

MALTA AT THE HEART OF THE MEDITERRANEAN

DARRELL HIRST FLIES OFF TO THIS LITTLE NUGGET OF AN ISLAND TO DISCOVER IF IT IS THE MEDITERRANEAN'S BEST KEPT SECRET.



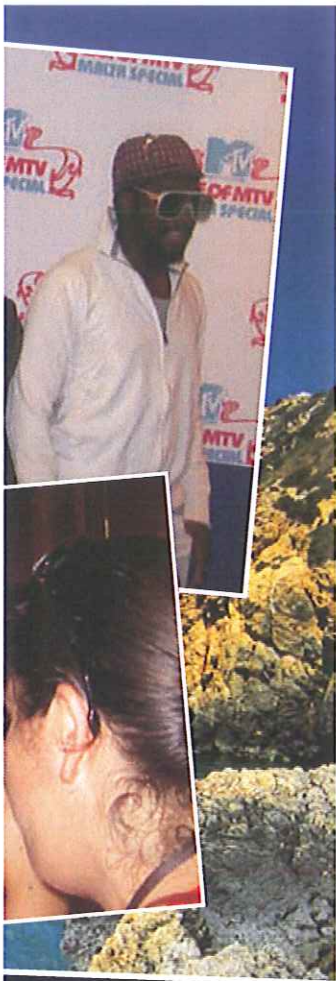
The three islands of Malta (the largest), Gozo and Comino make up the Maltese archipelago. Covering in total an area of little more than 315 square kilometres, this small cluster of islands with just over 400,000 inhabitants, should hardly register on the world vacation or cultural map... but they do. With a 7000 years history, and a constant stream of occupation by everyone from the Phoenicians, the Carthaginians, Romans... right through to the British (each leaving its own calling card) this gem in the middle of the Med has something for everyone.

Not so long ago, Malta was always associated with the older, perhaps more conservative visitor. Ones intent on delving into the unique



history of the place and capturing it all on camera to be shown back at their Women's Institute meetings to an appreciative, though ageing audience. Now things have changed. Guided by the Malta Tourist Board, the country is now running the Malta Music Week and MTV Malta Special, where a younger, more exuberant crowd, has found its way to its shores. They have not done away with the history of the place, far from it, as there are many mind-boggling attractions that should be seen by all, but the partying crowd have also now found a new place to enjoy. That's one of the fantastic things about Malta – there seems to be something for everyone. The weather is mild no matter what time of year. According to our tour guide, Clive, they often just have one week

Photos: visitmalta.com - Jurgen Scicluna
Photos: Darrell Hirst



of rain... if they're lucky. The island is packed with world class hotels and restaurants (great steaks, chicken, fish dishes often with an exciting Maltese twist). The waters around the island are temperate and ideal for all manner of fun water sports. Diving the wrecks or visiting the world-heritage capital Valetta, you're sure to find something to fascinate your interest.

Valetta – Over-looking the harbour, the capital of the island has superb vistas and is adorned with beautiful baroque buildings. The demand for berthing expensive yachts and power boats is so great, the island is planning on building five more marinas to cope.

Sliema and St Julians – Near to the capital, these two towns are regarded as the main tourist areas with a vast array of accommodation, shopping and entertainment zones.

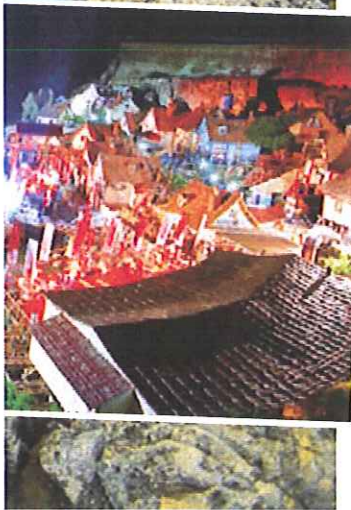
St Paul's and Bugibba – Another main tourist area north of the island; with a good mixture of bars, clubs, eateries and a place with its own attractions and a growing list of new fans.

A trip around the island will throw up a host of hidden treasures; small bays, rocky outcrops a few tiny sandy beaches, secluded villages and many historical artefacts. For those who don't want to hire a car, the centre of Valetta has a very substantial bus network to deliver you to your chosen destination. A ferry trip will take you to Gozo and its fantastic beaches, restaurants and laid back attitude. An outing to the Blue Lagoon at Comino is also recommended where you can swim in the crystal clear water.

Anchor Bay – A small bay with a tiny sandy beach and home to the Sweethaven Village

set for the 1979 Robin William's film, Popeye www.popeyemalta.com is regarded by many as one of the most beautiful open air venues in the Mediterranean. It also hosts many of the MTV dance parties and has become something of a clubbing sensation on the island. I grooved along happily to Roger Sanchez on my visit and the young excited crowd partied the night away. This was the start to many musical shows and events across the island culminating in the 3rd MTV sponsored Isle of MTV concert featuring amongst others, Lady GaGa and the Black Eyed Peas. Attracting crowds of around 50,000 and broadcast on MTV this is one event that shouldn't be missed. www.isleofmtv.com

The great thing about Malta and Gozo is that both islands want to look after you. From the friendliness of the natives, to the accommodation on offer, your comfort and desires come first. Over the past 5 years Malta has moved away from the tired hotels of the past and has embraced the chic and up market. Like the Five Star Fortina Spa



TRAVEL MALTA

Resort which offers guests, not only a spa in their own bedroom, but also an array of 200 treatments to pamper and beautify those who like a more relaxed and indulgent holiday. You can while away the sunny days lounging by the pool, eating in the 6 exquisite restaurants or feel the power of the healing therapy at their renowned Belle Époque Spa.



The island doesn't have a version of Manchester's Canal Street or London's Soho so the gay scene is spread around, although there are bars or clubs in sites to find the nearest venue near where you are staying but local word of mouth will find you the current 'in' places.

The island is a historians and archaeologist dream but it also offers opportunities for rock climbing, cycling, trekking, para-gliding and some of the best diving in the Med. The country has a football team that is linked, via sponsorship, to Sheffield United back in the UK. In fact, the Blades goalie Justin Haber comes from Malta.



The eating in most restaurants is splendid and reasonably priced, try these Local dishes:

Brajoli – Beef olives filled with a mash of spiced Maltese sausage and egg.

Timpana – Macaroni pie

Lampuki – Dorado fish

Stewed or fried rabbit is also a local delicacy as are the many fantastic soups and pasta dishes.

Since the beginning of this year the currency is the Euro

Flights to Malta from most major UK airports. Approx 3 hours
We travelled courtesy easyJet - flies from London Gatwick to Malta from £43.99 one way (£70.98 return) including tax. To book visit www.easyJet.com or call 0905 821 0905

With thanks to the five star Fortina Spa Resort in Sliema, standard 5* room from £699 including return flights from Manchester, Gatwick or Heathrow for a 7 night all inclusive stay. Cost of a spa bedroom from £998 including return flights Manchester, Gatwick or Heathrow for a 7 night all inclusive stay. For further information about the Fortina Spa Resort or to make a booking call UK: 0800 917 3001 or Malta: +356 2346 0000 or visit www.hotelfortina.com

Finally, to the people who made the trip exceptional; www.visitmalta.com where you can plan every part of your stay.

