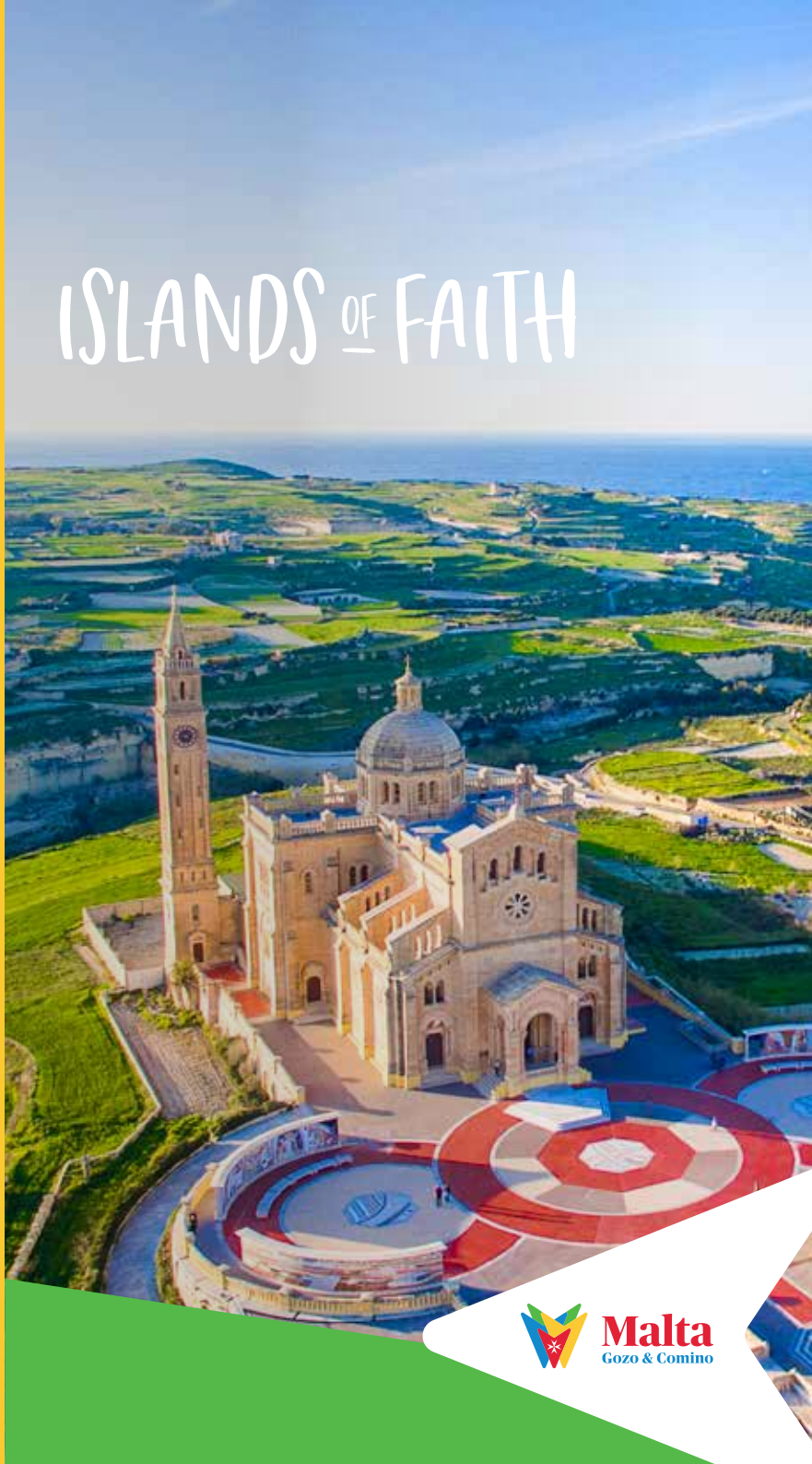




ISLANDS OF FAITH

MALTA & GOZO



Malta
Gozo & Comino

EXPLORE SACRED HISTORY



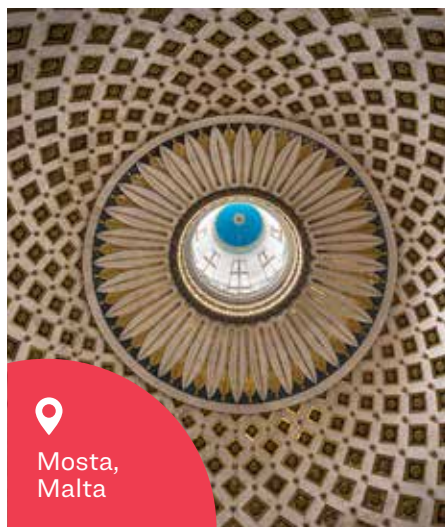
SANCTUARY OF OUR LADY OF MELLIEĦA, MALTA

The Maltese Islands are a wonderful place to explore **sacred** history. Religious riches and a treasure trove of art are a joy to discover, with the chance to experience everything from prodigious cathedrals to small chapels for quiet contemplation.

Malta and Gozo are islands where prehistoric settlers built temples to their fertility goddess, where the apostle Paul survived a **dramatic** shipwreck to introduce Christianity, and where the Knights Hospitallers built the entire capital of Valletta, a **fortified city** of baroque palaces, gardens and churches.

The population of Malta is predominately Catholic, and the islands are dotted with some **365 churches**, one for every day of the year. Some parish churches are imposing structures, physically dominating the village skyline, proudly boasting red or silver painted domes.

Pilgrims walk in the footsteps of St Paul and modern-day Popes. However, it is no surprise that a country with such a chequered history also offers fascinating traces of other cultures and religions such as Anglican, Jewish, Islamic and Orthodox.



Mosta, Malta



Hal Saflieni Hypogeum, Paola, Malta

PREHISTORIC MALTA

The earliest settlers built majestic temples. These enormous decorative neo-lithic edifices, with their cult objects, bear witness to the development of organised religion. The evidence suggests that the Mother Goddess of Fertility reigned supreme. It is not overstating it to say that, in antiquity, Malta was the foremost strong promoter of female power, reverence and mystique.

A must for any visitor is the **Hal Saflieni Hypogeum**, the only prehistoric subterranean burial site in the world. Built more than 5,000 years ago, it predates the Egyptian Pyramids. It is an almost perfectly intact example of prehistoric architecture, giving what **UNESCO** described as “a unique testimony to a civilisation which has disappeared.” It contains several statuettes, most notably that of the sleeping lady, a representation of a woman of abundant form lying on her side on a couch. Also nearby are the **Tarxien Temples** which display exquisite examples of prehistoric art.

