

Pick 'n' mix Valletta

See in the return of spring in Malta: we look to its capital and to excursions across this island nation, for a variety of short break ideas that you can tailor to your taste

The ongoing boost from 2018, when Valletta served as European Capital of Culture, makes this city an all-round joy to visit – that and the temperatures, which stay in the teens even in midwinter, and only get better from there. The former stomping ground of the crusading Knights of Malta is a Baroque beauty written in stone, and given a distinctive touch by the enclosed wooden balconies on almost every historic building. The city itself is one of Europe's smallest capitals, but the urban area takes in other mini-cities such as Floriana, Sliema and Senglea, which crowd around Valletta's two flanking harbours. Whether you want to concentrate on its historic riches, enjoy the Mediterranean food and lifestyle, or combine different ways to discover the city, you'll find the ingredients here. →

Looking down the steps of Valletta's Triq San Ġwann (St John's Street) towards the Three Cities



Clockwise from top left: Apartment 1 at 10 Strait Street; red phone boxes are a reminder of the 150-year British presence in Malta; a harbour lookout from Valletta Vintage's rooftop terrace; latte art in progress at Lot Sixty One; gins of the world are the speciality at Yard 32; Australian grass-fed beef sirloin, king oyster mushrooms, mushroom purée and, pak choi, as served at the Harbour Club; the beach at Ramla Bay, on the neighbouring island of Gozo. Opposite: A view from Valletta's Upper Barrakka Gardens across the Grand Harbour to the city of Senglea



Ditch your suitcase

A great-value and intimate stay, with three attractive rooms (and two new apartments off-site), Valletta Vintage has midcentury furniture and a split-level rooftop terrace with wonderful harbour views (from £90, two-night minimum stay; vallettavintage.com). The 18th-century palazzo that's home to 19 Rooms has a more contemporary look inside than many hotels in town, even with its heritage limestone walls. The guest rooms are all individually designed, with details including vintage-feel radio sets, and surround a showpiece, building-height atrium (from £105, two-night minimum stay; 19rooms.com.mt). To pretend you might have your own luxurious pad in town, book one of the six apartments at 10 Strait Street. The furnishings and colour schemes are soothing to the eye, with a few elaborate touches such as carved stone fireplaces (from £200, three-night minimum stay; 10straitstreet.com).

Get your bearings

Valletta proper covers a finger of land between the Grand Harbour and Marsamxett Harbour, and shelters behind heavy-duty walls. Republic Street, just over half a mile in length, runs from Renzo Piano's hotly debated new Parliament House where the city begins, past the knights' old seat of power in the Grandmaster's Palace, to Fort St Elmo where Valletta juts out into the Mediterranean. The city was built on a grid plan and many streets are pedestrianised, so apart from some hilly gradients it's easy to get around. It's only from Valletta's edges, on the quayside or at high

viewpoints such as the Upper and Lower Barrakka Gardens, that you'll truly appreciate the city's maritime setting and why it was such a contested prize in history.

Splendid meals

The smartly assembled cuisine served in a minimally adorned setting under Noni's stone vaults makes inventive use of modern Mediterranean flavours: one highlight is the slow-cooked octopus tagine with Israeli couscous, kalamata olives and marjoram oil (noni.com.mt). Guzé is another dining space that makes attractive use of its centuries-old interior, this time with gilded mirrors creating a more classically romantic ambience (guzevalletta.com). Its seasonally changing menu often includes rabbit, a Maltese favourite. If you prefer to dine out in the open, The Harbour Club has a terrace that's a dream in fine weather, with views of the Grand Harbour to complement its dishes drawn from Italy and the wider Mediterranean (theharbourclubmalta.com).

Food on the move

Whether your ideal snack to go with your morning coffee shot is a croissant, brownie or 'energy ball', you'll find it at Lot Sixty One – a small, white-tiled café that opened in 2017, with sought-after tables on the sloping street outside (lotsixtyonecoffee.com.mt). Open for grocery shopping from 7am until 10pm daily, with food stalls running later on Friday and Saturday nights, Is-Suq Tal-Belt ('The City Market' in Maltese) is Valletta's traditional food hall, restored to cater to →

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The hilltop city of Mdina was built before Valletta. Right: Evening outside wine bar Trabuxu



any hankering, including sushi, Turkish kebabs or mozzarella bites (issuqtaibelt.com). To **keep things traditional**, fill up on ftira, Malta's answer to pizza. In its barrel-vaulted premises, Nenu the Artisan Baker sprinkles its varied choices with olives, capers, ricotta, beef and more (nenuthebaker.com).

Daytime diversions Valletta owes its existence to military need: it was built after the Great Siege by the Turks in 1565 and became a key naval base for Britain that was heavily bombed in World War II. Discover its **history of resistance** at 16th-century Fort St Elmo. It houses the National War Museum, which brings Malta's two big heart-stopping moments to life with artefacts and audiovisual displays (heritagemalta.org). At Valletta's centre, St John's Co-Cathedral is an **artistic treasure**, not just for its exuberant Baroque interior, but also its paintings by Caravaggio (stjohnscocathedral.com). For a more immersive experience, head for Marsamxett Harbour: near the Sliema ferry departure point, you'll find steps down to a quayside where you can **swim in clear waters** with city views all around.

Pause for a drink Strait Street is the long-time centre of nightlife in the city, more salubrious now than when Malta was a naval base. Gin is having its moment here, too: Yard

32 is a tiny bar and live music venue that pairs its tapas with more than 180 **gins from around the world** (yard32.com). A more typical combo of wine and cheese is the attraction at Trabuxu, which you'll find at the landward end of Strait Street. The bar's **atmospheric stone cellar** dates back four centuries (trabuxu.com, mt/wine-bar). As spring turns into summer, take advantage of **warmer evenings** in the city at spots where you can sip your drinks on gently sloping steps, either at the tables outside craft beer specialist and mixologists' favourite Café Society (facebook.com/cafesocietyuptown), or on colourful scattered cushions at Bridge Bar, a Friday-evening event that looks like a spontaneous party (May–Oct; Liesse & Triq Sant'Orsla).

Head out on an excursion Valletta is less than half a square mile in size, so out-of-town trips make sense even for a short visit. The closest to hand are the **scenic boat trips** in a dghajsa ('dye-sa', traditional rowing boat) around and across the Grand Harbour. These run to the Three Cities, founded before Valletta was built (vallettaferryservices.com). Inland, and older still, hilltop Mdina was Malta's capital before the knights came. After it lost its role, its streets lined with **aristocratic mansions** took on the nickname 'the Silent City'. Malta's identically named main island is home to nine out of 10 Maltese, but over on the second island of Gozo, **rugged landscapes** abound, especially along its coast. With frequent ferries taking 20 minutes to cross over from Ċirkewwa on Malta island (gozochannel.com), it makes a fine day-trip by car or bus from Valletta. 📍

Fly direct to Malta International Airport with airlines including Air Malta, BA, easyJet, Jet2 and Ryanair (from £90; easyjet.com).