

PANORAMA



MALTA

Experience Malta:
The Mediterranean's
ultimate destination
for leisure and business tourism

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The tourism sector is thriving, with winter vacations increasingly in demand



Diverse historical, cultural, natural and gastronomic assets make Malta ideal for any tourist



The Mediterranean archipelago is a dream location for yachting, diving and land-based sports



Hosting business-related events is one of the tourism industry's fastest growing segments



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Traditional luzzu fishing boats in the ancient port of Marsaxlokk



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A panoramic view of Malta's awe-inspiring Valletta Grand Harbour

Your ultimate Mediterranean winter getaway

The fascinating Mediterranean island nation of Malta is fast becoming a destination of choice for discerning leisure and business travelers seeking an eclectic range of unique experiences at any time of the year.

Home to only around 500,000 people, the diminutive Southern European archipelago that spans just 122 square miles is made up of three equally beguiling islands, which are separated by short stretches of sparkling azure-blue sea.

Each of the trio is distinct, although they share many characteristics, including glorious sandy beaches, majestic landscapes, at least 300 sun-filled days a year and numerous physical reminders of a rich history that goes back seven millennia. Malta, the largest, merges all the traditional benefits of a Mediterranean island vacation with a vibrant and cosmopolitan city lifestyle. Smaller, less-populated Gozo provides more rural adventures and a relaxed retreat for those who need to unwind from the stresses of their daily routines; while tiny Comino, named after the thousands of cumin plants that scent its air, is a remarkably picturesque protected nature reserve.

As Carlo Micallef, CEO of the Malta Tourism Authority (MTA), asserts: "There are many destinations in Europe and around the world that offer sun, but Malta combines that with something different. Our islands appeal to travelers who don't want to sit on a beach or by their hotel's pool all day every day. Instead, visitors to Malta are interested in discovering new places and exploring our fabulous history, culture, gastronomy, wines, towns, villages and natural environments. They are interested in embarking on experiences, not just as observers but as participants in our lifestyle."

Recent statistics demonstrate that this combination is attracting a growing number of international tourists. In 2023, the islands welcomed 3 million visitors from around the world, 30



Carlo Micallef
CEO, Malta Tourism Authority (MTA)

percent more than in 2022, with the number of U.S. tourists rising 36 percent to 55,096.

Over the same period, the nights visitors spent in the country expanded by 22 percent and their expenditure went up 33 percent to reach \$3 billion, with each tourist spending \$146 a day on average. Figures from the first six months of 2024 show a continuation of this upward trend: in comparison with the opening half of last year, there have been increases of 23 percent in inbound visitors, 16 percent in nights stayed and 25 percent in tour-

ist spend.

What is particularly striking is that a growing proportion of travelers are now aware that Malta is the perfect winter-getaway destination. "In the first three months of 2024, our visitor numbers were 38 percent higher than in the first quarter of 2023, which was our previous best winter performance," reveals Micallef.

"It was a very good season for our hotels, with some categories having 80-percent occupancy rates during those months. The hotels in Malta never close during the year but, in the past, they would reduce the size of their workforces in winter. There's been a complete turnaround in that situation, with hotels having consistently high occupancy levels and profitability throughout the year. This allows them to offer their employees careers rather than jobs, and they can hold onto and develop their good people."

Expanding tourism in milder months

MTA, which is responsible for promoting, regulating and sustainably advancing Maltese tourism in collaboration with all industry stakeholders, has played a key role in facilitating the shift in seasonality.

Over the years, the authority has developed close relationships with international trade partners, such as travel agents, tour operators and airlines, which it continued to maintain and

Public sector strategies and investments have made Malta a year-round destination for global travelers

strengthen during the COVID-19 pandemic. Combined with ongoing promotional reminders about the English-speaking destination to global traveler audiences, this enabled Malta's tourism industry to regain and overtake its previous strong position faster than other countries once foreign travel began to open up again.

However, as tourists started flooding back in 2023, MTA became concerned that further growth in visitor levels within the traditional high season could become unsustainable, with the country's tourism sector in danger of losing the characteristic personal touch that helps make a Maltese vacation so memorable.

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"In October 2023, we decided that summer tourism had reached a certain limit — we didn't want to put more pressure on the industry, the islands' infrastructure or the country generally in July and August. Instead, we wanted to grow the sector in the months where there was capacity to fill, aiming for a more constant level of tourism throughout the year," Micallef explains. "We devised a strategy to grow business in the winter months, when our hotels have more capacity to accommodate guests and the country is quieter."

The authority then launched an extensive worldwide marketing campaign across social, digital, print, television and direct-marketing media in November of last year, a month that normally sees a lull in global tourism promotion.

"It worked out beautifully. We stood out, as there wasn't much competition from other destinations advertising, and we immediately saw

bookings come in at a rapid pace. Following on from the winter, visitor numbers in April, May and June this year were also very good and we saw flatter, more stable levels of tourism in July and August, which was our goal," he states.

