

HEADQUARTERS

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THE MALTESE ISLANDS STARS ON THE RISE IN THE MEDITERRANEAN

THE MALTESE ISLANDS: MALTA, GOZO AND COMINO

A Rising Meetings Destination in the Mediterranean



The Three Cities and the Grand Harbour

Malta may be one of the smallest countries in Europe, but it also boasts quite a dynamic history spanning 7,000 years of rule and conquest passing from the Romans, Knights of the Order of St. John and Napoleon to the English in more recent times. Almost everywhere you look on the Maltese archipelago you'll find remnants of the islands' past, from the Megalithic temples to the Baroque churches and palaces constructed by the knights. With the ability to transform almost any historic site into a stunning venue, it's no surprise Malta is capitalizing on its culture and emerging as one of the top new meeting destinations in the Mediterranean.

Report Lane Nieset

Located in the middle of the Mediterranean between Sicily and northern Africa, the Maltese archipelago includes the three inhabited islands of Malta, Gozo and Comino. It's believed that humans first made their way to Malta in 5,000 B.C., crossing a land bridge connected to Sicily. Now you can cross from Sicily to Malta's capital city of Valletta in 90 minutes on a high-speed catamaran.

capital of Mdina and you're instantly transported back in time to a fortified city that's maintained the same narrow winding streets it had 1,000 years ago.

Gozo, meanwhile, is just a 25-minute ferry ride away, but the island seems even more removed from modern-day life than mainland Malta. With its red-sand beaches,

important characteristic in our daily lives. We also share a culture of discipline which was brought about by the influence of the British rule which lasted 150 years. Whilst our history has influenced and shaped considerably our culture, we are also Mediterranean but most importantly, we are Maltese. We are an island nation and we care to share all that is unique to us with any foreign guest- whether it is a tourist, friend or relative. We strive to deliver an 'experience' in all we do and share our hospitality even with something as simple as a smile.'

MTA HAS A SUBVENTION SCHEME IN PLACE TO ASSIST INTERNATIONAL AND EUROPEAN ASSOCIATIONS HOST THEIR CONVENTIONS IN MALTA OR GOZO

While Malta may seem modern compared to some of the more rustic spots dotting sister island Gozo's countryside and coastlines, the country has still maintained many of its historical elements and treasures. In the cosmopolitan town of St. Julian's, you'll find a mix of city and sea, with private beaches and restaurants, a strip of five-star hotels, and state-of-the-art meeting facilities at Hilton Malta, which can accommodate anywhere from 10 to 1,400 delegates. Head just 20 minutes away to the old

spectacular dive sites and coastal walks, it's no wonder the Maltese head here for a true island getaway that still offers the characteristic culture and charming hospitality the country is known for.

INGRAINED HOSPITALITY

Antonella Micallef, M.I.C.E. Manager of Malta Tourism Authority (MTA) puts it like this: *'As a destination, we are very well known for our hospitality which in itself is a very*

The fortified city of Valletta has come a long way in the past few years. Built in 1566 by the knights after the Great Siege, the World Heritage City was placed strategically on the Sceberras peninsula offering sweeping views from the Upper Barrakka Gardens, which look onto the Grand Harbour. While home to Malta's administrative and political organisations, the capital city was falling into disrepair with buildings in major need of a facelift.



Mdina Palazzo Falson

© Mario Galea



Gharb Square

Walking through the pedestrian-friendly city now you'll notice major changes underway as Valletta gears up to be the European Capital of Culture in 2018. Construction is taking place to bring new life into the city restoring landmarks like Is-Suq tal-Belt, the indoor covered market and Strait Street, transforming it into a mecca of cultural activities. Homes that are hundreds of years old are also getting a facelift as hoteliers move in to convert the buildings into boutique hotels, upping the number of rooms available in the historic city.

