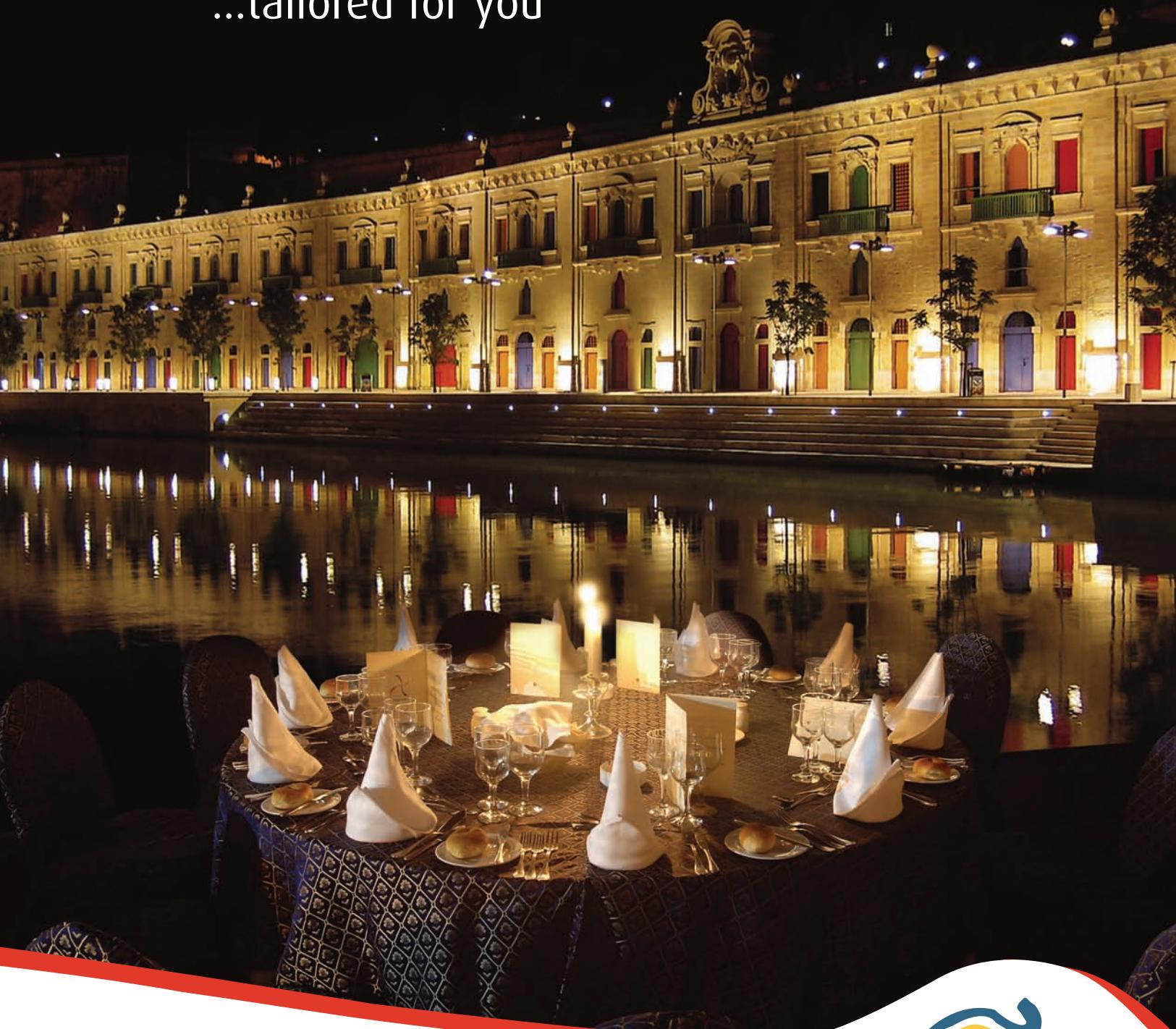


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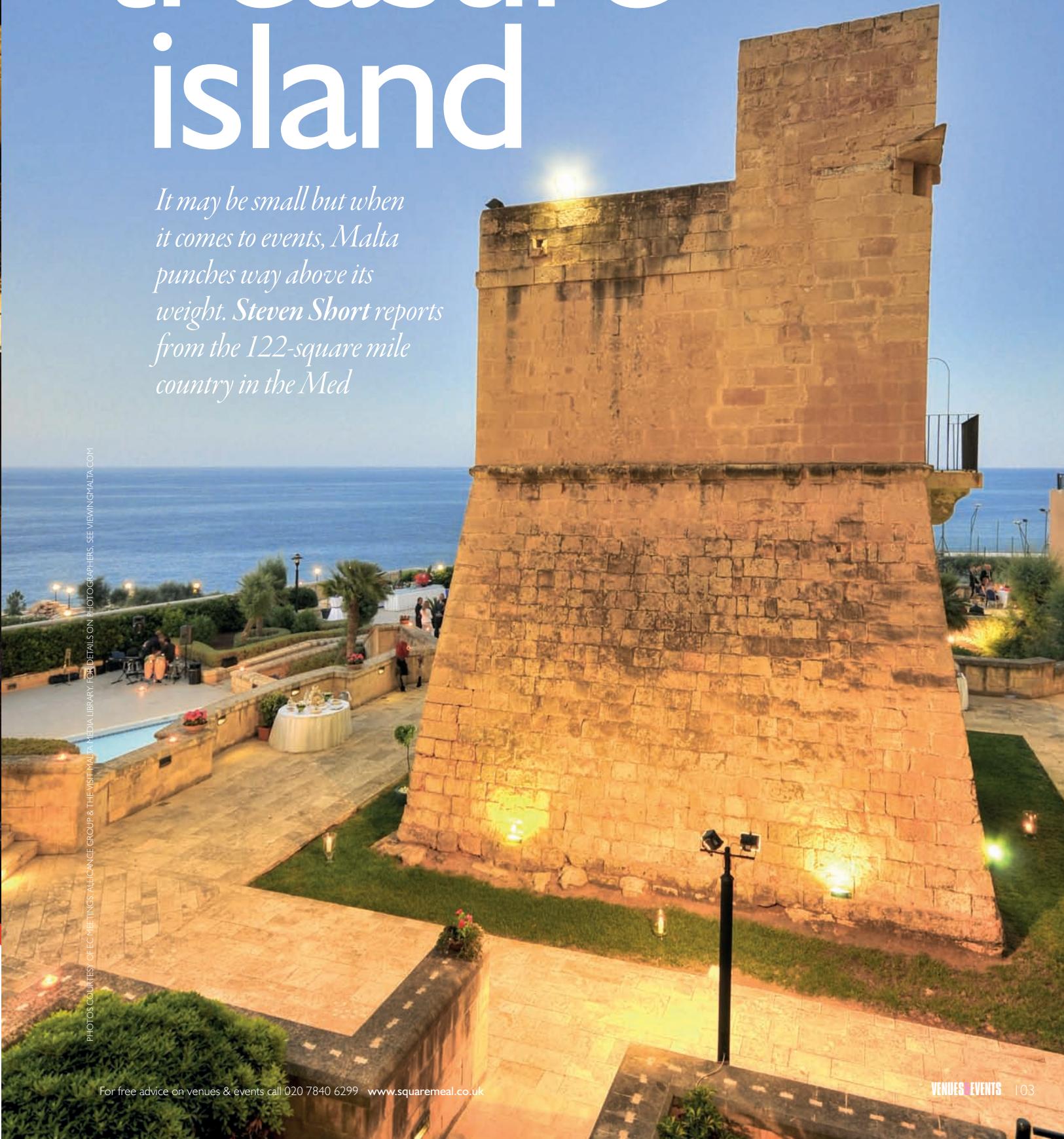
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treasure island

It may be small but when it comes to events, Malta punches way above its weight. Steven Short reports from the 122-square mile country in the Med

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66

'150 YEARS OF BRITISH RULE HAVE, OF COURSE, LEFT THEIR MARK BUT THE WEATHER IS ANYTHING BUT ENGLISH'

1



GETTING THERE

Air Malta (0845 601 1407) flies from both London Heathrow and Gatwick twice daily, from Manchester once daily and from Birmingham twice weekly. EasyJet, Ryan Air and BMI also serve Malta from most major UK airports.



2



thousands (indeed, it's set to host 5,000 delegates from a leading cosmetics company this August) but its compact size means getting around is simple. You won't have to spend more than 30 minutes in a car or minibus to get anywhere on the island.