Malta's countless attractions can all be enjoyed at any time of the year. Just to mention a few, they include some of the oldest freestanding man-made structures worldwide; hundreds of religious and other historical buildings that offer evidence of the numerous civilizations that have inhabited the islands; sites connected to the country's central involvement in World War II; award-winning diving sites; first-class facilities for diverse sports, outdoor activities, business events and weddings; Michelin-starred restaurants; and renowned luxury spas and wellness centers.

In MTA's opinion, many of the islands' highlights are best appreciated in the milder and more tranquil months of the year. "Therefore, our winter marketing campaign was well targeted to specific interest niches and people that want to travel in those months who are not price sensitive. Malta is highly competitive in terms of the experiences it offers. We are grateful to every person who chooses to spend their hard-earned money on a trip to our islands and we give them the best experience and value for their money, but it's not a cheap destination," he says.

First-class and sustainable services

To further spur travelers to select Malta, the authority has started to expand the calendar of events taking place in the country so that there is plenty to entertain guests outside of the summer season.

"For example, we're investing in sports activities that you can participate in as an amateur, professional or spectator, as well as large-scale concerts from international artists, cultural activities and this year we held the first art biennale in Malta. It's been an exercise in diversification of our tourism offering and making the best use of the many resources that the country has at its disposal," says Micallef.



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There are an estimated 359 cathedrals, churches and chapels in Malta

The archipelago is surrounded by calm and clear azure seas

The authority has also invested heavily in ensuring the islands' hospitality sector welcomes visitors with the highest levels of service. Its efforts in this area are often carried out in partnership with the Maltese Institute of Tourism Studies, which has provided cutting-edge education and training to about 8,000 graduates over the last decade.

"When it comes to training, we work hand in hand with the industry — not only hotels but also restaurants and the people on the front line — to make sure we are constantly improving and upskilling our sector. In addition, we're pushing the industry to embrace new technology and digitalization in order to make it easier for visitors to explore new experiences without losing Malta's authenticity. We never forget that tourism remains a people industry," he declares.

The authority is helping drive the sector toward net zero too. Malta as a country is a front-runner in sustainability, ranking 15th globally in Yale's Environmental Performance Index 2024. As well as protecting its vast biodiversity on sea and land within well-established marine and natural parks that are havens for eco-tourists, the government has, for instance, enacted bans on single-use plastics, incentivized solar-panel installations and invested in substantial electric vehicle uptake.

MTA is supporting the country's progress in sustainability. "As an illustration, we've launched the world's only diploma in climate-friendly travel with the Institute of Tourism Studies and in conjunction with the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, through which we're trying to create more climate-friendly champions," discloses the CEO.

Furthermore, MTA has memorandums of understanding with the Global Sustainable Tourism Council, Green Key Global's Eco-Rating Program and the European Union's Ecolabel for environmental excellence. Within a couple of years, it will be mandatory for Maltese accommodation providers to meet the standards of and secure certification from at least one of these internationally recognized schemes, and the authority is

currently providing training for local operators to guarantee that they fully understand and can fulfill the programs' requirements.

Hospitality with a personal touch

Partly as a result of MTA's efforts, excellent and sustainable accommodation options to suit all budgets can be found throughout Malta, with visitors seeking luxury having a plethora of properties to stay in that range from 5-star boutique hotels to centuries-old palaces and restored farmhouses. Most of the accommodation available on the islands is owned and run by small local businesses, with the majority of properties having been lovingly cared for by the same families for generations.

"We are very proud about that. Nevertheless, with all the success that our tourism sector has been having over the past three years, more top international hospitality brands are now looking at Malta. A number of Maltese hoteliers are currently engaged in talks that will eventually result in world-renowned operators coming here. We welcome that development and believe that our strategy and investments for attracting high-quality tourists all year round will produce great incentives for getting these brands to our islands," states Micallef.

"For example, the number of American leisure tourists coming to Malta is growing, as is the number choosing the country for meeting, incentive, conference and exhibition travel. We will have welcomed around 60,000 to 65,000 visitors from the U.S. in 2024. However, we need to raise that figure to 120,000 in order for major hotel brands to consider Malta seriously and for U.S. airlines to decide to fly here directly. That's my challenge and MTA has a plan in place to achieve this within the next five years."

Bolstering global flight connectivity

All flights land at Malta International Airport, which for the last six years has been ranked in the Airports Council International's annual customer survey as Europe's best airport handling between five and 15 million annual passengers. MIA is lo-

cated on the main island of Malta and just 20 minutes' drive from the center of the nation's capital, Valletta, which is the most popular base for tourists thanks to its blend of dynamic urban culture and a diverse historical legacy so well preserved that the entire city has been awarded UNESCO World Heritage Site status.