Numbers of visitors to the Hypogeum are restricted, so be sure to book ahead to see this World Heritage Site.

The Neolithic temples at **Haġar Qim and Mnajdra**, occupying a striking coastal position, are well preserved, with a tent-like structure that enhances the visitor’s experience while protecting the mighty, yet delicate, temple complex from the elements. Haġar Qim still has parts of its original roof in place. One of its treasures is the Venus of Malta, a figurine thought to represent fertility. A special experience is the spring solstice on 21st March. The temple is suddenly shrouded in light and the standing stone walls take on a magnificent glow as everyone stands in awe.

The **Ġgantija Temples** on Gozo, considered to be one of the most important archaeological sites in the world, are another place of mystery and prehistoric worship. Take in the huge dimensions of the megaliths and wonder at what life was like in 3600 BC.



ST PAUL'S GROTTTO, RABAT, MALTA

ARRIVAL OF CHRISTIANITY

A shipwreck occurred in AD 60 and its consequences reverberate today. It brought the apostle Paul to the island. During his three-month stay he introduced Christianity to the people of Malta and changed the course of history.

Paul is believed to have lived and preached from a cave in Rabat known as **St Paul's Grotto** which is now a place of worship and pilgrimage, including for Pope Saint John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI.



VALLETTA
CHURCH OF ST PAUL'S
SHIPWRECK

You can reach it from the **Collegiate Church of St Paul** in Rabat and the **Wignacourt Museum**, which hosts a wealth of religious art. Nearby are the catacombs dedicated to the martyr **St Agatha**. These catacombs are especially important for their remarkable medieval frescoes, some dating from the 12th century.



THE BEHEADING OF ST JOHN, VALLETTA, MALTA

THE LEGACY OF THE KNIGHTS

The Knights of St John of Jerusalem, a Hospitaller Military Order, settled in Malta in 1530. After repelling Ottoman forces in the Great Siege of 1565, they set out to build a new capital, **Valletta**. The Knights ruled until 1798, leaving a glorious legacy of palaces, churches and art. Valletta, a walled city of breathtaking beauty, was European Culture Capital in 2018 and is a UNESCO World Heritage City.

