

Isles of splendour and history

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was educated at De La Salle College (Malta) and Stonyhurst College (UK), and obtained a BA (Hons) Economics Degree from Nottingham University. Mr Formosa Gauci started his career with Price Waterhouse in London and then in Malta, in the Audit and Business Services Department. He was President of the Malta Hotels and Restaurants Association (MHRA) until his appointment as Chief Executive of the Malta Tourism Authority. He has been a member of the Malta Tourism Authority's Board of Directors during his tenure as MHRA President, as well as a Member of the Malta Council for Economic and Social Development (MCESD).

The Maltese islands have been blessed with many characteristics that render the archipelago a must-visit destination for the discerning traveller, not least being the islands' position, right at the very heart of the Mediterranean Sea. Malta, Gozo and the tiny island of Comino, the three principal islands, comprising some 325 sq km, have a population of 420,000. Throughout the year, however, Malta and Gozo host 1.4 million tourists plus another 500,000 cruise passengers, more than four times the islands' population. What is it, though, that draws these significant numbers of tourists to Malta, year-in, year-out, with approximately one third of these being return visitors?

Simply put and despite its size, the country has so much to offer that is authentically Mediterranean and oftentimes unique to the islands, that the motivations to visit Malta are probably as plentiful as the things to see, do and experience on the islands.

Malta and Gozo are steeped in history, reaching back 6,000 years and more. The islands have been pivotal in the political, military and cultural affairs of nations around the Mediterranean since time immemorial, at times even being crucial to the outcome of historic events. Little is known about the race of temple-builders who inhabited the islands in pre-history, building magnificent, unique structures that are still around to this day, including the only underground temple complex known to exist in the world, the Hypogeum, a UNESCO World heritage site. The Phoenicians, Carthaginians and Romans, held sway over the islands, as did the North African Arabs during the great Islamic expansion in the 9th century. The Normans, Aragonese and Spanish followed suit, whereas in 1530, the islands were handed over to the Knights of St John of Jerusalem, who settled here until they were ousted by Napoleon in 1798. Following Napoleon's expulsion, the British ruled Malta from 1800 onwards, until the country achieved independence in 1964. Malta became a republic ten years later and joined the European Union in 2004.

Malta and Gozo enjoy a temperate climate all year round, with over 300 days of sunshine and glorious weather. Winters are very mild whilst summers are on the hot side, reaching average temperatures of 33 degrees in peak season. This basically means that any time of year is ideal to visit. Moreover, the islands

have garnered a reputation in recent years for being a veritable hub of activity, with an impressive calendar of events running throughout the twelve months of the year. Europe's largest free music festival, the Isle of MTV, Malta, is organised each year, attracting audiences in excess of 50,000 for every edition. The world-renowned Rolex Middle Sea Race departs and finishes from Malta, along with more international festivals, concerts and other such initiatives than one could believe possible for such a relatively small place.

Any visit to the Maltese islands should kick off with the country's capital, Valletta, itself a UNESCO world heritage site. The city has just been confirmed as the European Capital of Culture for 2018, a unique honour for a unique city.

Built in the immediate wake of the Great Siege of 1565, by the heroic Grandmaster Jean Parisot de la Valette, after whom the city is named, Valletta is a fortified town, surrounded by majestic bastions on all sides, and is the first city in the world ever to be built entirely in grid formation. Valletta is also the administrative capital of the islands and is home to some amazing architectural and artistic gems, such as the Grandmaster's Palace, the baroque magnificence of the Manoel Theatre, one of the oldest in Europe, splendid, ornate churches and chapels, the Knights' auberges or headquarters, as well as the renowned artistic masterpiece that is St. John's co-Cathedral, which houses the breathtaking *magnum opus* by Caravaggio, the only painting the artist ever signed: The Beheading of St John.

During the day Valletta is buzzing with life, with locals and visitors alike thronging towards the sites, gardens, open air cafes, markets, shops and generally going about their business. In recent years the city has also been revived substantially at night-time, what with an ever-increasing number of bars, restaurants and cafes opening up, and several events being organised there throughout the year. In fact, in and around Valletta, various annual events have become mainstays in the cultural calendar, such as the International Fireworks Festival in April/May, The Summer Arts Festival, the Malta International Jazz Festival, now in its 22nd year, the International Folk and Roots Festival, The Isle of MTV, the Opera Festival, a newly-launched Baroque Festival as well as a huge number of theatrical productions, art exhibitions, indoor and outdoor concerts, parades, re-enactments

and various other initiatives that certainly appeal to all tastes and all ages.

Valletta is currently undergoing significant restoration and embellishment works that are due to be completed in the near future. These include extensive restoration works on the bastions surrounding the city – An EU co-funded project set to cost some €36 million, as well as the complete overhaul of the City Gate area in a project designed by world-renowned architect Renzo Piano. The project includes the complete embellishment of the city's entrance, a new parliament building as well as the restoration of the old Opera House, bombed out during WWII, amongst others.

Another project is the regeneration of the Grand Harbour area, which aims to significantly embellish all the region surrounding the magnificent and breathtaking natural harbour, including areas in Valletta, its suburb Floriana, the Port town of Marsa, the village of Kalkara as well as the historic Three Cities across the Grand Harbour: Vittoriosa (Birgu), Cospicua (Bormla) and Senglea (L-Isla). In recent years, the harbour side area outside Valletta bastions was extensively renovated and transformed into the Valletta Cruise Port, which handles over half a million cruise passengers each year, and the Valletta Waterfront (pictured below), a promenade zone by the sea, flanked by an impressive array of restaurants, open-air cafes, bars, clubs and shops.

