

# Open Season

Escape the crowds and protect the pennies with an off-peak break to Malta, says Aby Dunsby

@AbraDunsby

**T**he scorching heat is dwindling, the gaggles of sun-scouting tourists are retreating, and the hotels are lowering their prices: what better time to hop on a short flight to Malta?

With its mild climate, friendly English-speaking locals, natural beauty and wealth of historical sites, Malta has long been popular with the Brits, and visiting off peak will allow clients to benefit from cheaper hotel and airline prices, and fewer crowds.

"Due to its great location near north Africa, spring in Malta starts earlier than in any other Mediterranean destination and the summer lasts well into October," says Lauren Ross, Europe product and commercial manager for Simply Luxury by Travel 2.

In October, the water is warm enough for swimming, snorkelling, and to take advantage of world-class scuba



**The trio of bite-sized Mediterranean islands is blessed with rugged landscapes and a sparkling coastline**


diving. Even in winter, Malta can reach 16C, making it more comfortable for active types who can choose to hike, bike, walk or play golf on the island.

Malta's mild winter is also the perfect time for older clients and families to take advantage of cooler temperatures and calm streets to absorb the beauty of Malta and Gozo's archaeological sites, which include the Baroque palaces of historic Valletta, built by the Knights of St John; the walled 'silent city' of Mdina; and Gozo's temples and towers, which gaze out towards the sea.

## STAY ACTIVE

"Malta boasts a wide range of outdoor activities and is a strong favourite for people who want an active winter holiday," says Peter Vella, Malta Tourism Authority director. The trio of bite-sized Mediterranean islands - Malta, Gozo and Comino - is blessed with rugged landscapes and a sparkling coastline, making them a haven for wintertime walkers.

Inntravel's The Three Islands of Malta itinerary takes walkers from tranquil Gozo, where clients can explore the rural landscape and the beaches and coves framed by cliffs, to tiny Comino, home of the beautiful Blue Lagoon, and finally, to the history-rich cobbled backstreets of Malta.

At a third of the size of its sister Malta, the island of Gozo moves at a slower rhythm, and clients wishing to soak up its relaxed atmosphere while keeping active should consider a self-guided walking tour. 





➔ Exodus has an itinerary that allows clients to walk as much or as little as they like, and all walking is at low altitude, opening the trip up to older clients or those with families.

The relatively small size of Malta and Gozo means they are also easily discovered by bike, and the landscape offers stunning views from spots that are hard to reach by car. Distances between towns and villages are short, so cycling here requires little effort, and even the undulating coastal slopes only require a moderate level of fitness.

For divers who don't mind cooler water, visiting Malta in winter can allow for excellent scuba diving conditions.

Phil North, brand manager at specialist operator Dive Worldwide, says: "Malta is open year-round and the diving promises wrecks and fascinating underwater landscapes, neither of which shift with the seasons. "Bear in mind that the water temperature drops to about 18C in winter, meaning a wetsuit or a drysuit is required. Malta is famed for its excellent visibility, but the colder winter months can often have the best visibility, while the islands are also quieter."

▶ **FESTIVAL FEVER**

"Despite common perceptions, Malta doesn't go to sleep in the winter months," says Kate



LEFT: Cycling in Malta

RIGHT: Carnival in February



“The Maltese love to party and the island plays host to various events, especially during carnival week

floats and elaborate costumes.”

Malta's main nightlife hub, Paceville, is the place for clients to head to for late-night carnival after-parties, which are hosted by the many bars and clubs.

Meanwhile clients keen to explore a darker, uniquely Maltese side to carnival should make a trip to Nadur in Gozo, where locals wear masked and hooded costumes and interact with the crowd.

Clients visiting in October can coincide their visit with the one-night spectacle, Notte Bianca on October 1, which kicks off the autumn season. For one night each year, Valletta, which will be the European Capital of

Culture in 2018, keeps its state palaces, museums and other cultural venues open throughout the night, playing host to an extensive programme of entertainment, from performing arts to live music and fairs.

▶ **FAMILY FUN**

Plenty of museums, hotels, restaurants and bars stay open at Christmas, and this Catholic island goes to town in its celebrations, making it a great time for families to visit. Clients mustn't miss an evening at the impressive St John's Co-Cathedral in Valletta for carol singing by candlelight, or the annual pantomime at the Manoel Theatre, which is popular with adults and children alike.

Prestige Holidays recommends Malta as an ideal destination for half-term breaks and Easter holidays, as several hotels on its programme offer kids' activities, including the Westin Dragonara Resort, which has its own family pool, kids' club, and large family rooms where up to two kids under the age of 12 stay free when sharing the same room as two adults.

More suitable for couples is Malta's most luxurious hotel, The Phoenicia, which is due to reopen in November this year after an extensive refurbishment. Room rates start from €250 per night including breakfast. **tw**

BELOW LEFT: Valletta

BELOW: Wreck diving



Explore's eight-day Malta and Gozo Discovery trip departs in March-May and September 2017, from £995 including flights, seven nights' B&B accommodation, transport and local guides. [explore.co.uk](http://explore.co.uk)

Prestige Holidays offers a half-term stay at The Westin Dragonara Resort, Malta, from £1,259 per adult and £449 per child, sharing a deluxe seaview room. The price includes B&B accommodation, Ryanair flights from Stansted on October 22, and private transfers. [prestige-holidays.co.uk](http://prestige-holidays.co.uk)

**RIVIERA TRAVEL**  
**GO SOLO**  
 TOURS EXCLUSIVELY FOR SOLO TRAVELLERS

Riviera Travel are delighted to introduce Go Solo, our new collection of escorted group tours, specially created for solo travellers.

- ✓ Holidays for solo travellers that cost less than you think
- ✓ Holidays departing from many regional airports and local regional rail connections for Eurostar
- ✓ Great levels of commission paid on the whole holiday price
- ✓ Hand-picked hotels and personally tested itineraries
- ✓ All customers met at departure airport or Eurostar station by one of our team



Talk to agency sales on:  
**01283 744307**  
[agencysales@rivieratravel.co.uk](mailto:agencysales@rivieratravel.co.uk)

