

# The eyes have it

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



**1** here 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 ➤

# 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](http://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](http://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](http://thesaintjohnmalta.com)



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Marsaxlokk; St John's Co-Cathedral, Valletta; Upper Barrakka Gardens, Valletta; Hotel Ta' Cenc & Spa, Gozo PICTURES: Shutterstock; Rossignau.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. [prestige-holidays.co.uk](http://prestige-holidays.co.uk)

**EasyJet** flies direct to Malta from Gatwick, Southend, Newcastle and Manchester, with return fares from £49. [easyjet.com](http://easyjet.com)

around Sliema, a waterfront resort town, or spend a couple of days pottering around the 16th-century fortress city of Valletta.

Yet this compact island – the largest of the Maltese archipelago, which includes Gozo and Comino – is easy to explore by car or public bus. And spending time away from the touristy areas might just surprise and challenge those with preconceptions about package holidays and partying.

### FISH OF THE DAY

Marsaxlokk is a great place to start. Seafood restaurants have outdoor tables teetering right at the water's edge, while fishermen touch up their boats' paintwork or dry their nets in the sun. Stallholders set up daily to sell Maltese honey, leather goods and magnets emblazoned with the Maltese cross. The place 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,

“Marsaxlokk explodes with life on Sundays, when locals haggle loudly at the weekly fish market and often stay for lunch

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 ➤



## HOW TO SELL

☀️ Temperatures in Malta hover around 15C 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](http://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.

“Those interested in Maltese food can tour the restaurant's sheep farm, lemon groves or vineyard

entire villages. 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](http://diarilbniet.com)).



## 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, at the back of their shop.

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

## top tip

For more information and itinerary ideas, go to [visitmalta.com](http://visitmalta.com)



ABOVE FROM LEFT: Diar Il-Bniet restaurant, Dingli; Caffe Cordina, Valletta

kunserva, an intense paste made from sun-dried tomatoes.

Authentic experiences can be found in the more typical tourist areas too. In Valletta, that could mean ducking down St Lucia's Street, where specialist stores sell

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. **TV**

## DESTINATIONS

MALTA | WINTER SUN

### VALLETTA'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 lofty garden perch 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.

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