

# Getting Started

Malta is a traveller-friendly country that provides holidays options for people on all budgets, and allows for more than just warm-weather, beach-going vacations – there's a good deal of history, culture and tradition to explore too, so a long weekend here in the low season could constitute a cheap and fun city break. The country is so small you could cover most of the highlights in just a few days.

Malta has a typically Mediterranean climate, with mild winters, hot, dry summers and some 300 days of sunshine. This means it's a year-round destination, so if you're planning to visit from most parts of Europe you should be able to find flights and package deals at any time of year. There aren't too many alternatives to Malta if you want to stay within Europe and still be sunbathing in November!

Winters are not at all unpleasant here, with an average of six hours of sunshine daily in January and daytime temperatures around 16°C. Sea temperatures around the islands range from 15°C in midwinter, to a balmy 25°C in August and September.

## WHEN TO GO

The peak season for travel to Malta is June to September, when many resort hotels are booked solid. However, daytime temperatures in July and August can reach more than 35°C – uncomfortably hot – and it's tough to find your own patch of sand or rock at any beach (or battle the crowds at attractions). Weather-wise, the best time to visit is spring (April to June) and autumn (September and October), though September still counts as high season in many hotels and the pleasant weather can sometimes be interrupted by a hot and humid wind, or rainfall. For water-babies, the sea temperature is considerably warmer in autumn than in spring.

In November and December you can expect daytime temperatures of 12°C to 18°C and a fair amount of sunshine between spells of rain showers (the total annual rainfall is low, at around 580mm, and it falls mainly between September and February). January and February are the coldest months, when a strong northeasterly wind (the *grigal*) makes conditions more unpleasant. Winds are a feature of Malta's weather (see p138). The stiff sea breeze is cooling in summer, but in winter the *grigal* can whip up

### DON'T LEAVE HOME WITHOUT...

- Double-checking the visa situation (p178)
- Confirming what currency Malta is using – the lira or euro (p176)
- Prebooking your visit to the Hypogeum (p80) – limited spaces are available, and demand is high
- Sunscreen, sunglasses and a hat to protect you from the fierce summer sun
- A travel insurance policy (p174) specifically covering you for any planned 'high risk' activities, such as scuba diving
- A copy of your diving qualifications, or a snorkel and mask to help you better investigate Malta's underwater world (p44)
- Earplugs – handy if you find yourself in a hotel undergoing renovations or neighbouring one of the many construction sites around the country

See the climate chart (p170) for more information.

the waves that pound across the harbour walls and occasionally disrupt the ferry service to Gozo. In spring and autumn the southeasterly *xlokk* (sirocco) sometimes blows in from North Africa, bringing humid and occasionally foggy conditions.

The main season for festas (feast days) is June to September, but if you want to catch a festa out of season, there's the Feast of St Paul's Shipwreck in Valletta on 10 February, and the Feast of the Immaculate Conception in Cospicua on 8 December.

Two of the liveliest and most popular events on the islands, marked by public holidays, are Carnival Week in early March and the L-Imnarja festival on 28 and 29 June. See p172 for more information on these events, plus details of how this nation of dedicated Catholics celebrates Christmas and Easter.

The Christmas–New Year period is a mini-high season in the middle of winter, when many Maltese emigrants return home to visit friends and family, and European tourists come looking for a spot of winter sunshine. Otherwise you can find some cheap flight and accommodation deals from November to March.

## COSTS

If you're heading to Malta from North Africa (from Tunisia, for example), you'll find the prices quite steep. By European standards Malta is good value, although prices are steadily increasing and the authorities are behind a push to get more upmarket tourism down this way (hence a noticeable increase in the number of five-star hotels, and cruise liners dropping in to see the sights). Locals are worried about the potential impact on inflation the euro may have when it replaces the Maltese lira as the national currency (scheduled for 1 January 2008; see p176 for details).

If you budget on around Lm15 per day, you'll get pleasant hostel or guest-house accommodation, a simple restaurant meal, plenty of bus rides, and a decent street-side snack. If your accommodation has self-catering facilities and you cook your own meals, your costs will be even lower.

On around Lm25 a day, you can start to live it up in a hotel with air-con and a swimming pool (especially in the low season) and enjoy meals at better restaurants. Allow extra for car rental (average about Lm10 per day).