The city's crowning glory is the spectacular **St John's Co-Cathedral**, described by the famous Scottish writer and historian, Sir Walter Scott, as possessing the "most striking interior I have ever seen". Dating from 1577, it offers baroque art, relics and statues in abundance. Look up at the vaulted ceilings, decorated by the Italian artist **Mattia Preti**, and you will be enthralled. Each of its eight lateral chapels houses its own riches, and even the ornate marble floor of the church, inlaid with the tombstones of the Knights interred below, is bursting with multicoloured detail. The

lavish decoration is indicative of the Knights' status as the wealthiest, most powerful and prominent defenders of Catholicism in the region. It is the perfect home for **Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio's** masterpiece 'The Beheading of St John the Baptist' (1608). This is the largest work of art by Caravaggio and the only one to bear his signature.

It was during the time of the construction of St John's in 1574 that the first Inquisitor was sent to Malta by Pope Gregory XIII.

The Inquisition was meant to iron out the conflicts which often arose between the Order and the Church in Malta. However, its presence on the island brought about a constant power struggle between the Grand Master, the Bishop and the Inquisitor.

The Roman Inquisition lasted throughout the stay of the Knights. The **Inquisitor's Palace** is situated in Birgu and is open to the public.

Here's something you probably didn't know: Two resident Inquisitors went on to become Popes - Alexander VII in 1655 and Innocent XII in 1687.



OTHER VALLETTA GEMS

The Knights Hospitallers, made up of noblemen from all over Europe, were divided into different langues. There were eight in all: Castille et Leon, Italie, Aragon, Angleterre, Baviere, Allemagne, France, Auvergne and Provence. Five survive to this day. Each langue had its own Auberge and Church, some of which are still standing. The **Auberge d'Italie** houses



MUŻA, the Malta National Community Art Museum. Adjacent is the **church of St Catherine of Alexandria**.

The Grand Master of the Order had his own **Palace**. Its armoury and magnificent state rooms contain many of the treasures amassed by the Knights. Today the building in question houses the office of the President of Malta.

The Knights were established formally in Jerusalem and later settled in Acre, Cyprus and Rhodes, eventually coming to Malta in 1530. The Papal Bull issued by Pope Paschal II in 1113 in favour of the Order transformed a community of pious men into an institution within the Church. The Bull can be found at the nearby **National Library**, where the archives of the Order are stored.



THE ARMOURY
VALLETTA, MALTA



Ta' Liesse Church
Valletta, Malta

PLACES OF WORSHIP APLENTY

Valletta has no fewer than **nineteen churches** within its walls. You may find your own special place of prayer. A visit to the **church of St Paul's Shipwreck**, or the **Basilica of St Dominic** is worthwhile if you wish to admire wonderful examples of baroque art and architecture.

The 42-metre-high oval dome of the **Basilica of Our Lady of Mount Carmel** dominates the Valletta skyline. The original church dates from **1570** and was rebuilt after suffering severe damage in the Second World War. It contains a painting of Our Lady of Mount Carmel dating from the early 17th century.

Close by is **St Paul's Anglican Pro-Cathedral**, offering its own contribution to the horizon with a 60-metre spire. The Cathedral was commissioned by Queen Adelaide during a visit to Malta in the 19th century when she discovered there was no place of Anglican worship on the island. The Queen laid the foundation stone in March 1839 and her banner hangs above the choir stalls.



St Paul's Anglican
Pro Cathedral,
Valletta, Malta

MDINA SIGHTS



St Paul's Cathedral, Mdina, Malta

A visit to **Mdina** is like stepping into history. The narrow streets and squares of this magnificent walled city offer Medieval and baroque architecture and it is a place of beauty and solitude, earning its moniker: the **Silent City**.

Its 17th century Cathedral, **St Paul's**, has a striking stone exterior while its interior impresses with grand Corinthian columns and a magnificent dome beautifully decorated by celebrated artists such as **Mattia Preti**. The original cathedral, dating back to the 13th century, was almost completely destroyed in the earthquake of 1693. It was redesigned and rebuilt soon after, with the cupola designed by the Maltese architect **Lorenzo Gafa** in 1701.

