



# Malta's moment

At once chaotic and captivating,  
the island nation of Malta  
offers a vibrant taste of the  
Mediterranean. *By Dan Avila*





When invited, I jumped at the chance to visit his home country with my girlfriend at the time (now my wife, Zora), staying with Frank's family along the way. Slipping into the Maltese way of life was so seductively simple. Safe, bohemian, sun-soaked times with family and friends resonated with my Latin heritage, adding a North African flavour that felt exotic and unique.

Fast forward to 2023. While in Europe, Zora and I couldn't resist the opportunity to spend a week back in Malta. Yet I was nervous that the romanticised Mediterranean memories of my youth would be quickly dashed by the modern reality of unstoppable European progress.

A few weeks in Scandinavia prior to the Med conditioned me to a new normal. Discipline, order and practicality sat as a defining structure across pristine cities, and while not stifling to their personality, chaos was not part of the equation. Arriving in Malta, the

difference was jarring. At every turn there's a free-flowing and chaotic melding of loud expression and an apparent unwillingness to allow perfect planning and organisation to usurp the adequate.

Nothing about modern Malta feels clinical and precise, from the layout of the streets and state of the roads and sidewalks, to any conversation with a local. Yet after a few days of decompression and deceleration into the speed and rhythm of the island, it starts to make sense. The lifestyle is highly social and, while entrepreneurial and industrious, the Maltese way is to highly value relaxing with friends. Malta is not the place for a solo disconnection from the world.

#### THE PERFECT MEDITERRANEAN LIFESTYLE

For such a small country, Malta has distinct regional personalities, and it is important to experience more than one to truly get a sense of the place. The coastal enclaves of St Julian's and Sliema are proximate to the impressive capital of Valletta. And although each has unique features, they share an equally outgoing, upbeat personality. Valletta is a UNESCO World Heritage Site, an artistic masterpiece of baroque architecture with grand palaces, churches, museums and gardens built by the Knights of St. John in the 16th century.

There are endless hole-in-the-wall bars and cafes with a cool, European vibe. Valletta also enjoys a car-free city centre, coming alive at night. And although tourism is an important

staple for Malta, nothing here feels kitsch or tackily built for the masses.

Our base for this part of the island is The InterContinental Malta in St Julian's. Where Sliema is all about breezy afternoons, boutique shopping, cool cafes and beaches, St Julian's is a shift to nightlife and entertainment, with many clubs, bars, casinos and restaurants. This is Malta's party central, and the sprawling InterContinental Hotel is at the junction of the lively entertaining hub and shopping district, with sheltered beaches only minutes away.

#### THE SILENT CITY

We're in the ancient walled capital of Mdina for the last part of our stay. Mdina is known as the 'Silent City', with very few residents and their vehicles within the old city's ramparts. During the day, the narrow streets are filled with tourists. But as the sun sets and tour buses depart, the bustle settles and the city is returned to the locals and the lucky few, like us, fortunate enough to stay within the ancient walls.

The Relais & Châteaux Xara Palace is our home, the exquisite historic residence – a converted 17th-century palazzo with a storied history – built into the city's towering walls; some luxurious rooms offer both elevated views across the island and balconies above the town's narrow

streets. It's a special place and the only hotel within the walls of the Silent City. Staying here is less like a usual luxury hotel experience and more like being the pampered guests at a wealthy European family mansion. In fact, it was once the childhood home of Frank's grandmother ... many years ago. Like any Relais & Châteaux experience, extraordinary dining is paramount and the alfresco breakfast featuring local Maltese delights served on the medieval bastions is a highlight.

Walking around the beautifully persevered city at night – did I mention it stars as a setting in *Game of Thrones*? – feels like stepping back into the Middle Ages. There is a peace and gravitas about the place, so much so that I find myself whispering reverently (and unnecessarily) when speaking to Zora within the city walls.

The decades between my first personal journey of discovery of Malta as a mere lad, and my recent return, highlighted changes that are to be expected. More traffic, development, more people and more diversity of the population. Happily, my romanticised memories of the island that were an important part of my youth were not dashed by the modern reality. Malta is still Malta: gregarious, social, welcoming and far from clinical. A beautiful chaos. Just how it should be. 🇲🇹



#### TRAVEL FACTS

STAYING THERE  
ihg.com  
xarapalace.com.mt

OPENING IMAGE: Malta's stunning old town © Georgios Tsihliis/Shutterstock THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Inside St Paul's Cathedral, Mdina, originally founded in the 12th century; 'The Silent City' of Mdina; the beautiful chaos of Sliema and St Julian's back streets; towering limestone walls within Mdina's old city

Once affectionately described by locals as a place of 'yells, bells and smells', the island nation of Malta's personality can

be described as optimistic, gregarious and ... emotional. People here wear their heart on their sleeve, as I fast learn (again). This is the Mediterranean's extrovert island, where precision and order yield to art and individualism, and a request for directions to a coffee shop will illicit an impassioned response about which little cafe does the best coffee in town, rather than simple directions.

#### TURN BACK TIME

It has been half a lifetime since I last visited Malta. Back then, I was a young man based in London, working in finance and media, dazzled by the European lifestyle. My roommate in London, Frank, was a British-educated Maltese lad from a notable family.