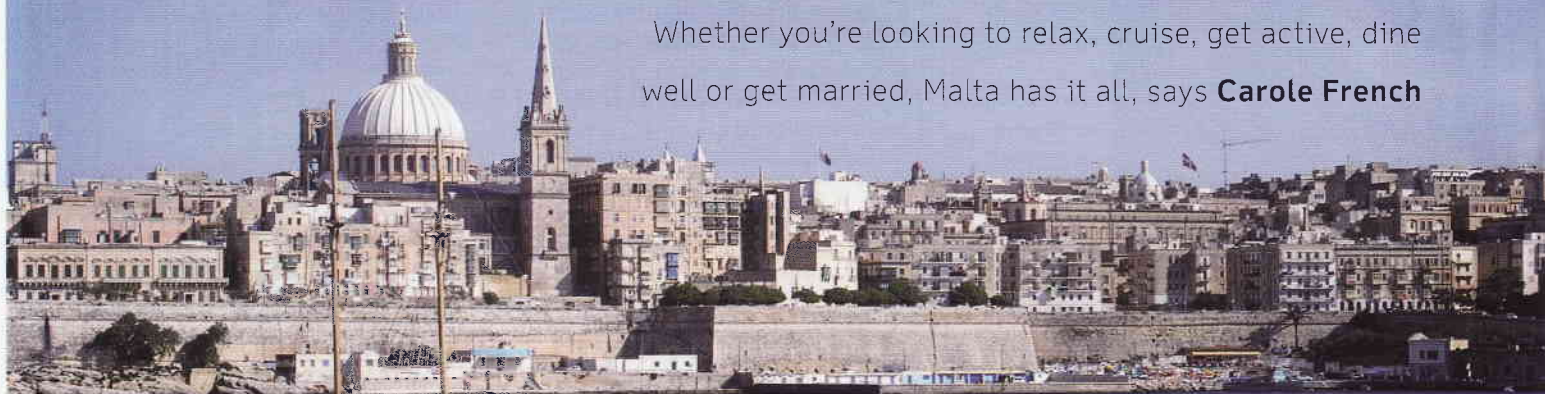


perfect MATCH

Whether you're looking to relax, cruise, get active, dine well or get married, Malta has it all, says **Carole French**



Cruise: Valletta

VALLETTA IS AN important port of call on many Mediterranean cruises, its Grand Harbour a natural deepwater inlet that has welcomed maritime traffic for centuries. The city's fine baroque architecture includes the Grand Masters' Palace, the Knights of the Order of St John of Jerusalem's headquarters for more than 200 years. The Knights ruled Malta from 1530 to 1798.

In recent years, the mile-long waterfront has been transformed into a dedicated cruise ship area that is among Europe's finest. As a result, the Port of Valletta has seen a steady increase in cruise passenger traffic – there was a rise of 17.7% in 2006 and a similar figure is expected for 2007. More than 160 cruise itineraries now include the island of Malta.

Amenities and attractions provided for discerning visitors are plentiful. Shops on the Valletta Waterfront include an outlet for Mdina Glass, the island's famous contemporary

glassware manufacturer, and Bristow Potteries, offering traditionally crafted Maltese ceramics. Bijoux Ternier displays fine leather accessories and there's the delightful Pedigree Toyshop, along with a number of high fashion and jewellery stores – they all vie for attention with the seemingly endless selection of restaurants around the portside areas.

Stylish Korean, Italian, Cantonese, French and American food outlets, along with cosy venues serving Maltese cuisine, are among the restaurants catering for hungry visitors.

The Port of Valletta, as well as being an elegant embarking point and a lively place for cruise ship passengers to spend time before setting sail again, is also well placed for the easy trip into the city centre.

Compact in size, Valletta is a historic city that offers many must-see sights. The National Museum of Archaeology sits within one of the *auberges* where the Knights once lived;

another houses the prime minister's office and contains priceless artefacts from Malta's long past. Visitors can also take in St John's Co-Cathedral, a masterpiece of design, along with other museums, palaces and churches.

