

THE SACRED MALTESE ISLANDS EXCLUSIVE ITINERARY



Bongu (Hello in Maltese)

The Maltese Islands have been an epicenter of faith stemming back some 7000 years. Evidence of this reigns clear in Malta's megalithic temples that dot the islands - some being 1000 years older than the pyramids at Giza and Stonehenge. Throughout its centuries, Malta has been the storyline of conquering civilizations who ultimately brought along their faiths - namely Islam and Christianity. Early Christianity is highlighted with the shipwreck of the Apostle Paul and ultimately his conversion of the inhabitants to his new faith. Jewish culture for a period of time was also dominant in certain areas of the county including Malta's old and noble capital.

Malta's storyline is connected from its temples right up to the present day where Roman Catholicism is celebrated by 96 percentage of the population. With 364 parish churches, wayside chapels, legends and celebrations, Malta provides nothing short of an unbelievable faith experience. Let us take you on a journey to the Sacred Islands.

Day 1, Sunday - Monday (D)

Depart for Malta and arrive the next day at our European connection city. Arrive in Malta by mid-afternoon and be transferred to our host hotel. Dinner will be served at a local restaurant located steps away from our hotel. A seamless check in awaits you as you get used to our surroundings. Take the afternoon off with a rest and or leisurely walk around the resort property.

Day 3 – Tuesday (B,L,D)

For our first full day in Malta, awaken to the sounds of the sea and the anticipation of what the capital city, Valletta, has to offer. Enjoy breakfast at the resort followed by transportation to Valletta where we will learn about the landmark city that the Knights of Malta built. Most of the touring today will be by foot, so be prepared with comfortable walking shoes and appropriate clothing. Enter the majestic gates of Malta as we learn about its history, and the Auberges of the Knights. We will visit the Lower Barrakka Gardens en route to the Upper Barrakka Gardens. In order to set the appropriate tone for today's touring, we will watch the high definition production of the Malta Experience. Just across from the Malta Experience was the Infirmary of the Knights.

Built in 1574, it provided about 900 beds for patients who included knights, soldiers, sailors and foreigners. Being Hospitallers, the original functions of the Knights was to care for the poor, sick or injured pilgrims to the Holy Land.

Lunch is served in an old bakery that has been converted to a restaurant. Every Mediterranean country has its unique shape and form of bread. They also have their own fillings. The Maltese opt for vegetarian or fish fillings and the bread is a disc-shaped semi flat bread that has a glorious texture. The restaurant that we will be dining in has brought back many of the traditional flavours of Malta right under one roof. What's the best part? We will have a "hand" in the creation of our lunches.

Our grand finale of the day will be a tour of the unassuming St. John's Co-Cathedral – the Church of the Knights of Malta. Inside we will discover a treasure trove of magnificent art and the opulence of the vaulted ceilings and tombstone flooring. It is here that perhaps the most famous work of art of famed artist Caravaggio is displayed - "The Beheading of St. John the Baptist" – which is his only signed piece in the world. From here, we gather to venture back to the hotel to relax and freshen up for dinner with wine at a special restaurant on the outskirts of Rabat.

Day 4 – Wednesday (B)

This morning we will return to Valletta for free time to explore some other attractions, shop or just stroll down its pretty streets. The early afternoon will have us visiting the Three Cities. These towns extending towards Valletta and dividing the Grand Harbour into deep inlets, are known historically with different names but those most commonly used today are Vittoriosa, Senglea and Cospicua. The Three Cities were the centre for the Knights of Malta's naval operations and it continued to be an important hive of activity as the base of the British fleet in the Mediterranean.

We will discover sites such as the Inquisitor's Palace, significant military forts, and the iconic watchtower. The watchtower of Senglea figures prominently as the main observation area for ships entering and leaving the Grand Harbour. Built by the Knights in the 17th century, this tower is adorned with symbols of vigilance and attention. Before traveling to neighboring Vittoriosa, we will make a private visit to the parish church of Senglea but not for a tour per se. Rather, we will gather around the statue of Christ the Redeemer to hear of its legend from creation to present day devotion where parishioners flock here from all over Malta. In 1813, the local clergy made a vow to the Lord that if Senglea were spared from the plague, they would hold three processions every year. One of these was to be held with the statue of Christ the Redeemer.

The Inquisitor's Palace was the seat of the Maltese Inquisition from 1574 until 1798 when it was abolished by Napoleon. Although not as brutal as the Spanish Inquisition, the Maltese one oversaw the supervision of Christianity on the islands - sometimes at odds with the ruling Knights of St. John.

Instead of traveling back to Valletta by coach, we've elected to take a more traditional approach by way of Maltese Dgħajsa boats. Enjoy a 30 minute Grand Harbour tour taking in the sites and unbelievable history that throughout the millennia in these waters.

