

History & Prehistory of Malta

Prehistoric, Roman and Crusader Jewels

The small island of Malta stuns with its extraordinary historical and archaeological sites, with remains of a civilization capable of complex stone temple-building a thousand years before Egypt built its Great Pyramids. Its natural harbours and strategic Mediterranean location subsequently made Malta the irresistible object of occupation for every trading or invading force in the region, from Phoenicians, Romans, Byzantines and Arabs to the Sicilians, and most significantly, the Knights of St John, who held the island for over 200 years. The cultural and architectural legacy of these invaders is what makes the island such a joy to discover, as we unravel its rich and complex history.

- Explore Valetta, the compact and beautiful fortified Crusader capital of Malta, with its fascinating Archaeological museum, as well as Mdina, the island's stunning ancient citadel
- Marvel at Malta's sophisticated prehistoric inhabitants, exploring the 4th century BC burial site Hal Saflieni Hypogeum, Megalithic temples Haġar-Qim and Mnajdra, and elaborate Tarxien temple
- Ferry to Gozo to see the Neolithic temple of Ggantija, one of the world's oldest free-standing structures, and the hilltop medieval citadel of Vittoria.

Day 1: London – Malta

The tour starts today in Valetta/Sliema (depending on final hotel chosen). Those making their own way there should arrange to arrive at the hotel by 17:30 pm in order to meet as a group for the first time over drinks in the hotel bar at 18:30, followed by dinner.

Those taking our recommended flights from London will fly from London Heathrow this morning with Malta Airlines on a direct service to Malta, arriving around 3pm. On arrival, a group transfer will take the arrivals to the hotel to check in.

Overnight: *AX Victoria hotel or similar* | **Meals:** *D*

Day 2: Walking tour of Valletta

Start in the morning with a visit to the island's National Museum of Archaeology. Here, a collection of hundreds of objects excavated from the neolithic temples on the island can be found, along with Bronze Age artifacts.

In the afternoon, a guided tour through the vibrant streets of Valletta reveals the beauty and charm of the fortified city built by the Knights of St John of Jerusalem, who settled on the island following their expulsion from the Island of Rhodes in 1522. The Knights ruled Malta for 268 years until thrown out by Napoleon in 1798, and we shall visit their finest monuments.

See the **Palace of the Grand Masters of the Knights**, the **Cathedral of St John**, a staggering baroque masterpiece decorated with rich gilt and works by artists such as Caravaggio, and the **Casa Rocca Piccola**. A beautifully-preserved 16th century palazzo, the Casa Rocca Piccola is still occupied by the descendants of the original Knight of St John who built it.

Afterwards, return to our hotel for dinner and overnight.

Overnight: AX Victoria hotel or similar | Meals: B/L/D

Day 3: Mdina, Rabat

After breakfast, depart by coach to visit the medieval hilltop city of **Mdina**, Malta's former capital, where the narrow, winding streets, dating back to the Arab period, lead to the imposing bastions, commanding a panoramic view of the islands. Established by the Phoenicians in the first millennium BC, the town today shows Norman fortifications, palaces, and many buildings in the baroque style. Visit the Mdina Cathedral and Mosta Dome.

Continue to the village of **Rabat** just outside Mdina, where there are significant Roman remains including catacombs.

We shall also look out for some of the island's mysterious '**cart ruts**' of which some of the best examples can be found nearby. These long parallel grooves in the bedrock are found in many locations across Malta and Gozo and have perplexed scholars as to their exact use, although it is generally believed they were dug to facilitate the transportation of bulky objects by cart or sled.

The rest of the afternoon and evening is at leisure for group members to enjoy dinner at a local restaurant of your choice (dinner not included).

Overnight: AX Victoria hotel or similar | Meals: B/L/-

Day 4: Gozo

Today we shall take the short (20 minute) ferry to the sleepy island of **Gozo**, which is well known for its crafts, particularly handmade lace and knitted garments.

The island's most famous site is the UNESCO World Heritage-listed temples at **Ġgantija**. Thought perhaps to be the earliest of the megalithic temples in the region, they are the oldest free-standing monuments in the world, pre-dating the Pyramids of Egypt. From the numerous figurines and statues found here, the temples may well have been the site of a Fertility Cult.

Close by is the **Xagħra Stone Circle**, where the most notable discoveries include skeletal remains and prehistoric art relating to the builders of the prehistoric temples. An earlier chambered tomb on the site dates to the period between 4100 and 3800 BC.

