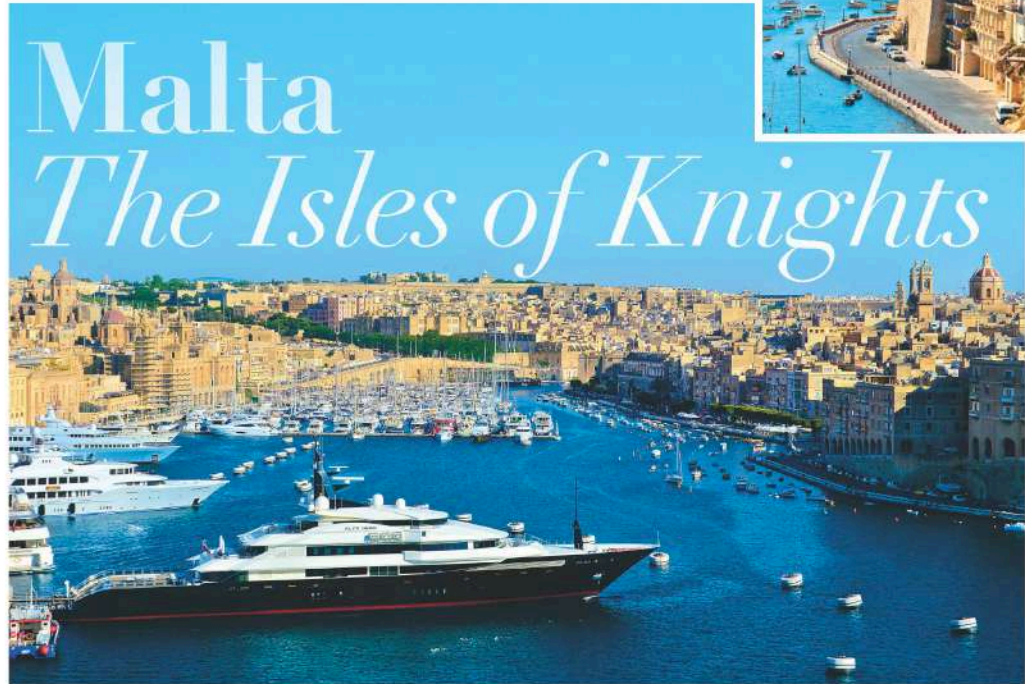


Kishan S Rana travels to Malta and discovers a tiny but proud European nation, with a rich, Catholic past, stony vistas, and vibrant nightlife, a stunning stopover for luxury cruise ships and yachts.



Malta

The Isles of Knights

Photographs by Ajit Rana

Imagine a tiny mid-Mediterranean community of islands, the largest of which measures 27 x 15 km; with six other islands, the total area is 315 sq km, home to 450,000 inhabitants.

Remarkably, tiny size has not inhibited Malta, now a proud member of the European Union, from playing a unique role in history and winning a formidable position as a tourism destination.

Malta's Grand Harbour, with high limestone cliffs, providing natural shelter against the region's unpredictable weather, gave this strategic location great value. A succession of powers, including the Phoenicians, Romans, Moors, Normans, Sicilians, Spanish, the Order of St John, French and British, have ruled Malta. Each has left a trace, with structures, fortifications and monuments, all built of cream-coloured limestone that is Malta's hallmark.

Above and inset: Views of the Grand Harbour and Three Cities: Vittoriosa, Senglea, and Cospicua.

It was the Knights of St John, a militant Catholic order that gave this island a special identity, after they were driven out of Rhodes, thanks to their long-drawn battles with the Ottoman Empire. Between the years 1530-1798, they found a new home in Malta's stony, windblown environment, building towns, palaces, churches, gardens and forts, embellishing them with numerous works of art, producing a special cultural legacy. They withstood numerous Ottoman attacks, and launched their own expeditions in the religious wars of that era. We see that heritage today in the fortified towns across Malta and the adjoining isle of Gozo, a magnificent collection of churches and cathedrals, even in the fortified watchtowers that dot the coast, designed to alert the population to withdraw to these protected towns whenever

invading forces, including the notorious Barbary pirates, were sighted.

In 2016, Malta received two million tourists, earning from them € 1.7 billion (\$2 billion), including nearly visitors 700,000 that came on cruise ships. So tourism is a great industry, with hotels and resorts dotting the coastline. That gives the capital city Valletta and the many historic towns great vibrancy, with a nightlife to match. Restaurants are thick on the ground, mainly focused on Malta's own cuisine, and their take on neighbouring Italy. Marine food and rabbit are among their specialities.

A property boom is visible all over the island, with tall cranes hovering over projects under



From left to right, by row, from top: Views of the Three Cities: Vittoriosa, Senglea, and Cospicua; The interior of St John's Co-Cathedral in Valletta; Merchants Street, Valletta; Interior of St John's Co-Cathedral; The façade of St John's Co-Cathedral; The bastions of Valletta - Auberger de Valletta, the Office of the Prime Minister, sits on the skyline; Views of the Three Cities; A traditional horse-drawn carriage or *karozzin*, in the narrow streets of Mdina.



construction. Besides the hotels and resorts, the boom spills into construction of apartment blocks, many to become the lodgings for charter tourists that come for one and two weeks – or longer – to escape the European winter, or enjoy the summer sunshine. Many are bought as second or third homes by those that prefer their own *pied à terre*. Both the months of summer and winter are high season, with crowded beaches in the hot season.

A different class of high-end visitors travels to Malta on luxury yachts and sailboats, attracted by the numerous marinas that dot all the islands, such as those at the beautiful St Julienne. They add glamour to the travel and shopping scene.

Malta offers a long-term residence visa to foreigners, through a 'Malta Individual Investor Programme', which typically costs the investor around €650,000 (around \$800,000), which can lead to a Maltese passport, with full access to the EU. That too attracts investment into real estate, bringing revenue to Malta's large tribe of lawyers.

Some of Malta's exotic flavour comes from its proximity to North Africa, which blends into its language, ethnicity, and traditions, giving these islands a true character as a bridge between cultures. For the visitor, it adds a patina of the exotic and the unique. ■

