



MALTA

A Mediterranean Jewel

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Photography by John and Monica Frim

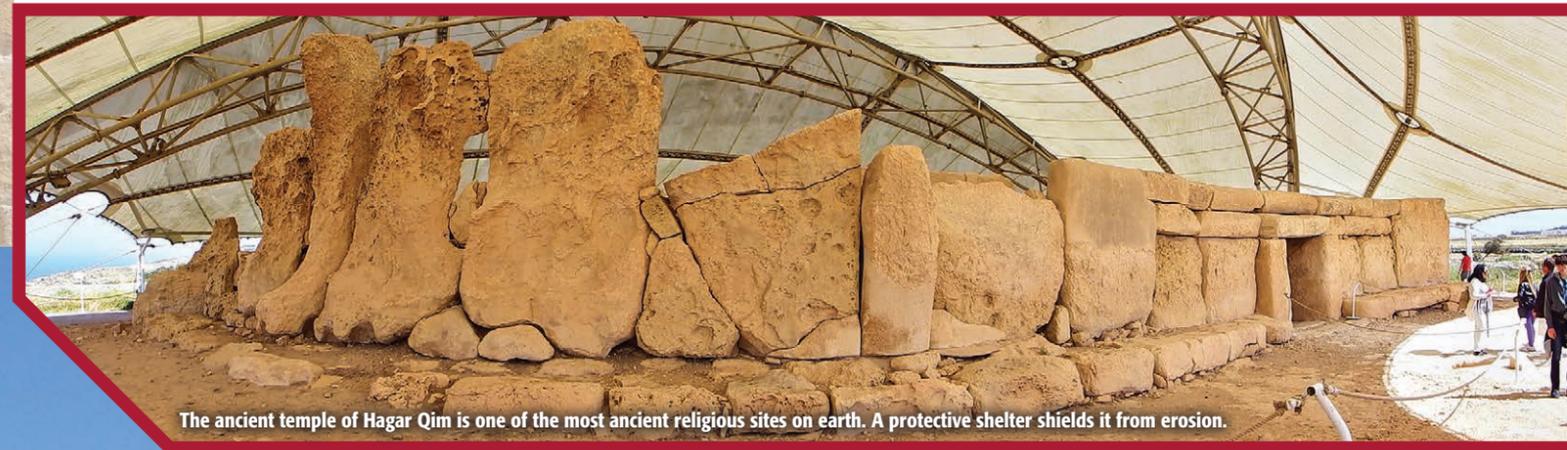
For a small island that's basically a rock, Malta boasts an uncanny mix of history, culture and recreational delights. Roads lined with stone and prickly pear fences radiate from the capital city of Valletta to hillside towns and megalithic temples that lie scattered like chaff among patchy fields of spurge and fleabane.

No matter where you stand, you are always within viewing distance of a castle, fort, monument or statue that honors the past. History flows seamlessly here, cascading over cliffs and ramparts to a fossil-flecked coastline stippled with caves and grottos. Everything—from the

land itself to the buildings and lookout towers—seems carved out of honey-colored limestone, Malta's greatest natural resource. Upon closer inspection, beads of color burst through the monochrome rock in the form of brightly painted balconies and flowerpots, riotous with foliage and tropical blooms.

Three islands make up the Maltese archipelago: the main island of Malta; the smaller Gozo, which some believe to be Homer's Ogygia where Odysseus spent seven years cavorting with his beautiful captor, the sea-nymph Calypso; and teensy Comino, which measures less than 1.5 square miles but boasts stunning caves and a Blue Lagoon. Together, the islands' footprint is smaller than Kansas City, but their worldly imprint is vibrant and large.

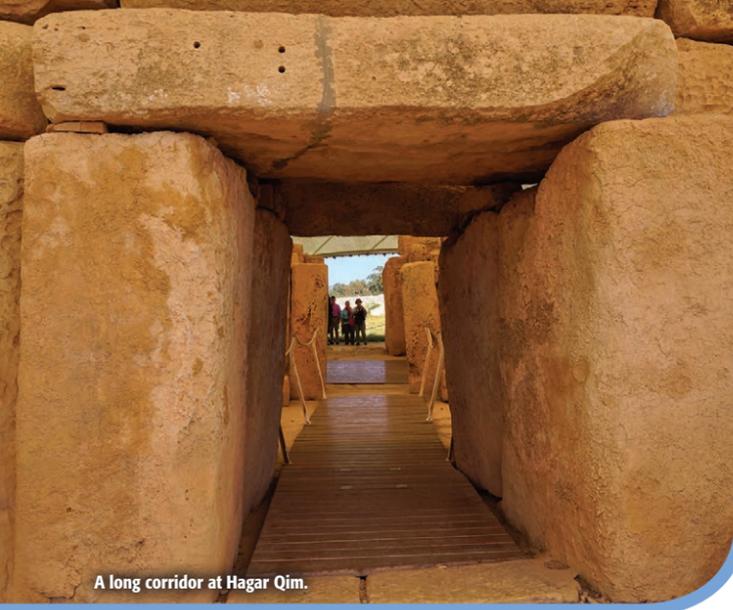
Whacked on all sides by the Mediterranean Sea and the various marauders who crossed it, Malta has been a