► **Alternative:** Comino is the island that lies between mainland Malta and Gozo, and is a popular stopping-off point for smaller cruise boats taking visitors on tours around the islands. Many drop anchor at the Blue Lagoon, a popular movie location where both Brad Pitt and Madonna have filmed scenes in the natural cove.

► **Sample:** Oceania Cruises has a programme of cruises that includes calls at the Port of Valletta. Among the line's cruise itineraries is the 12-day Enchanted Escapade cruise from Athens to Rome on board *Nautica* in June this year. Other dates are also offered, with prices starting from £1,200. T: 0870 112 1102. www.oceaniacruises.com

Food and Drink:

Marsaxlokk

Marsaxlokk, in Malta's south-east looking out to Marsaxlokk Bay, is home to one of the island's most prominent wine producers. Marsovin's Marnisi Estate has more than 50,000 vines and, along with other growers, produces some excellent chardonnay, sauvignon blanc, syrah and grenache wines.

The island even has its own grape varieties, the white girgentina and red gellewza. Although Malta doesn't export wine on a grand scale, its wines can be found at restaurants throughout the island and go well with the traditional cuisine.

Maltese cuisine is inspired by Britain and the Mediterranean, and is complimented by its fresh tasting wines. Italian pastas and pizzas, which the Maltese adore, are an alternative to traditional British Sunday roasts. Fish, such as sea bass, stonefish, bream, red mullet and swordfish form an integral part of menus.

Vegetables and salads accompany most meals, as does Maltese bread, traditionally served with butter, tomato paste or olive oil. Fresh fruits include oranges and grapes.

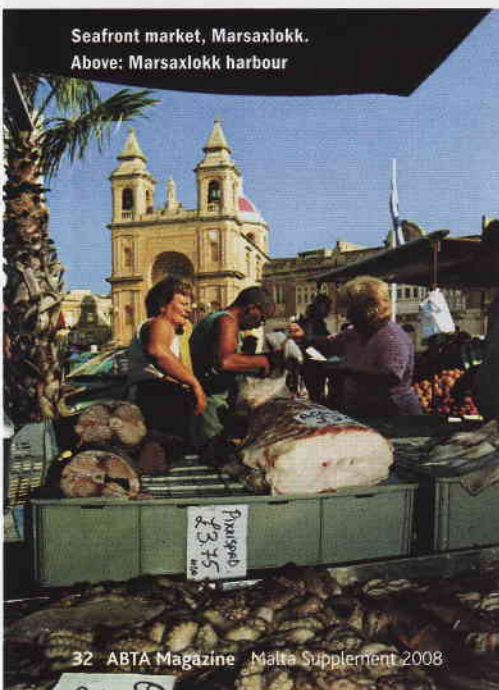
► **Alternative:** St Paul's Bay, in the north-west of the island, is popular with visitors keen

to sample the wide variety of local fish. Fishermen can be seen unloading their daily catches, while restaurants serve up sumptuous fish dishes.

► **Sample:** Sunspot Tours is offering a three-night break at the five-star Corinthia Marina Hotel in St George's Bay, close to Malta's nightlife area, from £269 with half-board upgrades from £12 per person per day. The hotel features the Da Marina restaurant, where traditional cuisine is served, and a cheese and wine bar. T: 01580 715222. www.sunspottours.com ■



Seafront market, Marsaxlokk.
Above: Marsaxlokk harbour



BEST OF THE REST

- **DIVING:** A visit to Malta wouldn't be complete without a trip to Gozo. In fact, a third of all holidaymakers visit the island at least once during their stay. It offers exceptional diving opportunities, along with paragliding and watersports.
- **NIGHTLIFE:** Whether visitors want a cosy, intimate dinner for two in one of the island's restaurants or to dance the night away in a lively nightclub, Malta can cater for both. The island also has a number of casinos, the best-known of which being Dragonara, open 24 hours a day.
- **CULTURE:** The awesome megalithic temples of Ggantija on Gozo, built around 7,000 years ago, are well worth a visit. On Malta, visitors should glimpse

- the 16th-century Verdala Palace near Mdina, former home of the island's governors.
- **NATURE:** Dingli Cliffs, close to the village of the same name, offer great views out to sea, not to mention rock climbing. The Blue Grotto, tucked in a cove on the south-east coast of the island, is a beautiful place to visit by boat, throw out the anchor and while away the hours.
- **FESTIVALS:** Malta is an island of people who love to celebrate. Village festivals, carnivals and religious events take place somewhere almost every week of the year. Most take the form of decorated streets or buildings, firework displays, exhibitions and colourful processions of characters and musicians.

