

Malta travel advice

The small island of Malta is one of a tiny archipelago set in the Mediterranean Sea, south of Sicily. In spite of its size, the island has a rich and complex history beginning in the Stone Age and continuing through the lives and times of all the major Mediterranean civilisations.

Its strategic importance due to location and its several safe harbours have attracted colonisation from many powers over the centuries, including the British. Covering just over 300 square kilometres, little Malta is one of the most densely populated countries on the planet. Its capital is Valletta and its largest city is Birkirkara.

Malta's attractive countryside is mainly composed of low hills holding terraced fields, and there are no permanent rivers or lakes on the island. Its pretty coastline has many tiny, rocky bays with seas of an incredible blue.

Malta has many jewels to attract sightseeing visitors, the most famous being the ancient capital of the island, Mdina, set at the heart of scenic Rabat town. Its megalithic temples are some of the oldest buildings in the world and museums and cultural sites abound. Traditional Maltese life still goes on uninterrupted outside the capital and away from the main tourist spots.

Getting there

This little country has its own national carrier, Malta Air, bringing travellers to its airport at Luqa from many European, Middle Eastern and North African countries. The budget airline Ryanair flies from London Luton, Dublin and Edinburgh plus a plethora of European airports and easyJet runs routes from London Gatwick, Manchester and Newcastle as well as from Rome and Milan.

Fast ferries run from Sicily's Catania port and from Pozzallo on the Italian mainland, taking 3 hours and 90 minutes respectively, but poor sailors should note the seas here can be very rough with a heavy, stomach-turning swell. Larger passenger ships call at Malta from Rome, Palermo, Genoa, Salerno, Livorna and Tunis, but take much longer to arrive.

Climate

Malta's climate is classified as sub-tropical Mediterranean, with hot summers, generally mild winters and rainfall concentrated outside the summer months. The coldest month is January, with daytime highs of around 20°C and lows at night dropping by around 10°C. The heat of summer is represented by August's daytime highs of 30°C, dropping by 10°C at night. Spring and autumn are pleasantly warm, and annual sunshine hours are among the highest in Europe at 3,000. Winter sunshine is a big bonus of a late break here.

Culture

The culture of Malta shows influences of the diverse cultures brought to the island country over many centuries, beginning with the Phoenicians and including the Romans, the Arabs, the French and the Crusaders, and ending with the British in the early years of the 19th century. In legend, Catholicism replaced paganism after St Paul was shipwrecked on the island and is still strong today.

Making yourself understood in Malta is relatively easy, as English is the island's official language along with Maltese. Italian is also widely spoken and understood.

Malta is a very safe destination, even at night. The Maltese are a friendly people, if a little reserved at first, but happy to help and generous with their time.

Eating out

Although in the major tourist resort areas most eateries cater to British tastes, offering old-fashioned pub grub like bangers and mash, traditional Maltese cuisine is out there if you search hard enough. Maltese cooking is, basically, peasant food, based on fresh vegetables and fish prepared with local olive oil and few spices. Vegetables are mashed to give thick, rich soups and the Maltese sausage is a delicious mix of salted pork, coriander seeds and parsley, eaten either raw or cooked. Maltese platters made up of traditional delicacies are becoming popular even in the resorts. As with most Mediterranean destinations, the best way to find great local food is to eat where the local do!

Sightseeing

If sightseeing is at the head of your holiday list, Malta won't disappoint. The atmospheric ancient capital of Mdina, know as the Silent City, perches high in the centre of the island, surrounded by charming Rabat town. Together, they are a joy to visit. Mdina's medieval glories are set in the local stone and have witnessed centuries of change. Valetta, although Malta's capital and a modern city, boasts a rich history with cultural sites and museums galore. The city's links with the Crusaders and the famous medieval Knights Hospitallers of the Order of St John give it a unique flavour.

Attractions

Mdina

The medieval walled town of Mdina is Malta's finest gem and lies on a low hill surrounded by tree-covered expanses of green. Over 300 people still live here, surrounded by history going back some 2,700 years to the Phoenicians. With its palaces, winding alleyways and charming squares, its magnificent cathedral designed in the Portuguese style, its churches and other historic buildings,

Mdina is unforgettable. The picturesque small town of Rabat, right next door to Mdina, also hold some stunning architectural delights and was built over a Roman town. Must-sees here are the famous Catacombs of St Paul and St Agatha, dating from the Roman era.

Megalithic temples

Malta's five famous Stone Age megalithic temples are all UNESCO World Heritage sites dating back at least 5,600 years. Massive stone blocks piled one atop the next form passages and gateways and define the perimeters. Two, one of which is the underground marvel of Hal Safieni Hypogeum, are the world's oldest free-standing temples. Malta's known history of human occupation goes back 7,000 years.

Sun, sea and sand

Malta isn't just a paradise for history and heritage buffs; it's a great destination for sun, sea and sand. With its Mediterranean climate combined with some of the cleanest sea in the region and popular sandy beaches as well as remote and idyllic rocky coves, there's a seaside holiday for every taste. Diving is popular here, with professional diving schools giving instruction of preserving the magnificent underwater ecology surrounding the island. The waters around Malta are amazingly clear, giving rise to healthy reefs and underwater life.

Valletta

The capital of Malta owes its magnificence to the Knights Hospitaller who built the city, with the majority of its superb Baroque architectural buildings surviving to the present day. Fascinating structures, palaces and around 320 monuments to its history adorn the city, surrounded by ancient fortifications. The glorious Cathedral of St John holds the only signed work by the famous artist Caravaggio in the entire world. Valletta is also home to a vast selection of bars, cafés and varied eateries.

Southeast Malta

The quieter side of the island is home to Zurrieq's fabulous Blue Grotto, its huge domed cave accessible only by boat and with mysterious deep blue waters. The system holds seven adjoining caves, with the best time to visit being in the early morning when the rising sun shines into the dark spaces and reflects ever-changing colours in the waters. Nearby is Marsaxlokk, a charming and traditional fishing village with its harbour crammed with the colourful Maltese luzzo boats.

Excursions

Gozo

The tiny island of Gozo lies in the same archipelago as Malta and shares its megalithic history and Stone Age temples as well as its patterns of settlement over the ages. It's less developed than Malta, with its traditional life left intact in many villages. Its rocky west coast is spectacular, with an inland sea connected to the ocean through a 100m tunnel through the towering cliffs and the Blue Hole, one of the most amazing diving spots in Europe. Tiny beaches, hidden ancient temples and shrines, valleys and hills make Gozo a great place for hiking and walking.

Comino

This miniscule island measuring roughly four square kilometres is a magnet for beach-lovers arriving on little ferries from Malta and Gozo to swim in the remarkably clear waters. The island is also a nature reserve and a bird sanctuary as well as having two fine buildings, the 13th century Chapel of Our Lady's Return from Egypt and St Mary's Tower, built by the Knights of Malta in 1618 after they'd cleared the island of pirates and other unsuitable residents. The beautiful Blue Lagoon is its main natural attraction, and there is only one hotel on the island.

Festivals

One of the joys of a visit to Malta is catching an example of the traditional festivals held during the summer months in every town and village on the island.

Held here for hundreds of years, these events are a dazzling combination of bands, processions, firework displays, street decorations, huge and heavy religious statues carried around the streets and merry-making including copious amounts of food and drink carry-on for around four days. Good Friday and Easter Sunday are the best times to be here, with processions all over the island involving scenes of the Passion and Resurrection. Carnival takes place in March, involving floats, extravagant costumes, masks and children having the time of their little lives with water guns.