Also visit the medieval citadel at the island's largest town, **Victoria** and the **Victoria Archaeology Museum** which exhibits the Neolithic artefacts from Ġgantija as well as objects of the Phoenician, Punic, Roman and Medieval Periods.

Lastly, enjoy the views at **Xlendi** and **Dwejra**, rugged bays which show off Gozo's unique beauty. Fans of the TV series Game of Thrones will recognise Dwejra as the setting for scenes from Season 1, although sadly the natural stone arch the bay is known for collapsed during a storm in 2017.

Return to the hotel for dinner and overnight.

Overnight: AX Victoria hotel or similar | Meals: B/L/D

Day 5: Mnajdra, Hagar Qim, Hypogeum, Blue Grotto

After breakfast, depart for the south of the island. The megalithic temple complexes of **Mnajdra** and **Hagar Qim** are located atop a hill and made the greatest impression on the prehistorian Gordon Childe.

Afterwards, we shall visit the most complex of the megalithic temples at **Tarxien** which comprises a group of sites, followed by the nearby extraordinary underground burial site of the **Hal Saflieni Hypogeum** dating to the 3rd Millennium BC. Another of the island's UNESCO World Heritage Sites, the Hypogeum is the only one of its kind in the world.

Enjoy lunch on the picturesque seafront at **Marsaxlokk**, Malta's most picturesque traditional fishing village.

Rested and fed, continue to visit the remarkable cave of **Ghar Dalam**, the Cave of Darkness, which has several layers of bones that were trapped in the cave during the Pleistocene period, including dwarf elephant and hippo and giant swan which are on display at the site museum.

Complete our exploration of the south with a boat trip to the **Blue Grotto**, facing the little deserted islet of Filfla. The location of this fascinating natural grotto combines with sunlight and the surrounding chain of caves to reflect the phosphorescent colours of the submerged flora and the deep dark shade of blue of the sea.

Return to our hotel, where the evening is at leisure to pick your own restaurant for dinner (dinner not included).

Overnight: AX Victoria or similar | Meals: B/L/-

Day 6: Ta' Hagarat and Ta' Skorba

Travel to the northwest of the island to see the final two of the seven sites which make up the full set of UNESCO World Heritage listed megalithic temples on Malta and Gozo.

The sites of **Ta' Hāgrat** and **Ta' Skorba**, surrounded by fields, are particularly scenic. Dating to the Neolithic period (4th millennium BC), the buildings represent a milestone in humankind's technological evolution and are considered to be among the oldest on the islands. Whilst there are fewer remains here compared to the other temples seen so far, archaeologists have found the remains of ancient dwellings within both sites, and at Ta' Skorba studies on these have shed vital insight into the way these prehistoric ancestors sustained themselves, what they ate, and how they lived their daily life.

After the visit, return to our hotel for free time this afternoon to enjoy the facilities of the hotel or to explore independently. Lunch is not included today so you can enjoy more time to explore.

We can arrange an optional wine-tasting tour at the picturesque and prestigious Meridiana Wine Estate in Ta'Qali Malta's agricultural heart, for those who wish to try some local wines.

Meet this evening for a farewell dinner.

Overnight: *La Badira Hammamet or similar* | **Meals:** *B/-/D*

Day 7: Departure

After breakfast, free time this morning for last explorations and souvenir shopping. Check out at the hotel is at 12:00; meet with your baggage ready for collection by our driver.

Enjoy a final excursion to bid farewell to magnificent Malta; a cruise around the island's famous harbour that drew Carthaginians and Swabians, Hapsburgs and Aragonese, Romans and Crusaders to form the nation of Malta that we see today. We shall split up into small groups and cruise by Dghajsa, the colourful traditional Maltese water taxi which is akin to a Venetian gondola, powered by a boatman using two oars. Enjoy fabulous views of the historic Valetta waterfront, as well as the Fort St Angelo dominating the opposite shore of the harbour at Vittoriosa.

After lunch at a local restaurant, the tour ends. A group transfer to the airport is included to coordinate with our recommended Malta Airlines flight which departs at 16:50 and arrives into London Heathrow at 19:30.

Those not taking this flight are welcome to make their own onward arrangements – we can quote for a private transfer on request.

Overnight: - | **Meals:** *B/L/-*

Private Extensions

For those with more time to explore, we're able to arrange transfers, hotels and private guiding to visit any part of Malta, or simply extend with a relaxing few days at the beach. Please ask our team for more information and a quote.