Nearby is the **Carmelite Priory**, which is open to the public. Carmelite friars share their lifestyle with visitors. There is a museum too.

AROUND MALTA

Wherever you go in Malta there are places of worship to explore and marvel at.

The **Annunciation Chapel at Hal Millieri**, near Żurrieq, and the **Chapel of Santa Marija ta' Bir Miftuh**, close to the airport, are both medieval, with outstanding frescos.

The **Mosta Dome** is impressive with a massive rotunda, the third largest in the Christian world. During the Second World War a bomb fell through the dome without exploding. A replica of the bomb is on display inside the church.

The original chapel of **St Lawrence** in Birgu served as the first Conventual Church of the Order upon its establishment in Malta between 1530 and 1571. The present baroque church is today Birgu's Collegiate Church.



ST MARY
MAGDALENE CHAPEL
DINGLI, MALTA

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St Gaetano Parish Church in Hamrun is best known for the statue and relic of Saint Ġoġ Preca, the first Maltese Catholic saint.

Devotion to the Holy Mother is evidenced in a number of churches dedicated in her honour. Most notable is the **Sanctuary of Our Lady** in Mellieħa. The church's altarpiece is a **Byzantine** style fresco, possibly dating back to the 12th century.

The feast of St Mary, on 15th August, is celebrated in seven different parishes in Malta and Gozo.
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TAL-MAQLUBA CHAPEL, QRENDI, MALTA

LEGENDS



San Dimitri,
Għarb, Gozo



TAL-ISPERANZA
CHAPEL
MOSTA, MALTA

Some old chapels are associated with legends. A mysterious crater in the ground behind a small chapel dedicated to St Matthew, in Qrendi, has created folklore. It's known as **Tal-Maqluba** (literally translated as “turned upside down”). The story tells how the local population had turned away from God, and how the sinkhole was created overnight during a terrifying storm, when angels ripped the village from its roots and dumped it out at sea. Thus, the island of Filfla came to be.

The legend of **San Dimitri** in Gozo speaks of a woman who prayed before the saint's painting for the return of her son, taken away by Barbary corsairs. St Demetrius heard her supplication. She saw him

moving in the painting, from which he rode out, galloping across the waves, in pursuit of the pirates. He soon returned holding the boy in his arms. Then he re-entered the picture frame, but the horse's hoof mark remained imprinted in the rock.

In a raid by pirates at **Wied tal-iSperanza** (Valley of Hope) in Mosta, a young woman hid in a cave and prayed to the Virgin Mary for protection, saving her from being kidnapped. A church was built in the exact place where she had found shelter.



CITADEL CATHEDRAL

The Cathedral of the **Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary**, within Gozo's Citadel, is a baroque treasure from the early 18th century. Money was short at the time of construction and would not run to a dome. The Sicilian painter **Antonio Manuele** came to the rescue by painting a trompe l'œil, creating the illusion of one.

THE BASILICA OF SAINT GEORGE

The current church was built in the 17th century, but its history is much longer. The parish originated in Byzantine times. The Basilica is covered entirely with marble and gold stucco, with the spiral columns of the impressive main altar inspired by St Peter's at the Vatican.

The religious feast of **St George** in summer draws a large congregation, including many Gozitan emigrants from abroad who come home to enjoy the feast with their relatives.



There is a long history of rivalry between two parishes in Gozo. To this day the two church communities promote their love of opera through two opera houses, **Astra** and **Aurora**, managed by San Ġorġ and by the Citadel Cathedral respectively. Each puts on a fully-fledged opera annually, usually in October, which is a remarkable achievement for an island with a population of only 30,000. Astra and Aurora are also the headquarters of the two band clubs which are central to community life.



THE SHRINE OF TA' PINU




The **Basilica of Ta' Pinu** in Gozo is fascinating. It is a place of pilgrimage and prayer, especially for people who are ill.

The story begins in 1883 when a local woman, **Carmela Grima**, heard the voice of the Blessed Virgin in a small chapel. In the following years, acts of grace were manifested. It was believed that prayers said in the chapel saved Gozo from the plague which struck Malta at the time. A decision was taken to build a larger church on the site in honour of the Blessed Virgin. It was consecrated in 1931 and given the status of a Basilica by **Pope Pius XI** the following year. The narrow rooms either side of the altar, leading to the old chapel, are full of ex-voto offerings, from early naive paintings of ships at sea to crutches, children's clothes and photographs, all testament to local belief in the intercession of the **Madonna Ta' Pinu**.



