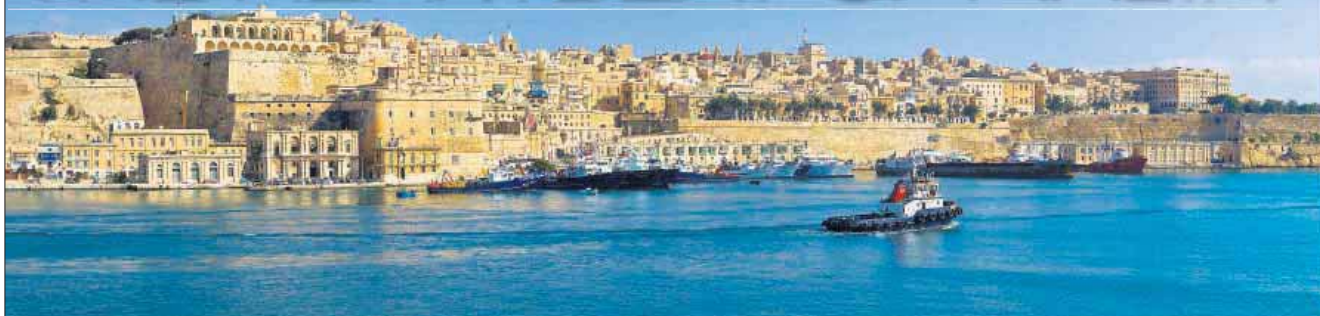


# THE HEARTBEAT OF MALTA



SMI-4239551/ONEYP/ALAMY

**Nick Redmayne** is swiftly conquered by the historical and cultural charm of Valletta, Europe's smallest capital

**M**ention **Malta**, at a dinner party and eyes glaze over. Associations with mass tourism are ingrained – either as a fly-and-bop-till-you-drop centre for clubbers or a winter haunt for retired couples. It's true that despite the island's steadfast defiance in the face of Ottoman armies and the Luftwaffe, a later invasion of mass-market tourism did indeed make an unopposed landfall elsewhere in **Malta**. However, Valletta's bastions have endured and the city remains unconquered, a surprise of Baroque delight characterised by history, architecture and fine art.

The Knights Hospitaller of the Order of St John arrived in Malta during 1565 after a peripatetic existence, being chased around the Mediterranean by the Turks. In a strategic move, Holy Roman Emperor Charles V gave the Hospitallers tenure of the Maltese archipelago in return for religious devotions and the yearly rent of one falcon – not a bad deal, even then.

Victory for the Knights during the Great Siege, holding out against a vastly superior Ottoman armada, produced funds to reinforce the islands as a "last castle of Christianity" and allowed Grandmaster Jean de la

Vallette's plans for a fortress city to

become reality.

It's November now and Valletta is enjoying "the summer of St Martin", twinkling morning light playing over the Triton Fountain. A benign m el e of bright yellow charabancs of a certain age, all polished and sporting such proud epithets as "Leyland", "Perkins" and, reassuringly, "Old But Strong", patrol the city gate. Inside, Valletta measures about 600 by 900 metres, the EU's smallest capital, enclosing a resident population of only 6,500.

My first daylight impressions are of ornate limestone fa ades fronting six or seven-storey buildings, enclosed balconies and occasional open walkways peopled by those in need of a smoke. At ground level, shopfront signs (Muscat, Pace, Luigi) reveal Arabic and Italian influences – Maltese is close to colloquial Arab dialect, and Sicily is just 90 minutes away by ferry.

Having spent the previous night in a bar, I decide that the new day requires alternate exploration of Valletta's socio-political spectrum. Nicholas de Piro, ninth Marquis de Piro and ninth Baron of Budach, should offer that balance. At the Marquis's home, Casa Rocca Piccola, now open to the public, more than 400 years of Maltese nobility is

recalled in paintings, photographs, jewellery and furniture, and de Piro

proves a knowledgeable guide. After heading below ground to Malta's first air-raid shelter, excavated with remarkable pre-war prescience by his father, I ask the Marquis about Valletta. "It's the heartbeat of our sovereignty. It was won by the knights, lost to the British... for a while. You know, this city is much more beautiful than we realise. Valletta in the next few years will be a real wonder."

It's quite a wonder now and once out on the streets again, within a few minutes I've crossed the austere threshold of St John's Cathedral. The gilded interior in contrast is

sumptuously ornate and home to works by Caravaggio – his spine-tingling masterpiece, *The Beheading of St John the Baptist*, and facing another evocative work, *St Jerome*.

Elsewhere, in the sunshine of Republic Square, Caff  Cordino's waitresses ferry cappuccino while an enthroned statue of Queen Victoria looks on impassively. At the rear of the square the 18th-century Bibliotheca's vaulted, book-lined reading room resembles a forgotten film set. Here, among the entire written history of the Knights of St John, is Charles V's Deed of

Donation detailing the Maltese falcon lease.

Crossing Strait Street, I note that



Source: Sunday Telegraph (Travel)  
Edition:  
Country: UK  
Date: Sunday 29, November 2009  
Page: 5  
Area: 871 sq. cm  
Circulation: ABC 588469 Weekly  
BRAD info: page rate £34,000.00, scc rate £80.00  
Phone: 020 7538 5000  
Keyword: Malta

> durrants

the crumbling naval bars and dance halls, once **Malta's** Red Light district, are deserted. A little farther though, at the 18th-century Manoel Theatre on Old Theatre Street – where else? – Josette Portelli is showing a group of Spanish **visitors** around the tiered Neapolitan-style auditorium – I tag along.

“Our season runs from September to May. We’ve had all kinds of performers, from Maltese tenor Joseph Calleja to percussionist Evelyn Glennie, to the National Theatre and the Reduced Shakespeare Company, and soprano Tatiana Lisnic arrives late this month. We’re the oldest theatre in Malta and the third oldest in Europe.” I’d like to chat longer but have an appointment with a cannon.

Just before noon, I am at the Upper Barrakka Gardens, which overlook the Saluting Battery where at 12 o’clock sharp each day, 2lb of black powder is discharged from a British cannon – enough to produce a shocked smile on most faces.

Earlier this year, among other projects, plans by Pompidou Centre architect Renzo Piano were approved to rebuild Valletta’s Opera House, and in 2018 the city will become European Capital of Culture. For now, Sir Walter Scott’s “city built by gentlemen for gentlemen” already offers a historical and cultural cocktail heady enough to entertain visits by most gentlemen, and ladies.



**Great guns: (clockwise from top) Valletta; detail from the old opera house; the cannons at Upper Barrakka Gardens; St John's Cathedral; and multi-storey buildings in St Paul's Street**

## ESSENTIALS

### GETTING THERE

easyJet ([www.easyjet.com](http://www.easyjet.com)) has return fares to **Malta** from £45.98.

### STAYING THERE

The Phoenicia **Hotel** (0808 238 1710; [www.phoeniciamalta.com](http://www.phoeniciamalta.com)); **b&b** in a double from £110. Further information from **Visit Malta** (00356 2291 5000; [www.visitmalta.com](http://www.visitmalta.com)).

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