The ancient temple of Hagar Qim is one of the most ancient religious sites on earth. A protective shelter shields it from erosion.



The capital city of Valletta as seen from Sliema across Marsamxett Harbour.



A long corridor at Hagar Qim.

Goths, Arabs, Normans, Ottomans, Spanish, French and British. They all left their marks, which makes the Maltese one of the most intriguing blended cultures in the world.

Megalithic temples, thought to be the oldest in the world, are scattered throughout the country, built by a Stone Age people who mysteriously disappeared around 2,500 BC. We wandered awestruck through the ruins at Hagar Qim and Mnajdra, set on the hills above the Blue Grotto, one of Malta's most scenic attractions. Known for their solstice alignments, these ancient temples comprise sacred halls and passageways with square portholes hewn out of the rock. Below the temples, the Blue Grotto, with its massive arch and sea-caves, shimmers with multiple shades of cobalt, purple, green and turquoise. Both the grotto and the temples offer mesmerizing views to Fifla, the uninhabited, mysterious islet that sits like a stone altar in a cerulean sea, off-limits to people but home to a large colony of storm petrels.

Curiously, Malta's most impressive temple complex is not in the open air, but hidden underground in the

coveted territory for millennia, proving that even long ago, location mattered more than size—especially when it came to control of the Mediterranean trade routes. Seafaring Phoenicians colonized the island in the seventh century B.C., followed by Carthaginians, Romans, Sicilians, Vandals,

The noon day canon fire at Saluting Battery, Valletta



Fort Manoel in Gzira was built in the 18th century by the Order of the Knights of St. John.

village of Paola, roughly eight miles southwest of Valletta. Known as the Hal Saflieni Hypogeum, the complex is made up of three levels of underground caves and chambers carved out of the limestone to mimic the temples above. Built between 3600 and 3000 BC, it is the only known prehistoric underground temple in the world. Originally used as a place of worship it later became a burial site. Excavators found more than 7,000 human bodies along with a wealth of pottery, ornaments, and figurines. The temple's most iconic masterpiece is the 'Sleeping Lady,' a unique statue that emblemizes the "fat ladies" temple culture, which also includes corpulent stone figures from other temples including Hagar Qim. Despite the name, the statues are androgynous, bereft of features that would decidedly pin down their gender. These figures, including the 'Sleeping Lady,' are now on display at the National Museum of Archaeology in Valletta.

Only a half-mile long and 600 yards wide, Valletta squeezes a smorgasbord of historic buildings with protruding baroque balconies into a gridwork of long narrow streets lined with lively bars and restaurants. Yet, a surprising number of urban breathing spaces abound in the form of cobbled squares and flower-filled gardens. At the Upper Barrakka Gardens, flowers and statues constitute

the foreground to an arcaded viewing platform that overlooks the Grand Harbour and the massive Fort of St. Angelo. We timed our visit to the gardens to coincide with the traditional cannon shot fired at noon from the Saluting Battery below, which is possibly the best—and loudest—daytime entertainment in the city. If you're holding a camera, try not to jump... or you'll miss the shot.

Defense, culture and religion go hand in hand in Valletta, where most of the historic structures were established during the 200 year reign of the Knights of St. John. Most outstanding is St. John's Co-Cathedral, a paean to Baroque flamboyance, with gilded ornamentation, intricately carved stone walls, frescoed ceilings, and the tombs of some 400 knights embedded in the floor. Among the glorious statues and relics, the Beheading of John the Baptist and St. Jerome, two paintings by Caravaggio, are the cathedral's most awe-inspiring attractions.

Like St. John's Co-Cathedral, the Grandmaster's Palace at St. George's Square is an austere Mannerist building on the outside, but richly decorated on the inside. Once the seat of power for the Order of the Knights of St. John, it now houses the Office of the President. Along with the State Rooms, the Palace Armory is open to the public and contains a large collection of arms and armor used in the



A street in Vittoriosa teems with the colorful enclosed balconies typical of cities and villages throughout Malta.

battles of centuries past.

