



Race you to Malta

Joanna Booth dons her trainers for Malta's marathon and discovers the destination's other activity options

I can't be sure, but I think the guy who overtook me uphill on the Mriehel Bypass was in his 70s. What makes this particularly unusual is that we were both on foot.

It was around seven miles in to the Malta Half Marathon, and while I'd been prepared to see plenty of older British tourists

on the island, I hadn't really expected them to be bounding ahead of me during the race.

Once, those who came to Malta from the UK in winter were looking for relaxation. Low-season prices brought the over-60s flocking to spend weeks sitting in the balmy winter sunshine.

Now, that bright, fresh weather is still appealing, but to a different, more active type of visitor. Hiking, biking and diving bring tourists of all ages to this action station in the Mediterranean, while for one Sunday each spring – in 2019, it's February 24 – Malta becomes one big racetrack.

ON THE RIGHT COURSE

The Malta Marathon has been running – pun intended – since 1986. From just over 100 participants in that first year it has grown significantly, with more than 4,400 runners taking part this year across the full and half-marathon distances.

And if you think no one

→ would be mad enough to fly to a different country to go running, think again. Over 2,900 of the competitors came from abroad, with more than 800 from the UK. (Some are even from Malta's traditional age bracket, with the oldest participant in the full marathon a 76-year-old British man.)

It shouldn't come as a surprise. In England, more than two million of us run at least once a week, and record numbers apply for big-ticket races such as the London Marathon. When it's cold and gloomy in the UK, it makes sense to throw your trainers in a bag and escape to a place where the temperatures are in the mid-teens.

The Malta Marathon is an excellent choice for UK runners for a number of reasons. Short, regular flights from a range of regional airports mean a trip to run the race and do a spot of sightseeing or celebrating can easily be fitted in to a long weekend.

The course is predominantly downhill or flat, making it a gentle introduction for those new to running and a potential PB (running parlance for 'personal best') opportunity for the more experienced.

It's a scenic run too, which is important when you consider runners may be out there for anything from one and a half to six hours, depending on the distance they run and their speed.

The course starts just outside the walls of Mdina and plunges through the countryside towards the coast - the marathon taking a more circuitous route than the half - and then snakes



The course starts by the Mdina and plunges through the countryside to the coast - it's like an alternative way to sightsee

around the walls of Valletta before tracing the shore north to its finish at Sliema Ferry. There's a slightly suburban section in the middle, but the majority of the run feels like an alternative way to sightsee, with some beautiful views.

▶ SPACE RACE

This year, 33 bands kept us entertained along the way, with a mix from traditional brass bands to guitar-heavy rock groups and lone balladeers.

Despite its relatively small size, the race is professionally organised. There are coach transfers from Sliema to the start line; a service to bring your bag back to a pick-up point beyond the finish line; good toilet facilities; and stations along the route with water, sports drinks, fruit and sponges.

But this isn't a large race. Runners who have become accustomed to the congested roads of many of the popular UK races, where it can feel like dodging others is half the battle, will be pleasantly surprised. After a slightly crowded first two miles, the pack spreads out and there's plenty of space to hit your stride.

There's a friendly atmosphere, and although support along the way isn't at the level of something like the London Marathon, the last few miles are lined with cheering spectators helping to give you that final push towards the finish.

Running the half-marathon, I barely noticed the first six miles tick past, with plenty to look at and a nice downhill course. A few uphill sections made the next three miles a bit more of a slog, but as we neared Valletta I got a second wind, and made good time along the waterfront for the last four miles to finish in 1.47.36 - not quite a PB, but one of my faster half-marathon times.

▶ BASE RUNNING

One of the most convenient places to stay for the race is Sliema - it's where the transfers to the start leave from, and where the finish line is, so clients will be able to hobble back to their hotels.

But one of the benefits of Malta's small size is that it's not far to any of the island's resorts, so clients can also safely choose their hotel based on what else they want to do during their stay.

A boutique base in Valletta will allow them to sightsee from their door, wandering among the grid of streets to see the gilded splendour of St John's Co-Cathedral and the gorgeous harbour views from the Upper Barrakka Gardens.

But a larger resort-style property with space for pools and spa facilities will be a better bet if all they'll really want to do before and after the run is, like Malta's traditional winter clientele, relax.

ABOVE:
Mdina

BELOW:
Valletta



PICTURE: VIEWINGMALTA.COM/CHEN WEIZHONG



➔ **BOOTS, WHEELS, FINS**

The Maltese islands, small in size, with hilly, beautiful terrain and a mild climate, could have been designed for exploring on foot or by bike, and whether clients are looking for short ambles or longer adventures, they can find something to suit.

Destination specialist Mercury



Malta's clear waters, with no tides to speak of and few strong currents, make it great for novice divers



Holidays has a Top 10 Walks section on its website, with suggestions for hikes lasting from a few hours to several days, and Malta's excellent bus system makes reaching the start and end of walks easy.

If clients want routes planned for them, a number of operators offer walking itineraries. They include Intravel, whose self-guided Glorious Gozo & Historic Malta is a 10-day trip packed with route ideas. Prices start from £810, including accommodation, a bus pass, taxi transfers and some meals.

Malta's little sister island, Gozo, has some of the country's best walking, and Headwater and Exodus Travels both focus their trips there. As well as self-guided walking, the former offers self-guided cycling trips too. Both its six-night trip and a four-night short break (from £1,009 and £879 respectively) include stays in luxury hotels with breakfast and dinner; bikes, maps and route

notes; and luggage transfers between hotels each day.

Malta's safe, clear waters, with no tides to speak of and few strong currents, make it a great spot for novice divers. There's a mix of wrecks, reefs and caves to dive, and most centres offer long weekend taster packages as well as entry-level Padi courses.

Recommend clients book with a dive centre that's a member of the local Professional Dive Schools Association, which monitors the safety of centres and works to ensure dive sites are protected and accessible. Find out more at pdsa.org.mt

Kids can learn to dive from the age of 10, but there's plenty of other watery fun to be had for young and old alike. Borg Water Sports in Golden Bay is a well-established outfit offering everything from sailing, jetskiing and wakeboarding to glass-bottomed kayaks and the 'crazy sofa', a six-seat inflatable towed behind a speedboat. **TW**

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AITO ABTA
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ABOVE LEFT:
Hiking in Gozo

LEFT:
Diving in Gozo