

MALTA

A scenic view of a rocky coastline in Malta. A natural sea cave is visible in the rock face, with a small boat in the water inside. The foreground features a large agave plant and a cactus. The sky is a clear, vibrant blue.

Gozo

*The perfect
island escape*

**48 hours in
Valletta**

THE GOURMET GUIDE

**Where to stay,
where to eat,
what to do**

FOOD
and
TRAVEL

MALTA

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This small Mediterranean capital is a treasure trove of Baroque architecture



Welcome

Malta is always reinventing itself. Thirty years ago this meant leading the way in sun-and-sea getaways; now – while those elements of Malta will always be alluring – the archipelago is becoming a gourmet traveller destination. In this 24-page celebration you'll discover how small producers are using traditional methods to create beautiful foods, from *fira* flatbreads to rare albino olives (pages 6-15). Then there's quiet Gozo, Malta's lush neighbouring eco-friendly island (pages 16-21), which has its own blossoming culinary scene. But, should you only have a few days, Valletta makes a perfect city break (pages 22-23). No matter what time of year you visit there's always something going on in the islands, because the Maltese love nothing more than a good festival (page 3). If you've been to Malta and felt its charms, I doubt you'll need inspiration to return, but to remind you that there's always something new to see, check out our list of Malta's top ten hidden gems (page 5).

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FESTIVAL **fever**

Whether you plan to visit in January or July, in Malta you're never far from a festival – locals are always finding a new reason to celebrate. Here are just a few of the very best...

JANUARY

INTERNATIONAL BAROQUE FESTIVAL, VALLETTA

Valletta is widely considered to be one of the finest Baroque cities anywhere, so it's about time the city launched an annual festival celebrating this. The first will run in 2013; events include opera in the Manoel Theatre. vallettabaroquefestival.com.mt

FEBRUARY

CARNIVAL, VARIOUS LOCATIONS

Forget New Orleans – the world's oldest carnival, dating to 1535, takes place in Valletta and around Malta and Gozo. Colourful parades with lavishly costumed performers, live bands and floats.

MARCH

EASTER CELEBRATIONS, VARIOUS LOCATIONS

Catholic Easter celebrations include Good Friday processions through 21 different towns and villages in Malta and Gozo.

APRIL

INTERNATIONAL FIREWORKS FESTIVAL, GRAND HARBOUR

For two days at the end of every April, the sky above Malta's Grand Harbour is ablaze with competitive pyrotechnic displays. Grab a spot at Barriera Wharf in Valletta for the best views.

APRIL-MAY

MEDIEVAL FESTIVAL, MDINA

Malta's ancient hilltop town plays host to a charming medieval festival, which includes themed museum exhibitions, music, fire juggling, and actors dressed as Knights of St John. You can even witness a performance of Gregorian chanting. medievalmdina.eu

JUNE-SEPTEMBER

TRADITIONAL VILLAGE FESTAS, VARIOUS LOCATIONS

Every village in Malta has its own patron saint, and once a year a celebration is held in that saint's honour, with the locals bringing out elaborate street decorations, music, food stalls and fireworks. Four straight months of events means that if you visit in summertime you're likely to catch at least one of them.

JULY

JOSEPH CALLEJA CONCERT, FLORIANA

Maltese tenor Joseph Calleja is something of a national treasure, and watching him perform in his home country is particularly enthralling, whether you're a fan of classical music or not. He gives an annual concert every summer at the Granaries in Floriana. josephcalleja.com

JULY

MALTA ARTS FESTIVAL, VARIOUS LOCATIONS

One for those who like to get stuck in; theatre, dance and visual arts come together in a series of demonstrations, performances, workshops and talks. maltaartsfestival.org

JULY

INTERNATIONAL JAZZ FESTIVAL, VALLETTA

Taking place at Ta' Liesse church at the Grand Harbour, this festival is so close to the water that crowds watch the performances from aboard their bobbing boats and yachts. maltajazzfestival.org

OCTOBER

OPERA SEASON, VICTORIA, GOZO

Gozo has two opera houses, the Aurora (teatruaurora.com) and Astra (mediterranea.com.mt), and each puts on their own musical celebration within a few days of each other every October.

NOVEMBER

INTERNATIONAL CHOIR FESTIVAL, VARIOUS LOCATIONS

Every two years (next in 2013), Malta hosts choirs from around the world. Secular and sacred music performances in Malta's churches and events spaces.

DECEMBER-JANUARY

BETHLEHEM LIVE, GHAJNSIELEM, GOZO

In a 20,000 square metre nativity village, over 150 actors re-enact the scene of Jesus' birth throughout December and into January. You can even visit a bakery, market, crafts area, or stay a night in the Bethlehem Inn. ghajnsielem.com

VILLAGE **food** FESTIVALS

MARCH

Milk Festival, Gharghur

APRIL

Strawberry Festival, Mgarr

MAY

Rikottafest, Kirkop

MAY

Potato Festival, Qrendi

JUNE

Farmer's Festival, Burmarrad

SEPTEMBER

Bread Festival, Qormi

SEPTEMBER

Olive Oil Festival, Zejtun

OCTOBER

Chocolate Festival, Hamrun

EVERY SUNDAY

Fish Market, Marsaxlokk





GRAPE ESCAPES

Even the most devoted oenophile probably hasn't had many chances to sample Maltese wine, seeing as – despite a winemaking tradition stretching back 2,000 years – it is rarely available outside the archipelago. So all the more reason to visit during one of the summer wine festivals. Every July producer Marsovin holds a three-day vinous celebration with music and dance (marsovin.com) in Valletta's picturesque Hastings Gardens, while Delicata (delicata.com), Malta's oldest family-run winery, hosts their own version in the capital's Upper Barrakka Gardens and Nadur, Gozo in August. If you can't make it to one of the scheduled events, some producers on both Malta and Gozo offer tastings and tours of their vineyards year-round.

