

MALTA: THE MEDITERRANEAN'S BEST-KEPT SECRET

LOVERS OF HISTORY, ARCHITECTURE AND GASTRONOMY WILL FIND
A WEALTH OF TREASURES ON THE ISLANDS OF MALTA AND GOZO



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TRADITIONAL
CRAFTSMANSHIP
COMBINES WITH
MODERN DESIGN,
PUSHING THE
BOUNDARIES OF
STYLISH LIVING



The view across the
Grand Harbour from
Upper Barrakka

massive Ġgantija temples on Gozo. Dating from 3500BC they are far older than Stonehenge.

Walking through the giant portals of Ġgantija, or around the walls of Tarxien, Hagar Qim or any of the other temple complexes, it's as if the earliest myths and beliefs of the Mediterranean have been given the solidity of stone. And nowhere more so than in the underground chambers of the Hypogeum, a nexus of decorated underground burial chambers. To climb down into the passages and crypts, where the remains of 7,000 bodies were discovered, is to enter a Neolithic cathedral. One can only guess at what these early peoples' beliefs were, but the discovery of voluptuous 'Venus' figurines suggest that fertility and abundance were being sought or celebrated.

The temples, carvings and burial cisterns are the first but already confident steps on an architectural path that leads across the Maltese Islands via Roman remains, Christian catacombs, Baroque cathedrals and palaces, immense ramparts and bastions of the harbour defences and British forts; a history flowing through stone.

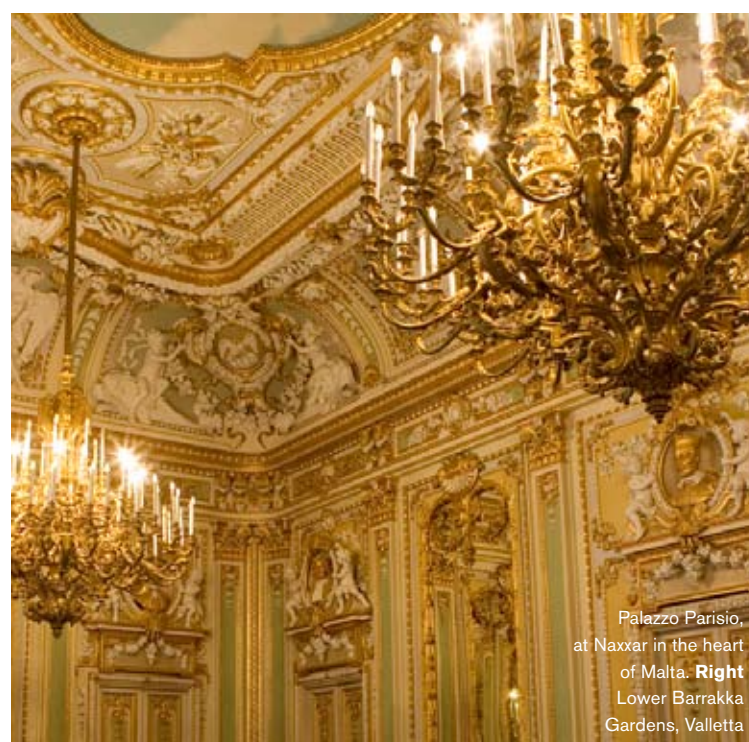
THE KNIGHTS OF MALTA

Unlike the outposts of Romans, Arabs and British, the Knights of St John had Malta as their only homeland for the 268 years they lived on the islands. They were, indeed, the Knights of Malta. The knights had migrated from Jerusalem to Acre, Cyprus, and to Rhodes before being given the islands by Charles V of Spain in exchange for a rent of one Maltese falcon. On arrival in 1530 the knights, with slaves and local workers, began improving defences and fortifications around the harbours allowing them in 1565 to resist a summer-long siege by a far greater Turkish force.