IMAGES: MALTA TOURISM AUTHORITY

TRAVEL ESSENTIALS



WHEN TO GO

Malta has a typically Mediterranean climate with hot, dry summers and mild, humid winters. Even on a typical winter day you can expect sunshine. The sea is relatively warm by May and stays pleasant for swimming until November. The temperature averages from 15C between November and April, rising to 33C between May and October. Rainfall is low on Malta, with only 600mm annually.

- ▶ **CURRENCY:** Malta entered the euro zone on 1 January 2008. £1 = €1.45.
- ▶ **TIME DIFFERENCE:** GMT +1.
- ▶ **INTERNATIONAL DIAL CODE:** 00 356.
- ▶ **LANGUAGE:** Maltese and English. Many residents also speak Italian.

GETTING THERE

- ▶ Air Malta flies to Malta from Heathrow, Gatwick, Stansted, Bristol, Birmingham, Manchester, Liverpool, Newcastle and Glasgow.
- ▶ British Airways flies to Malta from Gatwick and Manchester.
- ▶ Ryanair flies to Malta from Luton.
- ▶ **AVERAGE FLIGHT TIME:** Just over 3h.

GETTING AROUND

Malta's buses are colourful, efficient, reasonably priced and operate from the main bus terminal in Valletta to all parts of the island. Car hire rates are among the cheapest in Europe and driving is on the left. There is a regular car ferry service between Malta and Gozo (20 minutes) and a passenger-only link between Malta and Comino. A frequent ferry service also operates between Sliema and Valletta. A seaplane service flies from Valletta's Grand Harbour to Mgarr Harbour in Gozo, while a regular shuttle connects visitors from the airport to the ferry terminal at Cirkewwa.

FAST FACTS

- ▶ The Maltese islands' population is 405,000.
- ▶ There are 39,105 beds in the islands.
- ▶ 48% of all beds are in four- and five-star hotels.
- ▶ 90% of Malta's tourists originate in the EU.
- ▶ 95% of them arrive by air.
- ▶ British tourists average 9.93 nights in Malta.
- ▶ 41.9% of total visitors to Malta are from the UK.
- ▶ 917 catering establishments.

Malta history

The Maltese Islands have been inhabited for at least 7,000 years. The earliest settlers were a Neolithic race responsible for the numerous ancient structures that survive today.

- ▶ 700BC: after the first inhabitants had died out, Malta was colonised by the Phoenicians. Around 300 years later, it was the turn of the Carthaginians and in 218BC, the Romans.
- ▶ AD60: St Paul was shipwrecked on the island while travelling to Rome and he turned the islanders towards Christianity.
- ▶ 870 years later: Arabs introduced the cultivation of citrus fruits and cotton.
- ▶ 1530: Up till now Malta was an extension of Sicily, but Roman emperor Charles V bequeathed the islands to the Order of St John of Jerusalem. The Knights brought culture and art to Malta and withstood the Great Siege by the Ottoman Turks in 1565.
- ▶ 1798: Napoleon conquered the island, although a British blockade ensured the French occupation was short-lived.
- ▶ 1964: British rule lasted until independence, with its influence evident in the country's systems of legislation and education.
- ▶ 1942: Malta was awarded the George Cross in recognition of its efforts during World War II.
- ▶ 1974: Malta became a republic and joined the European Union in May 2004.

Did you know?

- ▶ The University of Malta is one of the oldest universities in the world and was founded in 1592 as the Collegium de Melitense.
- ▶ Malta is a country of bastions and belfries. No other country in the world can boast so many walled cities, churches and chapels in such a small area.
- ▶ In 1967, Arvid Pardo, Malta's ambassador to the United Nations, proposed a landmark resolution calling for an international authority to administer the oceans and ensure the seabeds would be used for peaceful purposes. The UN General Assembly convened the 1973 Third UN Conference of the Law of the Sea to write a new treaty, which entered into force in November 1994.
- ▶ There are two main political parties in Malta and elections generate widespread voter turnout exceeding 96%. The margin between the two parties is so narrow that a 52% share of the votes can still be considered a 'landslide' for the winning party.