MIA served 7.8 million travelers in 2023, 33 percent up on the previous year, and oversaw 27 percent more flights, with 51,353 plane journeys that were 85 percent full on average flying to and from more than 100 destinations in 35 countries.

“People arrive as visitors and leave as locals, taking with them unforgettable memories and becoming our greatest ambassadors.”

Carlo Micallef
CEO, Malta Tourism Authority

"We're seeing rising demand from airlines and succeeded in increasing connectivity with practically all geographical regions in 2023, including with our main markets of Italy, Germany, France, the U.K. and Poland. We also achieved growth in long-haul markets, such as the U.S., Australia and Asia, and opened new markets," Micallef confirms. We try to find a balance between so-called low-cost and legacy carriers, and are selective about the routes we choose to invest in. We're directing our strategy toward airlines that fly to regions with the less price-sensitive target audiences that we want to get to Malta."

Airlines currently using MIA include British Airways, Air France, ITA Airways, Swissair, Turkish Airlines, Emirates, Lufthansa, Austrian Airlines and the new national carrier KM Malta Airlines that only flies to European destinations at the moment, but which has codesharing agreements with transatlantic operators. "Right now, we're working on getting other legacy carriers to fly to Malta, es-

pecially to bolster our connections with North America, which is a priority market for us — we believe it is the next frontier for our tourism industry and want to ensure Malta is a convenient destination of choice for travelers from that continent," he reveals.

"As an example, Aer Lingus is starting flights from Dublin to Malta as from Oct. 25, offering very good new connections from several U.S. and Canada airports. Latin America is an opportunity for us too, as we're seeing a lot of interest from Mexico, Brazil and Colombia in particular. And there is plenty of potential in Japan, Korea, Australia and the Middle East, among other places."

To help encourage flights from these regions into Malta, MIA is conducting a substantial development program, the first phase of which should be completed this year. This will involve a doubling of the airport terminal's footprint size and renovating both its runways.

Another highly rewarding way to visit the island of Malta is by cruise, as nearly 900,000 travelers did last year. The country's location in the middle of the Mediterranean means that many cruise companies include it on a wide variety of routes and for homeporting.

In the CEO's view: "Valletta Grand Harbor is always stunning, but especially so when you are approaching our capital's historic port on a cruise at sunrise, for example. Cruises are an excellent opportunity for us to showcase what Malta stands for and they are great familiarization trips for tourists — people spend a few hours here and they love it. Within two or three years, they come back for a longer vacation."

It doesn't take more than a few days on the islands for those vacationers to start feeling at home, Micallef insists: "Tourists are immediately welcomed to jump into the Maltese way of life and enjoy themselves. People arrive as visitors and leave as locals, taking with them unforgettable memories and becoming our greatest ambassadors. The emotions, memories and activities they share with their friends, family and on social media are the best advertising for Malta."

A patchwork destination

Possibly unique in the concentration of diverse attractions that fill its lands and seas, the Maltese archipelago makes an ideal destination for any tourist, whatever their motivation for travel. And thanks to its small size, visitors can gain a holistic appreciation of its experiences within a very short period of time, with the main island of Malta being connected to smaller Gozo and Comino by regular ferry trips that take well under an hour to reach their destinations.

History lovers are certainly catered for. Malta has been inhabited for more than 7,000 years and due to its location at the crossroads of Europe, the Middle East and Africa, copious civilizations have been drawn to the islands over that time. Among them were the Phoenicians, Romans, Byzantines, Arabs, Normans, Sicilians and Knights of St. John, while the French controlled the country in the age of Napoleon, followed by the British until Malta became independent in the 1960s.

Impressive reminders of these populations and more are found throughout the nation, attracting not just tourists, but major movie and TV productions such as Ridley Scott's *Gladiator* and *Napoleon* films, *Troy*, Ron Howard's *Da Vinci Code*, *Game of Thrones* and Sky's World War II series *Das Boot*. As Malta Tourism Authority's CEO Carlo Micallef explains: "It's not a coincidence that so many different movies are shot in Malta. Its heritage is so rich, genuine and authentic that the country can stand in for numerous locations and eras."

The country boasts three UNESCO World Heritage Sites, the most ancient of them being a collection of awe-inspiring Neolithic temples and domestic buildings that are scattered across the islands, which include some of the world's oldest freestanding megalithic structures. A second World Heritage Site also dates back over 5,000 years and is even rarer: Hal Saffieni Hypogeum, an underground temple complex on three levels that covers nearly 5,400 square feet.

The third is the country's fortified capital, Valletta. Originally constructed by the Knights of St.

John in the 16th century, the coastal city's elegant streets are packed with honey-colored architecture from that period, as well as Baroque palaces and other buildings, some of which have been converted into fascinating museums, galleries and luxury hotels. Even better preserved glimpses into the islands' medieval and Baroque past can be explored in the narrow winding lanes of Mdina, Malta's first capital that is 30 minutes inland from Valletta, and Cittadella, a hilltop town above Gozo's capital Victoria.

