

# Explore



Eat, drink, shop, relax

EXTRA DAY

## Valletta

Soak up the history, architecture and cuisine of Malta's UNESCO-listed capital



### START OFF AT ST JOHN'S CO-CATHEDRAL.

Visions of the Maltese archipelago are often dominated by turquoise waters, soaring cliffs and brightly coloured *luzzus* (fishing boats), but on land, the most distinctive sites are defined by the country's Catholic roots. Terracotta, honey and sandstone church cupolas signpost towns and villages across the ancient islands, providing handy orientation points.

Valletta is one of Europe's smallest capitals, yet houses 28 churches – including one of its most famous places of worship. Commissioned as the spiritual home of the Knights of St John and completed in 1577, St John's Co-Cathedral is today renowned for its intricate marble tombstone floor (beneath which many of the original knights still lie), as well as its gold-leaf, baroque interior and two Caravaggio paintings. Pre-book tickets and grab an audio guide to take in the best bits in under an hour.



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## BARRAKKA GARDENS

As one of Europe's most southerly countries, greenery isn't a big part of Malta's topography; tough prickly pear and rosemary bushes are the flora most committed to spicing up the pale, limestone land. In Valletta however, two serene spaces provide some leafy relief from the bustling walkways and *gallerija*-covered streets.

Perched on the highest point of the city walls, the Upper Barrakka Gardens were originally a recreational space for the knights. Shaded seating, fountains and a columned terrace provide spectacular views of the Grand Harbour. Visit at noon or 4pm to see the ceremonial cannon fire from the Saluting Battery one level below. The smaller Lower Barrakka Gardens are dominated by a neoclassical monument and views of the harbour's breakwater and Valletta's lower fortifications.



## STRAIT STREET

Previously referred to as 'The Gut', this strip of bars and restaurants has come a long way since its time as the capital's red-light district. Today, it's an ideal place to sample some of the city's best libations. Tico Tico is a good spot to start, with red velvet armchairs, pictures of pin-ups and a local presence affirming its good-time credentials. Gin lovers should beeline for Yard 32, which serves over 180 gins. Beyond Strait Street are plenty more watering holes. Cafe Society is a snug basement bar whose trendy vibes spill out onto the staggered walkway. Or grab a pint at The Pub – the site where actor Oliver Reed took his last breath and which now has memorabilia on the wall.

## THE THREE CITIES

A quick boat ride across the Grand Harbour takes you to the neighbourhood trio of Vittoriosa, Senglea and Cospicua. The Three Cities were home to the knights for some 40 years in the mid-16th century and the focal point of the Great Siege of 1565. Valletta was built as a result of the knights' unlikely victory; the Ottomans outnumbered them and the capital gets its name from Grand Master Jean Parisot de la Valette who led the defence. Today, these quiet residential towns offer an authentic taste of Maltese life, as well as physical testament to Malta's battle-weary past. Built in the 12th century, Fort St Angelo was a key stronghold during the siege, as well as a target in World War Two (it took nearly 70 hits from German bombs). Seek out the tip of the promontory where a ship's mast stands tall, denoting the fort's historic role as a British Navy shore base.



## TASTE OF VALLETTA

Maltese cuisine has been influenced over the centuries by its occupiers, as well as neighbouring Sicily and North Africa. Seafood and fish are big business, with *lampuki* a seasonal highlight. Crispy *pastizzi* with cheese or peas can be found for a euro, while *bragoli* (stuffed beef bundles) are worth trying. Valletta has three Michelin-starred establishments: Under



Grain, Noni and ION Harbour by Simon Rogan. But if you're between meetings and looking for something speedier, try 59 Republic in St George's Square for 'bites to share' that offer a Maltese twist on international cuisine.



IMAGE ANNIE HARRIS; GETTY/ELA 2007, MAREMAGNUM; ION HARBOUR; VISIT MALTA