The opulently florid ceiling panel, 'The History of Malta', floating above the landing in the Palazzo Parisio, shows a montage of the islands' successive eras. Working at the end of the nineteenth century, Filippo Venuti painted a file of characters – a Roman senator and bow-pulling Arab among them – leading up to Charles V of Spain giving the islands to the Knights of St John. At the head of this visual time-line Britannia, with lion and trident, looks over her improved harbour fortifications and a flotilla of steam-powered battleships. If painted now, a century later, the panel would have to be extended both back and forward in time. Archaeological findings have brought new knowledge of the islands' earliest inhabitants and their stone temples and burial chambers. Whilst within the last 50 years the Maltese Islands have found independence and joined the European Community.

ARCHAEOLOGY

Stone has been claimed as the Maltese Islands' greatest natural resource. For more than seven millennia islanders have shaped coralline limestone and softer globigerina limestone into ambitious buildings. When first quarried globigerina is as easy to work as plaster before hardening over time, a quality that has ensured the survival of the world's oldest free-standing structure in the



Palazzo Parisio,
at Naxxar in the heart
of Malta. **Right**
Lower Barrakka
Gardens, Valletta

PHOTOGRAPHS BY TIMOTHY CLINCH





Interior of the St John's Co-cathedral, Valletta.
Below A typical backstreet in Victoria, Gozo



Courtyard at the Xara Palace Hotel, Mdina.
Below, from left
 The church at Għarb, Gozo. Twotwentytwo restaurant, Valletta

ARCHITECTURE; VERNACULAR AND CONTEMPORARY 'Architecture,' states Maltese architect Konrad Buhagiar, 'is about solving problems.' If so, then the Maltese Islands are an architect's dream. The big 'problem' is that the islands have a 7,000-year legacy of uniquely preserved buildings, leaving little space for new and iconic architecture. The solution has often been to combine state-of-the-art restoration skills with creative thinking to mix old with contemporary.

Thus the Stock Exchange has been constructed from steel and glass within a 19th-century chapel. The St James Cavalier Centre for Creativity is a reworking of an imposing Knights of St John edifice. In the Xara Palace hotel in Mdina the original soaringly high bedrooms have been made into suites with hanging mezzanines of 'reversible' construction, leaving the building's integrity intact. Grand Master Pinto's 250-year-old warehouses and the quays of the Valletta and Vittoriosa waterfronts have been developed into restaurants, bars and shops. Even the imposing, hulking fortifications of the bastion are being transformed; the Twotwentytwo restaurant pierces the walls in a sculptural arrangement of glass and metal planes.

This fascination with continuity finds outlet throughout the Maltese Islands. Vernacular architecture such as the tower and spindle-sailed windmills, village squares as in Għarb on Gozo, and details such as the balconies based on Arab architecture are restored and conserved. Other buildings are incorporated into

The knights, noble military hospitalliers were drawn from all over Europe. They were members of eight langues: Castille and Leon, Aragon, Italy, France, Provence, Auvergne, Germany and England, though the latter's presence was marginalised after suppression by Henry VIII. After the siege, the seafaring knights' trading and exports underwrote two centuries of peace and immense prosperity when opulent palaces, cathedrals and formal gardens were built and filled with the best of Renaissance art, including Caravaggio's only signed work (autographed in painted blood trickling from John the Baptist's severed head). Wealth underwrote the order's continued work as hospitalliers; surgery was performed with precision instruments whilst patients were served food on silver platters, and each got their own bed. But if Maltese chess sets featured a crownless queen because the Grand Master and his knights were nominally celibate, some of the nobles of the langues enjoyed courtesans and mistresses (indeed illegitimate children were known as 'spiteri,' now a common Maltese surname, in a contraction of hospitalliers), and fought duels in the narrows of Strait Street.

The end of the Knights' time on Malta came not from decadence but from outside events beyond their control. In 1798 the invading Napoleonic army forced the Knights of St John from Malta, leaving them officially stateless. Modern knights of Malta have their headquarters on the Aventine hill in Rome, which is where the current Grand Master, Englishman Matthew Festing, resides.



PHOTOGRAPHS BY: MTA/CLIVE VELLA, TIMOTHY CLINCH





“TRODOLORPE RILISIS
NULPUT VULPUTAT
NIAMET, SUMMODIAM,
QUAMET ALIQUAT
LUPTATIE EUISI



new projects. Whilst, in the spirit of preservation in harmony with contemporary design, two of the most modern buildings on the islands shelter the 5,000-year-old *Ħaġar Qim* and *Mnajdra* Temples.

