

Land of Honey

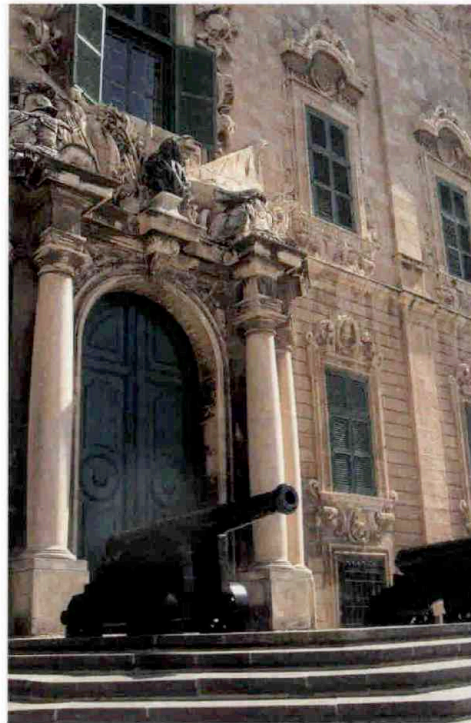
The Ancient Greeks named it “Melite” meaning honey or honey-sweet. Despite its sometimes turbulent history, Malta continues to inspire such eulogies from all who visit and deserves every one of them, as **Steve Beebee** discovered

IT HAS often been said that the best things in life are worth fighting for. On that basis, Malta must be considered a glittering prize to top all others given that people have been fighting over it for almost as long as there has been human history. This alluring, diminutive Mediterranean archipelago has been the coveted jewel of a procession of powers including the Sicilians, the Phoenicians, the Arabian Shi'a Fatimids dynasty, the Knights of St John and the British. In the Second World War, the holding of Malta - though barely more than a speck on the map - against the surrounding Axis powers was of the utmost strategic importance to the Allies, and despite concentrated bombing it held out, retaining not only its military significance, but also its character. For this reason, King George VI awarded the George Cross to Malta on a collective basis, a then unprecedented move.

In gaining its independence and joining the EU during more peaceful times, Malta has lost none of its distinct warmth. Despite a total land area of only 316 square kilometres, making it barely half the size of the Isle Of Man, Malta is a time capsule that seems to grow in depth and variety the more you choose to examine it. Indeed, the charismatic Clement Hassid who presides over the island's most prestigious hotel, the Hilton Malta, likens the tiny nation to “a computer memory stick - small but holding layer after layer of history.”

And what history it is - one that is influenced by Italian and Sicilian architecture while maintaining its own resolute identity, one that seems to embrace everything from ancient temples to traditional markets and luxurious, imaginative cuisine. In January this year the authorities governing Malta's transport system announced a six-week war on potholes, the scourge of its otherwise decent roads. By the time we visited in March it was clear that the war was over and the potholes had won. This slight difficulty in getting around (and Malta

obviously doesn't “do” high speed trains and subway systems) is countered by the fact that nothing you need to get to is likely to be more than a 30 minute drive away.



“You will find yourself reaching for your camera at every turn, buildings jostling for attention”

Malta enjoys blue skies and sunshine virtually all year round with temperatures a comfortable 17°C during March and rising to a skin peeling 40°C plus at the height of summer. Driving around you will note that Malta's residential areas almost bleed into one, though each is considered distinct. Cube-shaped houses cling in ranks to the hills and evocative, domed

