

Little *wonder*

The smallest member of the European Union, Malta is currently having a moment with savvy travellers as they discover its secret grottoes, ancient ruins and genuine hospitality.

Robert La Bua finds an overlooked island getaway that perfectly balances a history stretching back millennia with a very exciting future.

Next time you are in Europe, leave Sicily to The White Lotus crowd because Malta is the new rising star. The European Union's smallest member is a melting pot of Arabs, Italians, Normans, Aragonese and Britons who arrived on this island on ancient sailing ships.

And it is this cumulative amalgam of diverse cultures that has now formed one of Europe's most progressive societies. Malta recently hosted the LGBTQI+ EuroPride festival, it has become a haven for digital nomads with an early embrace of flexible working visas and is home to a new influx of artists and hoteliers.

But Malta has managed all this modernisation while still respecting its rich past. Malta finally achieved independence for the first time in 1964 when the British packed up and left after 150 years of rule and the island is also scattered with temples that predate the Great Pyramids of Egypt. These sites are easily accessible and far more intimate than Europe's other well-trodden archaeological sites, allowing visitors to be enveloped by the history and mystery at ancient sites such as Hagar Qim and Ggantija, a temple complex more than 5000 years old.

Malta's capital of Valletta consists of honey-coloured buildings that remain in pristine condition thanks to the city's designation as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Some of the ornately detailed buildings feature the unique *gallariji*, closed, ornate wooden balconies that are hallmarks of Maltese architecture. These protected spaces allow people on the inside to observe people on the street through spyholes in the walls and floors without themselves being seen, a feature of a city that has a long history of being under siege.



IMAGES, LEFT TO RIGHT: PARLOV - STOCK.ADOBE.COM, MALTA TOURISM

Visitors now come not to conquer but to indulge in the island's isolation, its culture and in authentic Maltese cuisine at traditional hotspots like Rubino, a modestly appointed restaurant in Old Bakery Street in Valletta that has been in operation for more than 100 years. Rubino caters to clientele favouring the freshest local fare prepared to exacting standards and served in an unpretentious dining room. Malta produces some excellent wine but exports hardly any of it; in addition to grapes typically used in wine production elsewhere in the world, the local gellewza and girgentina varieties native to the islands remain the country's oenological secret shared only with visitors in the know.

For a more rustic meal, grab a quick lunch at the fishing harbour of Marsaxlokk, where colourful *luzzu*, boats famed for the eyes painted at the bow, bring the day's catch right to the waterside restaurants. These nautical peepers represent the Eye of Horus, a symbol of protection that goes back even beyond the ancient Egyptians to the seafaring Phoenicians who once occupied much of the Mediterranean region.

To appreciate Valletta to the fullest, a guided walking tour is highly recommended. For example, although the Grand Master's Palace is currently undergoing restoration, a good guide can sneak you in for a peek. Denis Maslennikov is one of Malta's best guides. In addition to his encyclopaedic knowledge of the city, his work at Heritage Malta allows him the occasional special privilege. Also a talented photographer, Denis explains that he likes to help visitors "uncover the hidden gems and secrets of Valletta that are nearly impossible to stumble upon" on one's own. In a city with as rich a history as Valletta, many of those gems and secrets are easily overlooked without an insider's knowledge. Denis's guide services can be arranged through Malta Tourism Authority.

The main city sights are all within easy walking distance, so compact is the smallest of EU capitals. Most visitors first head to St John's Co-Cathedral, so named because a cathedral already existed in the archdiocese in Mdina before St John's was built. An enormous edifice, the co-cathedral houses an astonishing interior where every

surface is a work of art. Tombs with colourful stone inlays on the floor grab as much attention as the intricately decorated walls and ceiling. In the oratory are two paintings by Caravaggio, the gifted Italian scoundrel who sought refuge in Malta after committing multiple crimes in Rome. Ever the tumultuous soul, Caravaggio was eventually expelled from Malta but not before creating the two masterpieces on display here. *The Beheading of Saint John the Baptist* (1608) is his largest work and the only one to bear his signature, which in dramatic fashion is seen in the blood streaming from Saint John's wounded neck. The expressive *Saint Jerome Writing* (1607) was stolen from the co-cathedral in 1984 but was recovered two years later. It now sits to the front of the oratory's altar.

Less confronting works of art are found in the Casa Rocca Piccola, a museum of upper-class life in a more genteel era. Casa Rocca Piccola is not a relic of the past, however; the palace is still home to the noble de Piro family. Why not have a private tour of the house with the owners themselves? The ninth Marquis and Marchioness de Piro are happy to spend time with visitors and show them around. The house's lovely courtyard is a nod to the exclusivity of private outdoor space accorded only to the wealthy in the time of the Knights Hospitaller when noble families alone were granted permission for private gardens.

One of the major sights on Malta beyond Valletta is the Hal Saflieni Hypogeum, an underground necropolis revealed by accident in 1902 when renovations were being done on a home above it. In the town of Paola, the Hypogeum strictly limits the number of visitors to a maximum of 10. Be aware that tickets sell out weeks in advance. Other ancient sites around the island worthy of a visit include the megalithic temples in Tarxien, Mnajdra, and the aforementioned Hagar Qim. Past Mdina on Malta's southern coast is the Blue Grotto, where boat rides take visitors into the rock hollows at the base of the cliffs to appreciate the extraordinary blues of the sea and play of shadows and sunlight on the water. For the ultimate waterborne experience, a private yacht charter for a day in the Blue Lagoon off the coast of tiny Comino, the third of Malta's islands, makes an unforgettable memory.

