



Picture a small island on the edge of Europe, overwhelmingly Roman Catholic, but with a recently and dramatically liberalised society. Once a British colony (and therefore one of the few European countries that still drive on the left-hand side of the road), it is now an independent republic famous for its beautiful coastline, ancient temples, and resurgent restaurant scene. An open economy, it welcomes tourists and tech companies with equal enthusiasm. So far, so familiar. I could easily be describing Ireland, but this is Malta. Finding we have so much in common is a bit like finding a long-lost relative – we should really try to get to know each other better...

“When the sun shines in Ireland, there’s nowhere I’d rather be,” says every Irish person at some point in their lives. The only problem is – last summer notwithstanding – the sun is often nowhere to be seen. So spending some time with our Mediterranean kin makes more and more sense.

Many people will have a “package holiday” experience of Malta, where you transfer from the airport directly to a self-contained resort hotel and are bussed out daily to one of the sights. Historic city? Tick. Beautiful coastline? Tick. Ancient temple? Tick. And then back to the pool for the afternoon. But many travellers are looking for a more immersive and authentic experience nowadays, and Malta is more than up to the task of delivering.

Getting to Malta from Ireland is no problem, with Ryanair offering regular flights from Dublin, Cork and Belfast. Your first real decision for a more authentic experience is where to base yourself and what kind of hotel to stay in. The capital of Malta is Valletta and it makes a lot of sense to set up camp here, but you don’t have to stay in the centre. The Three Cities, consisting of the fortified cities of Birgu, Senglea and Cospicua, are just across the Grand Harbour from Valletta and offer a convenient but quieter



Views of Valletta

spot, with interesting boutique hotels popping up in the quickly-gentrifying neighbourhoods. These are real, lived-in streets for wandering and soaking up the local atmosphere (and maybe getting a little lost).

Valletta itself is very small and completely walkable, but densely packed with history. When designating it a

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Treasure Island

On a short jaunt to Malta, **BILL O'SULLIVAN** discovers a land of saints, scholars and stunning scenery.



ABOVE Inside St John's Co-Cathedral in Valletta
RIGHT "The Beheading of St John the Baptist" by Caravaggio, one of the cathedral's greatest treasures



World Heritage Site, UNESCO described Valletta as "one of the most concentrated historic areas in the world".

One of Valletta's unmissable sights is surely St John's Co-Cathedral. Completed in 1578, the exterior is quite plain, but the real treasures lie within. If Venice has its "Bridge of Sighs", the entrance to this building could be called the "Door of Gasps", as almost every visitor has an involuntary intake of breath at the unexpected richness of the decoration. It's so intricate and over-the-top – every available inch on the ceiling, walls and floor is delicately carved, encrusted with gold or encased in marble. And yet, it's most famous for an even greater artistic treasure – "The Beheading of St John the Baptist" by Caravaggio, a dark and monumental piece housed in the cathedral's oratory. (Caravaggio arrived in Malta from Rome, on the run from a murder charge. ►

WHERE TO STAY

BOCO Boutique Hotel

bocoboutique.com

Hidden behind a discrete door (albeit in a beautiful façade) on a quiet street in Cospicua, this quirky, arty boutique hotel has only six rooms, each individually decorated with unique artwork. The rooms are quite generous, the service friendly and the breakfast excellent. And don't miss the honesty bar and rooftop terrace with fantastic views over the Grand Harbour and beyond to Valletta.

The Snop House

thesnophouse.com

Another charming boutique hotel, this time located on the main square in Senglea. The owner will happily and proudly guide guests around the art collection (some guests have characterised it as more of an art museum that happens to have guest rooms), and recommend from the excellent restaurants only steps away from the front door.

The Phoenicia Malta

campbellgrayhotels.com/the-phoenicia-malta

Recently reopened after an extensive renovation, this grand hotel is located at the gates of Valletta, with its mix of ancient fortress walls and the contemporary public spaces around the new parliament building. Boasting an unusually extensive seven acres of landscaped grounds, it's also just across the road from the central bus terminal, from which you can reach every corner of the island.

Casa Rocca Piccola

casaroccapiccola.com

This 16th century palace in the centre of Valletta is still privately owned by a Maltese noble family, and features museum pieces such as an incredibly rare portable altar, a complete set of surgical tools brought all the way from Rhodes by the Knights of Malta, and the stools used by the family when they attended the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II. The palace also has a private garden (a rarity in private homes on Malta, one of the most densely populated countries in the world) and a fascinating bomb shelter, converted from the original wells carved out under the house. A long-established visitor attraction in Valletta, the palace now includes a small selection of restored guest rooms and suites, offering a unique experience to your stay.



The Blue Grotto

(It's worth asking your guide about the intrigue and conspiracy theories surrounding his ultimate fate.)

Once you've had your fill of Baroque excess, beauty of a more natural kind might be the answer. The coastline of Malta has featured in many films and television shows, though, sadly, the world-famous Azure Window collapsed into the sea in 2017. One of the most picturesque spots to visit now is the Blue Grotto on the south east coast. There are stunning views of the natural arch from the cliffs above, but you can also take a boat trip into the caves. If you time it right, you'll find the blue sky reflecting off the white sandy seabed, resulting in vibrant azure and cobalt coloured waters. On top of this, the cave walls sometimes mirror the brilliant phosphorescent orange, purple and green colours of the underwater flora – an awe-inspiring sight.



The subtle façade of Noni, an excellent restaurant in Valletta

A little bit further along the coast road you'll find Hagar Qim and Mnajdra – two megalithic temples dating back 3200BC. This is a place for contemplation of the dedication and ingenuity of Malta's prehistoric builders. The complex includes a 17-foot standing stone that weighs 57 tonnes – the mind boggles as to how that could have been achieved 5,000 years ago.

While on the road, just 20 minutes away is Dingli, where you'll find the perfect place for a pitstop. Diar il-Bniet (diarilbniet.com) is one of a number of "field-to-fork" concept restaurants offering traditional Maltese food using only the freshest of ingredients produced on their own farm. The food is hearty and delicious (various forms of stew are a Maltese staple), served up in a simple, homemade style by friendly staff. Highly recommended.

Malta has such a long and fascinating history, the visitor who takes the time to immerse themselves will be richly rewarded. This "Ireland in the sun" should be on everybody's must-visit list. ■



The streets of Birgu are lit entirely by candlelight during its annual festival in October

ADDITIONAL PHOTOGRAPHS BY GETTY, AND ANETA IVANOVA AND FERENC HORVATH/UNSPASH