GASTRONOMY

Not far from Malta's precipitous Dingli cliffs, lunches are served from a modest and homely building by the side of a remote road. The setting, like the menu, is typically Maltese. *Bigilla* – beans, olive oil and garlic macerated into paste – with fresh baked bread, followed by two courses of rabbit, first shredded onto spaghetti, and then in a rich stew. The wine is a local white, astringent and hinting of salt. The ingredients of this lunch are amongst the oldest and most basic of the rural kitchen. The food is delicious.

In the Maltese Islands dining is invariably about ingredients. Few are truly indigenous beyond the wild capers and fennel, the signature spices of the islands, and the firm-fleshed fish, sea-urchins and shellfish from the surrounding seas. The Phoenicians, the Romans and the Arabs introduced the vegetables, spices and meats which became the building blocks later used by the Knights of Malta to create variations on the cuisines of their own cultures. The British, perhaps, are responsible for the un-Mediterranean interest in heavy puddings.

Lunch in the tranquil gardens of the Palazzo Parisio or Valletta's Rubino, and dinner at the Corinthia Palace Hotel or overlooking Balluta Bay in St Julian's from the Villa Brassiere, all share something with a meal at the simple restaurant near Dingli. A respect for the two millennia of history that have created the Maltese kitchen, and a love of the best of ingredients whether



From left Inside Rubino restaurant. Valletta's recently restored waterfront at night



From left Traditional Maltese *ġbejniet* goat's cheese. Rubino restaurant, Valletta. Pastries at Café Cordina, Valletta. Capers are a Maltese speciality



PHOTOGRAPHS BY TIMOTHY CLINCH



it's a vanilla pod from Madagascar or *ġbejniet* sheep's cheese from Gozo. There is also a new pride in the islands' own wines, where vintages from producers Marsovin, Camilleri, Meridiana, Delicata and Montekristo have been awarded hard-earned DOK certification, guaranteeing that they are 100 per cent Maltese.

FESTIVALS AND FIREWORKS

That an island the size of the Isle of Wight has some 30 firework factories attests to the Maltese delight in setting summer night skies afire in honour of their patron saints. Look for the vibrant main-sail sized flags that fly above any town celebrating and join in with the *fešta*. You'll find streets swathed in richly embroidered banners and strung with lights, whilst the locals parade to the sound of marching bands and the explosions of petards underfoot. On Good Friday legions of Roman soldiery and hooded penitents carrying crosses accompany the massive tableaux from the crucifixion being carried through the streets, leading up to the triumphal processions on Easter Sunday.

The Feast of the Nativity of Our Lady Maria Bambina is celebrated on 8th September, as are victory in the Great Siege of 1565 and the successful resistance to the aerial bombing of World War II in 1942. On this day a regatta is held in the Grand Harbour, with exciting races between *barklori* rowing their traditional boats. The islanders' love of horse racing is indulged at some *festas*, especially in Rabat on Gozo, where trotting contests take place in the street.



The impressive basilica of Ta Pinu near the village of Għarb in Gozo. **Below** The Mnajdra temples, on the south coast of Malta, which have been roofed over this year to protect them against erosion