Valletta, though, is not the only must-see attraction in the Maltese islands. On the contrary, the list is staggering. There are, of course, the many unique pre-historic temples, specialised museums of all kinds, the traditional villages, the old capital of Mdina, an amazing fortified town bursting at the seams with history in every cobblestone, every block. The three cities in the Cottonera area also deserve a visit, as do the fishing villages, most notably Marsaxlokk.

A 25-minute ferryboat ride takes you to the sister island of Gozo. Although close in proximity, Gozo is almost another world. More verdant, hillier, more rural and rustic, Gozo has a particular charm and attraction that is defies definition. It is a distinct destination in its own right and is much sought after by visitors and locals alike as the ideal place to relax, unwind, take it easy and enjoy some quiet time.

Gozo has an ineffable spirituality about it, immediately noticeable. The world's oldest man-made free-standing building complex is to be found in the Gozitan village of Xaghra – The Ggantija (Giant's) temples, built some 6,000 years ago and pre-dating the oldest pyramids by centuries. A project is currently underway by the central government to turn Gozo into an Eco-island, promoting authentic produce, organic farming and agri-tourism. Gozo also has a large expatriate population, obviously drawn by the idyllic tranquillity that the island possesses. No visit to the Maltese islands can ever be complete without a visit, or, preferably, spending a few nights on the island of Calypso, named after the beautiful nymph who resided in a cave on the island, as depicted in Homer's Odyssey. The hero of the epic saga, Odysseus, was held captive by the nymph, under a spell, for seven years. Though why he would have wanted to leave is anybody's guess.

Then, naturally, there's the sea. The Mediterranean Sea is synonymous with Malta and its people since the dawn of time itself. Malta is acknowledged as being one of the top three countries in the EU with the cleanest bathing waters, and currently has six beaches that have been awarded international Blue Flag status. In Malta, Gozo and Comino one finds both sandy beaches as well as rocky ones, with a good number of these being managed to the highest standards, as per Blue Flag criteria. Aside from sunbathing, swimming, practising

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various water sports or just strolling by the sea, diving has become one of the most sought-after activities throughout the year. And with good cause. In 2010, readers of the UK's DIVE Magazine voted the Maltese islands one of the top three dive sites in the world, and the top dive site in the Mediterranean – no mean feat considering the competition that exists in this area.

Being surrounded by the sea also means that fresh fish and seafood cannot get any fresher, all year round. Fresh produce is a staple of Maltese cuisine, which, like the people, the culture and the language, is a unique blend and fusion of all the flavours to be found in the Mediterranean region. Specialities here include fresh fish, of course, octopus, shellfish and mixed seafood, rabbit, tomato-based dishes, along with fresh vegetables, olives, traditional goat's cheese products, honey, olive oil and hearty, wholesome, tasty, freshly-baked bread. D.O.C. locally-grown and produced wines are also very much in demand, as are a host of other local beverages such as liqueurs, limoncellos, local beers and soft drinks. Eating out in Malta and Gozo can be an experience of culinary discovery in itself, with choices that satisfy anyone's tastes, anyone's budget.

Malta is characterised by colours and sounds – the Maltese are effervescent, bubbly, fun-loving and have a joie de vivre that is second to none. Any time is a good time to socialise, meet people and make new friends. The Maltese are renowned for their effortless friendliness and innate sense of hospitality, which is probably why one out of three visitors keeps returning. The islands also have a reputation for being very safe, in all senses.

Notwithstanding the fact that in Malta and Gozo everything oozes history, the country's infrastructure is highly modern and well-developed, as befits a European nation in the third millennium. Computer literacy is high, whilst mobile phone usage and internet connectivity, per capita, is in the topmost percentiles within the EU. Health care is free and Malta is considered to have one of the best health services in Europe. Hotels are of a high standard, with different categories and classes of accommodation to suit all pockets. Nothing is more than half an hour away, allowing one to combine various activities in the same day. More importantly, Malta's International airport is connected to over 80 destinations, mostly in Europe. **F**



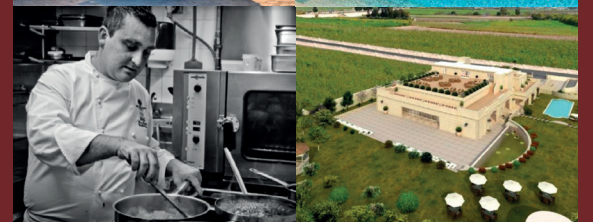
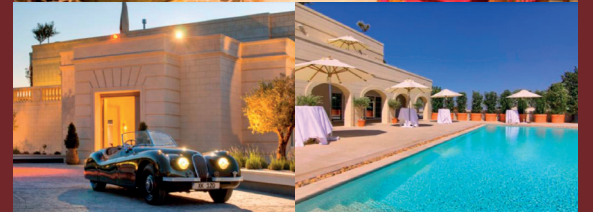
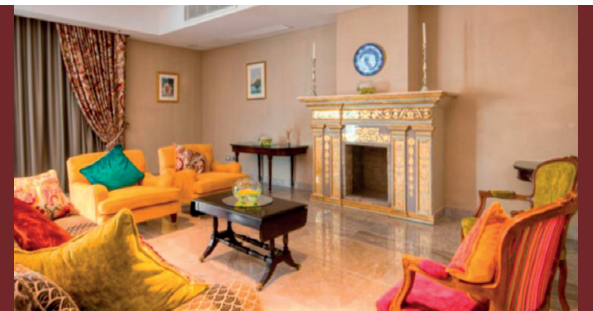
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