ANCIENT *wonders*

Maltese builders can hardly move an inch without discovering a new prehistorical site, thanks to the fact that Malta and Gozo have been inhabited for over 7,000 years. The Unesco World Heritage sites of Hal Saflieni Hypogeum (an enormous subterranean temple and burial place dating from 2,500 BC) and the Megalithic Temples, located throughout the islands, should be on every visitor's itinerary. But there are plenty of natural wonders too – don't miss the Azure Window, a remarkable limestone archway, and Fungus Rock (Dwejra, Gozo), covered with a plant once used as medicine by the Knights of St John. The Blue Lagoon (Comino) is one of Malta's most famous sights and can't be missed.

TRAVEL *info*



GETTING TO THE MALTESE ISLANDS

AIR MALTA runs direct flights from Heathrow, Gatwick and Manchester all year, and in summer, Birmingham, Bristol, Cardiff, Exeter, Newcastle and Norwich. airmalta.com

EASYJET flies from Belfast, Gatwick, Manchester and Newcastle. easyjet.com

RYANAIR operates routes from Birmingham, Bournemouth, Bristol, Edinburgh, Glasgow Prestwick, Leeds Bradford, London Stansted and London Luton. ryanair.com

GREEN ISLAND

With fewer than 30,000 people living in its strikingly green, undulating landscape – fringed by pristine beaches and secluded lagoons – Malta's sister island of Gozo has always been considered something of an eco-paradise. But by 2020 it will be official: the Maltese government is working to turn Gozo into an 'eco-island', with sustainable tourism at the forefront of the initiative. For visitors this means green accommodation (such as rural stays in traditional farmhouses), a bustling calendar of cultural events, and more opportunities for the excellent diving Gozo is known for. Plus, there'll be a new prehistory trail in Xaghra. eco-gozo.com



TOP

hidden gems in Malta

CAPITAL CHOICE

Valletta is a candidate for 2018 European Capital of Culture (an honour shared with a yet-to-be-announced Dutch city), and in preparation for the thousands of visitors that could descend on the city that year, locals are already working hard to ensure it looks its absolute best. Valletta is one of Europe's most important Baroque cities (a fact that will be celebrated for the first time at the 2013 International Baroque Festival, see page 3), but a heritage of spectacular architecture has far from left the city stagnant. A project by Italian Renzo Piano (who designed London's Shard) will see new buildings appear, including a new parliament, and an open air theatre on the site of the old opera house, which was bombed during the Second World War and has remained in ruins ever since. Even the old city gate will be refurbished. The projects are due to be completed by 2013, so if you want to enjoy the capital's sights there's no excuse for waiting until 2018 to pay a visit. valletta2018.org



Wit & wisdom

- At greater than 6,000 years old, Malta's megalithic temples are the world's oldest surviving freestanding structures, outdating even the Egyptian pyramids.
- Despite its small size, the island of Gozo has 46 churches, the largest of which – the Rotunda at Xewkija – can accommodate 3,000 people and boasts a huge dome.
- The tiny island of Comino, on which there is only one family in full-time residence, was supposedly named after the cummin seed, which once flourished here and still gives the island its characteristic scent.

Travel off the beaten path and you'll discover a new side to Malta – and terrific views



- 1 For an unforgettable view over Marsamxett Harbour and Manoel Island's historic fort and bastions, make your way to Hastings Gardens, which is located at Valletta's highest point.
- 2 The rejuvenated Tigne Point district in Sliema boasts a number of newly opened restaurants, and post-dinner on a balmy Maltese evening, it's the perfect place to stroll. A bonus is the excellent view of Valletta and the Floriana Fortifications.
- 3 At night, Malta's limestone buildings glow warmly with lights; head to Cospicua, the largest of the Three Cities, for a particularly romantic view of the Grand Harbour, nearby Vittoriosa, Fort St Angelo, Senglea and Valletta.
- 4 Built in 1637 to protect Gnejna Bay, which it overlooks, Lippija Tower is part of a larger island historic defence network. Besides Gnejna Bay, from the top you can see Ghajn Tuffieha Bay.
- 5 Snorkel lovers should plunge into St Peter's Pool, a cyan cove made for exploring in Malta's south. Or, just hang out on the warm limestone rocks and soak up the sun.
- 6 Situated at Comino's highest point, the Santa Maria Tower is easy to find on an island that's only a mere 3.5 square kilometres. For some great views of the island as well as the enchanting Blue Lagoon, scale its steps.
- 7 The gridded seascape of the Qbajjar salt pans, on the north of Gozo, shimmers with reflections of the sun and clouds, making for a picture-perfect landscape. Take the road from Qbajjar to Zebbug for unforgettable coastal views.
- 8 Towering 143 metres above sea level, the Ta' Cenc cliffs in south Gozo are not only great for the views over the sparkling blue water, but also for the garrigue and wild flowers. The area makes for a stunning walk in the heart of nature, wondering at the ancient cart ruts and prehistoric domain.
- 9 Ix-Xatt I-Ahmar Bay literally means 'Red Beach', and is a beautiful secluded spot that is great for swimming, but also diving – the wreck of a scuttled Gozo ferry lies out in the depths of the bay, making an excellent site for underwater enthusiasts.
- 10 The Eastern-most part of Gozo, the small village of Qala, affords spectacular views over Comino and Malta from its rocky hillsides. The coastline is rugged and wild, but perfect for tackling on a trek; Hondoq Ir-Rummien beach is great for diving.