One of the most interesting aspects of the country's history is its key role in the 20th-century's two world wars. In the first, it was the regional base for Britain's naval fleet and it acted as "the nursemaid of the Mediterranean," with 27 hospitals providing medical care to more than 130,000 wounded servicemen.

Malta continued to be a vital maritime hub in World War II, when it was also at the heart of the Allied forces' air operations. Tourists can visit various facilities connected to the conflicts or dive down to the wrecks of planes and ships that fell, while those who gave their lives in Malta's skies, waters or on its soil are commemorated in war cemeteries.

Melting pot of cultural influences

The country's religious heritage is equally absorbing. It was among the first places to convert to Christianity, after St. Paul was shipwrecked there on his way to Rome over 2,000 years ago. As described in the Bible's Book of Acts, the apostle and his fellow travelers stayed in Malta for some months and established places of worship. Today, there are an estimated 359 cathedrals, churches and chapels in Malta, with three of the most intriguing being St. Paul's Grotto in the town of Rabat where the saint is thought to have lived, St. John's Co-Cathedral in Valletta that contains the only signed painting by Caravaggio and Our Lady of the Snows chapel by the ancient port of Marsaxlokk.

As an indication of the range of religions practiced in Malta over the centuries, the site of the

Diverse historical, cultural and natural assets make the Maltese archipelago an unbeatable choice for any tourist



Yachting is among the most popular activities on offer in Malta

latter was previously used to worship prehistoric, Phoenician, Carthaginian and Roman gods, while Islam was introduced to the islands about a millennium ago and the archives show that nearly a third of Mdina's population was Jewish in the Middle Ages.

Unsurprisingly, the diversity in Malta's heritage has given rise to a wealth of gastronomic, artistic and cultural traditions, many of which can be enjoyed at the numerous festivals and events that are held in communities countrywide throughout the year.

Modern culture is also prolific, not the least in Valletta, which lists an exuberant nightlife, Michelin-starred restaurants, plus international music, dance and art festivals among its pleasures. The capital's latest must-see venue launches this fall: Malta International Contemporary Art Space. Described by Bloomberg as "Europe's most significant museum of the year," this vast new complex occupies a 17th-century fortress with amazing views of the capital.

Myriad natural attractions

The islands' natural environments also open up a patchwork of opportunities for tourists. Its calm, clear turquoise seas, for instance are perfect for all water sports and the country ranks as one of the best places in the world for diving, both from boats and the shore.

As well as the remnants of world wars, older sea wrecks can be investigated, in addition to underwater archaeological parks and caves, reefs and an abundance of marine life. Possibly its most iconic diving sites are in the breathtaking Blue Lagoon, a protected area in Comino island.

On land, the country presents more enticing options for outdoor experiences. Occupying just 1.4 square miles, low-lying Comino is covered in shrubs, herbs and rare wild flowers, and is one of the best places in the Mediterranean for bird watchers. Gozo is very walkable too, with a green interior countryside that includes working farms

and vineyards leading down to dramatic cliffs with panoramic vistas.

The larger island of Malta offers similar landscapes and more. One highlight is the Majjistral Nature and History Park, which is almost twice the size of Comino and abounds with wildlife. The island is also a splendid choice for multiple organized and spontaneous sporting and adventure pursuits. "For instance, Malta's west coast is more rugged and perfect for activities like cycling, rock climbing, hiking and trekking," says Micallef.

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CEO, Malta Tourism Authority (MTA)

Travelers who want nothing more than to relax on vacation are well served too. Encircling each of the islands are phenomenal white- and gold-sanded beaches, which bask in around 3,000 hours of sunshine a year and are relatively empty outside of the hottest summer months. There are also magical luxury retreats and wellness centers in Malta, while practicing yoga or pilates by the side of one of the country's spiritual ancient temples is an unforgettable way to rediscover oneself.

And there is probably no better way to watch the sun go down on a day that might have included breakfast on the beach, a morning cycle tour in a national park, lunch at a world-class restaurant and an afternoon spent exploring a Neolithic site than relaxing on a dghajsa mini cruise with a glass of sparkling wine. These traditional, brightly painted gondola-like boats slowly ferry their passengers around Valletta Grand Harbour, enabling them to take in unobstructed views of one of Europe's most absorbing cities.



The islands are packed with diverse historical architecture



© Malta Tourism Authority

Where sports meet business tourism

Multifaceted Malta is a high-potential destination for MICE and sporting activities

Malta is emerging as a prime location to watch or take part in a wide range of sporting disciplines. For instance, leading international athletes and sports teams now use the country's world-class facilities for training camps, with many of their supporters traveling with them to observe practice sessions and friendly tournaments with local or foreign rivals.