Arrive back at the hotel late afternoon to relax and for dinner on own.

Day 5 – Thursday (B,L,D)

Step back in time – specifically over 5000 years ago as you visit a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The temple builders have left their significant mark on the island with a multitude of temple sites. The site we will be visiting this morning is the Hagar Qim site. First excavated in 1839, the remains suggest a date between 3600 – 3200 BC, a period known as the Ġgantija phase in Maltese prehistory. Hagar Qim was in fact never completely buried as the tallest stones, remained exposed and featured in 18th and 19th century paintings.

We then venture to the majestic cliffs of Dingli for some amazing views. Make sure your camera is full charged. The village lies on a plateau some 250 metres above sea level, which is one of the highest points of Malta. The area provides not only open sea views over the tiny, uninhabited isle of Filfla, but is also a good vantage point over Malta. Here we encounter the wayside chapel dedicated to Mary Magdalene. Wayside chapels were built to serve the local community and farmers before village populations grew. They are still used today and opened for special occasions. On almost all of the wayside chapels throughout the islands, you find a Latin inscription that is tied to an intriguing history. A farm to table lunch will follow at a local restaurant.

Our afternoon will have us visiting Rabat and Mdina (the Silent City). The Arabs, during their 200 years of rule, divided the old Roman City of Melita into two: the citadel became known as Mdina and the rest of the area as Rabat. In Rabat we find St. Paul's Church and Grotto as well as the St. Paul's Catacombs. It is here where we learn the story of a shipwrecked St. Paul in Malta. The Catacombs of St. Paul are not themselves associated with Paul but derive their name from their proximity to St. Paul's Church and Grotto. They are a fascinating labyrinth of 3rd-century AD subterranean tombs and the earliest archaeological evidence of Christianity in Malta.

An authentic treat awaits us as we enter the Old City, Mdina, also known as the Silent City. As a prelude to dinner, enjoy an aperitif on the bastions before being “lead” through the narrow medieval streets to our host restaurant for a delectable evening of food and wine. We are sure to fall in love with Mdina inasmuch as the families who continue to live here throughout their generations.

Day 6 – Friday (B,HT)

With Mdina fresh in your mind, we'll travel to the Silent City for some self exploration. Mdina is an entirely different experience during the day. Your Tour Director will help you investigate Mdina through fun and intriguing challenges. Lunch suggestions include the panoramic Fontanella Tea Garden or the sumptuous Xara Palace Trattoria. Following lunch, we'll travel to the Ta'Qali Craft Village for a visit to Mdina Glass. to see some fine works of art being made right before our eyes. Shortly before World War II, the area was used to build a military aerodrome and a station for the Royal Air Force. Many of the former military huts and buildings have been converted into workshops where Maltese Craftsmen produce their handiwork.

We'll make a quaint stop at San Anton Gardens in Attard which is next to the Presidential Palace. Established by the 54th Grand Master of the Knights of St. John, it serves as a beautiful retreat animals and humans alike. The city of Mosta is our next stop and it is here where we will discover the Church of the Assumption of Our Lady and its significant connection with World War II. It is here that a German bomb dropped through the rotunda unexploded as parishioners prayed. Based on the Pantheon in Rome, the rotunda or dome is the 3rd largest in Europe and the 9th largest in the world.

To cap off our day, we journey to Naxxar to Palazzo Parisio and Gardens, an 18th century palace, a treasure trove of delightful artefacts and a beloved family home. Located in the heart of picturesque Naxxar, this stately home is a place of wonder that begs to be explored. On your visit you will discover the intricate nuances of Malta's historic nobility and their enchanting way of life. Touring this stately home offers great insight and sparks the imagination – whether you find yourself seeking inspiration from the grand Ballroom, the detailed Family Chapel or the fabulous walled Gardens and Orangery, you'll find it. After some touring, bask in a High Tea experience before venturing back to the hotel

Day 7 – Saturday (B)

With some touring under your belt, today is yours to explore. Let our Tour Director help customize your day for you. Consider the following options:

- Relax at the hotel and enjoy
- Enjoy a walk along the coastline boardwalk
- Shopping in St. Julians or Sliema

Day 8 – Sunday (B,L)

A tradition every Sunday morning is the return of the fisherman to sell their catch. We will travel to the fishing village of Marsaxlokk to observe the fish market and the splendid array of Maltese fishing boats. A traditional fish lunch awaits us with options for those who do not eat fish. Following lunch, we visit a parish church for a private mass in English. Return to your host hotel to relax prior to departing for our evening experience.

From May until the 2nd week of October each village celebrates their parish church's patron saint(s) in grand fashion. These week-long celebrations culminate with processions that take place on Sundays wherein the patron saint is carried through the streets accompanied by a spectacular display of faith through music, fireworks, singing and more!