In gratitude for the Knights' defense of Christendom against the Ottoman Empire during the Great Siege of Malta in 1565, Europe rallied to help the Knights build a combined city-fortress for Christianity and to serve as the center of culture. They chose Mount Sciberras for its strategic location overlooking a deep natural harbor as the site of the Knights' new headquarters and named it Valletta in honor of their leader Jean Vallette. When the British assumed control of Malta in 1800 they added more grand palaces and defense works including the Lascaris War Rooms, an underground complex of tunnels and chambers used as a command center during World War II. Today, the once ultra-secret complex serves as a museum, open to all.

Heavily bombed during World War II, Valletta has been rebuilt over the years, with many of the historic buildings turned into fascinating museums, galleries and government offices. Out of the eight Auberges that once housed the knights of the European territories or "langues," five survive, repurposed and refurbished, but still bearing the knightly countenance of their history. The Auberge de

Castille, perched atop the highest point of Valletta, fittingly houses the Office of the Prime Minister. It is one of the finest baroque buildings in Malta.

But Valletta is much more than a capful of history on a magnificent rock. The entire city was revitalized and re-conceptualized in preparation for its role in 2018 as a European Capital of Culture. An ultra modern city gate was notched into the 16th century walls, opening on to a new artsy parliament building that looks more like a museum than a place of political chambers. Beside it, the state-of-the-art Opera House Open Air Theater incorporates into its framework the crumbled remains of its classical columns, which were destroyed in World War II. Valletta may be the smallest capital in Europe, but it's definitely neither trapped by its size nor its multifaceted past.

Neither is the rest of the island. You can walk through thousands of years of history in five minutes flat in just about any town, or take days to let the Maltese spirit seep into your bones. From fishing villages to walled towns to spirited coastal hotspots—nothing is more than a 45-minute drive from the airport.

At the south end of the island, Marsaxlokk is one of

the most picturesque coastal villages on the island. Traditional luzzu, the Crayola-striped fishing boats with the "eyes of Osiris" painted on either side of the prow, float like oversized bath toys in the cerulean bay. Rubber-booted fishermen stand on the quay inspecting and mending nets that are as colorful as the boats in the bay or the boldly painted doors of the villagers' homes. Vendors tend open-air market stalls laden with traditional Maltese foodstuffs, handicrafts (lace, filigree, ceramics, glass) and mass-produced souvenirs (check the labels). One could spend an entire day peacefully walking through the village with its pretty Church of Our-Lady of Pompei, shopping for Maltese mementos, strolling the promenade, or simply contemplating the idyllic surrounds from one of the colorful benches that lie between the quayside restaurants and the glimmering bay.

Throughout the island, hilltop towns with beautiful



A hotel in Marsaxlokk with colorful doors.

domed churches bubble out of the scrub and limestone and reach their apex in Mdina, the country's oldest city and former capital. After the Knights built Valletta, Mdina became virtually a ghost town, which may be one explanation for why it is now called the "Silent City." The



Marsaxlokk Harbour teems with traditional Maltese boats called luzzu. Originally used as fishing boats, many luzzu now serve as taxis.



Collegiate Church of St. Paul, Rabat. According to tradition, St. Paul lived in the grotto during the three months he stayed and preached in Malta in 60 A.D.

The ornate nave of St. John's Co-Cathedral in Valletta.



city was indeed quiet when we entered the Baroque Main Gate and followed the snaking alleys and backstreets alongside aristocratic palaces where zigzagging Arabic motifs and fanciful brass doorknockers with animal shapes graced Norman and Neogothic facades. But, oh, if walls could talk! The stories of Mдина's 4,000-year history from its Phoenician roots, to the 11th century Norman invasions, to the 16th century arrival of the Knights in Malta, would surely yield a stockpot of intrigue.

As Mдина muted, Rabat roared. Famous for the Catacombs of St. Paul and St. Agatha, Rabat has become a bustling tourist destination that's managed to turn claustrophobia into a must-do venture. I recommend it heartily. The dark narrow corridors with openings to chambers of endless tombs in a vast underground maze are not at all scary as one would expect, but exhilarating and paradoxically gripping—especially when one considers that many Maltese found refuge in the catacombs during World War II.

Although the Knights were offered the keys to Mдина when they first came to Malta, they opted to make Birgu (Vittoriosa) their first headquarters. There they improved the medieval Fort St. Angelo and built Fort St. Michael at Isla (Senglea). The forts are located on the promontories on the south side of the Grand Harbour across from Valletta. Together with Cospicua (Bormla)—each city has two names—they form the Three Cities, an area that serves as a living canvas of Malta's Medieval, Baroque and Renaissance periods.

