

Anchors aweigh

Malta packs a punch for those who want to pursue a hobby on holiday, writes Aby Dunsby

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For every client who wants to enjoy their time off by relaxing in the sunshine and doing very little, there's another who can't sit still, seeing a holiday as the perfect opportunity to indulge a hobby or pick up a new skill.

For such a small archipelago, the three islands of Malta – Malta,

Gozo and Comino – are packed with everything from prehistoric monuments and sparkling waters for diving to a delicious cuisine that fuses the flavours of the Mediterranean and Middle East.

Whether clients want to immerse themselves in a hobby-focused holiday, or just tag an activity on to time spent exploring Malta and her islands, here we've picked out the best options for those with more than just sunshine in mind.

► INTO THE BLUE

While its location in the heart of the calm, clear Med makes Malta and Gozo perfect for scuba diving, the abundance of rocky caves, reefs and wrecks means diving here is some of the best

and most interesting in the world.

"Most diving is done from the shore, including some fantastic wrecks that are shallow enough for beginners to explore, while more experienced divers can enjoy boat diving further offshore," says Amy Cooper, specialist dive consultant at Original Diving.

Learning to dive in Malta offers great value for money, and the warm water in summer makes conditions perfect for new starters. Dive Worldwide's Learn to Dive course is great for families and is open to children from as young as 10 (from £795 for adults and £750 for children, including flights and self-catering accommodation for a week).

The Westin Hotel's Divewise

diving centre offers year-round courses for all levels, plus jetskiing, canoeing and sailing for all-round adventurers.

► WINE AND DINE

Maltese cuisine is a melting pot of flavours, reflecting the mix of cultures that have occupied the destination over the centuries.

Italian influence is apparent in the abundant use of olive oil, the creamy, ricotta-filled *kannoli* pastries and the ice creams in the many gelaterie.

Local delicacies include honey, *gbejna* (cheese made from sheep's and goats' milk) and rabbit stew; while fish lovers will be delighted with the fresh lobster, tuna and swordfish on many restaurant menus. →

→ Clients who prefer to cook their own catch should make like the locals and head to southern fishing village Marsaxlokk, where they will find *spnotta* (bass), *cerna* (grouper), *sargu* (white bream) *trill* (red mullet), and *lampuki* (the local name for mahi mahi), depending on the season.

Those keen to immerse themselves even further in local life – and gain some foodie knowledge in the process – can spend a day with a shepherd in Gozo village Xlendi, as part of The Family Adventure Company's eight-day family holiday to Malta and Gozo.

It's a hands-on experience, as guests feed and milk sheep before making Gozitan cheeselets, which can be eaten fresh, sundried, salted or peppered. After cheese-making, families can sample the fruits of their labour with a lunch of local cheese, olives, bread and tomatoes.

Over in rural northern town Mgarr, clients with an interest in the Mediterranean aspect of island cuisine can stroll around an olive grove, hear about the history of olive oil production in the area and taste some for themselves, alongside herb-infused Maltese coffee and wine from the local estate. Viator has an Extra Virgin Olive Oil Tasting in Mgarr from £21.

While Malta's wine-making might not be as renowned as its Mediterranean neighbours', it's starting to gain recognition, and the indigenous varieties of gellewza and ghirghentina have a body and flavour all their own. Clients who want to learn more can visit a winery for a guided tour and tasting, or pre-book a wine-tasting and wine cellar excursion, as part of TravelCube's Three Cities tour (£26).

▶ WALK THIS WAY

The tiny islands of Malta are a walker's paradise. An hour's ramble in almost any direction will take clients past ancient temples, baroque churches



FAR LEFT: Maltese cuisine

CENTRE: Marsaxlokk

LEFT: Manoel Theatre

BELOW: Gozo



An hour's ramble will take clients past ancient temples, baroque churches and caves

and caves ideal for exploring, and through landscapes that vary from sleepy, untouched countryside to quaint fishing villages, lush valleys and cliffs overlooking a glinting sea.

For day hikes, clients can don their walking boots to traverse areas including Dingli, Fawwara, the north and its various bays, or the southern coast near Delimara Point. Gozo also has excellent hiking, with highlights including the Giordan Lighthouse near Ghasri and San Blas Valley near Nadur.

Walkers can enjoy some self-guided sightseeing on Inntavel's The Three Islands of Malta itinerary, which starts with a week on Gozo wandering along

varied trails, followed by a day trip to Comino to circumnavigate tranquil paths, and finally ending in Malta to stroll along Valletta's iconic waterfront or get lost in cobbled backstreets.

Explore's Malta and Gozo Discovery tour also includes leisurely, scenic walks to areas including Gozo's spectacularly rugged Xwejini Bay and the temples of Hagar Qim and Mnajdra, a Unesco World Heritage Site (from £880).