The 150 years of British rule have, of course, also left their mark. English is still the official language alongside Maltese and is spoken everywhere; UK guests will also appreciate the three-pin plug sockets, left-hand traffic and classic red phone boxes.

WARMER CLIMES

The weather, by contrast, is anything but English. Mild in winter, hot in summer and pleasantly balmy during the shoulder months of April-June and September-November, Malta is also blessed with rain that tends to fall in brief bursts, interspersed with sunshine. Venues and hotels make the most of this climate by offering lots of flexible outside space, from poolside decks to rooftop patios, and water-based teambuilding activities like diving, snorkelling and kayaking. Should the weather take a turn for the worse, indoor options are usually factored in automatically.

Strategically placed midway between Europe and Africa, Malta has been settled since 5,200BC, with Phoenicians, Greeks, Romans and Brits all paying extended visits before independence was declared in 1964. To this day the island remains famed for its warm hospitality, with its firm hold on the tourism industry being particularly strong in the business travel market. Petite but punchy, it serves up a particularly impressive range of venues and accommodation. As one local hotelier puts it: 'We're small but we've got a lot to say for ourselves!'

Not only is Malta easy to reach – with daily direct and connecting flights from all over Europe – it has the kind of infrastructure you would expect from a much larger destination. The island regularly hosts conferences for

1 Ghadira Bay; **2** EC Meetings, cabana night; **3** Dining on the salt pans; **4** MCC Valletta

Unsurprisingly, evening cruises are a popular activity. Many hotels have private jetties and can arrange on-board check-in so groups can bypass reception and head straight from the yacht to their rooms. The island lights up beautifully as darkness falls and, on a clear night, you can even see Sicily twinkling in the distance.

Malta's picturesque capital, Valletta, is a UNESCO World Heritage Site with inviting narrow streets full of low-rise houses with orange, beige and yellow limestone walls and ornate windows and overhanging balconies. It was largely built by St John following the 1565 Ottoman Empire invasion, at which time no one was allowed to construct private outside space, so municipal gardens were created all over town to ensure people had access to fresh air. The best of these are the Upper Barrakka Gardens, which (council licence permitting) can now be used to host cocktail parties against the backdrop of views across the deep natural harbour and 'Three Cities' of Vittoriosa, Cospicua and Senglea.

The city is also home to St John's Co-Cathedral, a deceptively humble >>



1

'PALAZZO PARISIO FEELS LIKE A MORE ORNATE VERSION OF LONDON'S HAM HOUSE'

structure with lavish interiors and an art collection including works by the renowned Italian artist Mattia Preti: a must for culture vultures on their downtime but by no means the only church you'll encounter on Malta. There are almost 400 places of worship on the island – a constant reminder that the Catholic faith is strong here – but don't go expecting a pious mentality. Mediterraneans love a party and hardly a week goes by in summer without a town celebrating its 'Festa' (local feast). In February, it's pretty much carnival time all over the island.

ENTERTAINMENT VALUE

Those looking to venture beyond their hotel will find plenty of restaurants both in Valletta and the resort towns of St Julian's and Paceville, where bars and clubs stay open well into the wee small hours.

Malta also serves up excellent event space. For a glam reception or gala dinner, check out Palazzo Parisio in Naxxar (tel: 00356 21 412461). This sumptuous grand old palace, with its marble staircases, enormous chandeliers, gilding and stucco work, feels like a more ornate version of London's Ham House. Its not-to-be-missed ballroom is a shrine to maximalism, seating 130 diners in stunning surrounds, and two beautifully tended gardens combine to offer stand-up reception space for up to 1,000. No wonder the place is such a staple on Malta's top-end society wedding circuit.

Palazzo Parisio – one of many on the island offering services like these – can also host high tea for up to 120 guests and it's possible to have events inaugurated by the Baroness of the family that owns the palace.

Don't be fooled by the name of the Mediterranean Conference Centre in Valletta (tel: 00356 21 243840), which is actually much more than a meeting venue. Formerly the



2



3



4

1 Palazzo Parisio; **2** Alliance Group teambuilding;

3 Mediterranean Conference Centre;

4 fireworks over Grand Harbour, Valletta

Sacra Infermeria, it was built by the Order of St John in 1574 and remains one of the island's most iconic buildings. Today, the erstwhile hospital (Florence Nightingale sent patients here) is considered by many to be one of the finest venues in the Mediterranean.

