

MALTA**the Heart of the Mediterranean****6 days**

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Day 1 Arrive in Malta

Welcome to Malta!

Malta has a greater density of historic sights than any other country. Starting with its unique prehistoric temples, some of the oldest stone buildings in the world, it also has Roman catacombs, medieval towns, and the extraordinary architectural and artistic legacy of the Knights of St John (the Knights of Malta). The British left behind red letter boxes and phone booths, as well as the language, in spite of which Malta (independent since 1964) remains thoroughly Maltese. The country has thankfully shaken off the British culinary legacy and is home to some excellent restaurants specialising in Mediterranean food.

Overnight in Malta.

Included Meal(s): Dinner, if required.

Day 2 Valetta: City Tour & Dingli Cliffs

This morning we depart on foot for a full-day tour of Valletta, the capital of Malta.*

Valletta is arguably the smallest capital in Europe -- the entire city is only 1000m (1 km) long and 600m wide! Jean Parisot de la Valette, the Grand Master of the Order of the Knights of St. John, founded the city in 1566 following the Knights' defeat of the Ottoman Turks during the "Great Siege of Malta". Massive fortifications on the seaward side were built, and a defensive ditch on the landward side. The city inside the walls was then laid out on a regular street grid pattern, and adorned with churches, palaces, auberges (inns), and the famous hospital of the Knights, the Sacra Infermeria.

We start our day with a relaxing cruise around the two natural harbours on either side of Valletta, Marsamxett Harbour and the Grand Harbour. A detailed commentary will unfold the history of Valletta and the Three Cities connected with the two Great Sieges of 1565 and 1942, as well as the other places of interest including the historical forts, battlements and creeks which can only be admired from the seaharbours, creeks, shipyards, skylines and bastions of Valletta, and the "Three Cities" are unforgettable.

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We then proceed to the Upper Barakka Gardens, with its magnificent views of the Grand Harbour, and the fortified peninsulas of Senglea and Vittoriosa. Next is the Grand Master's Palace, today the official residence of the President of Malta and the seat of parliament. The palace housed the residence and state rooms of the Grand Masters from 1571 until their expulsion by Napoleon in 1798. If open, we will visit the State Apartments and the Council Chamber where the 17th century Gobelins tapestry are hung. We will also visit the Armoury, housed in the former stables of the Grand Masters. The armoury is the largest collection in the world of its kind. Thousands of suits of armour and a huge array of weaponry are to be seen here which either belonged to the Knights of the Order or were captured as trophies of war.

You will have free time to take lunch in one of the many sidewalk cafes and restaurants in Valletta. After lunch we will see the 45 minute film "The Malta Experience," an excellent audiovisual documentary providing a detailed overview of the history of the island, from prehistory to modern times. The film is screened in the 16th century hospital of the Knights of St. John -- the Sacra Infermeria -- famous throughout Europe for its sheer size and highest standards of care.

We finish our full day with a drive to the south coast of the island. We stop for the beautiful panorama at the 220m high Dingli Cliffs with its magnificent views of the cliffs and the offshore islet of Ffifla. Just beyond, at Clapham Junction, are the remnants of mysterious "cart ruts" in the limestone from the Bronze Age. These are a series of deep, intersecting parallel ruts, probably carved by sleds rather than carts.

PLEASE NOTE: Malta's Hal Saflieni Hypogeum site and tour is a popular option should you choose to extend your stay outside of our tour. We do not include it in our program as the number of visitors per day is very limited and spaces tend to sell out before many/most of our travellers commit to our tour; as such, promising the visit in our itinerary is problematic. We suggest booking your own visit once our tour is 'guaranteed' to operate.

* Most of our tours are accommodated in St Julian's, a smaller seaside district located just to the north of Valetta.

Overnight on Malta.

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Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 3 Valletta & Prehistoric Malta

We return to Valletta and begin the day with St. John's Co-Cathedral, the architectural gem of Malta. The church was built in the 1570's for the Knights of St. John, by the great Maltese architect Gerolamo Cassar, who also designed the Grand Master's Palace and many of the auberges of the Order. It is the masterpiece of Maltese baroque, with its rich interior decoration and paintings by the celebrated artist Mattia Preti (1613-1699). The impressive floor is paved with colourful slabs of inlaid marble, with ornate decorations and epitaphs marking the location of over 300 tombs below, including the tombs of the first 12 Grand Masters of the Order of the Knights. We will visit the Cathedral's Museum and Oratory, where hangs the masterpiece, 'The Beheading of St. John the Baptist' by Caravaggio. During his brief stay in Malta (1607-8), he was admitted (and soon expelled) from the order of the Knights, and commissioned to paint several works. 'The Beheading of St. John the Baptist' is the largest painting ever created by the artist, and the only one he ever signed.

From here we proceed to the National Museum of Archaeology, housed in an original Auberge, the residence of the division of Knights from Provence. Here we will get an overview of the prehistoric cultures, the first known inhabitants of the Maltese islands. On exhibition are the ancient artefacts of the mysterious megalithic temple builders -- dating as far back as the 4th millennium BCE.

We continue to south coast to Hagar Qim on the south coast. This temple dates to the Ggantija phase (3600-3200 BCE) and is spectacularly located on a hill overlooking the islet of Fifla. The prehistoric temples on the Maltese islands are the oldest surviving freestanding structures in the world; dating to the 4th and 3rd millennium BCE, they are 500-1,000 years earlier than the oldest pyramid built at Giza! Who were these mysterious people? Why and how did they build the temples? We also visit nearby Mnejdra Temple.