Soccer is a key illustration of this, with clubs such as Juventus, AC Milan and Manchester United recently staying on the islands in their off seasons. Furthermore, Malta Tourism Authority's promotional brand VisitMalta has become Manchester United's official global destination partner. "By partnering with major men's and women's teams in soccer, cycling and other sports, we've reached millions of people who follow those sports that wouldn't previously have thought about taking a trip to Malta. It's created huge interest in the country," reveals MTA's CEO Carlo Micallef. The authority is currently working on a project that will bring U.S. soccer to Malta, he adds: "We're going to be getting college teams coming for training camps, possibly with trials connected to players potentially joining European teams."

“As well as hosting sporting events that visitors can enjoy as spectators, Malta offers a host of events that everyone can participate in.”

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In addition to training, regular sporting events are held in the country that draw in the world's top performers and global fans of various disciplines. Unsurprisingly for a nation that boasts the largest yacht and superyacht registry in Europe, sailing is a particularly popular attraction. The highlight of that sport's calendar is the Rolex Middle Sea Race, which along with the U.K.'s Fastnet and Australia's Sydney-Hobart is one of the three most important 600-mile offshore yacht races worldwide.

Motor racing and cycling are other Maltese specialties. For example, one of the country's longest-running events is an annual classic car rally in the countryside around the ancient city of Mdina, while the newest addition to the diary is Extreme Urbenduro Malta, which sees more than 100 international mountain bikers race through the historic streets of Valletta in November. The expansive range of elite sports Malta can support is evidenced by the fact that it successfully hosted 2022's Special Olympics, in which nearly 1,000 athletes with intellectual disabilities from 23 countries including the U.S. competed in a vast program of activities over a few weeks.

However, "As well as hosting sporting events that visitors can enjoy as spectators, Malta offers a

host of events that everyone can participate in," Micallef points out. "We welcome anyone who wants to take part in the triathlons, marathons, half-marathons and other athletics activities that are held in Malta, for instance, some of which already attract participants from all around the world. That's partly because our agreeably warm and sunny climate in winter and spring means we can hold great events in months when it would be far too cold to have them in countries like the U.S."

Malta's stunning Mediterranean landscapes and rich history make it a wonderfully invigorating location for activities such as marathons, triathlons and even 3.5-mile cross-channel swims between the islands of Malta and Gozo. One of the most prominent of these events is the annual La Valette Marathon along the picturesque coastline of the country's capital region, the fifth edition of which will be run in March 2025.

Sponsored by VisitMalta, La Valette is highly inclusive. The full marathon is certified by the Association of International Marathons and Distance Races, and recognized as an Abbott World Marathon Majors qualifier for the world's six biggest marathons, which appeals to experienced athletes. But it also has half-marathon, 10-kilometer, 5-kilometer, relay and walkathon options, making it suitable for people at all fitness levels. This year's edition involved around 2,000 runners, more than half of whom had traveled to the islands for the race. According to Micallef, "With participants from over 55 countries, Malta is firmly on the map as a scenic marathon destination in Europe."

Beyond its large-scale events, numerous additional sports are provided for in Malta, either within organized groups or as individual pleasures. On land, these run the gamut from rock climbing, abseiling down or ziplining across cliffs, obstacle course racing, trekking, cycling and horse riding to playing golf on an 18-hole course. Facilities, equipment and guidance are also available for almost every water sport. The islands' boast dozens of diving centers, for example, that can supply PADI-certified training to anyone over 10 years old, enabling beginners, as well as advanced and technical divers to experience the crystal-clear seas, copious marine life and myriad sites that make Malta one of the world's best diving destinations.

Among the most thrilling excursions are exploring the vast underwater cavern and caves of Comino's Blue Hole and investigating the numerous wrecks that litter the ocean's floor in protected areas, which range from a millennia-old Phoenician vessel to World War II submarines, Spitfire planes and purposefully scuttled ships.

One advantage that makes the country stand out as a location for sporting enthusiasts is what it offers those traveling with them who might not share their interests. As Micallef notes: "People who come for training camps, trials, competitions and other activities often bring friends or family. This works out well, as there are so many more things to enjoy in Malta, such as relaxing on the



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Maltese destination management companies are skilled at planning tailored MICE programs

beach or discovering our history and culture."

The country's multifaceted attractions have also helped make it a superior option for team-building exercises, meetings, incentives, conferences and other corporate events, with business travel now representing around 15 percent of the Maltese tourism sector's revenues.

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Companies and organizations that decide to hold business-related activities on the islands benefit from the services of the dedicated Incentives and Meetings unit at MTA, plus award-winning, highly professional destination management firms. The latter are adept at putting together tailored programs that incorporate unique and authentic aspects of Malta. These could include, for example, yacht-based team-bonding excursions, cookery classes with local chefs, wine tastings in vineyards and craft workshops with Maltese artisans for small groups, or the planning of high-profile com-

plex events with thousands of attendees.

