

Maltese magic

Malta has fascinating sights in spades – and a new national airline makes a great first impression for first-time visitors, **Jo Fernández** discovers

hopping on the inaugural flight of new Maltese flag-carrier KM Malta Airlines from Heathrow (one of two London bases, alongside Gatwick), I tuck into *balbuljata* – scrambled egg with sun-dried tomatoes – and peppered goat’s cheese, served on a Mediterranean tile. It’s a delicious taster of this multifaceted destination.

Visitors come to Malta for many reasons, from sun-dappled beaches to honey-coloured cities that resemble film sets. In fact, Malta is a popular filming location, recently appearing in *Jurassic World* and *Game of Thrones* and soon to star in this year’s *Gladiator II* epic.

But for first-timers, a guide like Darrell Azzopardi, who has been leading tours of the island for two decades, can offer an invaluable introduction. As we walk through Unesco-listed Valletta, the easy-to-navigate grid system – meticulously designed by the crusading Knights of St John, who occupied

the island for 250 years – of slender lanes with olive-shaded terraces and spectacular architecture can’t fail to impress.

Once inside the 16th-century St John’s Co-Cathedral, which almost seems subdued from the outside, I can see the Knights of St John covered every inch in 24-carat gold leaf and inlaid marble. A vast painting of John the Baptist by Caravaggio – the only one signed by the Italian artist – hangs above the altar in the oratory. We continue to the antique-filled Grand Master’s Palace, which once housed the knights’ head honcho, and has just reopened this year following hefty restoration work.

OLD MEETS NEW

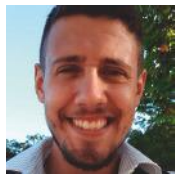
For a more modern excursion, we pass through the 16th-century City Gate to see some of the 21st-century additions from architect Renzo Piano, including the stilted, square-shaped Parliament Building locals call ‘the cheesegrater’. Across the road, ➤

Beach at Corinthia St George’s Bay

DESTINATIONS

MALTA | FIRST-TIMERS

ASK THE expert



Manuel Holden-Ayala
trade relations executive,
Visit Malta UK & Ireland

“While Malta’s charm lies in its fusion of rich history, stunning landscapes and warm hospitality, our culinary scene is enjoying a moment in the global spotlight. A new two-Michelin-starred restaurant, a Bib Gourmand and five Michelin recommendations elevate Malta’s status as an incredible gastronomic destination.”



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Malta’s honey-coloured stone dominates its historic buildings; the Three Cities; a Deluxe Seaview room at Corinthia St George’s Bay hotel; new flag-carrier KM Malta Airlines **PICTURE:** Olly Gaspar/We Seek Travel



Piano has created an open-air theatre on the ruins of the old opera house, which was bombed in the Second World War. References to 150 years of British rule (from 1814 to 1964) are everywhere, from red postboxes to the midday cannon salute above the Grand Harbour.

As I admire the blue-balconied hotels overlooking the water, Azzopardi explains: “In the past 10 years, more than 30 boutique hotels have opened in Valletta.” With nearly three million visitors to Malta in 2023, the accommodation boom is hardly surprising.

The Grand Harbour, the deepest natural harbour in the Mediterranean, is a huge expanse of green-blue water busy with ferries, cruise ships and brightly painted, gondola-style wooden boats known as *dghajjes*. We catch one over to the trio of petite fortified towns known as the Three Cities: Vittoriosa, Senglea and Cospicua. Yachts of all sizes are moored by waterside restaurants such as Don Berto in Vittoriosa, where we sit on a balustraded terrace eating fresh steamed mussels, sipping a crisp Maltese white wine.

I ask Azzopardi what his top sight would be. He eventually picks Mdina, a gorgeous inland citadel and Malta’s first capital. Wandering the atmospheric limestone alleys and admiring the bougainvillea that pours across a rainbow of doorways, I

imagine how it feels to be one of the aristocratic families who live in the balconied palazzi.

Afterwards, I return to the Corinthia St George’s Bay, a five-star resort overlooking the waterfront at St Julian’s. Behind the indoor pool and spa area, a 17th-century fortified tower provides an on-site history lesson.

Laid-back fishing village turned party town St Julian’s has a burgeoning food scene. Plus, the 117-room ME Malta by Meliá, opening later this year in the Mercury Tower, will house TV chef Gino D’Acampo’s first international restaurant.

SISTER ISLANDS

Part of Malta’s charm is that nothing is far away. The neighbouring island of Gozo is reached via ferry from the northern tip of Malta or a high-speed crossing from Valletta (both under 45 minutes).

Almost every square metre of Gozo has something beautiful, ancient, or both. The megalithic Ggantija temple is now part of a well-executed visitor centre, where you can wander among the herb-and-wildflower-dotted gardens that surround the crumbling stones.

Along Gozo’s wind-whipped coast, we stop at the Marsalforn salt pans, climb the cliffs above the Blue Hole dive spot and stroll the diminutive main town of Victoria, dominated by the citadel’s

restored sky-high walls. From here, at Gozo’s highest point, Sicily is visible on a clear day.

Malta’s third and final island, Comino, has only two permanent inhabitants, but when the sun shines, its shores hum with chatter and happy laughter. Sun-seekers flock to the island’s Blue Lagoon, which certainly lives up to its name: turquoise waters sit above a shallow sand channel, creating crystal-clear grounds for snorkelling and family-friendly swimming.

Each of Malta’s three islands has a unique character and ever-expanding list of sights, sounds and smells. There’s so much more to see – and once your clients get their first taste of Malta, they’ll surely feel compelled to return. **TW**

BOOK IT

Kuoni offers five nights’ B&B at the Corinthia St George’s Bay for £899 per person, including flights with KM Malta Airlines from Gatwick on June 10 and private transfers. kuoni.co.uk

KM Malta Airlines flies to Valletta from Heathrow twice-daily (three times on Friday) and daily from Gatwick. Fares start from £127 return. kmmaltaairlines.com