

# Knight and day

Mark Stratton savours the sights on a new slow tour of Malta



**m**editerranean sunshine bathes the formidable 16th-century walls surrounding Malta's capital, Valletta, as my cross-harbour ferry slips out of Sliema.

When the ferry docks, I enter the city to leisurely explore streets of wealthy merchant houses, palazzos, the alberges of Knights Templar, and Gothic churches. Near the cathedral, I eat lunch alfresco at a small Greek restaurant and think how lucky I am. It feels hard to believe I'm on a group tour to Malta. Group tours – and I've done a few before – can signify rushed schedules, daily hotel changes and long days battered by a salvo of facts leaving me wanting to snatch the guide's microphone and hurl it out the coach window.

But I am enjoying a free day on my own, to wander as I please, on one of Cox & Kings' new Spotlight tours. The operator's newest small-group tours are shaped by feedback from customers who voiced how they wanted to travel in post-Covid times.

"On the back of the pandemic our clients told us they would feel more comfortable travelling in smaller groups and moving around less," says managing director Kerry Golds. "They wanted to do less, ideally in one region rather than spending a lot of time travelling around. And while they enjoyed

our group tours to far-flung destinations, they also wanted less-travelled experiences in popular countries such as Malta."

## LESS IS MORE

Malta's compact size lends itself to being based in one location. Throughout this tour, our group remains in the modern four-star Waterfront Hotel in Sliema, with sublime views across to Valletta's bastions. I appreciate unpacking for six nights, and not fretting about rushed breakfasts and early meetings in the lobby before a madcap dash culminating in yet another hotel.

Quite the contrary. With local tour guide, Agnes, and just five other guests, each day focuses on just a few island highlights, peeling back, in greater detail, Malta's layers of history – from mysterious prehistoric temple builders to the grandiose ambitions of the zealous St John's Knights.

With a less-is-more outlook, the tour features unique experiences that help bring the island's history to life. In Valletta, for instance, the Marquis de Piro hosts us on a private visit around his ancestral home, the 16th-century Casa Rocca Piccola.

The marquis – who is a Templar Knight despite the order being forced to leave Malta for Rome when Napoleon arrived here in 1798 – leads us through centuries ➤

Vittoriosa, one of the Three Cities  
Picture: Malta Tourism Authority



# DESTINATIONS

## ESCORTED TOURS | MALTA



FROM FAR LEFT: Valletta waterfront (top); Senglea; Ggantija Temples; Valletta's Grand Harbour; Upper Barrakka Gardens (top); Victoria Gate

PICTURES: Malta Tourism Authority/kelvinjay

of Maltese history reflected in his dynastic collections. "Look, here's the box that contained chocolates given to my grandfather by Queen Victoria after fighting in the Boer War... and oh, that's a portrait of my ancestor the 6th Baron of Budach, Giuseppe; he was something of a dandy," says the marquis, warming to his task. We end with prosecco in the company of Kiku, his pet macaw, in his pretty walled garden.

After a leisurely free day, we reconvene to explore the medievally fortified Three Cities of Vittoriosa, Senglea and Conspicua, using novel means of transport far more pleasant than stupefying coach rides in the heat. I drive an electric golf buggy with a pre-programmed route, so-named a 'Rolling Geek', through Senglea's ancient streets.

### WOOD AND STONE

But I prefer our slow spin by wooden dghajsa around what is surely one of the great harbours of the world, Valletta's Grand Harbour. Dghajsa are the Maltese equivalent of Venetian gondolas. Our boatman, Geraldo, takes us close to the colossal, fortified city walls of

“ Our boatman takes us close to the colossal city walls to hear the firing of the midday cannons of Upper Barrakka Gardens

Valletta to hear the firing of the midday cannons of Upper Barrakka Gardens, an old city tradition.

But it's the prehistoric monuments that truly make this tour special. Malta and Gozo possess 32 limestone stone structures – temples and tombs – built between 4100-2500BC by a mercurial civilisation of which little is known.

The 5,800-years-old Fagar Qim temple's lavishness makes Stonehenge seem positively dowdy. It's an exquisite circular structure of carved blocks, accessible through trilithon entranceways leading to apses where priests performed rituals at free-standing altars. In one room 13 fat-bodied female structures were unearthed, thought to be fertility goddesses.

On another day, we venture by ferry to Gozo, Malta's smaller less-crowded sister island. There we visit Ggantija, another Stone Age

megalith, built around 3600BC. Individual blocks weighing 50 tonnes form another mighty stone circle. "We've no idea where these people came from or why they disappeared suddenly around 2500BC," says Agnes.

The relaxed schedule also allows for long lunches, like that at an artisanal restaurant within the walls of Gozo's most impressive citadel at Victoria. We tuck into a platter of homemade goat's cheese, pickles, stoneground bread and local rustic wine, and in keeping with the unhurried ethos of the tour, there's plenty of time to enjoy it.

### SLOW AND STEADY

Cox & Kings' Spotlight tours currently feature Morocco, Umbria, Georgia, the Azores, Athens, Veneto, Aegean Turkey, Slovenia, the Basque country and Malta. If travel is to offer a more wholesome experience

post-pandemic and grasp the importance of sustainability, then I found this tour making positive strides in the right direction.

Group sizes are typically 12, although mine was half that. There is little doubt that for the foreseeable future Covid-19 has put travellers off joining large groups, particularly if it involves being packed on to a coach.

Being based in the same hotel and never trying to do too much in the same day was also welcome. I was never back at the hotel after 4pm on any day. This gave me time to relax before heading out for dinner.

Above all, focusing on greater detail by visiting just two or three sites each day helped foster a richer cultural appreciation of a destination that some might only recognise for its winter sunshine. **TW**

### BOOK IT

Cox & Kings' new 7-day Spotlight on Malta tour costs from £1,425 and includes return flights, transfers, tours, and B&B accommodation with some lunches included. [coxandkings.co.uk](http://coxandkings.co.uk)