## TRAVEL LITERATURE

Considering how many tourists Malta receives, it's somewhat surprising that there's nothing by way of travel literature. And the genre of dissatisfied/overworked/lovelorn cityslickers finding themselves/finding love/renovating a farmhouse (or all three) in regions like Provence or Tuscany has yet to encompass Malta (although Gozo seems a logical place to set one of these stories – there are plenty of interesting characters, and farmhouses to restore).

There are, however, a few writers who have relocated to or holidayed in Malta and subsequently used the islands and their turbulent history as a backdrop for their stories. *The Kappillan of Malta* by Nicholas Monsarrat is the best example – it's the classic English-language novel about Malta. Written in the early 1970s when the author was living in San Lawrenz, Gozo, it describes the experiences of the humble parish priest Dun Salvatore during WWII, interlaced with a potted history of Malta.

More gripping beach reading is provided by David Ball's novel, *The Sword and the Scimitar*. It's a sweeping adventure set in the 16th century, bringing to life characters from the Ottoman Empire and the Knights of St John against the dramatic backdrop of the Great Siege.

## HOW MUCH?

Room in guesthouse

Lm6-10 per person

Bus trip Lm0.20-0.50

Cup of coffee Lm0.60

Day hire of sun lounge Lm1.50

One hour internet access Lm1

See also the Lonely Planet Index, inside front cover.

## TOP TENS

### Planning on the Internet

The internet is loaded with sites that can help you plan a holiday in Malta. Here are some of our favourites; many more are mentioned throughout this book.

Malta Tourism Authority ([www.visitmalta.com](http://www.visitmalta.com)) Huge official site that makes a good first port of call in addition to the Lonely Planet site ([lonelyplanet.com](http://lonelyplanet.com))

- Gozo ([www.gozo.com](http://www.gozo.com)) Great info if you're taking in Gozo too
- Maltese Islands ([www.malteseislands.com](http://www.malteseislands.com)) Nicely designed site with plenty of general information
- Malta Media (<http://maltamedia.com>) Bone up on issues making the headlines in Malta
- Malta Weather ([www.maltaweather.com](http://www.maltaweather.com)) Wondering what to pack? Check the 'Malta's Climate' section
- Heritage Malta ([www.heritagemalta.org](http://www.heritagemalta.org)) Swot up on Maltese history and prioritise your sightseeing
- Restaurants Malta ([www.restaurantsmalta.com](http://www.restaurantsmalta.com)) Plan to travel your tastebuds and expand your waistline
- About Malta ([www.aboutmalta.com](http://www.aboutmalta.com)) If it's about Malta, you'll discover it on this comprehensive directory site
- Public Transport Association ([www.apt.com.mt](http://www.apt.com.mt)) Useful advice on getting from A to B courtesy of big yellow buses
- StarWeb Malta ([www.starwebmalta.com](http://www.starwebmalta.com)) Labels itself 'Malta's first online concierge' and is home to listings in traveller-friendly categories

### Must-See Historic Sites

Many parts of Malta feel like open-air museums. The most remarkable and mysterious sites date back 5000 years, but the era of the Knights of St John is the most fascinating, and resulted in some magnificent architecture and ripping yarns.

- Hypogeum, Paola – built between 3600 and 3000 BC (p80)
- Mdina – buildings from the 13th century (p123)
- Valletta's auberges and alleys – dating from the late 16th century (p55)
- Fortifications of Valletta & the Three Cities – defences from the mid-16th century (p65)
- Vittoriosa's Il Collachio – buildings from the 11th century (p78)
- Il-Kastell, Gozo – buildings from the 17th century (p146)
- St John's Co-Cathedral, Valletta – built in the 1570s (p60)
- Haġar Qim and Mnajdra Temples – built between 3600 and 3000 BC (p142)
- St Agatha's Crypt & Catacombs, Rabat – frescoes from the 12th century (p128)
- Ġgantija Temples, Gozo – built between 3600 and 3000 BC (p161)

### Superlative Swimming Spots

It's not all history in Malta – the country built its holiday reputation on sunny weather and beaches. Just don't come here expecting miles of sand – there are only a handful of sandy stretches, and these get very busy. There are a number of rocky bays and coves that offer swimming and snorkelling in crystal-clear waters.

- Golden Bay (p114)
- Blue Lagoon, Comino (p164)
- Ramla Bay, Gozo (p163)
- Mellieħa Bay (p117)
- Ghajn Tuffieħa Bay (p115)
- Ġnejna Bay (p116)
- Paradise Bay (p120)
- Għar Lapsi (p143)
- Peter's Pool (p137)
- Wied il-Għasri, Gozo (p159)

The British novelist Anthony Burgess was a tax exile in Malta for a brief spell at the end of the 1960s. He lived in a house in Lija, which became the fictional home of the 81-year-old protagonist in his masterly novel *Earthly Powers*.

