the in-house Spa Sante offers everything from dental treatments to exotic massage treatments with their origins in far-eastern cultures.

The complex also specialises in 'lifestyle packages', such as weight loss programmes including life coaching and food intolerance testing.

But however enticing the inside of the spa may be, Malta begs to be explored; so if you visit, make sure you spend some time getting to know the island. The capital, Valetta, is a really beautiful mix of old buildings and pretty harbour sights; the cruise ships quietly mingle with their smaller cousins, the popular harbour cruisers.

If you have time to spare, pay a visit to St John's Cathedral in Valetta's Republic Street. The famous 16th century was built by the Knights of St John — Military Hospitaliers who were the forefathers of our own St John's Ambulance Service — and includes perfectly preserved and restored Baroque art and architecture. Painter Caravaggio's masterpiece 'The Beheading of Saint John the Baptist' resides here, widely regarded as one of

the finest paintings in the world. (Note that cathedral visitors will need to cover bare legs and shoulders, as a matter of respect, and remove any non-religious head wear).

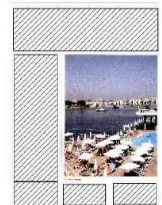
Continuing with the subject of beautiful buildings, everywhere you look in Malta, there are examples of the island's stone-masonry expertise; pale, yellowy limestone is the material of choice. The island's history can actually be traced through stone alone, from Neolithic cathedrals to castle bastions. Much of the island's defences and religious buildings were built by the island's revered Knights of St John.

If you are a water baby, Malta boasts an array of water sports such as snorkelling and para-gliding; so there's never a shortage of activities for those who enjoy life beneath the waves.

Interestingly, Malta has been voted the premier scuba-diving destination in Europe by 'Diver' magazine. (Also coming third globally, behind the more expensive and further-afield Egypt and the Maldives).

Once you have begun exploring Malta, you may feel in familiar territory – perhaps because the island is a popular film location, with epics including Troy and Gladiator filmed here. In fact, the slightly-creepy set from the 1980 live-action film Popeye, Robin Williams' debut movie, is regularly used as a venue for special music events.

So, whether you are travelling to Malta



for sun and sea, for its amazing historical importance, or for its short flight time of just under three hours, you cannot fail to fall in love with the island. It has been called 'The Med's best-kept secret' — and it isn't difficult to see why.

● Visit the [Malta](http://www.visitmalta.com) Tourism Authority's website, www.visitmalta.com, for details of forthcoming events, such as the [Malta](#) Carnival, from February 12 to February 16, 2010.

FACT FILE

Malta is directly served by several carriers from airports including Manchester and London. Kathy Carter travelled with EasyJet (www.easyjet.com / 0905 821 0905). Kathy stayed at the five star Fortina

Spa Resort in Sliema. Seven night, all-inclusive stay in five star room from £699; including return flights, all meals and drinks, two daily Thalasso pool treatments and one daily Spa Sante session.

www.fortinasparesort.com.

Languages: nearly all Maltese people speak English.

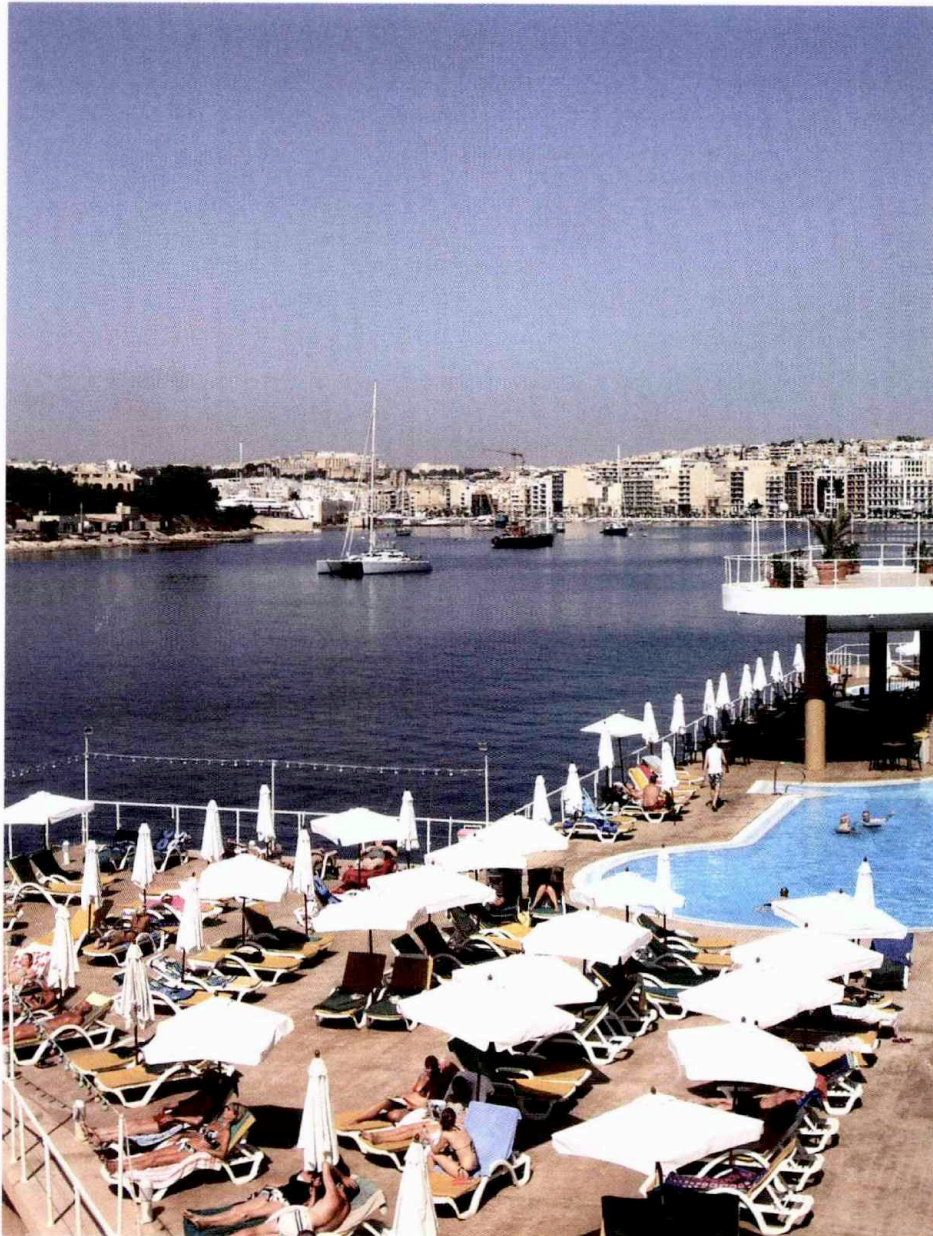
Currency: [Malta](#) uses the Euro.

Tipping: between 10 and 15 per cent is usual for main meals.



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Sliema Harbour