A NEW LOOK AT ASSOCIATIONS

Since 2012, MTA has had a subventions scheme in place assisting international and European associations who don't have a local counterpart to bring their convention to the Maltese Islands during shoulder months (from November to March). Now with the creation of Conventions Malta, the organisation is reviewing schemes and coming up with new ones to see what the best offer could be for international associations. But through these schemes, MTA and Conventions Malta has shown that they've created a local knowledge and established a position as a central organisation ready to assist association planners.

MTA also works closely with local destination management companies, restaurants and

FAST FACTS ON THE MALTESE ISLANDS

- Malta International Airport: 20 minutes from five-star hotels in St. Julian's, 15 minutes from capital city Valletta
- English is the official business language
- Venues hosting up to 10,000 delegates
- Conference centres accommodating 2,000 to 5,000 pax
- 15 five-star hotels with over 7,000 total beds
- Over 40 four-star hotels with more than 14,000 beds
- 18 Quality Assured Destination Management Companies
- Over 100 direct flights on 34 airlines, most under three hours from major European hubs
- Connectivity by sea: 25-minutes by ferry to Gozo, 90 minutes by high-speed catamaran to Sicily
- 300 days of sunshine

visitor attractions and has created a Quality Assurance Scheme to reward companies who have shown high levels of quality, consistency and professionalism. Currently, there are 18 DMCs who have earned this seal of approval and work alongside entertainment specialists, outside caterers, audio-visual professionals, and team building and

training providers, ensuring event and destination management quality.

Last year, Malta ranked 32nd in Europe in the ICCA rankings, hosting 30 meetings throughout the year. Micallef says while there are a number of corporate conferences taking place in Malta, they've also seen an increase in association conferences and with Conventions Malta, they can now give these conferences the attention they deserve. "There's also a good connections network in Malta, especially within the tourism industry itself," Micallef explains. "We foster these relationships, especially with the suppliers."

Paul Bugeja, MTA's CEO says: 'In the past, focus was predominately on C&IT Travel; in 2014 a total of 86,000 C&IT delegates visited the islands out of a total of 1,689,809 tourists. MICE is and will still be considered a very important niche market. Our aim is to continue building on the destinations reputable past and allow further room for growth. The creation of Conventions Malta will initiate a more comprehensive approach towards Association meetings and conventions. We already have a record of association events which have been held in our destination, however, Conventions Malta will help create awareness and generate new relationships with International and local Associations willing to host their events in Malta or Gozo.'

FOUR QUESTIONS TO PAUL BUGEJA

The former president of the Malta Hotels and Restaurants Association, Paul Bugeja, was appointed one year ago as CEO of the Malta Tourism Authority. Now with the launch of Conventions Malta, which was proposed and pursued during Mr. Bugeja's tenure, he explains how this will help put Malta on the map as an association destination.

What makes Malta stand out in the Mediterranean as a destination for international associations?

Malta has a vast and intriguing history that spans over 7,000 years, and in just a few days, visitors can walk through this history exploring our unique historical sites and buildings. The island is home to three UNESCO World Heritage sites: the historic capital city Valletta, the seven megalithic temples, and the hypogeum.

The Maltese Islands are centrally located in the heart of the Mediterranean and easy to reach by direct flight or sea. The temperate Mediterranean climate is another selling factor, as well as the hospitable attitude of the people here. English is an official language, but there are a number of other languages spoken on the island, offering an ease of communication and a clear understanding of a client's needs.

What are some of Malta's major strengths when it comes to hosting and catering to associations?

The Maltese Islands are known for their ability to cater to events of all sizes, from small high-end incentives to large annual conferences and exhibits. Malta boasts internationally renowned hotel chains and 13 conference hotels, in addition to a number of convention centres that can cater to large-scale groups, such as the Malta Fairs and

Convention Centre, which can hold up to 11,000 people for a standing reception. Most of the conference hotels offer onsite facilities and are clustered within walking distance of one another in areas like St. Julians.

With MTA's Subvention Scheme, international and European associations receive assistance and support with the bidding process, endorsement letters, site inspections and more when hosting their events here during the shoulder months. The government also launched Conventions Malta in May, acting as the foundation for the promotion of foreign conventions and congresses.