Alongside a modern 1,400-capacity auditorium, the MCC serves up two stunning medieval reception spaces. Its 155m long Sacra Infermeria hall – with original brick walls and beamed ceiling – works best for stand-up events, while the subterranean vaulted stone La Valette Hall makes an atmospheric dinner venue. Both hold between 900 and 1,500 guests and organisers can make the most of the historic setting by requesting flaming torches, entertainment from knights in shining armour and waiting staff in period costume.

Another meeting space that shouldn't be overlooked for evening events is the Malta Fairs and Convention Centre (tel: 00356 21 410371). Sure, it will require some dressing, and its location in a disused military field may not be sexy, but the huge permanent marquee

structure can accommodate just about any event you can think of. With a capacity of 22,000, the popular exhibition venue also hosts concerts (Tom Jones and Andrea Bocelli have both played here) and can be adapted to host gala dinners for up to 4,000 guests. >>

DESTINATION: MANAGED

Malta's leading Destination Management Companies are quality assured through a voluntary certification scheme. Each year, they have to reapply for accreditation through the Maltese Tourist Authority, which regularly interviews their clients as part of the process. This annual vetting produces some of the most innovative and reliable DMCs an organiser could hope to work with. For an up-to-date list of accredited companies, contact the Malta Tourist office (tel: 020 8877 6998).

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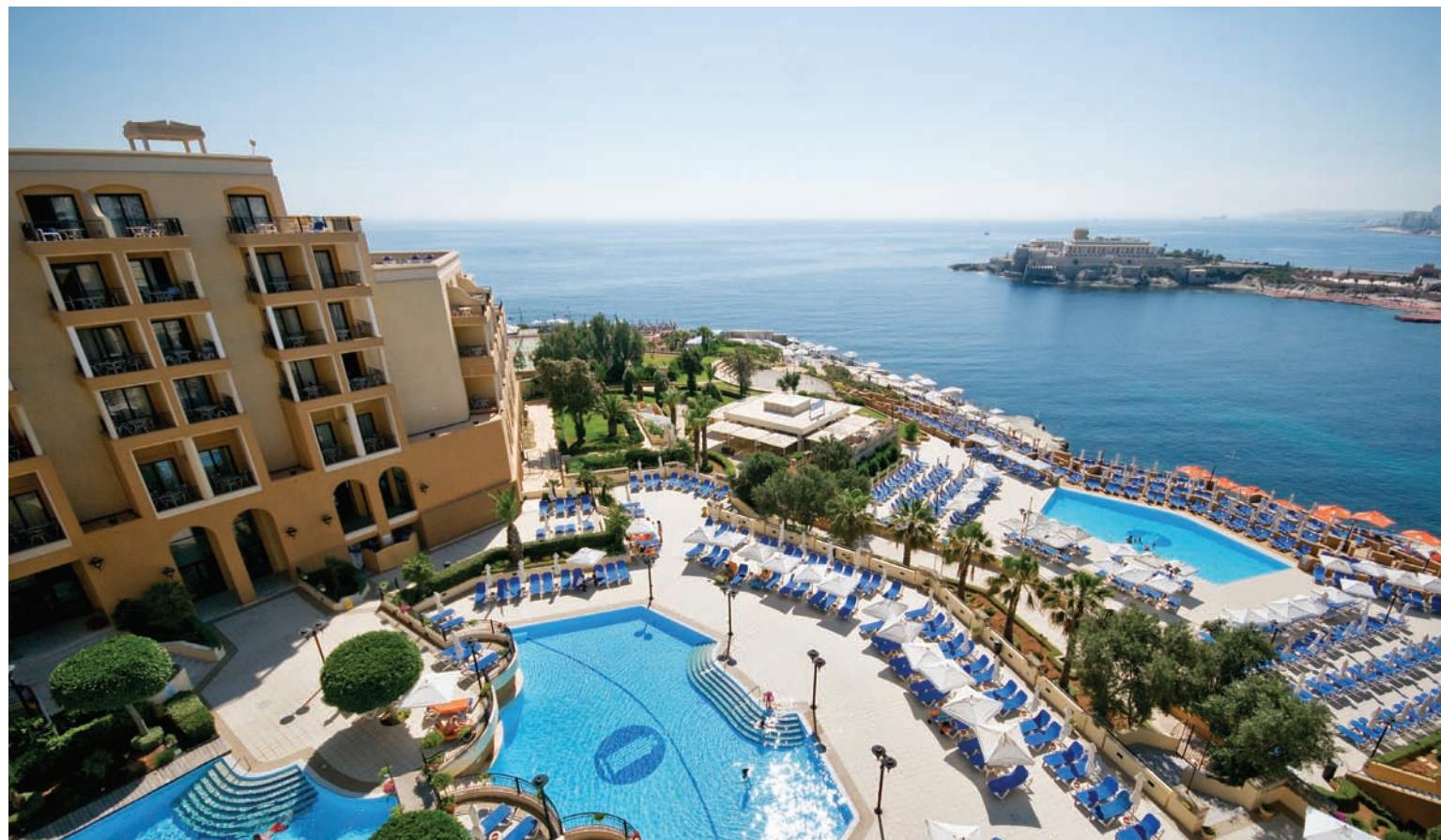
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1