ABOVE: For the ultimate tour of Malta charter a private yacht for the day and explore the coast of Comino, Malta's third-largest island.

OPPOSITE: Malta's capital of Valletta may be petite but it is packed with history, fascinating architecture and food experiences.

Old world hospitality

If you are keen to turn up the glamour, head to the perfect base for exploration. The legendary hotel The Phoenicia Malta embraces the Maltese reverence for the past with an understanding of the needs of present-day travellers. Bright rooms and suites emulate the public spaces where stylish comfort and service are the bywords. The hotel's large garden is an admirable assembly of exotic plants and trees; at its end is a bastion terrace where a swimming pool and bar area have splendid views of the Valletta cityscape.

Under the estimable leadership of Australian general manager Robyn Pratt, the hotel sits just outside Valletta's City Gate, a masterwork of architect Renzo Piano unveiled in 2014. The Phoenicia Malta's location facing the lovely Triton Fountain is perfect for enjoying the city's beehive of activity before withdrawing from it come cocktail time, afternoon tea in the lovely Palm Court Lounge, or dinner in The Phoenix restaurant, perhaps followed by a performance at Teatru Manoel.

One of the oldest theatres in Europe, Teatru Manoel is an apt representative of Malta as a whole; a plain exterior on a narrow side street belies the opulence of the oval theatre's elaborate interior and only those who actually enter can appreciate its grandeur to the fullest. Leave it to the helpful concierges at The Phoenicia Malta to arrange tickets or any other special requests.

"When I say we have a great team, it is really more like we are a family and together we are working towards achieving the owner's goal to be recognised as the best urban luxury hotel in the Mediterranean," says Robyn. "The team spirit is fantastic and this inspires me to do my best as so many people are working hard to do their best for the guest every day."



IMAGES, LEFT TO RIGHT: THE PHOENICIA MALTA, MALTA, TOURISM.

North star



Malta's northern city of Mdina is also a UNESCO World Heritage Site and the fortified town served as the island's capital in medieval times. Entrance into Mdina is through the monumental bridge of Mdina Gate and it feels like a passage from the present into the past. Thanks to a laudable restriction on motorised vehicles, ethereal Mdina is known as the Silent City and is indeed totally quiet after the daytrippers have left.

Numerous palazzos constructed in grand style complement the Baroque splendour of St Paul's Cathedral. Mdina was once the capital of Maltese territory until surrendering control to the Order of Saint John, better known as the Knights Hospitaller, who instead chose to rule from Birgu across the harbour from Valletta.

One place that still rules in Mdina is the Michelin-starred restaurant de Mondion. Located in a former palace, this is Malta's most exclusive restaurant. Exceptional dishes accompanied by the finest Maltese and international wines are served indoors and, in nice weather, outdoors on a terrace with literally stellar views of the night sky and Valletta in the distance.

This panorama encompasses much of the island of Malta. Contrasting with the elegance of de Mondion is the very simple Crystal Palace, an award-winning bakery where

Malta's famous pastizzi are prepared a short stroll from Mdina Gate. A choice of fillings is enveloped by layers of filo, pastizzi are well known outside the country thanks to the Maltese diaspora that has taken them across the world; less familiar is the delectable *qassatat*, a cheese-filled ball of deliciousness.

Eager foodies have to make the boat trip across to Gozo, Malta's second-largest island that has a culinary style all of its own. The best place to enjoy it is Ic-Cima, a popular establishment with stupendous sea views in the town of Xlendi, one of Malta's most picturesque locations. Ic-Cima makes the perfect lunch stop on a Gozo tour; it is conveniently located about halfway through a day's visit of the sights on this island that has long attracted painters, musicians and other creatives.

Easily reached by public ferry or private charter, Gozo maintains a strong spirit of independence that seems to imbue the visitor with a similar sense of empowerment, especially for Australians who will notice the many houses named for locations Down Under thanks to family ties to the homeland.

The welcomes on Gozo are especially amiable; maybe it is the similarity between the easy-going Australian lifestyle and that of the Gozitans, who take Malta's live and let live attitude to another level, that strengthens the

bond between the two countries. Travelling through Goza I felt a tinge of pride that there is such vigorous camaraderie between Malta and Australia. That sentiment is even stronger for Australians of Maltese descent such as singer and Australian Idol 2007 winner Natalie Gauci.

When asked about her cultural background as a Maltese-Australian, she replied: "My Maltese heritage is very important to me. My dad was born there, and even though I was born and raised in Australia, my Maltese roots are extremely strong. When I landed in Malta for the first time, it felt like home."

Whether seen from above on land or from below on the water, the stunning cliffs at Sanap, Ta' Cenc, and Dwejra Bay along Gozo's southern and western coastlines are, like those seen in Xlendi, among the most dramatic in the country. The north side of the island is less rugged and the wide swathe of sand on popular Ramla Beach is the same honey colour as Valletta's historical buildings.

Viewpoints above Ramla Bay include Calypso's Cave, which, legend has it, was the inspiration for Homer's tale in *The Odyssey* of Calypso and her imprisoned lover, Odysseus. Whether or not that tall tale is true, one thing is for certain, island hopping in Malta is bound to captivate travellers who are yearning to explore further on a European jaunt.

OPPOSITE: The Phoenicia Malta combines Maltese history with modern facilities like Infinity pool with views over Valletta's town centre and harbour.

ABOVE LEFT: Exploring the walled city of Mdina is a highlight. **ABOVE RIGHT:** Visitors to the Blue Grotto are struck by the plays of shadow on the ocean.