How does Malta's rich history and landscape play a role in delegates' experience during a conference?

Given Malta's small size – 316 square kilometers – the quantity, quality and versatility of the venues and facilities here is quite impressive. There are a variety of historical and modern venues to choose from, and the government is investing in opening new venues, such as Fort Saint Elmo and Fort Saint Angelo in Valletta.

In terms of cost, venues and infrastructure, what can associations expect when hosting a conference in Malta?

The islands are an accessible meeting hub for delegates, since many of the direct



Paul Bugeja

flights are three hours or less from major European gateways. There are currently over 92 routes connecting Malta with a total of 84 cities, and additional routes were launched this year.

There is also the advantage that being so small, we have easy access to the higher authorities. If a DMC would wish to organize an event in a palace or venue closed to the general public, they would come to us and we could speed up the process.

Now with Conventions Malta, I think one of the strongest positive points that will come out of this is that the islands' DMCs, hotels and stakeholders will work closer together, understanding that the competition is with other cities, conventions bureaus, and countries that have larger budgets and purchasing power.

There's always an issue of measuring value for money, but I think overall when you look at hotel prices, transport costs, and food and beverage offerings, there really is a total package in Malta that is competitive.

SWISS FEDERATION OF TRAVEL GENERAL ASSEMBLY 2014

Last November, the Swiss Federation of Travel took their annual meeting to Malta, inviting French-speaking delegates from Geneva and German-speaking delegates from Zurich for the four-day event taking place at Le Meridien St. Julians Hotel and Spa organised by Event Solutions Malta by Vacations Malta Ltd together with MTA Switzerland and MTA Head Office. The general assembly brought together a group of over 200 for a seamlessly executed event spanning venues on both the island of Malta and sister island Gozo.

ENHANCING TOURISM

During the general meeting, Malta's Minister for Tourism, Dr. Edward Zammit Lewis, discussed measures of enhancing Swiss tourism to Malta, mainly through increased air connectivity to Switzerland in 2015, with Swiss operating at least four weekly flights from Zurich, upping the number of flights to 15 per week.

The meeting was quite a success, dividing the group between French- and German-speaking guides who gave brief overviews of the island and its history while delegates were bussed from one location to the next. During the assembly, non-delegates had the chance to

visit Malta's main glass blowing factory and explore the San Anton botanical gardens, also the residence of Malta's president. Later in the day, the group joined together to visit the capital city of Valletta and the stunning Upper Barrakka Gardens before a cocktail reception and dinner at Relais & Châteaux's Xara Lodge.

HEALTHY COMPETITION

As Malta Tourism Authority's CEO, Paul Bugeja, explains: "There are a considerable number of licensed DMCs operating in Malta and Gozo but that in itself is an advantage as it creates a healthy competition between the companies. They constantly seek to improve

their services and create new activities and events tailor made to each individual requests."

Following the conference, the Quality Assured DMC Event Solutions Malta (by Vacations Malta Ltd.) also arranged an itinerary showcasing the best the islands have to offer, from jeep tour rallies across Gozo visiting picturesque parts of the island like the salt pans and Calypso Cave to boat rides at the Blue Grotto and tours of the Dingli Cliffs and Hagar Qim megalithic temple on the southern coast of Malta.

The Swiss Federation of Travel's response to the experience was overwhelming praise, with executive director Walter Kunz saying that the commitment of the Event Solutions team plus the "enormous effort they put in every single detail were highly appreciated, not only by us but also by the numerous participating travel professionals."

FIBA EUROPE GENERAL ASSEMBLY 2015

Earlier this year, the International Basketball Federation (FIBA) hosted their annual European General Assembly in the capital city of Valletta, bringing in 140 attendees from 52 European basketball national federations for the event. FIBA chose 3sixtymeetings, one of MTA's Quality Assured DMCs, to handle all the details, which included arranging special transport for VIP delegates and securing a venue that offered meeting facilities and accommodations.

