

# Malta's Cultural Heritage

*A perfect place for a long weekend*



Our short visit had many highlights which included the trip to Gozo, a ride in a horse and cab around the former capital, known today as the 'silent' city, a boat trip around the bays in the capital Valletta and visits to natural phenomena like the blue grotto.

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MALTA IS A COUNTRY PACKED WITH HISTORY  
AND WITH ITS NEIGHBOURING ISLAND OF GOZO  
IS GREAT FOR THOSE WHO LOVE HISTORY AS  
WELL AS THE SUNSHINE

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## *Introduction*

*As I sat looking across the azure blue water as we waited for the ferry to leave Gozo for the mainland I wondered why I had never visited Malta before. Wanting to blow away the winter cobwebs but with the expense of Christmas still weighing heavily on the bank balance it had been a cheap flight. The Spa hotel with its inclusive breakfast had also been a great price and a great find. Throw in some good weather all year round, a welcoming friendly population who speak English as well as Maltese, a fascinating and colourful history, stunning scenery, great architecture ..... I could go on and on.*

Maltese cross

Valetta

View of Gozo from the water







## Valetta

No trip to Malta would be complete without a visit to its capital Valletta. Its narrow streets, often one way are steep and clogged with traffic and parking is almost impossible so driving a hire car in town is not a sensible option. Kerbs are high and the ground underfoot is not always easy but this does not mean that you have to miss out. Taking an hour and a half trip by boat around the harbours and its bays on either side of the peninsular which Valletta occupies will give you wonderful views and the informative commentary will explain everything you need to know.

Other boat trips also take you to other island highlights lasting from a few hours to a whole day. At the Malta Ex-

perience, which you can reach by bus or taxi, the islands history is extolled in a 45 minute presentation. This includes much of its importance during the world wars, a very topical subject in these memorial years.

From outside the Co-Cathedral of St John is unassuming but if you are going to visit just one of the capitals religious places of worship make it this one. Inside it drips with gold and intricately carved stone wall designs with a painted vaulted ceiling and side altars with scenes from the life of St John. Among the treasures found in the Cathedral is the unique Caravaggio painting depicting the beheading of St John and the splendid vaulted central nave with frescoes of Mattia Preti.





HORSE AND CARRIAGE WAIT OUTSIDE THE SILENT CITY

ONBOARD THE HORSE DRAWN CARRIAGE

VIEWS INSIDE THE CITY

## The Silent City

In Malta's former capital which is known today as the silent city, we took a horse drawn carriage around the narrow medieval streets. It is one of Europe's finest examples of an ancient walled city and is a mixture of medieval and baroque architecture. Its history goes back over 4000 years and tradition records that St Paul stayed here after his shipwreck 2000 years ago. Today 200 people live within its confines, many of them in religious orders. It has three main gates and from a view point on the massive ancient wall which surrounds it much of the island can be seen.

We gained these and many other fascinating facts from our driver who

continually lifted the fringing on the canopy over our heads to lean in and give us a potted running commentary. 'Here live 7 sisters who belong to a closed order and they have never set foot outside'.

'Here they film many movies including the Count of Monte Christo.'

'See the two crosses on the top of the cathedral. Its one cross for a church-like the one on the other side of the square, 2 for a cathedral and 3 for a basilica.'

'Here the wounded were brought in the Second World War'.

'This is the Bishops palace but the current one won't live here. He doesn't like it so now it is the ex palace.'

And so it continued as the little carriage raced with its bell ringing loudly



for tourists on foot to flatten themselves against the walls. Every now and then he would stop and alight, telling the horse to stand still while he pointed out some other feature or suggested this was a good photo opportunity. He had a great sense of humour and was warm and friendly like all of the Maltese we encountered.

## Gozo

Despite it being January it was warm and sunny which meant that the small island of Gozo was like a gem set in a shimmering sea of blue. As the island experiences 300 days of sunshine each year few visitors will see it otherwise. It lies to the north of the main island and can easily be seen in a day although staying here for longer and taking time to appreciate the slow going pace and tranquillity is very inviting. It is just a short half hour ferry ride from the main land and boats leave every 45 minutes.

Even before the ferry docks the citadel dominates the landscape and once on shore all roads in Gozo lead to Rabat also known as Victoria and the citadel which rises above it. This high ground is said to have been settled since Neolithic times. For many years the citadel served as a sanctuary but later attacks by Barbary corsairs and Saracens took its population into slavery.

After the Great Siege of 1565, the Knights set about re-fortifying it to provide refuge and defence against further attacks and for the next 75 years the population was required by law to spend their nights



## VIEWS in Gozo

within its confines for their own safety. In later, more peaceful times, this restriction was lifted and people settled below its walls, creating the prosperous town of Rabat. We found the pretty market square with its fountain a great place to enjoy a coffee and soak up the atmosphere. Currently work is being done on many of the access roads

around the citadel so gaining entry is not easy but once the work is finished it will be greatly improved.

Gozo has 46 places of worship and all have great merit. After the Citadel, Ta Piu is one not to be missed. In 1883 a woman from the nearby village of Gharb,





FISHERMAN'S NETS



TRADITIONAL MALTESE BOATS

heard the voice of Our Lady at the small chapel that then occupied the site. It rapidly became a centre of pilgrimage and the number of visitors soon overwhelmed the little church. Today's monumental shrine to Our Lady of Ta' Pinu was built between 1920 and 1931. It is an architectural masterpiece, especially inside with its superb sculptures and craftsmanship in Maltese stone. The sanctuary was constructed in front of the original chapel which still exists. The stone carvings outside are remarkable and against the blue sky they create a lasting impression.

The azure windows lies to the west of the island and is one of the most visited natural sights. It is a 50 metre high rock arch in the Dwejra Point cliffs. Here the sea has

worn a hole through a narrow headland forming "the window". Being January the traditional colourful boats which offer trips out to view it from the water were drawn up on the shore, but when I looked through the giant hole in the rock I saw a boatful of brave souls in the swell. As for me I was quite content to soak up the sight from terra firm!

The hard sandy coloured rock underfoot was fairly smooth but between me and the water, with its view of the famous fungus rock, the ground was honey combed with amazing fissures carved out by the swirling water. Standing here it was easy to understand why the arch is continually eroding and why it is estimated that in a few years it will have completely disappeared. The experience was enhanced by pools of still water which reflected the rocks around and the sky above while all around the stillness and quietness was broken only by the crashing waves.





Malta's history goes back thousands of years and has some great ancient archaeological sites. Mnajdra and Hagar Qim amongst them. Both are much older than Stonehenge and like other sites on the islands are UNESCO listed. They have multiple rooms, flooring, roofs, monumental doorways, stone furniture and statuary. They are all well worth a visit.

So in conclusion, what did I think of Malta. I found it well worth the visit and a place we shall definitely visit again. Return airfares for both of us from our local airport in Bristol were inexpensive and three nights at our four star Spa hotel - via Booking.com, with all its benefits was great value for money. Prices for food and attractions are in Euros and similar to home, so if you like to surf the internet there are some great deals out there, especially at this time of year!



BLUE GROTTO

ANCIENT ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITE

CHURCH IN NORTH OF ISLAND



VALETTA HARBOUR AND LIGHTHOUSE