Day 9 – Monday (B,L,D)

Pack your bags as we head North to St. Paul's Bay, Buggiba, Mgarr and Mellieha. Mgarr is one of the few remaining rural villages in Malta what still has a pronounced agricultural community. The typical rural landscape with terraced fields hosts a variety of interesting features that make this locality unique. The strong roots of olive cultivation in the Maltese Islands are evident here and it is here that you will travel to an olive grove where you will taste some extra virgin olive oil together with lunch. The rural village of Mellieha is located in the Northwest part of Malta. Its name is likely to have been derived from the Greek word "Melleca" meaning honey. Remains of the prehistory, a red painted Tower and the sheltered church courtyard will give a historic dimension to the tour combined with breath taking views overlying the rocky shore.

While in Northern Malta, we will pay a visit to a cave sight that was used as a residence up until the early 20th century. Known as "Il-Grotta ta' San Martin, mass is only celebrated here on specific dates. Our visit to the village of Mgarr brings us to the parish church dedicated to the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Hear about the unique fundraising campaign to build the church which is tied to the shape of its dome. You'll also have an opportunity to climb the steps of the bell tower to learn about messaging to villagers through bell chimes.

Travel to Cirkewwa to board the Gozo Channel Ferry for the island of Gozo where we will spend the next 2 nights. Gozo affords a certain charm and tranquility that sets it apart from the main island. Before checking into our hotel we will visit the Azure Window - a coastal landmark that features a bridge or table-like rock that reaches across the sea to an eroded pillar. A group dinner with wine is included this evening. Take the rest of the evening to only dream of what awaits us tomorrow.

Day 10 – Tuesday (B,L,D)

On this day, discover Gozo's splendour. The production of sea salt has a long tradition in Gozo and the saltpans found near Marsalforn are still used today. We will arrive after breakfast to see these magnificent saltpans and then travel to a local farm to learn of Gozitan dairy production. You'll have a hands-on opportunity in the collection of goat milk; you only live once! We'll also witness a Gozitan cheese-making demonstration. The most popular cheese on all of Malta is called Gbejna and the very best comes from Gozo.

After our farm visit you will venture to the capital of Gozo for a leisurely walk through the village streets as we witness local people in their daily jobs en route to the Citadel. The Citadel or Citadella is an area known to have been first fortified during the Bronze Age and later developed by the Phoenicians and continues development until, by Roman times, it had become a complex

Acropolis. Up until the 18th Century, it was the only fortified refuge against attack for the inhabitants of the island. Enjoy a traditional Gozitan platter lunch (with Gbejna cheese) at a local restaurant. Gozitan wine, while not widely distributed, is a true testament to the love that the islanders have of their land. We will share in a wine tasting experience with a local producer and more!

Our last stop will be at the Ggantija Temples site - recognized as one of the oldest free-standing structures in the world. According to archaeologists, the Ggantija temples were dedicated to the Great Earth Mother, a goddess of fertility.

Travel back to the hotel to freshen up before enjoying dinner here.

Day 11 – Wednesday (B,L,D)

This morning after breakfast, we will check out of the hotel and visit the shrine of Ta' Pinu whose origins date back to 1534. The original chapel was built by the noble family of the Gentili in devotion to Our Lady of the Assumption. In 1575, the church was closed by a delegate of Pope Gregory XII because it was in such a bad state. He also gave orders for the shrine to be demolished but, according to the legend, the first blow with the pick broke the worker's arm, which was understood as a divine message. So, the chapel was saved. Later on, in 1598, the property where this church lies was bought by another family. The chapel was restored and a new stone altar was then erected with the painting of the Assumption of Our Lady in the altarpiece. Hear about the "calling" and "miracle" that ultimately shaped its future with the construction of the basilica.

Late morning we'll board our private boat for the waters of Comino Island - the smallest of the inhabited islands of Malta. A picnic lunch is included on this day. Named after the cumin seed that once flourished in the Maltese islands, Comino is noted for its tranquility and isolation. It has a permanent population of only four residents. The crystal clear waters of Comino's Blue Lagoon reflect the blue sky with a lovely cyan as well as let you see the pure white sand bottom of this part of the Mediterranean Sea. This long and narrow bay surrounded by rock and a bit of sand is almost like a pool, which makes it the ideal place for swimming, snorkelling, scuba diving or simply relaxing on the beach. We will return to Malta by 6:00pm and check into our host hotel for our final night and farewell dinner.

Day 12 – Thursday (B)

After an early morning rise, we will depart the hotel for the airport. We trust that you will leave with fond memories of unbelievable experiences. Thank you for the opportunity to share our lovely sacred islands with you.