

Magnificent Malta

The tiny nation of Malta is anything but short on charm

By Yvonne Horn

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Photo: The entrance to Valletta, Malta's Grand Harbour // © 2011 Yvonne Horn

Europeans have flocked to Malta to enjoy its long, warm summers and mild winters. In its blue-green waters, said to be the cleanest in the Mediterranean, visitors swim, snorkel and scuba dive off rocky coves.

However, there are many other reasons why agents should suggest a trip to this diminutive nation -- including its 7,000 years of compelling history.

Malta is an archipelago comprised of three main islands and a sprinkling of rock islets. The largest island, also called Malta, is about 17 miles long and nine miles wide. Gozo, the next largest and far-less populated island, is nine miles long by five miles wide; tiny Comino is but one square mile.

Located 58 miles south of Sicily and 186 miles north of Africa, Malta has a central location in the Mediterranean and deep, natural harbors, making it a strategic gem for thousands of years.

A succession of powerful cultures claimed its shores -- the Carthaginians, Romans, Arabs, Normans, Knights of St. John, French and, lastly, the British who granted Malta independence in 1964.

English is equally spoken along with Maltese, the national language derived from an Arabic dialect. Other vestiges of the British occupation are red telephone booths straight out of Old London and the custom of driving on the left. Your clients will find the Maltese friendly and helpful, with Americans warmly greeted as a welcome rarity.

Valletta on the Island of Malta, the country's capital and a UNESCO World Heritage Site, is one of the world's first planned communities. Laid out by the Knights of St. John as a "city built by gentlemen, for gentlemen," Valletta's fortified stone ramparts encircle walkable but staircase-steep streets packed with palaces and churches.

A suggested first stop is the Maltese Experience, a 45-minute audiovisual presentation that explains Malta's complicated past. Another must-do activity is to stroll the arches of

the Upper Barracca Gardens, built for the knights' pleasure, for a stirring view of the Grand Harbour -- today, a popular cruise-ship port of call -- that made the capture of Valletta such a prize for thousands of years.

Getting about is easy, thanks to a public bus system that, for the equivalent of about 60 cents regardless of the destination, operates on both Malta and Gozo. Taxis are numerous (haggling is common) via *karozzin*, a horse-drawn carriage, which is utilized by the local population as well. A clip-clop tour through the quiet, narrow streets of Mdina, Malta's aristocratic capital until 1571, is quite possibly the ideal way to pass the balance of the day.

Destination Resources

Getting There

There are no direct flights from the U.S. Air Malta, Alitalia and EasyJet offer direct, short flights to Malta from Rome, the closest connecting international airport.

When to Go

Spring and fall are Malta's most spectacular seasons with almost no rainfall and temperatures in the mid-70s to mid-80s. Fiesta season runs from May to September, as each village celebrates with fireworks, marching bands and tables loaded with Maltese food.

Where to Stay

Castille Hotel, Valletta

Housed in a 16th-century mansion with splendid views from its rooftop restaurant.

www.hotelcastillemalta.com

Phoenicia Hotel Malta

Valletta's venerable grand hotel, located just outside the city gate.

www.phoenciamalta.com

The Palace Hotel Malta, Sliema

A luxury, boutique, five-star luxury hotel with European ambience.

www.thepalacesliemahotel.com

Where to Eat

Bobbyland, Dingli Cliffs

People come from all parts of Malta to savor rabbit and other local dishes at this unpretentious restaurant.

www.bobbyland.eu

What to Do

English is widely spoken so getting around is simple, and no sites are more than an approximately 30-minute drive from Valletta. The tiny country's compelling history,

including prehistoric sites, is a major attraction for American tourists, but clients might also like to take advantage of the Mediterranean's clear waters for swimming, snorkeling and diving.