The three-day event was held in May at the Grand Hotel Excelsior Malta, one of the five-star hotels in Malta's capital city of Valletta, kicking off with welcome drinks during check-in and registration. The welcome dinner was set up on a terrace by the sea

overlooking Manoel Island and the star fort built by the Knights of St. John.

When delegates arrived at the Gala Dinner on the last night, they saw a different side of Malta, hopping on board a traditional

Turkish gulet for a cruise through the Grand Harbour before stepping off in the shopping district of Sliema. When they arrived, the farewell gala was just steps away and they could see the shining city of Valletta lit up in the background. Not only were the participants pleased with their time in Malta, the clients also thought the assembly was a success, thanks to the support by 3sixtymeetings' events manager and its multilingual team.



Swiss Federation of Travel General Assembly 2014



Swiss Federation of Travel General Assembly 2014



Swiss Federation of Travel General Assembly 2014



Malta Fairs & Convention Centre (MFCC)



Mediterranean Conference Centre (MCC)



Mediterranean Conference Centre (MCC)



Palazzo Parisio - Garden Gala Dinner



Palazzo Parisio

BRINGING TOGETHER THE OLD & THE NEW

With venues ranging from 16th century infirmaries and former palace homes to state-of-the-art conference centres holding up to 10,000 people, the tiny island knows how to capitalize on its vast offerings for conferences combining cultural surroundings with the latest technology that only begs one questions – are you in the mood for a modern meeting, something more historical, or a mix of the two?

Wherever you go on the island, you won't be more than 5 km from the sea, which is a major perk when it comes to choosing conference venues, since many feature sea views. There's five main convention and conference centres spread across the island, with two attached to five-star properties in the "Golden Mile" on St. Julian's Bay. In total there are 13 five-star hotels in Malta and 2 in Gozo, most of which boasts in-house conference facilities and M.I.C.E. teams. Since many are within walking distance of one another in St. Julian's, you can easily spread large groups out among these hotels during a conference. From private meetings of 10 to groups of 10,000, there's plenty of venue options for every size – and none are more than 20 minutes away from the other.

THROW A CONFERENCE LIKE NO OTHER IN THE COUNTRYSIDE

The **Malta Fairs & Convention Centre (MFCC)** in the centre of the island is the largest conference and exhibition centre in Malta—stretching 7,000 sqm for a capacity of 10,000 theatre-style and 13,000 standing. The main area, sporting high ceilings thanks to a Tension Fabric Structure that once covered Wembley Arena in London, can easily transform from a conference centre by day to a gala dinner by night.

Looking for something on a smaller, and more intimate, scale? Nearby in the town of Naxxar lies the opulent 18th century **Palazzo Parisio** and its Baroque gardens, looking just as they did when the Marquis Giuseppe Scicluna

bought and renovated the palace, used as his getaway from city life in Valletta. While the gardens can host groups of up to 800 for gala dinners, the over-the-top palace rooms can be used as conference and meeting facilities in a setting that looks like anything but a boardroom. The mirrored Grand Ballroom can seat 150 people in gilded chairs theater-style in a space that gives Versailles a run for its money. Larger groups can also use the adjacent Sala Lombarda, designed in Louis XIV style, for an additional 60 seats, setting up a screen to capture the meeting next door.

HOLD COURT IN A FORMER HOSPITAL

In Valletta, perhaps one of the most impressive venues lies within the 16th century **Mediterranean Conference Centre (MCC)**, the former hospital for the Knights of St. John overlooking the Grand Harbour. Converted into a conference centre in 1979, the venue is a member of the Historic Conference Centres of Europe and plays host to large-scale conferences, as well as exhibitions and banquets. The Republic Hall set in the former courtyard of the *Sacra Infermeria* can host up to 1,400 delegates in the 728 sqm space, making it the largest auditorium in Malta. MCC offers 7,000 sqm of space in total, with nine other conference rooms and break-out areas to choose from, including the Michel'Angelo Grima Hall, which can hold up to 450 people and offers interpretation facilities for up to six languages, and the Temi Zammit Hall, which can hold 230 delegates theater-style.