Inhabited since 5,000BC and located at the crossroads of ancient trade routes, Malta boasts

A KNIGHT



a unique cuisine that is as eclectic as its fascinating history, discovers Lucy Gillmore

'S TALE

PHOTOGRAPHY BY SARAH COGHILL



Standing at the crossroads of various cultures, Malta has been occupied in turn by Phoenicians, Carthaginians, Romans, Arabs, Normans, Aragonese, Knights of St John (an international bunch), French and British

Donald Caligari's cosy little restaurant, Tal-Petut, was once a humble neighbourhood greengrocers, but is now a gourmet gem hidden down a narrow alley in historic Vittoriosa. Whipping up a dish of fresh, local goat's cheese rolled in olives and capers, served on a bed of tomatoes with a dash of sun-dried tomato purée and flavoured with fennel seed, he passionately tells me about food on his island. 'Why do people want cuisine to be cosmopolitan?' he begins. 'I don't care if the Italians come over here, what does mozzarella have to do with us? This is Malta; I serve goat's cheese. We want Maltese snails, not *escargots*.' He gives a dramatic shrug. 'I am a cook not a chef. I provide honest food – that's it!'

That's not quite it: his food is exceptional. An ex-drug addiction councillor who went on to work for news agency Reuters, Caligari's passion for Malta – and Maltese cuisine – led him to open the restaurant three years ago serving traditional dishes, but with a modern twist. Rabbit, Malta's unofficial national dish, usually fried in garlic or cooked in tomato sauce and eaten with spaghetti, is made here instead with caramelised onion and flavoured with carob syrup, fennel seed, bay leaves, pepper, chilli and garlic. It's cooked for days, rather than hours.

His home-baked theorising comes thick and fast. 'Recession is good for the kitchen. People go back to basics and "recycling" food, cooking things like bread pudding and belly or collar of pork.' Wasteful, extravagant cooking is not on the menu here.

We try the pork collar first. It has been rubbed with sea salt and fennel seed, wrapped with bay leaves and rosemary, rolled in foil and cooked in a bain-marie for more than two hours. Then, it was

rested in the fridge for a couple of days before being baked for another two hours. It melts in the mouth. The bread pudding with anise, homemade candied peel and rosewater, drizzled with local honey and served with a dried fig compote is equally delicious.

Caligari is just one of a stream of passionate advocates of a cuisine, Mediterranean in style but with North African influences – and its own indelible character, that's virtually unknown outside these waters. This tiny archipelago, just 90km from Sicily and around 280km from Tunisia, once straddled the major trading routes between North Africa and Europe and, as a result, has a complex culinary heritage. Standing at the crossroads of various cultures, it has been occupied in turn by the Phoenicians, Carthaginians, Romans, Arabs, Normans, Aragonese, Knights of St John (an international bunch), French and then, from 1800, the British. Malta as we know it now only gained independence in 1964, and even today red British phone boxes are still dotted around.

With so many different countries occupying these soils, no one stands out as the major influence on the gastronomy, and the Maltese are so proud of their cuisine that they're reticent about attributing any part of it to another nationality. However, rabbit in tomato sauce with spaghetti clearly has an Italian influence, *aljotta* is a garlic and tomato-based fish soup with more than a passing resemblance to a French bouillabaisse, carob syrup is used liberally in Maltese cooking – thanks to the Arabs who introduced the carob tree (along with citrus groves) – and it's partly down to the Knights of St John that rabbit stew is widely regarded as the national dish.

The knights tried to ban the hunting of rabbits, viewing this as the preserve of the nobility. The Maltese peasants, however, rose up in resistance; and with the backing of the bishops at the end of the 18th century, restrictions were lifted. As well as cooking rabbit at home, meeting up with friends for a *fenkata* (the eating of rabbit stew) is a popular night out, while on the 28 and 29 June every year in Buskett Gardens, Malta's only real woodland, rabbit is the main dish served at the traditional knees up, the Imnarja Festival.

It's not only the food that has a multitude of multicultural influences. Today, on the islands most people are bilingual, speaking Maltese and English. The Maltese language is a Semitic language written in Latin script. After the Arabic period the island was re-Christianised and many words have their roots in languages such as Italian, Spanish and French. Good morning, for instance, is *bongu* from the French, bonjour. The word for God, however, in a country where 95 per cent of the population is Roman Catholic (you can't move here without tripping over a church) is, tellingly, *Alla*, which sums up the hybrid nature of this Mediterranean rock.

The archipelago has three main islands: Malta (45km by 13km), Gozo (14km by 9km) and Comino (just three square kilometres). The total population is only 410,000, most living in the southern —>

TRAVEL INFORMATION

Currency is the euro; Malta is one hour ahead of GMT. Malta has a Mediterranean climate with a mean annual temperature of around 18°C. Summer highs hover around 30°C, while winters are mild, with lows around 10°C. Parts of the islands average more than 300 sunny days per year.

RESOURCES

Malta Tourism Authority (visitmalta.com) has practical information, and brochures available for download. The tourist board also has detailed accommodations listings, from five-star hotels to apartment rentals.

FURTHER READING

Malta, Gozo and Comino – Off the beaten track by Malta Nature Trust (see ramblersmalta.org).

Uncommon Malta and Gozo by Emma Mattei (Miranda Books, £19).

Pippa's Festa – A celebration of food in Malta by Pippa Mattei (Miranda Books, £27).

Cooking with Peter by Peter Dacoutros (Sierra, series from £12).



