

# Islands in the sun

Forget winter. Now is the perfect time to visit the islands of southern Europe with their pleasantly mild climates.

**Alison Willmott** looks at five that are ideal for off-season breaks

Summer may seem a distant dream just now, but you don't have to go far for a good dose of sunshine; many European resorts average six or more hours a day at this time of year. And although it may be too chilly for a beach holiday, most Mediterranean and Atlantic islands have other attractions to tempt visitors in winter or early spring. Sightseeing is easier amid cooler temperatures and thinner crowds, while spring brings unique delights, such as flowers in profusion. We've chosen destinations with lots more than pleasant weather to offer.

## » Madeira

Known as the "floating garden of the Atlantic", this subtropical island celebrates spring in style with a Flower Festival, this year on April 17 and 18. It begins with a Wall of Hope, built by children from thousands of flowers.

Then floats festooned with blooms parade the capital, Funchal, filling its streets with perfume. To see more native vegetation, visit Funchal's Botanical Garden, among the finest of many beautiful examples on the island.

Madeira also offers untamed nature in abundance: rugged mountains and ravines, primeval woodland and volcanic peaks. Explore its valleys by walking the *levadas* – irrigation channels whose waters ripple beside narrow pathways, providing easy tracks across steep, flower-strewn hillsides.

**Page & Moy** offers a seven-night trip, *Madeira – The Garden Island*, departing April 12, 2010 (for the Flower Festival). **From £832pp**, including flights and a tour of Funchal's old town and Botanical Garden. (0800 987 5112; [www.pageandmoy.com](http://www.pageandmoy.com))

## » Malta

Its strategic location in the middle of the Mediterranean has endowed Malta with as rich a past as neighbouring Sicily. A cruise on Valletta's Grand Harbour provides a fantastic view of the capital's baroque and other historic buildings that have earned it Unesco World Heritage Site status. The harbour also hosts the Freedom Day Regatta on March 31, which celebrates the withdrawal of British troops in 1979.

But Malta is so much more than an "open-air museum". Another cruise explores the

Blue Grotto, a dramatic series of underwater limestone caves and rock formations on the south coast, which are said to be at their best in early morning when the sun comes up. Find time, too, for the tranquil charms of Gozo, Malta's smaller, greener, more rural sister isle.

**Travelsphere** offers a seven-night trip to Malta, with monthly departures from March 25, 2010. **From £552pp**, including flights. (0800 112 3313; [www.travelsphere.co.uk](http://www.travelsphere.co.uk))

## » Cyprus

Reputed to be the hottest Mediterranean island, Cyprus is a classic winter sunspot, but the political situation there has previously meant having to choose between North and South. Now, since border controls have been relaxed, you can experience both on the one trip.

Voyages Jules Verne bases its all-island tour at two resorts on the north and south coasts – Kyrenia, with its picturesque harbour, and Paphos, legendary birthplace of Aphrodite, goddess of love. Included excursions cover highlights of Cypriot heritage, from the Gothic Bellapais Abbey and medieval castles of the north, to the walled city of Famagusta, to the spectacular Roman ruins at Salamis and Kourion.

There are also visits to the Troodos mountains and both parts of Nicosia, the divided capital.

**Voyages Jules Verne** offers an eight-night Cyprus *From North to South* tour, with departures from February 15,

2010. **From £947pp**, including flights. (0845 166 7003; [www.vjv.co.uk](http://www.vjv.co.uk))

## » Sicily

The largest island in the Mediterranean has had an eventful history, falling into the hands of the Greeks, Romans, Byzantines, Arabs, Normans, French, Spanish and Bourbons before voting for unification with Italy in 1861. Each left its mark on Sicily's architectural heritage: for example, Palermo and Monreale are known for their splendid Norman churches and cathedrals.

The remnants of ancient civilisations are also impressive, particularly the extensive archaeological park at Syracuse, the Valley of the Temples at Agrigento, where majestic ruins are backed by sea views, and the hilltop site of Selinunte. All bear evocative witness to the wealth and power of important Greek settlements.

**Andante Travels** offers a seven-night *Bare Bones Sicily* tour, with guide lecturer, departing March 20, 2010. **From £1,095pp**, including flights. (01722 713800; [www.andantetravels.co.uk](http://www.andantetravels.co.uk))

## » The Azores

Far out in the Atlantic, over 900 miles from Portugal, these nine volcanic islands are peppered with active and extinct craters, but their enchanting scenery ranges from awe-inspiring mountains and coastlines to verdant meadows.

A tour of just a few provides a varied itinerary. The largest, São Miguel, has the stunning



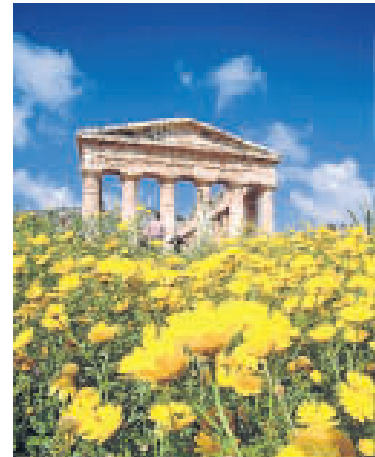
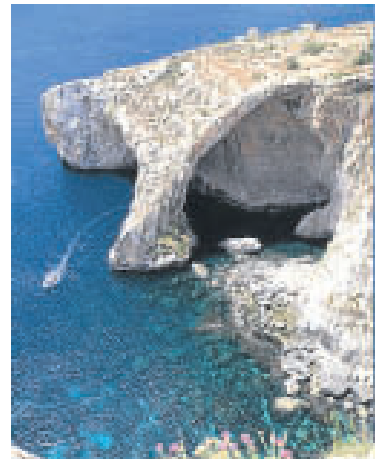
blue and green crater lakes of Sete Cidades, pineapple and tea plantations, and the idyllic village, hot springs and botanical gardens of Furnas, beautiful in early spring when azaleas are in bloom.

On Faial, a museum recalls the Azores' last volcanic eruption in 1957, which added over half a mile to the island's western tip; while Pico has a display about the whaling industry.

*Sunvil offers a seven-night Azores Three Island Tour of São Miguel, Faial and Pico, with weekly departures.*

*From £1,187pp, including flights. (020 8758 4722; [www.sunvil.co.uk](http://www.sunvil.co.uk))*

**Marble statue of Aphrodite in the Cyprus Museum, Nicosia**



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**Natural wonders:**  
from far left, dancers  
at Madeira's annual  
Flower Festival; the  
Blue Grotto, Malta;  
sunset at the port  
of Kyrenia, Cyprus;  
one of Sicily's  
impressively  
preserved Greek  
temples near  
Agrigento; the crater  
lakes of Sete Cidades  
on the Azorean island  
of São Miguel