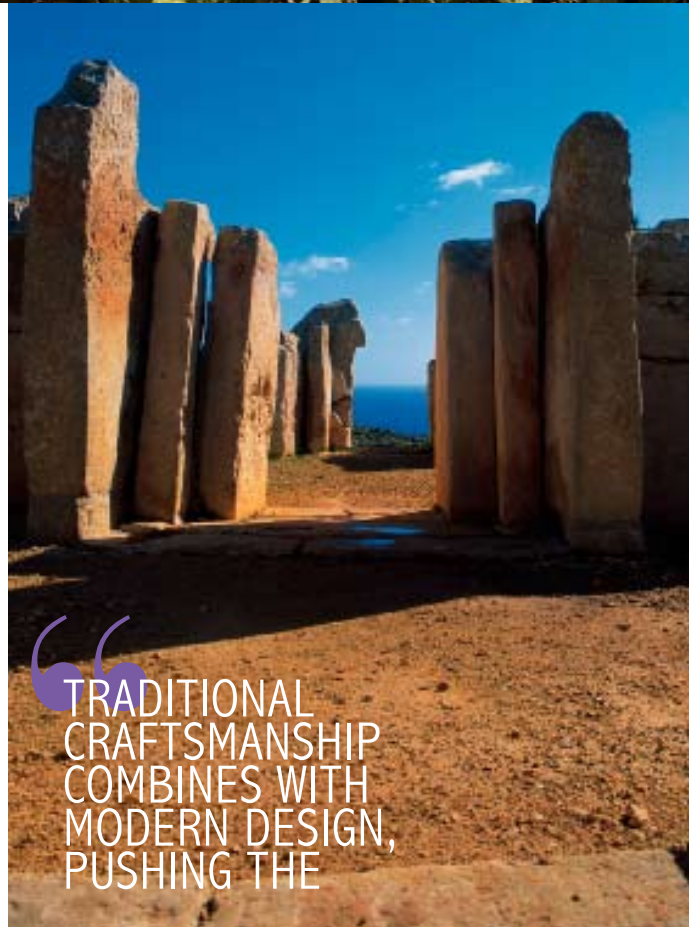
THE ARTS IN MALTA

Perhaps because of the theatricality of the islands' setting and the drama of its history, the Maltese adore opera and theatre. Manoel Theatre in Valletta, built in 1731, is one of the oldest still in use in Europe. There are annual theatre, music, opera and choral festivals, whilst in Joseph Calleja, Malta has a tenor of world renown.

Malta's traditional music of accordions, bagpipes, tambourines and guitars is harder to find, though projects including Andrew Alamango's Etnika and Kannella groups and bagpipe (*iz-zaqq*) player Ruben Zahra's Nafra quartet both collect and perform Maltese music. Whilst folk arts include the famed *bizzilla* – Maltese bobbin lace – as well as the distinctive glass work being blown in factories like Mdina Glass, which despite only being established for 40 years has become a Maltese icon. Arguably, too, there is art in the paintwork decorating the *luzzijiet*, *dghajjes* and *fregatini* moored in the harbours, and in the yellow, black and chrome of the classic 40-year-old buses on some island routes.

In the many films shot on Malta and Gozo it's the islands, even when disguised, who've been the stars. *Troy*, *Popeye*, *Gladiator* and *Midnight Express* were all filmed here, as was the *Malta Story*, recounting the islands' role in the Second World War.

Malta attracts foreign artists and writers. Billy Connolly retreats to Gozo, as did Nicholas Monsarrat, whilst Desmond Morris wrote much of *Manwatching* in the islands. Lord Byron was another visitor, as was painter and nonsense-poet Edward Lear who wrote that Gozo's landscape was 'pomskizillious and grophibberous, being as no words can describe its magnificence.'



TRADITIONAL CRAFTSMANSHIP COMBINES WITH MODERN DESIGN, PUSHING THE

PHOTOGRAPHS BY MTA/DANIEL CILIA, TIMOTHY CLINCH

ARCHITECTURE: MEDIEVAL, BAROQUE, BRITISH COLONIAL
Two centuries of peace under the Knights of Malta produced one of Europe's richest flowerings of Baroque architecture. This time of prosperity was, though, preceded by the warfare and sieges of the Medieval period and followed by the Napoleonic invasion, the establishment of the British naval base and the bombings of the Second World War. The historic architecture of the islands is a mix of palaces and fortifications.

On Malta and Gozo one can step from one century to the next, often within the same building. Start in the walled, hilltop town of Mdina, the 'Silent City', where remnants of Roger the Norman's Medieval city can be seen as the foundations of buildings that were rebuilt as or added to in Baroque style after the earthquake of 1693. The Palazzo Falson embodies features from all periods; miraculously its 700-year-old door lock still has its original keys.