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:
PLATTER, TA KLARICC, RABAT;
FRESH ZEPPOLI; FONTANELLA
CAFE; BRAISED ARTICHOKE
HEARTS; SNAILS, TA KLARICC;
XARA PALACE; CHOCOLATE
CAKE, FONTANELLA





Rabbit with spaghetti clearly has an Italian influence, *aljotta* has more than a passing resemblance to French bouillabaisse, and carob syrup is used liberally in Maltese cooking, thanks to the Arabs

THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: STREET SIGN IN VITTORIOSA; KIOSK SELLING TRADITIONAL CAKES AND NOUGAT, RABAT; STEPS IN VITTORIOSA; BAKER SALVU SCERRI WITH FTIRA LOAVES. OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: SUNSET OVER BIGHI; SERVERS AT TA KLARICC; REMOVING LOAVES FROM THE WOOD-FIRED OVEN; MATTY CREMONA; PORK COLLAR, TAL-PETUT; DONALD CALIGARI, TAL-PETUT





half of Malta. On Comino there are only four residents – and one four-star hotel. In spring the islands are ablaze with wildflowers and carpeted in green. However, the overwhelming hue throughout Malta is golden. The abundant limestone quarried here is white when it's cut but turns a honey colour as it bakes in the sun. The stark contrast with the deep blue sea and sky is dramatic.

Holidaymakers flock here for the Mediterranean sunshine, and you can't blame them, what with over 300 sunny days annually. Malta is a haven for history buffs too – with 7,000 years of architectural sights, from megalithic temples to Baroque palaces and three Unesco world heritage sites, it's chock full. There's historical Valletta, former seat of the Knights of St John, and the ancient hilltop fortified capital of Mdina which, after an earthquake destroyed most of it in 1693, was rebuilt in Baroque style. Meandering its narrow alleys and tucking into a gooey cake in the Fontanella Tea Garden, perched on the walls with breathtaking views, is a highlight of a trip here.

Maltese villages have cultural – and gastronomic – appeal too. Each has its own patron saint; there are a fair few St Pauls, as this was the Apostle who introduced Christianity to the islands after he was shipwrecked here in 60AD. Saints' feast days are celebrated in exuberant style with marching bands and most villages even make their own fireworks for the occasion. Food festivals are big events, and many villages have their own specialities. In Kirkop they make ricotta, and Qormi is known for its bread (bakeries sprang up here as it's close to the port where the flour was traditionally landed). Lija is famous for citrus fruits – oranges, lemons and grapefruit – there's an olive oil festival in Zejtun and in Mgarr, you'll find a cluster of restaurants around the church all specialising in rabbit.

It's not all about the traditional; in areas like Portomaso Harbour, modern, sleek restaurants buzz day and night with stylish locals in search of contemporary Mediterranean cuisine. Village life, however, can be like stepping back in time: the butcher, baker and candlestick maker are still part of the scene. During the summer, it's so hot indoors that the Maltese spend all day and evening by the sea. They set up a barbecue, simply telling the local butcher how many will be there and trust him to do the rest. Maltese sausages are traditionally a mix of beef, pork, fresh onion and herbs – and no salt. —>

WHERE TO EAT

Prices are per person for three courses with half a bottle of wine, unless otherwise stated.

Tarragon Marvin Gauci is one of the most exciting chefs in Malta; his restaurant, overlooking St Paul's Bay, is one of its most fashionable eateries. His signature dish is *umbrina al sale* – a Mediterranean bass in salt. The whole fish is covered in a thick layer of salt, doused with sambuca then set alight at the table for a touch of theatre. Signature starters include sesame crushed black tiger prawns in champagne tempura with a chilli and honey vinaigrette and salmon and local grouper carpaccio marinated with garlic, olive oil and fresh lemon juice. From £22. *Church Street, St Paul's Bay; 00 356 2157 3759, tarragonmalta.com*

Tal-Petut This rustic-chic little restaurant in historic Vittoriosa serves traditional Maltese dishes with a contemporary twist. The five-course menu plus lemonade costs £23, including a selection of antipasto, a main meat course and coffee and dessert. *20, Triq Pacifiku Scicluna, Birgu, Vittoriosa; 00 356 2189 1169, talpetut.com*

Ta' Nenu A little artisan bakery and restaurant specialising in traditional *fira*, the Maltese version of pizza. The same dough is used but it's kneaded in a different way. Each costs between £5.20 and £8. *143 St Domenic St, Valletta; 00 356 2258 1535, nenuthebaker.com*

Ta' Klaricc This traditional restaurant is packed with Maltese customers tucking into rabbit spaghetti or sharing platters of *bigilla* (a broad bean, garlic and parsley *pâté*), goat's cheese, sun-dried tomatoes, capers, olives, pickled onions, all served with crusty bread. Finish with a mix of sweets and nuts: homemade Turkish delight, dried apricots, walnuts and fresh figs. Dishes from £5. *Buskett Road, Rabat; 00 356 2145 0888*

Rogantino's This old 16th-century hunting lodge is out in the sticks – but worth the effort it takes to find it. Think stone-flagged floors, vaulted ceilings, bare honey-coloured walls, antiques and antlers. Tony Grech's speciality is suckling pig cooked for 10 hours – it melts in the mouth. A three-course meal costs £20. *Palazz I-Ahmar, Wied il Buzbies, Landrijiet Rabat; 00 356 2145 2003, rogantinos.com*

Sciacca An upmarket fish bistro, named after the Sicilian fishing village that inspired its creation. Three-course set menus from £20. *St Augustine Street, St Julians; 00 356 2133 1310, sciaccamalta.com*



Bragioli is another Maltese speciality, a beef roll with mince.

The baker is also part of everyday life. Salvu Scerri, grey-haired and swarthy, clatters around the bakery in shorts and flip-flops. It's too hot to wear anything else. He and his wife Lily bake bread in the traditional wood-fired oven twice a day: he gets up at 1am, she rises at 5am. Then each morning he heads out in his van to the surrounding villages, delivering bread. Customers leave a bag outside their homes with the money inside for their requested loaf.