▶ **Napoleon conquered the island in 1798, although Britain ensured French occupation was short-lived. British rule lasted until 1964, with its influence evident in the systems of legislation and education**

Activities: Marsa

Located inland and surrounded by rolling countryside and yet on the water's edge at the southernmost tip of Grand Harbour, Marsa enjoys the type of terrain suitable for a large number of sports and recreational activities.

There, just south of Valletta, you will find the Royal Malta Golf Club, with its 18-hole course designed to sit unobtrusively amidst the greenery that surrounds it, and a clubhouse offering a combination of British and Italian inspired cuisine.

The Marsa Sports Club has a programme of racket sports, including tennis – one of the most popular activities on the island – along with netball, baseball and basketball, while local clubs offer climbing nearby, walking and marathon running. Swimming is widely available, too.

Horse riding enthusiasts can be found trotting in the lanes and bridleways that surround Marsa and its neighbouring towns and villages. Indeed, most registered riding centres are located in this area.

Marsa's position close to Grand Harbour offers visitors the proximity to sailing and watersports, as well as land-based sports. Windsurfers can hire boards or take tuition at a number of watersports centres, most of which offer waterskiing, snorkelling, canoeing,

speedboat rides and boat hire as part of their programmes. Diving schools can be found, too.

For visitors keen to go sailing though not necessarily wishing to take the helm themselves, Malta's resorts offer boat trips. Marinas can be found in Marsamxett Harbour, the other great natural inlet between Valletta and Sliema, with scores of small craft berthed at Msida and the Lazzaretto area around Ta'Xbiex.

► **Alternative:** A great trip for families is a visit to the film set that was the tumbledown seaside village of Sweethaven in Robert Altman's 1980 film *Popeye*, starring Robin Williams and Shelley Duvall. It's located at Anchor Bay in the north of Malta and has many wooden buildings to explore. Across the island, at Bahar ic-Caghaq, the children can swim with dolphins in the Mediterraneo Marine Park.

► **Sample: Belleair Holidays** offers a seven-night holiday at the Hotel Phoenicia by Valletta's City Gate, a short distance from the main activity and sports centres of Marsa, from £511. The price is for Gatwick departures in March. Other dates and departure airports are available. T: 020 8785 3255. www.belleair.co.uk ►



Clockwise from left: Valletta across Marsamxett Harbour; Grand Harbour bastions; sailing off the coast; Malta from underwater

►► The Port of Valletta has seen a steady increase in cruise passenger traffic — a rise of 17.7% in 2006 while a similar figure is expected for 2007

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Weddings: Sliema

Malta is one of the most popular short-haul wedding and honeymoon destinations for UK couples, largely because it's relatively straightforward to marry on the island. The legal formalities and residency requirements are minimal, English can be spoken and there are around 365 Catholic churches, along with churches of other denominations, including the Holy Trinity Church in Sliema.

Civil ceremonies can also be held at the registry office in Malta's capital Valletta or

at a licensed hotel. Almost all the larger hotels in Malta offer packages for bridal couples, including the coordination of flowers, cars, photography, hairdressing and wedding stationery, as well as accommodation for the wedding party and the reception.

► **Alternative:** Gozo is fast catching up with its larger sister as a popular spot for an idyllic island wedding. A number of hotels offer ceremonies in addition to the registry office in Victoria, plus the island offers the chance to

take the short trip to one of its beaches as a setting for some truly romantic photographs.

► **Sample: Brides & Beaches** offers a range of wedding and honeymoon options, including a stay at the Hotel Fortina Spa Resort. The hotel will coordinate flowers, photography, videos, reception, cake, music, transportation and accommodation, and features a spa for relaxation. Prices start from £500, depending on the services chosen. T: 0870 142 4446. www.bridesandbeaches.com ►

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Balluta Bay, Sliema. Above: the bay's modern Carmelite Church