Nicholas Rinaldi's novel *The Jukebox Queen of Malta* uses WWII Malta as a backdrop for his book – a love story between an American soldier and a girl called Melita. The book has been compared to *Captain Corelli's Mandolin* with its juxtaposition of island romance, local history and the senseless violence of war.

# Itineraries

## CLASSIC ROUTES

### MALTA'S MAGIC

#### One Week

Malta's diminutive dimensions mean that you can squeeze a lot of sightseeing into a short time. But it's more fun to take it easy – take time to absorb the history from the stones of Valletta, Vittoriosa and Mdina, to cool off at swimming spots while exploring, or chill out at a view-blessed café. Your own car is an asset, otherwise base yourself in Valletta, Sliema, St Julian's or Bugibba for the easiest bus connections.

Begin by taking in **Valletta** (p55) – explore the narrow streets and walk around the fortifications. Feast your eyes on the views from the Upper Barrakka Gardens. On the second day explore the charms of **Vittoriosa** (p76) and **Senglea** (p80), towns not yet high on the tourist radar. On day three visit the **Tarxien Temples** and **Hypogeum** (p80) en route further south for a seafood lunch at **Marsaxlokk** (p137). On day four spend the morning at **Hagar Qim** and **Mnajdra temples** (p142) and the **Blue Grotto** (p141), and the afternoon in exquisite **Mdina** (p123) and **Rabat** (p128). Day five should be spent relaxing on a beach in the northwest (**Golden Bay**, p114, is glorious), recharging your batteries for some physical activity on day six – a cliff-top walk, maybe a scuba-diving taster. End on a high with a day trip to Comino's spectacular **Blue Lagoon** (p164).

Few other countries can boast such concentrated history, architecture (and yes, beaches) in so tiny an area. Malta is perfect for travellers looking to take things easy for a week, do the rounds of the sights but not have to travel far.



### GOZITAN DELIGHTS

#### Five Days to One Week

The island of Gozo is smaller than Malta (14km by 7km) and you might think a day here is all you'd need to whizz between villages and sights. But that wouldn't be doing Gozo justice – a slower sightseeing pace is necessary to appreciate the more relaxed way of Gozitan life. Plan your visit with culinary precision – for food-lovers, dining at some of Gozo's great restaurants should feature high on the agenda. The island is so small you could base yourself anywhere in order to follow this itinerary, particularly if you have your own set of wheels (recommended).

Ideally your trip should start with a day exploring **Victoria** (p145), wandering around majestic Il-Kastell and the laneways of Il-Borgo, then eating well somewhere like Maji Wine & Dine or It-Tmun Victoria. Spend day two walking, swimming and snorkelling at **Dwejra** (p157) after paying your respects at the grand **Basilica of Ta'Pinu** (p156). The **Xlendi waterfront** (p154) makes the perfect place for sundowner drinks. Begin day three with a visit to the temples and other attractions of **Xaghra** (p160), then spend the afternoon reclining on the red sands of the blue **Ramla Bay** (p163), the biggest beach on Gozo. Frock up for dinner at the highly acclaimed **Restaurant Ta'Frenč** (p160) outside Marsalforn. Day four could be set aside for exploring around **Ta'Cencé** (p154) with its sunset views north, and for seeking out a lesser-known spot for swimming and snorkelling (nearby **Mġarr ix-Xini**, p153, is lovely). Spend day five visiting **Comino** (p164), discovering the tiny island on foot and swimming in crystal-clear water, then stop in for a beer at convivial Gleneagles in **Mġarr** (p153) after your boat ride back. There's five days covered – but why not allocate a week to Gozo, rent a lovely old farmhouse and spend a few days relaxing poolside?

Reset your clock to the relaxed pace of Gozo time. Malta's second island is pocket-sized and a pleasure to explore – take it in slowly to fully appreciate the character-filled villages, impressive landscapes and friendly locals, and set aside an afternoon for aquatic delights on tiny Comino.