A film of flour coats the air. Opening the oven door he manhandles the hot, crusty bread, placing it onto the table and breaks off a chunk for us to try. 'I've asbestos hands,' he laughs, shoving a handful of dishes back in the oven – another age-old tradition. Villagers for centuries have used the baker's oven to cook their dinner or roast a joint after the bread has been baked. The bread has a hard crust and dense, chewy texture: the *hobza* (the cob), *panina* (a small cob) and the *bezzun* (a long skinny loaf only differing in shape). During the summer these breads will be smothered with a tangy tomato paste and topped with tuna, olives and capers, to make *hobz biz-zeit*.

Bread is important in Malta. 'The Maltese eat everything with bread, even cantaloupe and Turkish delight!' laughs Frank Cassar, the chef at Ta' Klaricc – a restaurant renowned for its rabbit. 'The Maltese can tell if a restaurant is good by the way they cook the rabbit. Some places serve it in a brown sauce, or use frozen meat', he grimaces. 'We do a lot of slow, one-pot cooking in Malta,' Frank tells me, 'which is the Arab influence – and because the women are lazy. They don't want to do the washing up!'

The restaurant is named after Brian Schembri's grandfather Klaricc, a farmer who worked all his life in the fields and died at the age of 96. Most of the fresh vegetables and salad served in the restaurant come from his other grandfather's farm. As we drive around the island we pass terraced fields and fig, almond, olive and carob trees. To my eyes the land doesn't look particularly fertile.

'The soil is arid and temperatures high, yet agriculture is bountiful here,' Matty Cremona, enthusiastic cook and the author of *The Way We Ate: Memories of Maltese Meals* tells me later. Her husband, Sam, produces olive oil – and re-discovered white —————>



REGIONAL RESTAURANTS

VITTORIOSA

Don Berto Contemporary Mediterranean restaurant on the water's edge; make sure you grab a seat on the terrace. *Birgu; 00 356 2180 8008*

Two and a half lemon Nice waterfront views overlooking the yacht marina. *Birgu; 00 356 2180 9909, twoandahalflemon.com*

Del Borgo There is a wonderful atmosphere at this wine bar and wine shop located in a former palace. *Birgu; 00 356 2180 3710, delborgomalta.com*

Lupanara Traditional Maltese food in a fantastic setting below Fort St Angelo; *00 356 2180 3086, lupanara.com.mt*

VALLETTA WATERFRONT

Pintonino Great Grand Harbour views; considering the location, it makes sense that it specialises in fish. *00 356 2122 7773*

Pepe Nero Fresh seafood on the Valletta waterfront. *00 356 2122 2220*

MDINA

Medina Located in an old Norman residence, but the courtyard is the place to be to soak up the local atmosphere. Portions are generous. *00 356 2145 4004*

Ciapetti A lovely, secluded and romantic courtyard, and good pasta dishes on offer. *00 356 2145 9987*

ST JULIAN'S

Gululu Homely sharing dishes, both traditional and modern, right on the waterfront. *Spinola Bay; 00 356 2133 3431, gululu.com.mt*

Peppino's Maltese and Italian cuisine. *00 356 2137 3200, peppinosmalta.com*

San Giuliano Fish restaurant overlooking the water. *Spinola Bay; 00 356 2135 2000, sangiulianorestaurant.com*

Raffael Specialises in seafood. *Spinola Bay; 00 356 2135 2000*

Terrazza Romantic restaurant and wine bar with outdoor terrace overlooking the bay. *Spinola Bay; 00 356 2138 4939, terrazza.eu*

SLIEMA

The Chophouse Steak restaurant with excellent views across to Valletta. *00 356 2060 3355, chophouse.com.mt*

Sale e Pepe Laid-back atmosphere, Maltese and Italian food. The fish options are the most popular. *00 356 2138 3345*

MARSAXLOKK

Harbour Lights A good spot for lunches in this atmospheric fishing village. *00 356 2165 8089*

Ix-Xlukkajr Watch the fishing boats putter around the harbour while you enjoy a seafood-filled meal at this restaurant, which is one of the village's best. *00 356 2165 2109*


MELLIEHA

Giuseppi's Located in an old Maltese farmhouse, this local favourite has an intimate atmosphere. *00 356 2157 4882*

The Arches Award-winning restaurant with an upmarket menu and décor. *00 356 2152 3460, thearchesmalta.com*

OPPOSITE PAGE, CLOCKWISE
FROM LEFT: GHAJN TUFFIEHA BAY;
FONTANELLA SIGN; WINES FROM
MERIDANA ESTATE; BEEHIVES IN
MELLIEHA. THIS PAGE, FROM TOP:
MDINA; MERIDANA ESTATE

GOURMET TRAVELLER



In Kirkop they make ricotta, the village of Qormi is known for its bread, Lija is famous for its citrus fruits, there's an olive oil festival in Zejtun and in Mgarr you'll find restaurants specialising in rabbit



THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: ROGANTINO'S RESTAURANT DINING AREA; INSIDE BOTTEGIN PALAZZO XARA BAND CLUB; MDINA CATHEDRAL. OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: ZEPPOLI FILLED WITH RICOTTA; LOCALS IN RABAT; FEAST OF ST JOSEPH, RABAT; OLD BEER CRATES, ROGANTINO'S; CANDIED PEEL; ROGANTINO'S

During the summer, it's so hot indoors that the Maltese spend all day and evening by the sea. They set up a barbecue, simply telling the local butcher how many will be there and trusting him to do the rest

olives on the island. For centuries everyone thought they were a myth, mentioned in the writings of Cicero in Roman times, but consigned to folklore until Sam stumbled upon a tree in the grounds of a rehabilitation centre in 1994. Proudly producing jars of white olives swimming in oil and brine he takes up the tale. 'The Italians thought they were albino olives and so wouldn't reproduce, but I grafted them in Bari and brought 30 young trees back to Malta and started to produce white olives. We don't have enough to press yet so don't know if they can produce oil. Maybe this year!' □

Lucy Gillmore and Sarah Coghill travelled to Malta courtesy of the Malta Tourism Authority (visitmalta.com) and Air Malta (airmalta.com).