On top of this, the islands contain plenty of amazing and versatile venues for business events of any size and type that are equipped with the latest technologies. Among the largest of these are Malta Fairs and Conventions Centre, a modern facility with around 237,000 square feet of flexible space, and the 86,000-square-foot Mediterranean Conference Centre that fills a 16th-century landmark building in Valletta. Other equally unforgettable indoor and outdoor venues include luxury hotels, private villas, cruise vessels and restaurants; medieval castles in the countryside; and archaeological sites such as the Neolithic temples of Ggantija on Gozo island.

Another advantage is the country's small size, which makes it quick and easy for attendees to reach any venue from the well-connected Malta International Airport just outside Valletta, or to transfer guests between multiple venues.

As testament to Malta's suitability for business travel, it was named Europe's best meetings, incentives, conferences and events destination at Business Travel magazine's inaugural European Mission Awards in 2022. Accepting the prize, Minister for Tourism and Public Cleanliness Clayton Bartolo said: "This prestigious award cements Malta's prospects in being a natural choice for the MICE industry, a quality tourism niche that we have every intention of investing further on in the years to come."

Fancy a Med cruise? Put Valletta on your itinerary

Malta has firmly positioned itself as a preferred Mediterranean cruise destination and a regular port of call for ships from most major international operators, including Carnival Corporation, Royal Caribbean Cruises, Norwegian Cruise Lines, MSC Cruises, Ritz-Carlton and Viking Cruises.

In 2023, it welcomed 312 cruise vessels with 889,336 passengers, 65 percent more than in 2022, and the number this year could exceed the record 908,549 visitors who arrived or left the country by sea in 2019. Not only that, the archipelago is rising in prominence as a homeporting location for global operators, with 23.5 percent of all passengers beginning or ending their cruise in Malta last year, many of them opting to spend a number of nights on the islands before or after their marine-based vacations.

There are a variety of clear reasons why the country is an increasingly sought-after stopping point on diverse itineraries, according to Malta Tourism Authority's CEO Carlo Micallef: "One of Malta's key strengths is our beautiful location in the middle of the Mediterranean, which allows cruise companies to include Valletta in western cruises that also visit places like Italy, France and Spain, as well as eastern cruises going to Turkey, Cyprus and Greece."

Secondly, the approach into the islands' cruise port in Valletta's Grand Harbour is renowned as a bucket-list awe-inspiring spectacle. Passengers entering the natural deep-water harbor are treated to panoramic views of both the 16th-century fortified capital, which sits above a port waterfront

lined with magnificent Baroque buildings, as well as the three historic cities of Vittoriosa, Senglea and Cospicua that occupy the other side of the harbor.

In addition, "The cruise port is so close to the heart of Valletta that people who arrive on a cruise can rapidly walk into the city and enjoy it without opting to join a paid excursion," states Micallef. "Having said that, 30 percent of day-long visitors do still take excursions organized by their cruise companies, either because they prefer to have a guide or because they want to travel slightly beyond Valletta to explore, for instance, fascinating ancient cities such as Mdina and Rabat or the island of Gozo, which, like many of Malta's other attractions, are all within an hour's distance from Valletta."

The country's capital is also less than 5 miles from Malta International Airport, a first-class convenience that goes some of the way toward explaining why the country is increasingly seen as the perfect place to start and end a Mediterranean cruise.

State-of-the-art historic port

Furthermore, notes the CEO, "Valletta Cruise Port is one of the best managed passenger ports in Europe that is recognized by cruise companies for its efficiency and reliability." As an indication of its status within the industry, in 2023 Valletta was entrusted with two particularly high-profile events: the naming ceremony for Oceania Cruises newest gastronomy-focused 1,200-passenger liner Vista and the arrival of the luxury MSC World

Malta has long been recognized as one of the Mediterranean's premier cruise stops

Europa, which can host 6,762 guests, on its inaugural cruise.

The Maltese port is also a favorite of visitors and has been ranked as the Best Global Port of Call by international cruise customers for the last two years in an annual survey undertaken by the organizers of FITUR, Europe's leading travel fair that takes place in Spain.

Since 2022, Valletta Cruise Port has been owned and managed by a subsidiary of Global Ports Holding, the world's largest cruise port operator, that has invested heavily in upgrading and modernizing the facility's infrastructure and services to ensure Malta can easily accommodate the biggest vessels and their passengers.

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Supporting the sector's future sustainability is one preoccupation for both GPH and the country. In December 2023, for instance, the operator completed a \$55-million project to provide ships with quick and flexible onshore electrical connections at each of the port's five main quays, which was co-financed by Maltese government bodies and the European Union.