MEETINGS WITH SPECTACULAR SEA VIEWS

A favorite for business travelers on the island, the super-modern **Hilton Malta Conference Centre** in St. Julian's overlooks the Portomaso seafront and has direct access to Hilton Malta just next door. Spanning 3,500 sqm over four floors, the centre can cater to anywhere from 80 to almost 1,400 delegates, offering 10 conference and break-out rooms. The largest option here is the 963 sqm multifunctional Grandmaster Suite, holding 1,330 pax with a tiered balcony and a foyer leading to the Vilhena and Wignacourt meeting rooms, each holding between 100 and 130 pax.

is within walking distance of the water, located inside one of the island's popular four-star business hotels, the 413-room **Dolmen Resort Hotel**. Both the hotel and conference centre are perfect for hosting associations, offering plenty of value for money, since rooms are some of the largest on the island (and most are doubles) and amenities appear like those of a five-star hotel but with four-star prices.

The conference centre's main meeting hall can seat 1,200 delegates in the 652 sqm space that includes a mezzanine and five breakout rooms, which can be joined together. The Oracle's inner circle below the mezzanine can be set up in a variety of

WHEREVER YOU GO ON THE ISLAND, YOU WON'T BE MORE THAN 5 KM FROM THE SEA, WHICH IS A MAJOR PERK WHEN IT COMES TO CHOOSING CONFERENCE VENUES

Many of the boardrooms are flooded with natural daylight, which also streams through the pre-function spaces throughout the building, adding an airy touch to meetings overlooking the sea. While the conference centre's spaces are sleek and contemporary, inside the adjacent five-star **Hilton Malta** you'll find the opposite – an ornate suite that features crystals hanging overhead and Roman-style columns lining the walls. The sumptuous 435 sqm Portomaso Suite can seat 506 people and be divided into three parts, each with a separate entry, depending on the size of the meeting.

MIX SEASIDE RESORT VIBES INTO MEETINGS

In the resort town of St. Paul's Bay on Malta's north coast, the **Oracle Conference Centre**

ways, with its stage and built-in screen ideal for seminars, as well as product launches and conventions, even hosting United Nations meetings. Delegates staying here have everything they need onsite, so after a long day of conferences, they can sneak away for some sun at one of the four outdoor pools, pop in the luxe Myoka spa for a treatment, or head down to the private beach club in the summer and partake in one of the water sports.

When it comes to selecting a conference centre or event space, planners don't have to search too far in Malta, since almost any spot – even stretches of rugged coastline, old limestone quarries, and prehistoric temples – can transform overnight offering a venue you won't find anywhere else in the world.



© Hilton Malta

Hilton Malta



Oracle Conference Centre



Dolmen Resort Hotel



© MFCC

Malta Fairs & Convention Centre (MFCC)



OFFSITE VENUES AND HOTELS

Choices from Coast to Coast

The Explora Interactive Science Centre

Who would think two small islands could offer so many out-of-the-ordinary venues? Driving across Malta, my guide pointed out some of the most unassuming spots and described the unique ways they could easily become the background for an elegant gala, casual lunch or cocktail event. The trick here is in the details, and the islands' skilled team of DMCs and events teams know just how to make these stunning settings pop during a conference—fireworks included.

SEAFRONT SEATS

Everyone says that Malta is even more beautiful come sunset, but one of the best ways to test if this is true is from the **Valletta Waterfront**, a 275-meter strip lined with 19 baroque warehouses dating back 250 years. You'll sit in the same spot by the Quay Wall where the Knights of St. John once unloaded their cargo, which has been the gateway to the city and centre of trade for thousands of years. The lit-up promenade has been transformed for concerts and events of up to 6,000, even bringing in cruise ships to hold additional guests for larger events. Last fall, German company Deutsche Vermögensberatung chartered four AIDA cruise liners, thanks to QA DMC On Site Malta, bringing 7,000 people to the waterfront.