FOOD GLOSSARY

- Aljotta** A garlicky fish soup.
- Ajoli** Pieces of bread mixed with anchovies, garlic, parsley and dill.
- Bigilla** White bean or broad bean and garlic pâté.
- Bragioli** A Maltese speciality, beef roll with mince, known as beef olives.
- Fenkata** Eating rabbit stew.
- Figolla** Almond-filled pastry for Easter.
- Ftira** Flatbread, pizza-like snack, with various toppings.
- Gbejniet** Gozitan cheeselet, made of sheep or goat's cheese.
- Hanini** Digestif made from carob.
- Hobz biz-zejt** Traditional sandwich bread rubbed with tomato and olive oil and filled with tuna, onion and garlic.
- Kusksu** Traditional soup for Lent – onions, olive oil, sun-dried tomato paste, tomatoes, breadcrumbs, peas, vegetable stock and pasta.
- Lampuki pie** Fish pie.
- Minestra** Vegetable soup.
- Pastizzi** Puff pastries filled with ricotta or peas; eaten throughout the day.
- Sfineg** Pastry stuffed with anchovy; a sort of fritter.
- Zeppole** Traditional choux pastry stuffed with ricotta; served at *festas*.

WHERE TO STAY

Xara Palace This elegant palace, now a luxurious Relais & Châteaux hotel with 17 suites, is probably the most glamorous place to stay in Malta. Think Persian rugs scattered across stone floors, antique furniture, original artworks and a good rooftop restaurant and terrace with panoramic views from its privileged vantage point in the walled city of Mdina. There is a small gym with a sauna, though it's not the place to come for a spa break. Doubles from £149. *Misrah il-Kunsill, Mdina; 00 356 2145 0560, xarapalace.com.mt*

The Palace Hotel A five-star hotel that mixes contemporary and classic design; four unique designer suites are themed around concepts such as 'music' or 'texture', while five palazzo capua suites are more traditional, with warm colour schemes. There are two restaurants and a café, as well as a three-levelled spa and an outdoor swimming pool. Doubles from £78. *Sliema; 00 356 2133 3444, thepalacemalta.com*

Hotel Juliani A small design boutique hotel, Juliani is located across from Spinola Bay in the popular St Julian's area. Rooms are comfortable and furnished with a white and seaside-blue colour scheme; many have lovely views across the water. There is a spa and gym, but it's best to head to the rooftop sun deck and swimming pool where you can relax after a busy day exploring the islands. Standard doubles from £55. *St George's Road, St Julian's; 00 356 2138 8000, hoteljuliani.com*

DON'T MISS

Marsaxlokk Fishing Village This bustling little harbour is picture-postcard pretty, the jauntily painted boats, called *luzzu*, have an eye painted either side of the bow to protect the fishermen from evil spirits. Along the waterfront the Sunday fish market is atmospheric and heaving, women cleaning and scaling fish from sea bass, bream, mahi mahi, grouper, red mullet, under makeshift awnings, while fishermen mend their nets in the sun.

Bottegin Palazzo Xara A typical 'band club', where local neighbourhood members meet for food, games, celebrations and music. This one in Rabat is located in a 300-year-old magnificent Baroque Palazzo. *Triq San Pawl; 00 356 7961 7429*



Meeting up with friends for a *fenkata* (the eating of rabbit stew) is a popular night out, while in June every year in Buskett Gardens, rabbit is served at the traditional Imnarja Festival



Go slow Gozo

The smaller, neighbouring sister island to Malta is a tranquil producing their own quality food from the sun-soaked land.



and lush paradise, with a rich and enduring heritage of generations of families
Lucy Gillmore discovers Gozo's rugged beauty and meets its charming residents

PHOTOGRAPHY BY SARAH COGHILL





We barely finish one course at Rikardu's restaurant before the delicately creamy cheese arrives with a plate of moreish ravioli – washed down with an earthy red



PREVIOUS: VIEW FROM CITADEL WALLS. THIS PAGE, FROM TOP: JOSEPH SPITERI, TA' MENA; RELAXING WITH A RED; A JAR OF GBEJNIET; RIKARDU AND HIS FLOCK; MAKING GBEJNIET. OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: CHURCH IN XAGHRA; PLATTER AT TA' RIKARDU; TRADITIONAL RAVJUL; BLOOD ORANGES, TA' MENA; TA' RIKARDU RESTAURANT; PRICKLY PEAR LIQUEUR, TA' MENA

Myth is no stranger to the island of Gozo. Reputed to be Homer's Isle of Ogygia, where the nymph Calypso kept Odysseus her captive companion for seven years, there's certainly an undeniable magic to it. Only a 25-minute hop by ferry from, and a third of the size of, Malta, it has a sleepier, more laidback vibe. It's greener and more rural than its sister; and is where, I'm told with a wry smile, the Maltese come for some peace and quiet. Even the occupying medieval Aragonese noted its appeal; 'gozo' is the Castilian word for joy.

