GENERAL INFORMATION

The city of Valletta is the capital of the small independent nation of Malta. Located in the middle of the Mediterranean, 52 miles (92 km) south of Sicily, the Maltese archipelago consists of three inhabited islands: Malta, Gozo, and Comino.

Malta has a population of over 370,000 inhabitants. Valletta is Malta's largest city and the center of Maltese art and culture. The developers of what is modern day Valletta were the Knights of the Order of St. John. When the islands were given to the Knights by the Spanish crown in the 16th century, the Order fortified the harbor to defend against marauding pirates. In 1565 the Grand Master of the Order, Jean de la Valletta, led the defense of the island against an Ottoman fleet of more than 30,000 men. Three months of brutal battle ended when the Turks finally withdrew. Construction of the city of Valletta, named after the hero of the battle, and its fortifications began shortly thereafter.

The country's strategic location in the Mediterranean has resulted in a series of invasions by the Phoenicians, Romans, Arabs, Berbers, Turks and most recently, the British. The official language of the islands is Maltese, a language of Phoenician and Arabic background. Due to the British influence many natives speak English and the island's largest number of tourists come from the United Kingdom. Malta's close proximity to Italy has also influenced its people, many of who can also speak Italian.

The Maltese people are a mixture of many Mediterranean cultures. Catholicism is the dominant religious influence, which can be seen by the many churches and cathedrals that dot the landscape. The architecture on the island is European with an Arabic influence. Geologically, the island is composed of limestone, therefore, all buildings on Malta are constructed of the sand colored stone, creating a unique blending of man made structures and the surrounding landscape.

HISTORY

The first signs of human life on Malta date back to the megalithic temples thought to be built around 3000 BC. The Phoenicians colonized the islands around 800 BC and control fell into the hands of their North African colony, Carthage. Malta became part of the Roman empire in 208 BC with the Carthaginian defeat in the Punic Wars. The Arabs arrived in 870 and were later expelled by the Norman warlord Count Roger of Sicily.

Politically linked to Sicily, the islands were ruled by a series of European influences including the Normans, French and Spanish, but little was done to protect the natives from Berber, Arab, and Turkish pirates.

The islands were given to the Knights of the Order of St. John of Jerusalem by the Spanish crown in 1530. Founded during the Crusades, the Knights of the Order of St. John protected Christian pilgrims traveling to and from the Holy Land, and its members were drawn from the most distinguished aristocratic families in Europe. Fortifying the harbor, the Knights established themselves on the Island. In 1565 the Great Siege of Malta by an Ottoman fleet of more than 30,000 men resulted in more than three months of bloody battle. The Grand Master of the Order, Jean de la Valletta, commanded less than 10,000 troops and defeated the Turks. The Knights were revered as the saviors of Europe and the fortification of the island intensified.
In 1798 Napoleon landed on the island and conquered Malta. The once powerful and prestigious Knights had become corrupt and surrendered without a fight. The Maltese defeated the French in 1800 and officially became part of the British Empire in 1814. After being developed as a major naval base, Malta, once again, found itself under siege during WWII. The island was considered a key in the battle for the Mediterranean.

**HISTORY continued**

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**Places of Interest**

1. **St. John's Co-Cathedral**, located on St. John Street, is best known as the Church of the Knights of the Order of St. John. Housing a unique collection of church vestments, Flemish tapestries and silver objects, the Cathedral is one of the most important monuments on the island. The Cathedral serves as the final resting place of many of the Knights, which is evident by the engraved marble tombstones that cover the Cathedral's floor. Works by Caravaggio are housed in the Cathedral's small museum.

2. **Palace of the Grand Masters** was completed in 1574 and is now home to the Maltese Parliament. Inside are period furnishings, portraits of the Grand Masters and a unique collection of Gobelin Tapestries. A fresco which lines the main hallway depicts scenes from the Great Siege. The Armory of the Knights is located in two halls of the Palace where weapons and armor of various periods are displayed. Please note that due to parliamentary (government) sessions and/or official visits, the Palace may be closed to the public without prior notice.

3. **National Museum of Archaeology**, also known as the “Auberge de Provence”, houses a small collection of items from Malta’s megalithic temples as well as displays of prehistoric pottery, sculpture, and tomb furniture from the Roman period.