You can also take a panoramic lift up 18 stories high to the top of the bastions for sweeping views over the Grand Harbour from the **Saluting Battery in the Upper Barrakka Gardens**. The gardens are nestled into Valletta's 16th century fortifications and form the perfect setting for an al fresco dinner with views from all angles of the Three Cities and Fort St. Angelo, hosting up to 300 people.

STICKING WITH TRADITION

If you're looking for a more traditional ballroom setting, the **Casino Maltese** in the centre of Valletta is your place, with most of its 16th century design still intact. What began as the knights' treasury, the members-only

club (which was at one time male-only) has a number of rooms open for events on the upper level, with the elegant ballroom hosting up to 180 guests, and the dining room overlooking St. George's Square holding up to 120. Just across the way, **Republic Square**, also known as Queen's Square, is home to many cafes and can be easily converted into an outdoor venue for 1,000 with the National Library of Malta's majestic façade forming the backdrop.

IBIZA-STYLE SUNDOWNERS

The Balearic Island institution **Café del Mar** has set up shop on Malta's northern shores in St. Paul's Bay and is one of the island's newest venues—and most stunning spots for sunset cocktails over chill-out music. Nestled in the rocks overlooking the sea, guests can catch spectacular views of sister island Gozo from the infinity edge pool or lido. Come nightfall, the restaurant and lido transform into one of Malta's hottest seaside lounges, accommodating anywhere from 400 seated to 4,500 standing party style.

GOING LOCAL IN GOZO

Since you're surrounded by nature and coastal views, why not make the most of your resources and host a picnic seaside in Gozo? **Dwejra** is the perfect place for a barbecue or lunch for up to 250 delegates on the flat rocks looking out to sea with one of the island's most beautiful natural wonders, the Azure Window, just beyond.

If you're more interested in fine dining with a local spin, **Ta' Frenc** restaurant brings both to the table when it comes to events. Set in an ancient farmhouse, the family-run restaurant is filled with local art and antiques, as well as other Gozitan touches like glass napkin rings commissioned from Gozo Glass and its very own Champagne bottled by the house of Boizel. The real stand-out feature here is the wine cellar, with a private table surrounded by thousands of bottle from around the world, available for private banquets of up to 20 people.

Just next door, **Maxtura Ivory Suite & Terrace** on the outskirts Marsalforn is known for its superb terrace setting that looks out on the island's rolling hills and rustic landscape. The rooftop is rather isolated, meaning parties can be louder – and go on longer – hosting up to 700 standing al fresco and 600 standing inside in the recently renovated Ivory Suite.

PARTY IN MALTA'S MINES

Another spot where you don't have to worry about noise constraints is at the **Limestone Heritage** located in the village of Siggiewi, deep in the countryside of Malta. Set in a former limestone quarry or open-pit mine, the venue is dotted with bay laurel and olive trees, as well as a waterfall running down the side of the limestone walls that can be lit up any way you'd like. The gardens can seat



SmartCity Malta

up to 400 on round tables with fireworks serving as evening entertainment and walls that can be used for projections. What's great about this venue is that it can be used for incentives as well, with Limoncello-making and limestone-sculpting teambuilding activities, and there's even a new marquee that can also fit up to 400.

SPOTS TO MEET AND SLEEP

In Malta's more commercial hub, Sliema, business travelers are drawn to the modern five-star hotel **The Palace** that is connected to the more traditional four-star **The Victoria Hotel**, decorated as its name suggests in a Victorian style. Just a five-minute walk from the harbor and smack-dab in the middle of the shopping district, the hotels are not only set in a great location for delegates, they're also a great mix of styles and venues for different budgets. The rooftop pool, for example, can be set up for an open air reception hosting up to 350 people, while the Royal Hall at The Palace can be partitioned in two for meetings up to 225 pax.