The atmosphere might be soporific, but the Gozitans are hard workers – and innovators. Ta' Savina is an artisan range of foods created here by the Magro Brothers whose first provisions store, four generations ago, was in the main square of Victoria (named after Queen Victoria in honour of her diamond jubilee, exactly 125 years ago). Now the largest food producer in Malta, during the harvest in July and August, over 300 farmers supply the company with 10,000 tonnes of sweet, sun-ripened produce to pulp and juice. At the Magro Food Village, you can watch artisan foods being made by hand before buying Maltese specialities such as carob syrup, honey, olive oils, jams and fig chutney. As well as reviving old recipes, they're taking Maltese food to a wider audience.

On a more local level, Ta' Rikardu in the citadel is another restaurant named after a farmer: this one still working the land, milking his goats and sheep and tending his vines. Field to fork is a recurring theme. We drive up the dusty track to meet Rikardu, who tends his 60 sheep and 40 goats with his sheepdog, Rex, on a patch of land slightly larger than a couple of football pitches. He grows five varieties of grape including cabernet sauvignon, grenache and sauvignon blanc. 'I planted the vines 12 years ago and now produce upwards of 9,000 bottles a year for the restaurant – and I also drink some, of course!' he says.

Rikardu heads to the farm at 5.30am, then takes the milk to his kitchen near the restaurant where he spends the morning making the creamy 'fresh cheese', *gbejniet* or Gozitan cheeselets, a local delicacy. Following him from the farm, we watch as he adds rennet powder to the milk. After 20 minutes, he spoons it into plastic pots pricked with holes so the whey will drain out and sprinkles salt on top. He turns the cheese from time to time to help it dry. By midday it's ready to serve in the restaurant.

What Rikardu doesn't sell as fresh cheese, he dries on the roof. He then preserves them in jars to sell in the restaurant. 'I don't like vinegar,' he says, rolling the little cheeses in rosé wine then coating them with pepper. 'It's too strong, so I use wine.'

At lunchtime, Rikardu the farmer and cheesemaker becomes a restaurateur. Tucking into a platter of the wind-dried cured *gbejniet*, capers, tomatoes and bread in the packed, stone-vaulted restaurant, we've barely finished one course before the delicately creamy cheese arrives with a plate of moreish ravioli – washed down with an earthy red. Everything you eat in Ta' Rikardu comes from his farm. 'Apart from the olive oil,' he laughs. 'I haven't got the time!' ➔





THIS PAGE, FROM TOP LEFT: MR CINI, 'THE OLD MAN OF THE SALT'; HIS SALT; THE AZURE WINDOW, DWEJRA. OPPOSITE: THE QBAJJAR SALT PANS

TRAVEL INFORMATION

Ferries to Gozo from Malta leave from Cirkewwa Harbour. Ferries depart every 45 minutes; the crossing takes 25 minutes. From £3.75. See islandofgozo.org and gozochannel.com

WHERE TO STAY

Farmhouses provide low-key accommodation and are the best way to experience real life in Gozo. There are far too many to list here, but find a complete listing on the Malta Tourist Board's website (visitmalta.com).

Ta' Mena Estate The first agro-tourism complex on the Maltese islands, the estate organises accommodation in a selection of farmhouses with pools in the area for up to ten people. £80-£150 per night. *Rabat Road, Xaghra; 00 356 2156 4939, tamena-gozo.com*

Ta' Cenc Located at the island's highest point, this hotel consists of 83 stone-built bungalows incorporated into the natural Gozitan environment. *Cenc Street, Sannat; 00 356 2219 1000, tacenc.com*

Kempinski San Lawrenz Aside from Ta' Cenc, this is the island's only five-star hotel. *Triq ir-Rokon, San Lawrenz; 00 356 2211 0000, kempinski.com*

WHERE TO EAT

Ta' Rikardu Rikardu's restaurant feels like an old cellar with vaulted ceilings, stone floors and bare stone walls. *Citadel; 00 356 2155 5953*

Zafiro Great waterfront views. *Xlendi; 00 356 2156 5555, hotelsanandrea.com*

Il-Kartell Made up of three connected bathouses. *Marsalforn Bay; 00 356 2155 6918, il-kartellrestaurant.com*



At the Qbajjar salt pans, we meet another hard-working old-timer – Emanuel Cini. Salt pans were first carved out of the limestone rock on the water's edge in Roman times. The seawater collected in the pans evaporates, leaving salt rich in minerals. It's one of the most natural processes in the world: all you need is sun, seawater and wind. Emanuel's family has been producing salt here since 1860, and he has tended the salt pans for the past 43 years. He stores the salt in a cave in the hillside, selling it from a roadside stall.

Gozo is also home to the archipelago's first agro-tourism enterprise. Ta' Mena offers farmhouse accommodation, tours of the estate and winery, and cookery classes. This organic 25-hectare estate is owned by the Spiteri family, and named after Carmen, or 'Mena' Spiteri, who started selling the farm's produce from the door back in 1971. Today, they make a range of products, including a rich sun-dried tomato paste, carob syrup, honey, marmalade, olive oil and wine.

There have been vines here since Roman times – evidence of olive oil, honey and wine were found in the remains of Roman villas. Malta even has two indigenous grape varieties: gellewza and ghirghentina. Wine might have been produced here for 2,000 years, but even the locals laugh that 'good wine' has only been made for 20. Maltese wine's reputation is growing, however, and Ta' Mena now exports to the UK. They produce chardonnay, vermentino and ghirghentina whites, and merlot, cabernet sauvignon, cabernet franc, syrah and serkuzan red wines – most DOC Gozo certified.

Sipping a glass of delicious chilled rosé in the sun with Joseph Spiteri and the estate's chef George Borg, we graze through plates of *bigilla*, a white bean and garlic pâté, and sun-dried tomato paste as Joseph lines up the range of liqueurs made from the estate's lemons, oranges, pomegranates and prickly pears.