# Snapshot

These days it's hard to find a local newspaper *not* bemoaning Malta's declining tourist numbers, with editorials and letters to the editor suggesting just how to fix the problem. The number of tourists visiting Malta has been static or dropping for the last few years, with authorities 'confident' of a reversal, but few believing that figures will do anything but worsen. It's big, bad news for the country, with the potential to wreak havoc on the economy (see p34 for details on the importance of tourism to the local economy). Malta has certainly felt the squeeze from increased competition in the form of cheaper Med destinations (such as Croatia) and North African hotspots (Tunisia and Morocco, for example). Everyone hopes this trend might be reversed with the long-awaited advent of low-cost airlines servicing Malta from late 2006, making a holiday here more affordable. We can't help but think that there are bigger problems to be addressed in order to ensure visitors leave the island with a positive impression – problems such as the rampant, unchecked construction, neglect of heritage sites, pothole-ridden roads, abuse of the environment and the often shabby standards of service. See p42 for a long list of environmental challenges facing the country, including the political hot potato that is birdhunting.

Along with the worries of declining tourist numbers, locals face the very real anxiety of a new currency being implemented in the near future: if everything goes to plan, on 1 January 2008 the country will adopt the euro as its national currency. The fear most people share is that the changeover to euro will trigger price increases – this from a population already feeling the pinch in their back pocket from higher oil prices, which in Malta impacts the prices of everything from petrol to electricity and water.

Still, EU membership has brought rewards, and there is a sense among locals that the best is yet to come. EU funds are being channelled into a vast number of projects (improved roads and new heritage projects, to name a few that visitors will encounter), and there's an optimistic mood that EU membership will generate enormous opportunities for the younger generation.

Perhaps Malta's most pressing concern since joining the EU is the number of irregular immigrants that have landed on its shores, putting pressure on a small, crowded island and an unprepared population, triggering a nasty outbreak of racism. Poverty and conflict appear to be the root of the current mass migration from Africa to Europe along the major routes – into the Canaries and mainland Spain in the east, and into Malta and Italy in the heart of the Mediterranean. EU help is needed to help stem the tide, and to help Malta process, then repatriate or rehouse irregular immigrants. In 2005 just over 1800 Africans left Africa (most likely Libya) by boat and arrived in Malta (often by accident – most would prefer to reach Italy); in the first nine months of 2006, close to 1700 irregular immigrants made the dangerous journey. They are housed in very rudimentary detention centres (some for up to 18 months) while the authorities determine if they are eligible for refugee status (not easy to obtain) or are able to stay in Malta on humanitarian grounds. Those who are permitted to stay are moved to overcrowded open centres, and some are able to search for casual work, although there is little to be found. These irregular immigrants have won few local fans with their protests for better conditions. As seems to be the trend throughout Europe, right-wing xenophobic groups are gaining popularity in Malta, and a radical element has resorted to arson against those who help the migrants or vocally support their rights (Jesuits, lawyers, newspaper editors and journalists). It's an unfortunate and ugly side to the country.

## FAST FACTS

Population: 400,000

Area: 316 sq km

Population density:  
1266 people per sq km

Number of registered  
vehicles: 325,000

Number of mobile phone  
subscribers: 334,220

Inflation: 2.8%

Unemployment: 7.3%

Number of tourists  
annually: 1.16 million  
(around 465,000 from  
the UK)

Most popular name for  
males: Joseph  
(14,523 men named  
Joseph)

Most popular name for  
females: Mary  
(12,056 women named  
Mary – spot the trend?)

# The Author



## CAROLYN BAIN

After travelling the four corners of Europe, Melbourne-born Carolyn still favours the southern region, and she happily dedicates a good deal of her time to the search for the perfect Mediterranean island. For Lonely Planet she has repeatedly visited Greece and Malta, among other destinations; for this book, it was back to tiny, sunny Malta for a spell of *pastizzi*, mad drivers, avoiding rabbit on the menu, and swotting up on the fascinating local history.

### My Favourite Trip

For me, the best part of any trip to Malta is time spent on Gozo. I have fond memories of a previous visit, renting a 17th-century farmhouse in Xaghra (p160) and sitting by the pool with friends, sunning ourselves while winter had hit the rest of Europe. On this trip I was flying solo and was thrilled to hunt down a small apartment in the heart of Victoria (p145) – right next to the Basilica of St George, in fact. For the price of a cheap hotel room I had my own outdoor terrace, views over the square, and the perfect village at my doorstep. Days were spent checking out the sights of this lovely island (don't miss Xlendi p154, Dwejra p157 or Ramla Bay p163), but it was always a treat to come home.



### LONELY PLANET AUTHORS

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