CEMETERIES AND CRYPTS

 Addolorata Cemetery, Paola, Malta



DOMINICAN CRYPT,
RABAT, MALTA

There are several cemeteries worth exploring. The **Santa Maria Addolorata Cemetery** is the largest. Built in the 19th century, in Neo-Gothic style, it boasts ornate gates, elaborate stonework and magnificent gargoyles. It is a place for visitors to contemplate and find inner peace. There are three **Commonwealth Graveyards**. They are of particular interest for visitors from the UK, Australia and New Zealand: Kalkara is known for its stunning stone arch, Pietà is a walled cemetery while Mtarfa nestles in a beautiful location, close to Mdina.



A DOME OF AWE

The **Rotunda Church** in Xewkija is famed for its enormous dome. It is supported by eight large columns covered with stone. The Church is decorated with fine sculpture, marble and modern paintings.

THE CHURCH YEAR

For people of Catholic faith, **Holy Week** is a very special time. Good Friday sees a solemn procession of pageantry and re-enactment in most towns and cities across the islands, with statues depicting episodes from the Passion of Jesus Christ. Churches are packed on **Easter Day** and bells ring out in jubilation. The Three Cities of Birgu, Bormla and L-Isla are renowned for their public joyous Easter processions, where men run with the statue of the Risen Christ along the streets filled with the faithful and curious onlookers.

In the summer, churches across the land celebrate their patron saints with **local festas** which bring the people out into the streets for processions and celebrations which can last for days. The festa is a major event in the calendar of any Maltese community. It is a mix of sacred and profane with street decorations, band marches and fireworks. Catherine wheels are

mounted on large poles in the street while other rockets light up the sky in large scale displays. The whole occasion is very colourful and evokes the essence of summer in the Mediterranean.



Christmas is a special time as the Maltese dress the windows of their homes with cribs to celebrate the birth of Jesus. Just walking around streets after dark is a delight, seeing the lights flicker from houses and shops festooned in decorations.

JEWISH HERITAGE

The Jewish community in Malta is small, but its history is long.

Jewish roots date back to the 4th Century during the Roman period, as evidenced by **Jewish Catacombs** with drawings depicting the Menorah.

Walk through the narrow winding streets of the walled city of Mdina and spot signs for the “Jewish Silk Market,” testimony to the time when the Jewish community was numerous.

The smallest of the three islands, Comino, is where the Jewish mystic **Abraham Abulafia** lived from 1285 until his death in about 1291. He was a Kabbalist from Spain with a dream of unifying Judaism with Christianity and Islam. A journey he took to Rome to try to convert Pope Nicholas III didn't go well; the Pope ordered he be burnt at the stake. The Pope's sudden death saved his life, and he spent his final years on Comino where he compiled his last and perhaps most intelligible work, the meditation manual “**Words of Beauty**”.



Our Lady of Damascus, Greek Catholic Church Valletta, Malta

GREEK CHURCHES

5,000 Greek Catholic Rhodians came to Malta in **1530** with the Knights Hospitallers and settled in Birgu. By 1569, they had erected the Church of St. Nicholas, commonly known as the **Church of Souls**. Another Greek Church was erected in about 1580 in Valletta. The miraculous icon of Our Lady of Damascus, which was brought from Rhodes, hangs in this sanctuary. This later became the parish of Greek Catholics in Malta. The church was destroyed through enemy action in the Second World War and rebuilt soon after to what we know today.

The Orthodox Greeks must have been tyed in the war, and they now meet for their religious service in Lower Merchants Street, Valletta.

ISLAMIC LEGACY

Malta's **Turkish Military Cemetery** in Marsa has an extravagant Orientalist style. Built in the 1870s, it was designed by the eminent Maltese architect Emanuele Luigi Galizia, and is considered one of his finest works. The project was financed entirely by the Ottoman Sultan, Abdülaziz.

The **Mariam Al-Batool Mosque** in Paola is somewhat newer, having only opened its doors in 1982. Its minaret is a landmark in its own right, being visible over a wide area.



OTTOMAN CEMETERY, MARSALA, MALTA