Valletta, founded in 1566, became a Baroque masterpiece protected by curtain walls and bastions. The Grand Master's Palace, completed in 1581, became the Governor's Palace under the British and is today's Presidential Palace. Inside you can visit the state rooms, including the tapestry room with its wall-sized gobelins, and a fascinating armoury. Nearby St John's Co-Cathedral's interior, remodelled under Italian artist Mattia Preti, is the apogee of opulent magnificence. Preti also decorated the eight side chapels allotted to different Knights' langues, each of which brought their own regional symbolism – and rivalries – to this contest in Baroque ornamentation. Most typically Maltese is the Casa Rocca Piccola, a grand family house which draws on its 400-years of history to exhibit everything from sedan chairs and inlaid furniture to hospitaliers' surgical instruments and charming early twentieth-century paintings.

The Knights of Malta's original walls and forts were extended under the British to include gun emplacements such as Fort Rinella (still home to the world's largest cannon, the 100-ton Armstrong Gun), additions to Fort St Angelo, and rock-hewn air-raid shelters under Vittoriosa which in the thick of the bombings in WWII could protect 500 people.

Walk through Valletta in the later afternoon to the Upper Barracca Gardens, overlooking the Grand Harbour and the Three Cities. Standing with the ghosts of knights and naval officers, one can look out over the centuries of Malta's history built in stone.

For more information on visiting the Islands of Malta, call 020-8877 6990 or visit www.visitmalta.com/houseandgarden



Manoel Theatre, Valletta. **Below** Fishing boats at Marsaxlokk harbour

MALTESE TIMELINE

5000 BC Arrival of Neolithic farmers
4100 BC Early stone temples built; the world's oldest buildings still standing
3600 BC Ggantija, then Tarxien periods of temple complex and burial chamber construction
750 BC Phoenician-Carthaginians begin trading glass, papyrus and spices from islands' ports
210 BC Romans settle, building villas, temples and catacombs
60 AD Christianity arrives when, according to the scriptures, St Paul is shipwrecked on the island
870 Arrival of Arabs and their influence on language and cuisine
1091 Arrival of the Normans under Roger I
1194 Period of divided rule by noble and royal families from Mediterranean states
1530 The Maltese Islands given to the Knights of St John by Charles V of Spain
1565 Great Siege of Malta; unsuccessful

invasion attempts by the Turkish are catalyst for the fortification of the harbours and towns
1798 French Invasion under Napoleon and the expulsion of the Knights of Malta
1800 Period of Maltese insurrection against the French, and first British moves in becoming liberators and then administrators of Maltese Islands
1940 World War II: Malta's harbours and airfields essential to British and Axis forces in the North African Campaign and the Invasion of Italy. The islands are intensively bombed
1964 Independence for Malta, the ceremonial transfer effected by the Duke of Edinburgh
1974 Malta becomes a Republic
1979 British forces finally leave Malta
2004 The Maltese Islands' accession to the EU
2008 The Malta Lira is replaced by the Euro on 1 January



FURTHER INFORMATION

The Maltese Islands are only three hours away from the UK, with flights leaving from most UK airports throughout the year. Air Malta www.airmalta.com and British Airways www.ba.com offer regular flights as do Ryanair www.ryanair.com and Easyjet www.easyjet.com

GETTING THERE

Malta International Airport is situated in Gudja. Maximum travel distance from the airport to anywhere on Malta is 40 minutes.

FROM MALTA TO GOZO BY FERRY

A regular ferry service carries passengers and cars between Malta and Gozo. The ferry leaves from Cirkewwa approximately every half an hour. Journey time is 30 minutes.

www.gozochannel.com

BY SEAPLANE From Valletta Waterfront.

www.harbourair.com

SOME BASICS

Island Archipelago - Malta, Gozo and Comino

Area of 316 square kilometres

Official Languages are Maltese and English

Driving: same as the UK

TIME ZONE

Central European Time (CET)

CONTACT

For more information about the Maltese Islands, visit www.visitmalta.com/houseandgarden, or call the Malta Tourist Office on 02088776990.

AVERAGE TEMPERATURES

Climate temperature averages according to months in Celcius

	HIGH	LOW
WINTER	16 - 18C	10 - 12C
SPRING	18 - 25C	13 - 20C
SUMMER	25 - 33C	22 - 23C
AUTUMN	22 - 30C	12 - 19C