Enabling liners to turn off their fossil-fuel-powered systems while berthed has been welcomed by cruise companies committed to meeting increasingly strict carbon-reduction targets and it has also had a noticeable impact on air quality and noise levels in Malta's Grand Harbour.

Significant investment has also been made into restoring the unique centuries-old buildings that surround the port. According to Stephen Xuereb, CEO of Valletta Cruise Port and COO of Global Ports Holding: "We constantly receive remarks from ship captains and crew that the sight of our historic port edifices glistening in the light of the Mediterranean sun is one of the most welcoming sights in any port worldwide. It is our prerogative to be curators of this parcel of land within our historic Grand Harbour and to sustain efforts to preserve it."

Great potential for more homeporting

Such is the port's popularity with cruises that its quays tend to be fully booked throughout the summer months, although there is excess capaci-



© Malta Tourism Authority

Many of Malta's sites can be enjoyed in a day

ty outside of the Mediterranean's traditional high season. "As a country, we have a great opportunity to expand our winter cruising programs, which is a time of year when we only experience rough weather very occasionally. For example, we offer U.S. cruise companies that normally keep their ships in the Caribbean over the winter with an excellent option to include more Mediterranean packages during those months," Micallef asserts.

"Going forward, if North Africa becomes even more politically stable than it already has, places such as Libya and Tunisia are likely to be the next big thing for the global cruise industry. Then we could start introducing more southern Mediterranean cruises in the winter, with Malta acting as a homeport for those cruises, as the country is so well connected to the rest of the world by air. This would be a very exciting development for the industry and for the region."

Malta International Airport is currently serviced by flights to more than 100 international destinations, with most major European hubs being just a few hours journey from Valletta, enabling quick and easy transfers from the U.S. At present, however, there are no direct flights from the U.S. to the Mediterranean archipelago, a situation that MTA is striving hard to change.

"I would encourage more cruise brands, such as Ritz-Carlton, Viking and the like, to consider homeporting in Valletta. That would present a great opportunity to introduce competitive direct flights to Malta from destinations on the East Coast of America such as New York, Miami and Newark. The combination of fly-cruise and regular tourism passengers could be key to starting those flights," he enthuses.

Additional homeporting would also allow more people to extend their time on the islands during pre- and post-cruise stays, which would let them freely enjoy a wider range of the country's diverse historical, cultural and natural experiences.

There is plenty of demand for this from international cruise passengers, states Micallef: "We've spoken to numerous American tourists that come onto Malta's shores on day trips as part of a cruise vacation. After visiting some of Valletta's attractions, museums, shops and restaurants, many of them wish they could stay for longer. Typically, within a few years those visitors return to properly explore our wonderful islands."



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Cruise captains describe Valletta Grand Harbour as one of the most welcoming sights worldwide



© Malta Tourism Authority

Maltese chefs are dedicated to showcasing the islands' unbeatable range of fresh ingredients



© Malta Tourism Authority

Tasting the flavors of Malta

An expanding gastronomic scene is attracting visitors from far and wide

The Mediterranean island nation's unique gastronomic pleasures are increasingly coming onto the radar of global foodies, helped by the fact that Michelin has been publishing a dedicated guide to the islands' best epicurean experiences for the last five years.

In the 2024 edition, which was released in April, a total of 40 restaurants were recommended for their excellence, with six receiving one star and ION Harbour in Valletta netting two, the first time a Maltese establishment has been awarded that accolade. Announcing the honors, Michelin Guides' international director, Gwendal Poullennec, said: "The Maltese culinary spirit is evolving and becoming increasingly dynamic and innovative. Chefs are now focusing on local gastronomy, highlighting the island's agricultural economy and thus consolidating a more sustainable approach to Maltese cuisine. Small vegetable gardens are appearing next to restaurants, allowing chefs to take advantage of local products with a Mediterranean flavor."

ION Harbour is a great illustration of this evolution. Located in a converted waterside fort with stunning views over Valletta Grand Harbour, since 2023 it has been led by Simon Rogan, who holds three Michelin stars at his more established restaurant in England that provides similarly creative farm-to-table menus. Like a number of other internationally renowned chefs, Rogan was drawn to Malta by the breadth of amazing ingredients generated by its seas and lands, and the passion for sustainability and quality shown by local harvesters of copious varieties of fruit, vegetables, herbs, livestock and fresh fish.

According to the chef, receiving two stars at ION Harbour is a high point of his career to date: "We wanted to ensure we worked as closely as possible with the suppliers and the produce on

this beautiful island, whilst keeping sustainable practices front of mind. I am so proud of what we have achieved here so far."