We drive to the picturesque village of Marsaxlokk set on a harbour of colourful traditional fishing boats. The boats are brightly painted in blue, yellow and red, with a vigilant eye on the bow to ward off evil, a tradition believed to date back to Phoenician times. Because most of the fishing boats of the island moor here, the Bay of Marsaxlokk has some of the finest seafood restaurants on the island.

Overnight on Malta.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 4 Day Trip to Gozo

This morning we head to the north-western tip of Malta to catch the ferry to the island of Gozo, which lies nearly 5km from the coast of Malta; the crossing takes only about 30 minutes. Gozo, pronounced "awdesch" in Malti, is about 1/3rd the size of Malta, 14 km long and 7km at its widest point. Gozo has its own distinctive characteristics and identity -- the Gozitans are proud of their traditions, lifestyle and dialects -- distinct from those of the main island. The island is more fertile, and economic activity is still based on farming and fishing; it is known for its magnificent landscapes, traditional villages and unspoiled coves.

We proceed to the prehistoric temples of Ggantija, one of the oldest and certainly the largest temple complexes of the Maltese archipelago, hence the folklore that they were built by giants. The largest megalith here is over 5m in length and is estimated to weigh over 50 tonnes! The two temples are surrounded by a monumental wall and date to the period 3600-3200 BCE, the same period as Hagar Qim.

We spend some time in the capital of the island, Victoria, inhabited since Neolithic times. The city encompasses both the imposing citadel, Il Kastell, perched on a high vantage point and dominating the landscape in all directions, and Rabat, the suburb outside the walls. Entering the main gate, we will explore the lanes and monuments of the citadel including its 17th century bastions, fortifications and the Cathedral of the Assumption. After a brief visit of the Archaeological Museum, we go to the Folklore Museum, a fine ethnological museum with exhibits dedicated to traditions and culture of rural Gozo. We will also wander the streets and colourful markets outside the walls.

Our last stop of the day is Dwejra for some the most spectacular coastal stretches of the island. Two huge underground caverns in the limestone collapsed to form what is today Dwejra Bay and the Inland Sea. We will take a relaxing boat trip, run by local fishermen to see the inland sea, a lagoon surrounded by cliffs which joins the sea via a 100m long tunnel through the headland of Dwejra Point. We will see the fantastic geological phenomena of the Blue Hole, and enjoy the panoramas of Dwejra Bay and Fungus Rock. The fungus (cynomorium coccineus) growing on the islet was exploited by the Knights of St. John for its wide array of curative properties. Indigenous to North Africa, but not found anywhere else in Europe, it was so valuable that the Knights built the nearby Qawra watchtower. Ferry back to Malta.

Overnight on Malta.

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Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 5 Mosta, Mdina & Rabat

Today is dedicated to the fascinating cities of the interior: Mosta, Rabat and Mdina.

Our first stop is to see the Rotunda Church in the city of Mosta, which dominates the landscape in all directions from its position on a plateau. Based on the design of the Pantheon in Rome, it is the 3rd largest unsupported dome in Europe after the Pantheon and St. Peter's Basilica in the Vatican. Built in the mid 19th century by a local architect and dedicated to the Virgin Mary, it has held a special place in the hearts of the Maltese because of the miraculous events of World War II. In June, 1942, three bombs were dropped on the church during a mass; 2 fell in the square and one penetrated the dome -- but none of the three exploded.

One of the main highlights of the island is the ancient walled city Mdina, former capital of the island, and its suburb outside the walls, Rabat. Both have been inhabited since antiquity. In medieval times, Mdina was known as Citta Notabile where the Maltese aristocracy lived and which is reflected in the quiet dignity of its 17th century architecture and narrow shady lanes. We will stroll the peaceful streets, stopping to admire the views from the city walls, the mansions of the nobility, the churches and Cathedral of St. Paul -- the seat of the Archbishop of Malta. You will have time to have lunch in one of the pretty cafes/restaurants.

Exiting the walls of the city through the Main Gate, we cross the moat to the suburb of Rabat. We stop first at the remains of the Domus Romana, a Roman townhouse with colonnaded courtyard and beautifully preserved mosaics. It is one of dozens of Roman villas which dotted the countryside around Mdina (Roman Melita). Here in Rabat is the Church and Grotto of St. Paul, where tradition says that he preached to the citizens of Roman Melita (Mdina) during his stay in Malta. According to Acts: 27-8, St Paul was shipwrecked on Malta on his way from Caesarea to Rome.

The governor Publius received him and gave him shelter for 3 months; he converted to Christianity, became the first bishop of Malta and was later canonized. We continue to see the series of interconnected Catacombs, the cemeteries which were dug into the rock outside ancient city walls. The two largest on the island are the so-called Catacombs of St. Paul and St. Agatha and date back to the 4th and 5th centuries. The most characteristic feature of these Paleochristian tombs is the mensa, or agape table surrounded by an inclined platform, for tomb visitors to partake in funerary feasts commemorating the dead. If the Catacombs of St. Agatha are not open, we will visit those of St. Paul.

Overnight on Malta.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 6 Departure

Departure from Malta.

IL-VJAGG IT-TAJJEB!

Included Meal(s): Breakfast