▶ MUSIC TO MY EARS

Whoever said Malta was solely for the blue-rinse brigade has clearly never spent a night in one of the island's buzzing clubs, or visited during the annual Malta Music Week (June 24-29), when events including a Café del Mar sunset party and legendary free music festival Isle of MTV take over the island.

Big-name DJs who have played in Malta's clubs, mainly in lively Paceville, include Calvin Harris, Martin Garrix and Eric Prydz. This year also sees open-air dance festival TheSoundYouNeed arrive on Malta's shores (August 26-29), with three days

of music, pool and boat parties set to draw in a young, party-loving crowd.

For those less inclined to rave all night, there's the Valletta International Baroque Festival, a celebration of Valletta's baroque identity, which centres around the Manoel Theatre and extends to the magnificent baroque buildings of St John's Co-Cathedral and the Grandmaster's Palace. Kirker Holidays has confirmed it will organise an escorted holiday to the festival when it takes place in January 2017.

For jazz aficionados there's the Malta Jazz Festival (July 17-19). Now in its 26th year, it takes place in the atmospheric setting of Ta' Liesse, where the Grand Harbour bastions meet the sea.

Classical music lovers should head to Malta for November 5, when Giuseppe Verdi's *Messa da Requiem* will be performed at the island's Republic Hall by international and Maltese soloists,

the St Monica Choir and the Malta Philharmonic Orchestra.

▶ A FINE ART

Whether it's contemporary art festivals or 17th-century masterpieces, Malta offers art lovers plenty of food for thought. The National Museum of Fine Arts, housed in a 16th-century rococo building, exhibits an impressive collection of art ranging from early Renaissance to modern. Caravaggio made Malta his refuge while on the run from the papal authority in Rome, and was granted hospitality by the Knights of St John and later admitted to the Order of St John.

One of his most famous and dramatic works, *The Beheading of St John the Baptist*, is on display in the Oratory of St John's Co-Cathedral in Valletta. It's Caravaggio's only signed painting, which the artist macabrely blended with

blood said to be from St John.

Saga tour Discover Art History in Malta includes a viewing of the painting, as well as other artistic sites including the National Museum of Fine Arts and St Agatha's Catacombs to view early rock paintings (from £829).

For contemporary art lovers, there's the Malta International Arts Festival, which comprises dance, theatre, art and music each July, held in interesting venues such as the Old Opera House ruins in Valletta. Budding painters inspired by the Maltese landscape can incorporate a stay at the Corinthia Palace Hotel & Spa, which is developing curated painting holiday packages following its recent Artist in Residence programme, which welcomed Canadian artist Tom

Forrestall. Details are yet to be announced, but packages will be modelled on feedback from the artist's recent stay on the island. →



Original Diving offers a seven-night diving holiday to Gozo from £895 staying B&B at the Kempinski Hotel San Lawrenz, with flights, transfers and to pre-booked dives. originaldiving.com

Inntavel's The Three Islands of Malta holiday starts from £670 based on two sharing, including 10 nights' B&B, and ferry and taxi transfers. inntavel.co.uk

Belleair's Historic Cities package starts from £429, including return flights, transfers, seven nights' B&B and various guided tours. belleair.co.uk



ASK THE EXPERT



Peter Vella, UK director, Malta Tourism Authority
 "A visit to the beach is only one of the things visitors can experience on our islands. Our diving product offers exotic marine life and an abundance of shipwrecks, not to mention the calendar of festivals and cultural events taking place."

THE REST IS HISTORY

"Malta is so much more than a beach destination - it is a small island bursting with history," says Will Sarson, product director at Riviera Travel.

Indeed, it's Malta's 7,000-year history that makes it such a unique destination, with its density of historic sights in such a compact environment making it easy to see the highlights in just a few hours. Malta boasts prehistoric Neolithic temples, the Roman catacombs of St Paul, medieval towns and the fascinating legacy of the Knights of St John, who ruled Malta from 1530 to 1798.

In Valletta, named European Capital of Culture 2018, highlights include the Manoel Theatre, one of the oldest working theatres in Europe, plus the Cathedral Museum and Grandmaster's Palace, which was even home to the Maltese Parliament until last year.

Outside the capital, the underground, multi-chambered temple of Hal Saflieni Hypogeum, with its Unesco-protected prehistoric spiral



LEFT: Mдина



Malta is so much more than a beach destination - it is a small island bursting with history

drawings, is a must-see. Gozo's ancient Ggantija Temples, which pre-date both Stonehenge and Egypt's pyramids, are equally intriguing, while Mдина,

Malta's first capital, is a labyrinth of small, charming streets surrounded by ancient walls and medieval buildings.

An escorted tour is a great way of packing in the key sights. Riviera Travel has an eight-day Undiscovered Malta tour with visits to Valletta, Gozo, Rabat and Mдина, from £799 including flights.

Mercury Holidays' nine-day Malta and Gozo escorted tour includes the option to add a three-night Historic Malta extension to either Sliema or Valletta (from £764). TW



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