Malta's one-star holders, which mainly create innovative or classic takes on Mediterranean cuisine, are similarly focused on showcasing local and seasonal products. Two of them, Noni and Under Grain, are also in Valletta. The others are de Mondion that occupies the top floor of a 17th-century palace in Mdina; Al Sale in Gozo, which is admired for its seafood and aged meat dishes; Rosamì in the seaside resort of St. Julian's; Fermandó Gastrotheque in the nearby Sliema, where you can enjoy a vast range of Maltese wines by the glass with your meal; and Bahja in the inland village of Balzan. The latter's menu is inspired not just by local ingredients but by the country's wider culture, with each dish being named after and influenced by a specific village or town.

A tradition of diverse excellence

While the majority of Malta's Michelin-star holders are relatively young establishments, many lesser-lauded and more informal family-run restaurants have been championing the islands' produce and their use in centuries-old recipes for much longer. The archipelago's diverse traditional cuisine encompasses elements from the various civilizations that have inhabited it, especially the Knights of St. John from Provence in France and Sicilians from Italy, as well as spice-loving travelers from North Africa and the Middle East. Some of the most distinctive dishes that should be tried when visiting the country are wine-braised rabbit stews, pies filled with the popular local lampuki or mahi-mahi fish and snails in a creamy sauce made from herbs, tomato and garlic.

Possibly the ideal starter to order at a traditional restaurant or bistro, however, is a Maltese

platter, which offers diners a combination of characteristic foods. Among other delicacies, this is likely to include crusty hobz tal-Malti sourdough bread, small fresh or mature gbejniet sheep's-milk cheeses, a mashed fava bean dip called bigilla, cured sausages and meats, olives and sun-dried tomatoes, which will be accompanied by olive oil and high-quality sea salt that is harvested by hand from pans around the islands' coasts.

Excellent restaurants serving this type of fare can be found throughout the country. Two prime examples in Valletta are Rubino and Leglign, while those who have time to travel a little further afield would be well advised to visit Diar il-Bniet in the village of Dingli on Malta's rural west coast. This fabulous venue creates classic meals from local fish and meats combined with seasonal fruits and vegetables from the family's own 600-acre farm. As an extra draw, next to the restaurant is a deli, where homemade food products and hampers are available to purchase for those who would prefer to picnic on Dingli's cliffs.

“With every Michelin star, we invite the world to savor the rich flavors and vibrant culture that Malta has to offer.”

Carlo Micallef
CEO, Malta Tourism Authority

Beyond full meals, the Maltese have developed a host of great snacks that can be enjoyed on the terraces of cafés, or taken away from bakeries and food stalls. Among the most iconic are flaky pastizzi pastries that are traditionally stuffed with local soft cheeses or crushed spicy peas. Gozitan ftira, on the other hand, stand out so much that they were added to the UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage List in 2020. Baked in wood ovens, these round flat breads come topped with anything from tuna, tomatoes, olives and capers to cheese and sausages.

Dessert pastries are an additional specialty, with many of them being doused in Maltese honey, a product that has been famous for millennia, with the main island's original name — Melite — hailing from the ancient Greek word for the sweet nectar.

A further unmissable treat for foodies is exploring Malta's markets. In Valletta, they should head to the recently restored Is-Suq tal-Belt, which contains numerous food and wine shops over its three floors, as well as stalls serving worldwide cuisines prepared from local ingredients. In addition, many of the country's biggest towns host regular farmers' markets, with the most extensive being the twice-weekly event in Ta' Qali, an agricultural region in central Malta.

The country's busiest market, however, takes place on Sunday mornings in Marsaxlokk, which lies a short distance down the coast from Valletta. Before sunrise, chefs, locals and tourists start arriving at Malta's oldest port to watch fishing vessels come in with the day's catch that is then sold on the waterfront. Much of the seafood is snapped up by restaurants surrounding the picturesque harbor, which are all packed at lunchtime, with diners relishing both the freshest possible fish and the views of a blue bay full of traditional painted luzzu fishing boats.

Away from the crowds, touring Malta's vineyards is another illuminating experience. The islands of Malta and Gozo have a wine-making heritage that goes back 3,000 years and, today, around 12 wineries produce about 1.5 million bottles of fine red, white, rose and sparkling wines a year, few of which are exported. Incorporating international varieties, as well as the indigenous red Gellewza and white Girgentina grapes, these wines' characters are shaped by the islands' excellent conditions for wine making: calcium-rich soils, almost constant warm sunshine and salty sea breezes.

Malta Tourism Authority's CEO Carlo Micallef is delighted that the country's rising status as a gourmet hotspot is tempting more visitors to discover the full extent of its gastronomic gems. When this year's Michelin guide was released, he said: "The addition of a new two-star Michelin restaurant, alongside a new one-star restaurant, a new Bib Gourmand establishment and five new recommended ones, including two in Gozo, underlines Malta's commitment to excellence and culinary diversity ... With every Michelin star, we invite the world to savor the rich flavors and vibrant culture that Malta has to offer. This recognition further cements Malta's position as a must-visit destination for food lovers from around the world."

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