From the wharf at the base of the Upper Barrakka Gardens, we skimmed across the harbor by water-taxi to Vittoriosa where the Maritime Museum, Malta At War Museum, the Inquisitor's Palace and the imposing Fort St. Angelo are part of the city's most popular attractions. But nothing compared to just walking the narrow twisted lanes of the collachio (old city center), where outdoor cafes, specialty restaurants and galleries breathe new life

into history's oldest buildings. It was hard to fathom that in bygone times brothels and taverns stood cheek by jowl with churches, auberges and aristocratic buildings.

When Charles V of Spain granted the island of Malta to the Knights in 1530 the deed included the island of Gozo and Tripoli. Like the main island of Malta, Gozo suffered staggering historical calamities. When the Ottoman Empire failed to capture Malta in the 16th century, the Ottomans made up for their humiliating defeat by capturing virtually all of Gozo's 5,000 citizens who had been hiding in the hilltop citadel.

Today the island is an oasis of serenity—an outdoor paradise ringed by cliffs and caves with great diving, snorkeling, hiking, kayaking and rock climbing opportunities. While most people visit Gozo for the sun, the citadel looming over Gozo's main city of Victoria encompasses enough museums, churches, palaces and historic buildings to satisfy the artistic yearnings of anyone looking for a window into Gozo's history and

culture.

Inter-island ferry traffic by locals is reciprocal: people from the main island come to Gozo to relax; Gozitans go to Malta to work. Some swim! Michelle Muscat, wife of Prime Minister Joseph Muscat, participates annually in a fund-raising swim. She completed her longest route between Cirkewwa and Mellieha July 2019—8.7 miles in five hours. No word on whether she's eyeing up a swim to Sicily—136 miles away.

Everywhere on the Maltese islands the British presence is strong. The George Cross, awarded to the Maltese for bravery in World War II, is woven into the Maltese flag, and English is still an official language (along with Maltese, a mix of Arabic and Sicilian) even though Malta gained independence from British rule in 1964. Not surprisingly, people from the UK make up the largest piece of the tourist pie followed by Italians, Germans, French and other



A corridor in St. Paul's Catacombs, which served as a burial ground in Punic and Roman times.

Mgarr Harbour on the island of Gozo.





The town of Mosta is dominated by its Rotunda, a large Basilica that boasts the third largest unsupported dome in the world.

Europeans. Malta gets about twice as much sunshine as Northern European cities, so it's easy to see why sun-starved Europeans would flock to the islands' diverse resorts and beaches. North Americans have traditionally taken their dose of holiday sunbeams in the Caribbean, but a few years ago started to recognize Malta as a safe, stable, economical and trendy alternative.

The question is, why has it taken so long? ■



The walled hilltop city of Mdina served as the island's capital from antiquity to the medieval period. Today, it's a major tourist attraction, known for its unusual mix of Norman and Baroque architecture.



The Gardjola guard tower of Senglea provides panoramic views of the Grand Harbour and the city of Valletta.

Acknowledgements

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Ambassador Keith Azzopardi of the Embassy of Malta

2017 Connecticut Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20008

https://foreignaffairs.gov.mt/en/embassies/me_united_states/Pages/ME_United_States.aspx

Malta Tourism Authority

www.visitmalta.com

Air Malta

Air Malta offers direct flights to Malta from various cities in Europe, North Africa and the Eastern Mediterranean.

<https://www.airmalta.com>

Dining, hotels and shopping in Malta

A special thank you to our hosts at the following establishments:



Corinthia Palace Hotel

Situated in the heart of Malta, across the street from the Presidential Palace and the San Anton Gardens, the luxurious Corinthia Palace Hotel & Spa is an oasis of calm, but with easy access to nearby boisterous hotspots. A free shuttle takes guests to the capital city of Valletta, a mere 15 minute-ride away, or to the lively resort towns of Sliema and St. Julian's. But if you prefer to unwind in quieter settings, the Corinthia Palace offers a peaceful break from the hubbub and buzz of seaside resorts or the heavily trodden urban centers with their trendy shops and bars and collateral babble. The tranquil gardens and fountains at the front of the hotel let you know, before you even enter the spacious marble foyer with its flower-filled vases and comfortable sofas, that this will be a place of comfort and calm.

