

On the Road



NEIL WILSON

Researching Malta in August can be a bit uncomfortable, with 35°C heat and high humidity making a smudged and sweaty mess of notebooks and maps. Fortunately, checking that the snorkelling at spectacular Dwejra (p147) is still as good as it used to be gave me a chance to cool off...

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

After working as a geologist for several years, Neil gave up the rock business for the more precarious life of a freelance writer and photographer. Since 1988 he has travelled in five continents and written around 50 travel and walking guides for various publishers. He wrote the first edition of Lonely Planet's *Malta & Gozo* guide back in 1999.

DON'T MISS...

...wandering through the back streets of Vittoriosa, especially the area known as Il Collachio (p77). This is where the Knights of St John first made their home in the 1530s, and these ancient alleys positively exude history as well as being wonderfully picturesque. Having last wandered these deserted streets in December, this time I

was there in August, when Vittoriosa holds its festa dedicated to St Lawrence – fantastic colour and atmosphere, and a superb wine bar to retire to. Unmissable.



Destination Malta & Gozo

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Getting Started

Malta is a traveller-friendly country that provides holiday options for people on all budgets, and allows for more than just warm-weather and 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!

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 p127). The stiff sea breeze is cooling in summer, but in winter the *grigal* can whip up 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.

See the climate chart (p160) for more information.

DON'T LEAVE HOME WITHOUT...

- 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 (p164), covering you for activities such as scuba-diving
- A copy of your diving qualifications, or a snorkel and mask
- Earplugs – handy if you find yourself in a hotel undergoing renovations

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 28–29 June. See p162–3 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).

If you budget on around €40 per day, you'll get pleasant hostel or guesthouse accommodation, a simple restaurant meal, plenty of bus rides and a decent streetside snack. If your accommodation has self-catering facilities and you cook your own meals, your costs will be even lower.

On around €80 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 €22 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.

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.

HOW MUCH?

Room in guesthouse
€16–25 per person

City bus trip €0.50–1.20

Cup of coffee €1.50

Day hire of sun lounger €5

One hour internet
access €3

See also the Lonely
Planet Index, inside
front cover.

TOP 10

Tunisia

 GOZO
 Comino • Valletta
MALTA

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.

- 1 Malta Tourism Authority (www.visitmalta.com) Huge official site that makes a good first port of call in addition to the Lonely Planet site (lonelyplanet.com).
- 2 Gozo (www.gozo.com) Great info if you're taking in Gozo too.
- 3 Maltese Islands (www.malteseislands.com) Nicely designed site with plenty of general information.
- 4 Malta Media (<http://maltamedia.com>) Bone up on issues making the headlines in Malta.
- 5 Malta Weather (www.maltaweather.com) What to pack? Check 'Malta's Climate'.
- 6 Heritage Malta (www.heritagemalta.org) Swot up on Maltese history and prioritise your sightseeing.
- 7 Restaurants Malta (www.restaurantsmalta.com) Plan to travel your tastebuds and expand your waistline.
- 8 About Malta (www.aboutmalta.com) If it's about Malta, it's on this directory site.
- 9 Public Transport Association (www.atp.com.mt) Useful advice on getting around.
- 10 StarWeb Malta (www.starwebmalta.com) Comprehensive 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.

- 1 Hypogeum, Paola – built between 3600 and 3000 BC (p80).
- 2 Mdina – buildings from the 13th century (p112).
- 3 Valletta's auberges and alleys – dating from the late 16th century (p53).
- 4 Fortifications of Valletta and the Three Cities – mid-16th-century defences (p64-5).
- 5 Vittoriosa's Il Collachio – buildings from the 11th century (p77).
- 6 Il-Kastell, Gozo – buildings from the 17th century (pp136-8).
- 7 St John's Co-Cathedral, Valletta – built in the 1570s (pp58-60).
- 8 Haġar Qim and Mnajdra Temples – built between 3600 and 3000 BC (pp131-2).
- 9 St Agatha's Crypt & Catacombs, Rabat – frescoes from the 12th century (p117).
- 10 Ggantija Temples, Gozo – built between 3600 and 3000 BC (pp151-2).

SUPERLATIVE SWIMMING SPOTS

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.

- 1 Golden Bay (p104)
- 2 Blue Lagoon, Comino (p154)
- 3 Ramla Bay, Gozo (p153)
- 4 Mellieħa Bay (p106)
- 5 Ġhajn Tuffieħa Bay (p105)
- 6 Ġnejna Bay (p106)
- 7 Paradise Bay (p109)
- 8 Għar Lapsi (p132)
- 9 Peter's Pool (p125)
- 10 Wied il-Għasri, Gozo (p148)

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Itineraries

CLASSIC ROUTES

MALTA'S MAGIC

One Week

Malta's diminutive dimensions mean that you can squeeze a lot of sight-seeing 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 cafe. 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** (p53) – 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** (p75) and **Senglea** (p79), 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** (p125). On day four spend the morning at **Haġar Qim** and **Mnajdra Temples** (p131) and the **Blue Grotto** (p131), and the afternoon in exquisite **Mdina** (p112) and **Rabat** (p117). Day five should be spent relaxing on a beach in the northwest (**Golden Bay**, p104, 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** (p154).

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** (p135), wandering around majestic Il-Kastell and the laneways of Il-Borgo, then eating well somewhere like **Maji Wine & Dine** (p140) or **It-Tmun Victoria** (p140). Spend day two walking, swimming and snorkelling at **Dwejra** (p147) after paying your respects at the grand **Basilica of Ta'Pinu** (p146). The **Xlendi waterfront** (p144) makes the perfect place for sundowner drinks. Begin day three with a visit to the temples and other attractions of **Xaghra** (p150), then spend the afternoon reclining on the red sands of the blue **Ramla Bay** (p153), the biggest beach on Gozo. Frock up for dinner at the highly acclaimed **Restaurant Ta'Frenč** (p150) outside Marsalforn. Day four could be set aside for exploring around **Ta'Ċenč** (p144) with its sunset views north, and for seeking out a lesser-known spot for swimming and snorkelling (nearby **Mġarr ix-Xini**, p143, is lovely). Spend day five visiting **Comino** (p154), discovering the tiny island on foot and swimming in crystal-clear water, then stop in for a beer at convivial Gleneagles in **Mġarr** (p141) 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.



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