

Summer Again: a week in Malta

By Frances West



I spent a week in Malta from November 25th. I recommend Malta for out-of-season travel, for archeology and history buffs, as an add-on to a trip to Sicily and for those who want to experience another culture without a language problem.

Malta is a Mediterranean country off the coast of Sicily. It gets hot and muggy in summer and the countryside dries out. However in early winter, we had shirt-sleeve weather during the day and green countryside. We did get lots of rain on our first full day there but weather was fine otherwise. It was very windy on our last day - even so, we still had lunch outside!

Although the Maltese speak Malti, their country is officially bilingual and everyone speaks English (at least, it seemed that way). Street signs are in Malti but shop signs were often in English. We had absolutely no problem communicating. Their language is interesting - a Semitic language which uses our alphabet. There are many loan words such as suq for marketplace.

Getting there:

You can fly into Luqa airport from London, Milan, Frankfurt and other centres. It looks cheaper to buy each segment (Toronto - London, London - Malta separately). In addition there is water transport from Sicily. In fact, you can day trip to Sicily if you wish.

Getting from the airport:

You can buy a taxi chit inside the airport at a preset price. I think we paid 6ML. However the local bus makes the trip for 15 cents (all prices in Maltese L). We took a taxi in and the bus back to Luqa airport.

We stayed in **Valletta**, the capital, in Hotel British overlooking the Grand Harbour. This two-star hotel has been run by the same family since the 1930's and offers a full service restaurant. Rooms are old-fashioned and floors are off-set so that the elevator does not service each level. However our room (#106) shared a huge deck with one other room (occupied by our traveling companions) and afforded a view over the harbour. It was most pleasant to sit outside and sip a local beer or glass of wine in the late evening in December! Continental breakfast was included. We paid 22 ML per night. The staff was friendly and accommodating.

There are a lot of apartment hotels on the island outside of Valletta and may be more suitable for longer trips or for families. There are pros and cons about Valletta - it is very quiet at night. It is more of a government and business centre. Lots of people strolling until the shops shut at 7pm, though. Valletta is where all the buses go from and the walls are great places to walk and it is "real".

What to see:

Malta is amazingly rich in archeological sites. They have the oldest megaliths in the world - older than Stonehenge. Hal Saflieni Hypogeum which may be a temple and dates from 3300-3000 BC is fascinating. Visitor numbers are severely restricted (80 visitors each day) and it is essential to make a reservation as soon as you arrive on the island. Our guide booked the tickets for us (more about that later). Another

woman told me that she contacted a Maltese travel agent to obtain the tickets. The tour of the hypogeum was fabulous. There are carvings and wall paintings and an "oracle hole".

We visited several other sites - the Tarxien Temples (3300/3000-2500 BC), a temple complex near the Hypogeum. There is a replica of the bottom half of an enormous statue (the original is in the Archaeological Museum in Valletta). When whole, the statue must have stood about 6 feet tall. Again, there was marvelous carvings in the rock and libation holes. We visited Hagar Qim where the Venus of Malta was found. And other sites including some mysterious tracks in the rock near Dingli. These cart ruts nicknamed Clapham Junction remain an unsolved mystery.

Valletta is relatively modern as European cities go - only 350 years old, founded after the siege of Malta in 1565. It and the harbours are surrounded by fortifications - our deck looked out at Fort St. Angelo. Malta's history is bound up with the Knights of the Order of St. John who gave medical care to sick knights during the crusades. However these Knights were also warriors and we saw their auberges (each participating country had its own hall of residence of novice Knights of the Order of St. John.) and their armour and weapons at the Residence of the Grand Master.

In Valletta, don't miss the Co-Cathedral of St. John with much-decorated walls and pillars and trompe-l'oeil paintings on the upper walls. In the Archaeological Museum you can see a marvelous small statue of a sleeping lady - absolutely exquisite. The interesting Maritime Museum included Roman artifacts through to the steamship of 1950.

In modern times, Malta played a large role in

World War II - the whole country was given the George Cross for valor in 1942. We visited the Lascaris war rooms inside the bastions. It was the command centre for the Mediterranean operations during WWII and remains intact with all its equipment operational.

Valletta streets, many of them stairways, are interesting with closed in balconies in Spanish or Moorish style. We had an interesting wander through the small adjoining towns around the harbour and saw interesting faux finish pillars and Christmas decorations.

Mdina is a much older town, designed to withstand the onslaughts of pirates. The town was the former capital and shows the Arab influence (they were there for 220 years). Its nickname is The Silent City but on the Sunday we were there, it wasn't!

But it is worth the journey. The local bus to Mdina from just outside the city walls of Valletta is easy - and cheap (10 or 15 cents). In the adjoining newer town of Rabat, we visited some catacombs which dated from the Roman period. I will also remember Mdina for the rosemary flavoured creme brulee.

It is worth going to **Marsaxlokk**, a fishing town. There we were pleased to see the brightly coloured fishing boats with the traditional eye of osiris painted on each side of the prow. Great seafood (a local delicacy, lampuki, was in season (aka dorado).



Gozo: We took the bus from Valletta (15 cents for the 50-55 minute ride) and the ferry (2.25 return, I think). A local bus met the ferry and we got off close to the village of Xaghra (very pretty) and the temples of Ggantija. These date back to 3600-3200 BC. Some of the walls are very high - about 20 feet.

The main city of Gozo is Victoria or Rabat (many places in the Maltese Islands have two names - the traditional name and the one some politician or bureaucrat gave. They use the traditional one!) There is an impressive citadel which give wide-ranging views of the countryside.



Cats!

Malta has cats everywhere, including keeping watch on the fishermen! We noticed that outdoor cafes tolerated them and in fact, fed them scraps.

Costs: prices for restaurant food was similar to Toronto (cheaper than Europe). Transportation is very cheap. Car rental is the cheapest in Europe.

Food has a strong Italian flavour with lots of fish. Espresso and cappuccino are the norm. Good local lager and wine (from grapes from Italy - there are some locally grown grapes but that wine is very expensive). They have an interesting soft drink called Kinnie which is bittersweet and tastes like orange marmalade, very refreshing.

I don't think that I have given you the flavour of Malta. In late November and early December, it was laid back, friendly, safe. There are wildflowers and flowers in gardens. There are also hunters though (we saw some near Dingli.) They were gearing up for Christmas with lights garlanding the streets and Christmas songs playing.

And of course, the whole is surrounded by the blue Mediterranean!

For more information, see:
<http://www.visitmalta.com/>