Founded by Alfred Pisani and his family, the Corinthia Palace rose from humble beginnings as a restaurant in 1962 to a world-class resort with an Athenaeum Spa and Health Club, both outdoor and indoor pools, and a variety of restaurants. The palatial Villa Corinthia, offers high-end dining at elegantly set round tables surrounded by Greco-Roman columns in the original century-old villa. We feasted on beef medallions with wild mushrooms, shallots and thyme, grilled and flambéd with brandy at the table—one of several locally sourced choices on a menu that changes with the market. For dessert, more flambés, in the form of crêpes Suzettes, also prepared table-side with generous dousings of Cointreau. Other must-tries were classic Maltese liqueurs like prickly pear and fig. Delicious! For something less formal, the Rickshaw specializes in spicy Far Eastern fare, and the outdoor Summer Kitchen serves home-made pizzas, Mediterranean dishes and salads. You can also grab a variety of dishes in the Orange Grove bar and brasserie.

Located in the sleepy historical town of Attard, the Corinthia Palace is the flagship of Corinthia Hotels with upscale hotels in Europe and Africa.

For more information:

<https://www.corinthia.com/en/hotels/palace-hotel-and-spa>

MALTA

Charles & Ron

Malta-inspired but with an international appeal, Charles & Ron is Malta's leading fashion house. Motivated by Maltese culture, scenery and architecture, the design team of Charles & Ron incorporates motifs of sunsets, Maltese flora and fauna, and even the interiors of Malta's grand buildings into the designs of their apparel, luxury scarves and leather handbags.

Charles & Ron have presented their collections at fashion Week in New York and Los Angeles as well as various cities in Europe. International publications, the international color company Pantone and leading trend websites have all taken note of this contemporary lifestyle brand.

Visitors in search of an upscale fashion memento can visit their boutique in the Corinthia Palace Hotel, their flagship store on Republic Street in Valletta, or their outlet at The Point Shopping Mall Tigne in Sliema.

For more information: <https://charlesandron.com>

Valletta Cultural Agency

With almost continuous mild and sunny weather, Malta boasts a rich and intense cultural scene year-round. There is always a festival, musical or theatrical performance, or cultural display taking place somewhere on the island. In March 2019, the Valletta Cultural Agency (VCA) replaced the Valletta 2018 Foundation established during Valletta's year of European Capital of Culture with a mandate to develop and coordinate an annual program of events and cultural initiatives in collaboration with artists and various creative agencies.

For a list of upcoming events in Malta:
<https://www.visitmalta.com/en/events-archive>

For information on the Valletta Cultural Agency:
<https://culture.gov.mt/en/VallettaCulturalAgency/Pages/default.aspx>

To contact the VCA: info@vca.gov.mt

T'Anna Mari Restaurant

In the quaint fishing village of Marsaxlokk, T'Anna Mari offers a taste of Sicily in the cozy comfort of a family-run restaurant. As part of the Slow Food movement, chef Salvatore takes pride in preparing a mix of Sicilian and local dishes using organically grown ingredients, fresh fish, and home baked bread that is like a slice from heaven.

Contact information:

28 Xatt is-Sajjieda Marsaxlokk, Malta

Phone: +356 2744 6211

<https://www.myguidemalta/restaurants/tanna-mari>

Il-Kartell, Marsalforn

The island of Gozo abounds with family-run seaside restaurants. At the north end of the island, Marsalforn is one of the most popular tourist resorts and Il-Kartell, one of its most pleasant outdoor dining facilities. Patrons can soak up the salty sea-air while enjoying fresh farm-to-table fare and gazing out at the sparkling blue Mediterranean Sea. Here the trio of food, scenery and service make for a truly enticing dining experience.

Contact information:

Marina Street

Marsalforn, Gozo

Phone: +356 2155 6918

<https://www.kartellrestaurant.com>

info@kartellrestaurant.com

Vini e Capricci

Vini e Capricci is a novel concept—a gourmet food and wine shop that supplies both retail and industry patrons such as hotels and restaurants with specialty foods, wines and spirits. Here food and wine are treated as art—indeed one section of the business serves as an art gallery—while another hosts special events like wine tastings, seminars and on site gourmet cooking lessons. In the retail area, artisanal chocolates, biscuits, flavored salts, local jams and preserves line shelves along with Riedel glasses and other quality wares. "It's better to serve cheap wine in a good glass than a good wine in a cheap or plastic glass," says Mr. George Borg, cookbook author and Vini e Capricci's executive chef. Mr. Borg showed us around the unique premises, pointing out various features such as the stainless steel vat that dispenses olive oil into bring-you-own bottles, a section of cured meats and cheeses, fresh pasta (dried is also available) and a wine cellar with over a thousand wines sorted by geographical regions. The concept of combining art, food and wine on a try before you buy basis appears to be a winning combination.

Contact information:

Gozitano Agricultural Village

Mgarr Road

Xewkija, Gozo

<https://www.viniicapricci.com>

viniicapricci@abrahams.com.mt