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6

'LOCALS CALL GOZO THE 10-MINUTE ISLAND, BECAUSE IT NEVER TAKES LONGER THAN THAT TO GET ANYWHERE'



3



5



SISTER ACT

A gentle 25-minute ferry ride away (or 10 minutes by luxurious seaplane) is Malta's sister island Gozo, where the pace of life steps down a gear. At just 14km by 8.5km, getting around by hire car couldn't be simpler and, for such a small island, there is plenty of accommodation – 1,700 hotel beds to be exact – as well as high-end meeting facilities and activity options.

The heart of the island is Victoria, a busy market town from which all other villages are easily reached. Locals (Gotizans) call Gozo the 10-minute-island, because it never takes longer than that to get anywhere from the capital.

Quaint villages worth visiting include Għarb, San Lawrenz and Xaghra. Linking them together on a mystery tour, where groups drive around the island looking for clues, ending up at a landmark or venue, is a great way of seeing as much of the place as possible.

On the ferry ride over, you will notice how incredibly blue the Maltese waters are –

nowhere is this more evident than in Dwejra, home to the Azure Window. This naturally occurring arch, set in a rocky outcrop, can provide a scenic backdrop to group diving or canoeing trips (also abseiling), and you can even arrange an alfresco gala dinner nearby, starting with a glass of Champagne as the sun dips towards the horizon.

For a boutique experience, stay at one of Gozo's Houses of Character (tel: 00356 21 556600), a collection of refurbished farmhouses and country getaways. The newest of these is The Hamlet, four farmhouses kitted out to the highest specs, with an in-house chef (if desired), indoor/outdoor pool, gym and treatment suite, plus full video and screening facilities. Properties like these are perfect for up to 30 guests.

1 Għarb church; **2** Lunch at Mgarr ix-Xini; **3** Hamlet pool; **4** Locals chatting in the street; **5** Pool at the Kempinski hotel; **6** Azure Window arch

If you've got a higher head count, a hotel like the Kempinski (see 'Where to Stay' overleaf) offers 30,000sq m of outdoor event space, an ayurvedic spa with group-booking options and other luxury facilities you'd expect from a five-star hotel.

Getting back to nature is easy on Gozo: groups can immerse themselves in agritourism at Ta' Mena (00356 21 555699), where teambuilding packages see delegates pick their own food and turn it into a delicious Mediterranean treat before eating it alfresco, along with tasty Gotizan wine. >>



'THE ROOFTOP INFINITY POOL AT BOUTIQUE HOTEL THE PALACE OFFERS SOME TRULY STUNNING VIEWS'

1

WHERE TO STAY

HILTON MALTA

There's more to the Hilton than its impressive conference facilities (the largest on the island, with capacity to host up to 1,400 people in a standalone facility), not least great restaurants: an award-winning outpost of upmarket Thai Blue Elephant and Bottega del Vino, an authentic Italian trattoria. There are also four pools, a tennis court and two squash courts for active guests, a private jetty from which you can charter your own boat around the island or to Gozo, and stunning sea and marina views.