At The Victoria, the main conference hall, the William Shakespeare Suite, looks out to the **Palazzo Capua** and can be divided into three parts holding up to 150 people, with an addition 200 standing on the adjoining terrace. The adjacent Victorian-style Palazzo Capua is another one of Malta's regal meeting spaces, a former palace set within 200-year-old stone walls for up to 100 people.

Near the 17th century Presidential Palace and San Anton Gardens, the 152-room five-star **Corinthia Palace Hotel & Spa** has an onsite events team ready to help and can host anywhere from 60 to 650 delegates throughout its seven conference rooms, the largest of which is the Chameleon Suite. The historic hotel is also home to six dining venues, including the 200 sqm Villa Corinthia at the heart of the property, set in the original villa that graced the grounds here one hundred years ago, for groups of up to 500.

As if these weren't enough event options, the island is gearing up for another major player for the M.I.C.E. market – the 22,000 sqm **Esplora Visitor Centre**, Malta's first interactive science centre set in a formal naval hospital overlooking the Grand Harbour. Set to open early-2016 to the public, guests will be able to arrive by boat for conferences, exhibitions and more on the 15,000 sqm outdoor terrace or take meetings indoors for presentations in the planetarium or events in the 5,000 sqm indoor exhibition space.

One of the newest venues on the island is the ultra modern **SmartCity Malta**, a complex of LEED-certified buildings with boardrooms hosting from six to 75 people. Last year, Laguna Walk opened in the centre of SmartCity's entertainment area, featuring an amphitheatre and a set of grand steps overlooking the lagoon and its dancing fountain, forming a picturesque backdrop for events of up to 1,500 people standing.



Saluting Battery



The Westin Dragonara Resort



Casino Maltese Valletta



Upper Barrakka Gardens



Corinthia Palace Hotel & Spa



PRE- AND POST-CONGRESS ACTIVITIES

Make the Most of the Maltese Islands' Sun-Soaked Shores

Given the fact that you can get almost anywhere on the small islands in under 40 minutes, the amount of activities available in Malta and Gozo is surprisingly large. You could spend weeks exploring the islands' natural wonders roaming the cliffs dotting the rocky coastlines or snorkeling in the turquoise sea. Pair the Maltese Islands' endless natural and historical attractions with 300 days of sunlight and quick transfer times and planners have a recipe for an action-packed itinerary that's perfect to tack on before or after a congress.

VENTURE THROUGH VALLETTA

One of the quickest ways to get to the heart of Malta's rich history is with a visit to the **Three Cities and Valletta**. Seen as the "cradle of Maltese history," the Three Cities – Vittoriosa, Senglea and Cospicua – resemble old Mediterranean port towns, with palaces, forts and churches even older than the ones you'd find in Valletta. Start in Vittoriosa on a guided tour of the medieval city that was the first home of the Knights of St. John and served as the stronghold during the Great Siege of 1565 when Fort St. Angelo protected the city and Grand Harbour against the Ottoman Empire's attacks.

Hop on a traditional Maltese fishing boat for a short cruise of the harbor, which has been used since Phoenician times, before making your way to the **capital city of Valletta**. The fortress city was built in the late 16th century by the Order of St. John after the Great Siege and features over 320 monuments and Baroque buildings, often called an open-air museum since it's one of the "most

concentrated historical areas in the world," according to UNESCO, which named it a World Heritage City.

One of the Baroque beauties that you shouldn't miss while visiting Valletta is **St. John's Co-Cathedral**, a gilded masterpiece dedicated to the knights with marble tombstones lining the floor where noble sons and grand masters from the 16th to 18th centuries are buried. The church also features a museum of silver and tapestries that were spared when Napoleon's troops pillaged the island in 1798. The museum is also home Italian artist Caravaggio's oil painting, *The Beheading of St. John the Baptist*, commissioned for the co-cathedral in the 17th century.