Jumping up suddenly, George plucks a blood orange from a tree nearby and slices it open for us to taste (Gozo claims to be the home of the blood orange). It's incredibly succulent and sweet.

'It's the sun – the sun which sweetens everything, gives energy to the fruit,' he enthuses. George is writing a cookery book, he tells us, celebrating traditional food – but with a contemporary twist. 'I'm recording our grandmothers' recipes. Rabbit stew is in there, of course, but I use chocolate, and orange to give it freshness.' Sitting in the sun-dappled orange grove, juice dribbling down our chins, he seems to sum up the reverence for the past, pride in local produce and vision for the future that makes the Maltese islands such a mesmerising – and intoxicating – mix. □

Lucy Gillmore and Sarah Coghill travelled to Gozo courtesy of the Malta Tourism Authority (visitmalta.com) and Air Malta (airmalta.com).

Emanuel's family has been producing salt here since 1860, and he himself has tended the salt pans for the past 43 years. He stores the salt in a cave in the hillside, selling it from a roadside stall





THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: MALTESE CROSS DOOR KNOCKER; CITY STREET SIGNS; GREENGROCER FRANS GRECH WITH HIS SON MARIO, IN ZACHARY STREET

Valletta

Europe's smallest capital it may be, but Valletta has the vibrancy and diversity – not to mention the rich cultural and historical offering – of a city many times its diminutive size

Few capital cities are as picturesque as Valletta. Almost entirely surrounded by the glittering blues of the Marsamxett and Grand Harbours, it is a Baroque masterpiece, and a recognised Unesco World Heritage Site. The Knights of St John, who founded the city in 1566, are to thank; their expenditure left Valletta with a rich collection of lavish art and architecture, as well as a fascinating historical legacy. Even still, this city is no museum: it has a seemingly endless events calendar, plus its residents' zest for life makes Valletta an invigorating spot for a short break.

Valletta's most compelling charms come to you slowly, in snippets: during a lazy walk through its tangled sun-bleached streets, where you'll catch a glimpse of the harbours through silhouettes of 16th-century homes; strolling along the waterfront as a light breeze cuts through the heat; discovering a modern, trendy boutique in a centuries-old limestone building. Life here is an intoxicating mix of slow – think chattering over iced coffee and *imqaret* (date-filled pastries) in Republic Square – and vibrant, like the many colours of the annual Valletta Carnival.

It's easy to while away the hours soaking up the atmosphere, but with a city of this historical stature it would be criminal to miss the sights – and they are impressive. There's St John's Co-Cathedral; unremarkable from the exterior, inside it drips in gold, detailed with insignia of the knights. Many were buried here, and a crypt holds the remains of the Grand Masters. The main draw, however, is the striking Caravaggio work, *The Beheading of St John* – his only signed work. From here move out to other related sights, including some of the *auberges* in which the knights used to live; of those which are open to the public, Auberge d'Italie and Provence (now housing the Museum of Archaeology) have the most impressive interiors. The 16th-century Casa Rocca Piccola (casaroccapiccola.com) is still owned by Maltese nobility and has an astounding collection of period art, furniture and Maltese lace; on some days the resident marquis even leads the tours.

Valletta has a modern side, too: hit the St James Cavalier Centre for Creativity (sjcav.org), a 400-year-old-fortress now used as a modern art, cinema and music space. Back outside, follow the city's ramparts, stopping off at Upper Barrakka Gardens, from which you can see across Grand Harbour to the Three Cities. There's hardly a better water view to be had, except for that aboard a traditional *dghajsa*, which will putter you across the harbour.

In the evening, sip glasses of plummy Maltese wine in laid-back cellar restaurants, or indulge in a creamy layered cake at iconic Caffè Cordina (caffecordina.com). Watch the sun sink down over the horizon; this is Valletta at its slowest, and it is enchanting.



Where to eat

Ta' Nenu (00 356 2258 1535, nenuthebaker.com) See page 11.

Rubino (00 356 2122 4656, rubinomalta.com) Typical Maltese dishes such as rabbit stew or stuffed aubergine with garlic are served.

Leglign (00 356 2122 1699) Located in an atmospheric cellar, this low-key wine bar and restaurant serves Maltese-style tapas.

Trabuxu (00 356 2122 0357, trabuxu.com.mt) On artsy Strait Street, this is a great wine bar. They also own a bistro on South Street.

Trattoria da Pippo (00 356 2124 8029) Great spot for lunch, with a daily changing market menu. Book in advance as it gets busy.

Ta' Gorg Trattoria (00 356 2122 0323) A popular local spot.

Where to stay

The Phoenicia Hotel (00 356 2122 5241, phoeniciamalta.com) Five-star hotel with lovely, sprawling gardens.

Grand Hotel Excelsior (00 356 2125 0520, excelsior.com.mt) Minutes from the city centre, with views over Marsamxett Harbour.

The Osborne Hotel (00 356 2123 2127, osbornehotel.com) Comfortable rooms, swimming pool and terraces.

Castille Hotel (00 356 2124 3677, hotelcastillemalta.com) Located in a 16th-century home in the city centre.

The British Hotel (00 356 2122 4730, britishhotel.com) The longest running hotel in Valletta. Good-value and family-owned.

Palazzo San Pawl (00 356 2123 2127, livinginvalletta.com) Four apartment suites form this restored 17th-century property.

Valletta Suites (00 356 7948 8047, vallettasuites.com) Luxurious private townhouses furnished with a designer's touch.



THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: VALLETTA SKYLINE AT SUNSET; VIEW OF THE THREE CITIES FROM UPPER BARRAKKA GARDENS; SELLING CAULIFLOWER; THE ARCHES AT UPPER BARRAKKA GARDENS; INNER CITY STREET; A LOCAL FRUIT VAN



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