*Portomaso, St Julian's, tel: 00356 21 383383, squaremeal.co.uk/malt-hilton
BR:404 FR:21 M:1,400 D:550 R:1,400*

LE MERIDIEN ST JULIAN'S HOTEL & SPA

Football teams such as Juventus and the England Under-21 squad love this place, which opened for business back in 2006, for its flexible group-hosting options: 14 meeting rooms, an amphitheatre-like space for workshops and satellite kitchens for private chefs. There's also a spa, where you can book 25-minute treatment slots for groups, a massive gym, squash court, plenty of outside space and three bars and restaurants. The hotel is also just metres away from some of the island's best nightlife and its stunning coastal promenade.

*Balluta Bay, St Julian's, tel: 00356 23 110000, squaremeal.co.uk/malt-meridien
BR:276 FR:14 M:350 D:320 R:650*

THE PALACE

The rooftop infinity pool at boutique hotel The Palace offers some truly stunning views over Silema, as well as entertaining options from barbecues to drinks receptions and gala dinners for up to 150 guests. The rooftop TemptAsian fusion restaurant, which can also be figured into these events, offers the likes of ramen, yakitori and curries, while The Tabloid Restaurant is a casual buffet-style affair with a popular Sunday lunch. The funky rooms and suites are spacious and modern with huge comfy beds, Wi-Fi, and either a balcony or terrace.

*Siema, tel: 00356 21 333444, squaremeal.co.uk/malt-palace
BR:157 FR:6 M:240 D:220 R:200*

KEMPINSKI HOTEL SAN LAWRENZ

This hotel chain's mission statement is to create a collection of individual properties that reflect each destination. In this case, they've gone for a hunting lodge look – grand rooms with high vaulted ceilings, with 122 rooms and suites and 30,000sq m of gardens, including veggie and herb patches, from which a lot of the kitchen produce is taken. The spa has 28 treatment rooms, making pamper packages a serious draw. Popular event options include gala dinners for 220 in the arched ballroom or a barbecue buffet for 120 on the terrace.

*San Lawrenz, Gozo, tel: 00356 22 110000, squaremeal.co.uk/malt-kemp
BR:122 FR:4 M:100 D:220 R:400*

1 Pool at the InterContinental; 2 Lobby at the Westin Dragonara Resort Hotel; 3 A deluxe bedroom at the Excelsior; 4 The view the Westin; 5 The spa at Le Meridien; 6 The Corinthia by night

