The eyes have it

Malta’s compact size makes it easy to explore beyond the tourist hotspots, discovers Ella Buchan

There are eyes everywhere in Malta. They watch from under thick, fluttery eyelashes, unblinking even as they bob about in shallow, teal-hued water. Traditional Maltese fishing boats, or luzzus, fill the harbour of Marsaxlokk, a tranquil village on the southeastern edge of Malta. Their wooden hulls are painted in bold, sunny shades of green, yellow, red and blue, with an Eye of Horus – said to protect fishing crews at sea – gazing from either side of its bow.

Most visitors to Malta tend to pick one area and stick to it. They might swim, sunbathe and snorkel.
Marsaxlokk explodes with life on Sundays, when locals haggle loudly at the weekly fish market and often stay for lunch.

Just driving around the island is eye-opening. Away from the coast, roads wind down rural lanes with higgledy-piggledy dry limestone walls, passing parcels of land with olive trees, pear cacti and rows of potatoes. There are hillsides etched with terraces, a little like the vineyards of Portugal’s Douro Valley. And there’s wine here, too: small but prized plantings include cabernet, chardonnay and girgentina, an indigenous grape that produces a crisp and delicate straw-coloured wine.

Land is scarce here and there are only around 2,000 acres of vines across Malta and Gozo. If anything, though, the wine tastes even better for its rarity. Happily, it goes perfectly with the cuisine, too, from hobz biz-zejt – chewy Maltese bread rubbed with juicy tomatoes and drizzled with peppery olive oil – to lampuki fish (mahi-mahi), in season between August and December.

That’s the best way to really get to know Malta: one bite at a time. The food is glorious, infused with North African and Sicilian influences, and soaked in Mediterranean sunshine.

Rabbit feasts, known as fenkata nights, are a popular way to celebrate special occasions or just the fact it’s the weekend, bringing together families and sometimes

DESTINATIONS
WINTER SUN | MALTA

WHERE TO STAY

PORT VIEW, MARSAXLOKK
Bright, breezily decorated rooms make up this guesthouse, located just steps away from the harbour. Doubles from £70.
portview.com

HOTEL TA’ CENC & SPA, GOZO
This tucked-away spa hotel has stylish rooms and an outdoor pool, while still being an easy drive from Gozo’s attractions. Doubles from £130.
tacenc.com

THE SAINT JOHN, VALLETTA
In the heart of the capital, this AX Hotels property has a chic vintage vibe. Rooms are decorated in muted shades and with rich, layered textures. Doubles from £170.
thesaintjohnmalta.com

BOOK IT

Prestige Holidays offers five nights’ B&B in a Superior Room at The Phoenicia, which overlooks the Grand Harbour in Valletta, from £699. The price includes flights to Malta, departing from Stansted on March 7, 2020, and private transfers.
prestigeholidays.co.uk

EasyJet flies direct to Malta from Gatwick, Southend, Newcastle and Manchester, with return fares from £49.
easyjet.com
Those interested in Maltese food can tour the restaurant’s sheep farm, lemon groves or vineyard. Some restaurants host occasional fenkata nights, or visitors can try the national dish at spots such as Diar Il-Bniet, where the rabbit meat is simmered in oil, wine and garlic. This cosy shop and restaurant, in the village of Dingli, specialises in farm-to-table produce. Those interested in discovering more about Malta’s food scene can tour the owners’ sheep farm, lemon groves or vineyard, with tastings followed by an optional meal (from £10, diarilbniet.com).

**HOW TO SELL**

- Temperatures in Malta hover around 15°C in winter, so it’s a good spot for clients who want sun and sea without the sweltering heat.
- Many hotels offer long-stay deals over the winter months, so clients with time to spare can take advantage of a two or three-week stay without breaking the bank.
- Hardly a week goes by in Malta or its sister islands without a village festival or other celebration. Check out religious holidays and other events at visitmalta.com/en/events.
- Hop over to sister island Gozo for a quieter way of life and a more-relaxed pace. Its mountain-biking trails, walking paths and secluded beaches make an enjoyable add-on to a stay in Malta.

**FARM TO TABLE**

Agritourism is burgeoning in Malta. On the outskirts of Zebbug, a town famed for its pale-lemon parish church, the owners of Tal-Karmnu will happily give tours of their sheep farm, followed by an optional meal (from £10, skalibuzet.com). They also offer samples of gbejna, or cheeselets, small rounds of sheep’s milk cheese eaten fresh (like a firm ricotta) or peppered and soaked in vinegar. Visitors can also browse shelves of local specialities, from dark, sweet carob syrup to lace-like filigree jewellery, or joining local crowds in elegant Caffe Cordina’s courtyard to sip tall glasses of hot, sweet tea with pastizzi – crisp filo parcels encasing mushy peas or lemon-laced ricotta. Suggest clients spend some time simply wandering around Valletta, whose walls, pillars and buildings are a uniform buttery limestone. From the ornate city gate designed by architect Renzo Piano to tiny, buzzy bars serving craft beer, there are surprises around every corner.

**VALETTA’S TOP SIGHTS**

- St John’s Co-Cathedral: This 16th century masterpiece, dedicated to St John the Baptist, features world-famous works by Caravaggio. The church was renovated in the 17th century and is the finest example of baroque architecture on the island.
- Upper Barrakka Gardens: The views over the Grand Harbour from this leafy garden park are phenomenal, but take a moment to look out for statues to notable figures, Winston Churchill among them, dotted around the gardens.
- Manoel Theatre: This majestic theatre is like Milan’s La Scala but on a smaller scale. If you have an opportunity to see a performance, take it.

**WIN!**

Alongside partner VISIT FLORIDA, we’re giving you the chance to discover the Flipside to Florida you are unlikely to find in any other guidebook. In association with Gold Medal magazine, VISIT FLORIDA is offering you the chance to win Gold Medal magazine subscription (8 issues), a trip to Florida, either on your own or with friends, and an exclusive day out in Orlando. To enter the prize draw, visit goldmedal.co.uk to enter the prize draw. There’s much more to Florida than meets the eye — beaches, wildlife, sports, arts, culture, visits, shopping and nightlife — book with Gold Medal to experience it all.

Call: 0800 014 7777 Visit: goldmedal.co.uk