

Massive luxury for such a tiny country

There are a multitude of reasons to visit the small but perfectly formed Mediterranean haven of Malta, and this top-class hotel is one more, writes PAULA MURRAY

MADONNA has stayed there, as has former James Bond star Roger Moore and, more recently, British pop group Faithless. So with this kind of reputation, it's clear this hotel is a pretty good bet.

Certainly, the Hilton Malta, in the seaside town of St Julian's, is among the most luxurious in the tiny country, which boasts a population of 400,000.

With on-site access to a newly renovated health club, an indoor pool, spa services, hair salon and beautician, several outdoor pools, water sports activities and a selection of shops, restaurants, bars and even a casino, it's little wonder some visitors choose to spend their whole break inside the complex.

But it's the staff that make the real difference, if you ask me, as they go out of their way to ensure every guest feels special. For that reason the Hilton Malta has won the TripAdvisor Travellers' Choice award in the luxury category for the last three years – something the hotel is hugely proud of.

According to Julian Diacono, director of sales and marketing, the tougher economic climate may mean cuts in budgets but the level of service is one area the hotel will not touch. "Staff training is hugely important and that budget will remain intact," he says.

"We have a very low staff turnover and our people are loyal to us. They put in long hours when needed and take it back during the low season when things

calm down. Most of the feedback we get is to do with staff so we need to make sure we continue to invest in that area."

The Hilton Malta is also one of the few hotels in Europe with its own adjoining conference centre. The set-up, with its numerous meeting and exhibition rooms equipped with state-of-the-art office facilities, is

impressive. And next door to the Hilton is the country's only skyscraper – the 320ft high Portomaso Business Tower, where there is a club on the 22nd floor.

A shopping centre with designer boutiques is attached to the Hilton complex and the main party area, Paceville, is just a short walk from the hotel entrance.

Although the hotel sounds like a paradise for grown-ups, children are well catered for. For instance, there are paddling pools for the family's smallest, games rooms for the older ones and even cookery classes for the eight to 12-year-olds.

Considering that the main island is just 17 miles long and nine miles wide, nothing is too far from the resort. The capital Valletta, for instance, with several world heritage sites to see, is just 20 minutes away.

Then there is the ancient walled city of Mdina, the amazing sea caves of Blue Grotto to the south and the traditional fishing village of Marsaxlokk further down the coast.

The islands of Gozo and Comino in the north are also worth a trip.

Malta is the sixth most-densely

populated country in the world with almost 3,400 people per square mile – in Scotland the figure is less than 170 – and it shows. Along the shores almost every inch is developed, but inland the landscape is dotted with vineyards and smallholdings whose produce lands in the hotel kitchens.

THE Maltese people are friendly and fiercely proud of their nation, which gained independence from Britain in 1964. Because of its strategic position on the Mediterranean, south of Sicily, the country has drawn influences from neighbouring cultures and it shows in its fascinating architecture going back centuries. But it is surprising so much

of the past is still visible. Dubbed as the "unsinkable aircraft carrier" by Winston Churchill, Malta became the most heavily bombed region on earth during the Second World War.

The island was targeted by the Italians and Germans but managed to keep the enemy at bay with the help of the British – but at a cost. In less than two months the Axis forces dropped more explosives on the island than London saw during the year-long Blitz.

More than 30,000 buildings were destroyed and 1,500 people killed. For their bravery and war efforts the nation was awarded the George Cross – an achievement which features in the country's red and white flag even today.

Last year Malta adopted the euro, but

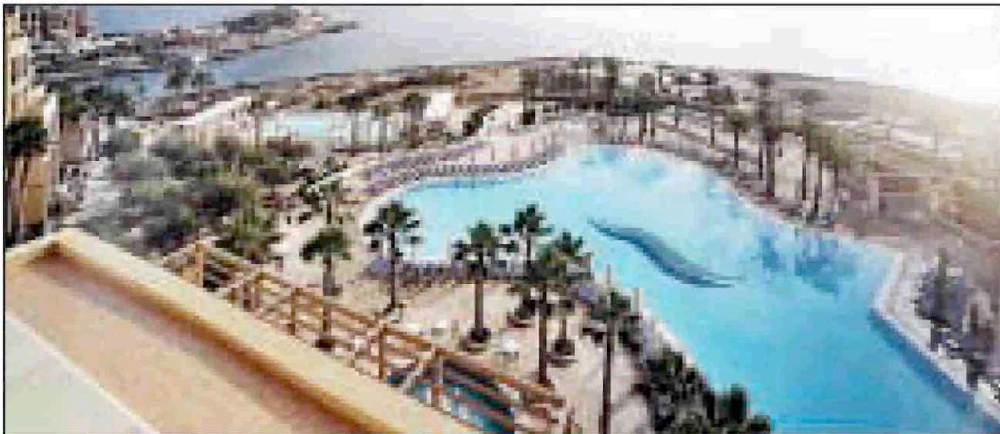


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even in the current economic climate the pound still goes a reasonably long way. And with direct flights from Scotland and a pleasant all-year climate, there really isn't an excuse not to give it a go.

GETTING THERE: *Direct flights are available from Glasgow. Prices at the Hilton Malta start from 175 euros per room per night. For more information, visit www.hilton.co.uk/malta or call +356 (0) 2138 3383.*



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complex has everything
you need for a holiday**

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