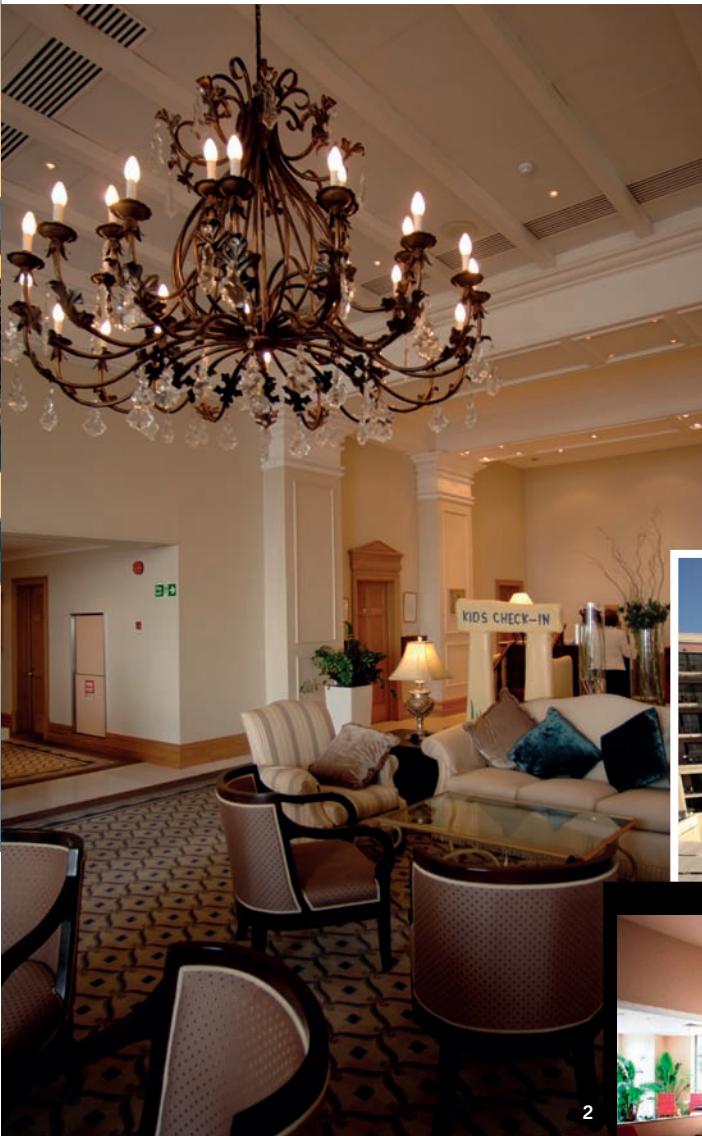
RADISSON BLU RESORT & SPA

This beachside hotel sits on a cliff overlooking the picturesque Sandy Bay, with all rooms either benefitting from views over the Mediterranean Sea or the green countryside. The property has extensive business facilities, including a dedicated, fully equipped centre with plenty of natural daylight. The spa and leisure centre has a huge open glass window that overlooks the bay. Watersports fanatics will love the on site dive centre as well as jetski and banana boat ride options, alongside a private beach, three outdoor pools and one heated indoor pool for the less adventurous. A tennis court and horse riding are also available.

*St Julian's, Malta, tel: 00356 21 374894
BR:252 FR:5 M:700 D:450 R:1,500*

CORINTHIA HOTEL ST GEORGE'S BAY

As well as its own jetty, from which you can arrange an exclusive waterside check-in service and depart on harbour cruises, the Corinthia has a 16th-century watchtower in its grounds, serving as a fantastic backdrop for gala dinners. Rather impressively, the hotel also has 13 eating options, as well as a grand, airy lobby complete with resident ivory tickler. Book an event here



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4x5 FILM



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2002 SOS



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2002 SOS



6

and you'll be assigned your own event assistant – a unique point of contact for all your needs. You'll even be given a credit-charged mobile from which to call them.

St George's Bay, St Julian's, tel: 00356 21 374114, squaremeal.co.uk/malt-corinthia
BR:250 FR:8 M:550 D:400 R:800

INTERCONTINENTAL MALTA

Everything about the InterContinental is huge. Not only is it the biggest hotel on the island with 451 standard rooms and three executive floors with separate check-in, it also has a 47m pool, two squash courts, a large gym with a revolving climb wall and its own stretch of beach. As an events venue its vital statistics are equally impressive: the Eden Lounge, which started life as an ice rink, can accommodate up to 3,500 people for a stand-up reception with the flexibility for pretty much any configuration.

St George's Bay, tel: 00356 21 377600, squaremeal.co.uk/malt-intercon
BR:481 FR:12 M:1,700 D:1,000 R:3,500

WESTIN DRAGONARA RESORT

From the group that introduced 24-hour room service and hotel beds you can buy for

your own home, this Malta giant (occupying 75,000sq m plot) has 340 rooms and proudly announces that 35% of its trade comes from events and conferences – so you know you are in safe hands. The conference centre is accessible through a portico situated at street level. The centre comprises 10 separate function rooms, the largest of which is the Dragonara Point Ballroom and can seat 600 guests theatre style. Many of the syndicate rooms offer access to the North Patio terrace that overlooks the bay and eight outdoor venues, including a sunken garden, are also on offer. There's plenty of R&R, too – the Westin has its own lido and on site dive school.

St Julian's, tel: 00356 21 381000, squaremeal.co.uk/malt-westin
BR:340 FR:10 M:600 D:400 R:1,000

GRAND HOTEL EXCELSIOR

The views from the Excelsior span the old harbour and the City of Valletta, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The food served in the

restaurants is versatile and accessible – a wide choice of breakfast options includes sushi and prosecco. Quirkier dining options are also available. A gala events on the Bastion Terrace, perhaps, sitting atop the 16th century city walls? A grand ballroom, with access to outside space, can accommodate up to 700 people, while the spa offers in-room treatments should your delegates need to de-stress. Recent guests include Lady Gaga and Tom Jones.

Floriana, tel: 00356 21 250520, squaremeal.co.uk/malt-excelsoir
BR:439 FR:10 M:560 D:350 R:1,000

KEY TO ABBREVIATIONS

- BR:** Number of bedrooms
- M:** Maximum meeting capacity
- D:** Maximum dinner capacity
- R:** Maximum reception capacity