EXPLORE MAJESTIC MEGALITHIC TEMPLES

With 7,000 years of history under its belt, Malta's impressive sites go quite a ways back with some of the best examples being the still-standing **Megalithic**

temples built around 3600 B.C. Uncovered in the 20th century, the temples dotting the shores and countryside of Malta and Gozo are the oldest free-standing stone buildings in the world – even older than Egypt's pyramids. Malta's tourist trail features four of the largest complexes, and you could easily squeeze in a visit one afternoon after wrapping up meetings. On Malta's Southern coast, two of the complexes, **Hagar Qim and Mnajdra**, are built next to each other overlooking the sea and the uninhabited island of Filfla. Before exploring the temples, stop at the **National Museum of Archaeology** for a look at how these complexes may have formed.

The next morning, weather-dependending, you can spend out on the water on a boat ride through the **Blue Grotto's** caves near the town of Qrendi off of Malta's southern coast, named after Capri's Grotta Azzurra since the blue water is a reflection of the phosphorescent colors in the cave.

SET SAIL FOR GOZO

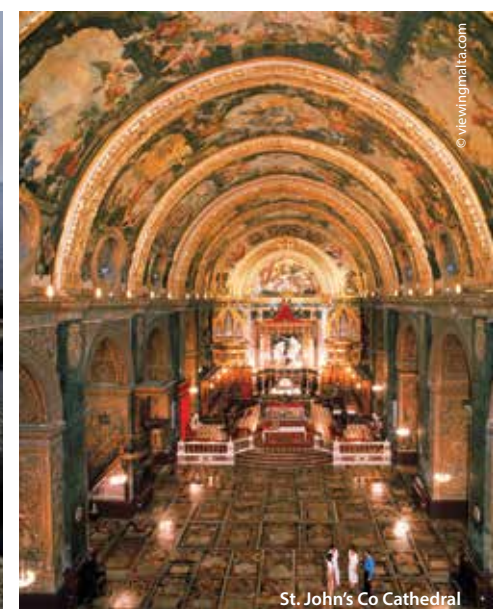
Dedicate the next day to detoxing on Malta's smaller sister island, **Gozo**. While it's 25 minutes away by ferry, adrenaline-seekers can get there even quicker by private speed boat. Nicknamed the "10-minute island," all of the roads on Gozo lead to the capital of Victoria in the centre, and no attraction is more than a 10-minute drive away. Take a Jeep tour of the island, which can even be transformed into a scavenger hunt with iPads for incentives, stopping to trek to the top of Victoria's Citadel with 360-degree views from the walled city. Afterward, make your way over to the 350-year-old Xwejni **Salt Pans** jutting off the northern coast.

If you'd rather explore the island on two wheels, it's a prime place for mountain biking, since the island is known for its symbolic three hills, and the highest point is just 450 meters high. A favorite cycling route for all skill levels starts in Gharb at the church of Ta' Pinu heading along the sea to the Salt Pans, ending at the sandy shores of Marsalforn Bay.

After having worked up an appetite, take a long pause for lunch at Ta' Cenc's open-air restaurant, **Kantra Beach Club**, overlooking the cliffs and sea on Gozo's southern side, for a meal of Mediterranean favorites like fresh seafood and antipasto (I tried the sea urchin pasta du jour and it was absolute perfection).

The afternoon can be as relaxing or as adventurous as you want, indulging in an Asian spa treatment at five-star **Kempinski Hotel San Lawrenz's Indian Ayurveda**, sea kayaking through hidden caves, or rock climbing along the cliffs. Despite which option you choose, be sure to save some time for a trip to one of Gozo's most famous landmarks, the Azure Window in Dwejra, a rock arch formed thousands of years ago that can be seen by sea or shore. There's also tons of activities to explore in this area, such as scuba diving in the **Blue Hole** (right across from the Azure Window) or a boat tour through the **Inland Sea and tunnel**, also a top dive site in Gozo.

Of course there's no better way to toast to a successful conference than with a **wine tasting** at one of Gozo's family-run wineries, hosted by the farmer himself. While you sip on some of the best local wines taking in views of the countryside, you'll also experience the welcoming hospitality the islands are known for—feeling right at home among Gozo's grapevines.



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