4. **National Museum of Fine Arts** is an 18th century palace housing paintings, furniture and sculptures associated with the Order of St. John. On display are works by Carpeccio, Dominico di Michielino, Tintoretto and works by contemporary Maltese artists.

5. **Upper Barrakka Gardens**, originally the private gardens of the Italian Knights, offer an excellent view of the Grand Harbour and the fortified towns of Vittoriosa, Cospicua, and Senglea. (The gardens do not close.)

6. **Fort St. Elmo** is located at the outskirts of the peninsula and was a strategic stronghold for the Knights against the Turks during the 16th century. More recently the Fort was used as the setting of the film Midnight Express. The Fort is currently home to the Malta Police Academy and is not open for interior visits.

7. **Mdina Cathedral** is the historic “Old Town” and was the island's hub before the arrival of the Knights who settled and developed the area surrounding the Grand Harbour. Located at the geographical center of the island, the Mdina is perched on a rocky outcrop which offers spectacular views. Known as the “Silent City”, Mdina has been a functioning walled city for more than 3000 years. The city’s narrow cobblestone streets are home to Mdina Cathedral, known for its fine collection of paintings and woodcarvings, and a number of small tourist and specialty shops.

8. **Mosta** is the location of the parish church designed by the Maltese architect Giorgio Grognet de Vasse. The church’s main attraction is its Dome, one of the largest unsupported church domes in the world. During the air raids of WWII a bomb smashed through the dome and landed on the floor of the church but did not detonate. This was later acknowledged as a miracle. The church has a small museum which displays the bomb and period photographs.

- **Admission Charges** are generally in local currency.
- **When going ashore**, passengers are advised to take with them only the items they need and to secure any valuables.

**SHORE EXCURSIONS** To make the most of your visit to Valletta and the island of Malta we suggest you take one of our organized Shore Excursions. For information concerning tour content and pricing consult your Shore Excursion Brochure or contact the Shore Excursion Desk.

**LOCAL CUSTOMS Bargaining:** Most shops have set prices, although bargaining for local handicrafts is fairly common.

**Tipping**: A 10% tip in restaurants and taxis is customary.

**Local Cuisine**: Maltese cuisine has adopted much from its closest neighbor, Sicily. Pastas and Pizza are very common. Rabbit or “fenek” is a local favorite as well as spicy beef rolls known as “bragioli”. “Timpana” is macaroni with meat sauce covered in a pastry case, and “Gbejniet” is locally produced goats cheese.

**Drink Specialties**: Cisk is the locally produced lager beer. Malta also produces a large selection of both white and red wines that are for sale in local shops and restaurants. After a meal it is customary to try the local liqueur, “Tamakari”. For those who prefer non-alcoholic fare, Malta produces a soft drink made of aromatic herbs called “Kinnie”.

Bottled water is recommended.

**LOCAL CURRENCY** The unit of currency in this port of call is the euro. There are 8 euro coins denominated in 2 and 1 euros, along with 50, 20, 10, 5, 2, and 1 cent pieces. Every euro coin carries a common European face. On the obverse, each Member State decorates the coins with their own motifs. No matter which motif is on the coins they can be used anywhere inside the Member States. There are 7 euro notes. In different colors and sizes, they are denominated in 500, 200, 100, 50, 20, 10, and 5 euros. The notes are uniform throughout the euro area; unlike coins, they have no national side. All euro notes are legal tender in all countries of the euro area.

**POST OFFICE AND TELEPHONE FACILITIES** The main Post Office is located at 305, Qormi Road. There are few public telephones available. The national phone company, Maltacomm, has an office on South Street. Overseas phone calls can be made from this office by using a phone card. Phone cards can also be purchased at the post office. Please note there is now a fixed prefix (21) for all local telephone numbers.

**USEFUL WORDS**

**ASK** • Għandizzu • Ġie

**THANK** • Burra • Xafir

**YES • IT IS** • Hafa għaxxu

**NO • IT IS NOT** • Hafna jilahuxx

**PLEASE** • Mieghem

**YOU'RE WELCOME • M'hemmx imniex**

**BOTTLED WATER** is recommended.