



# Wealth of opportunity

Five good reasons to consider Malta's varied and affordable options. *Alyson Cook reports*

## On the beach

The Maltese islands' **mild, sunny Mediterranean weather** means that there are plenty of opportunities for cheap, easily arranged outdoor group or team activities. "The beautiful thing about Malta is that a lot of its assets still come for free," says Fiona Captur, managing director of DMC Unconventional Malta. "In the current economic climate, we find that clients are reverting to the simpler things in life, with sandcastle-building competitions and beach games, including a good old tug-of-war and even the sack race, topped off with a barbecue or picnic."

## One in five stay free

The 104-room **Hilton Malta** in St Julian's has reclassified its room types, opening 93 executive rooms and 17 suites in April last year. It has its own marina for easy transfers, and is currently running the Hilton 'One in five' promotion for new business booked in May for events before December 2009. The deal is applicable only to meetings (where meeting rooms are used), and means that for every five delegates travelling, one stays free, up to a maximum of ten delegates. Prices are from €65 (£56) per delegate.

"This means free accommodation and any other services, such as dinners, lunches or day delegate packages," says Hilton Malta sales manager Mark Muscat de Celis.

## Affordable access

Malta is well served by **budget carriers** Easyjet and Ryanair, both flying from London and regional airports, and this has encouraged scheduled airlines such as British Airways to become more competitive on price. "Currently, we offer a secure business-to-business portal that allows individual delegates to book scheduled services online, with a pre-agreed percentage discount

on the lowest applicable published fares," says Air Malta UK group sales co-ordinator Claudia Vasto. "We can also quote competitive ad hoc group rates on our pan-European network for MICE business, as well as negotiate partnership agreements as the official carrier."

## Down on the farm

Malta is not short on four- and five-star hotel options, both on the main island and sister island Gozo, but for groups on a tight budget, Captur suggests trying something a bit different. "As a result of budget pressure we have also been looking for some new alternatives and have been pleasantly surprised at what we found," she says. "There are **clusters of farmhouses on Gozo** that are ideal for incentives or training, as well as some delightful three- or four-star properties, and even a retreat house that is run by nuns."

## Number crunching

The island's **large conference venues**, which include the Mediterranean Conference Centre (MCC) and Malta Fairs and Convention Centre, also offer value for money options for groups that are operating on a restricted budget. The 16th-century MCC, which overlooks the historic harbour in Malta's capital Valletta, can host a banquet for more than 1,000 delegates in its main hall, Sacra Infermeria. "A number of good deals are available in 2009, in what is our 30th year as a conference venue," says MCC head of sales and marketing Rosette Micallef.

In contrast, the 7,000m<sup>2</sup> Malta Fairs & Conventions Centre has recently celebrated its second birthday. "We are still in the process of growing and will always negotiate and try to help organisers who have stretched budgets," says Nadette Bugeja, marketing and PR manager at the venue.

**The 104-room Hilton Malta has its own marina for easy transfers**

# 72 hours in... Gozo

Alyson Cook recommends a three-day incentive itinerary on Malta's smaller neighbour

## DAY 1

**09.00** After breakfast overlooking the pools at the 122-room Kempinski San Lawrenz, take a short mini-bus transfer to the capital Victoria. Head to the Citadel cinema to watch a brief multi-visual show, 360°, which gives an overview of the history of Gozo.

**10.15** Take a short walk via the old main gate to Victoria's principal attraction, the citadel. Book a guided tour of the cathedral and/or the various museums, as well as the old prison with its moving, historic graffiti. Admire the view from the upper battlements and the 17th-century fortifications, built to fend off attacks from the Turks.

**12.30** Enjoy a relaxed lunch at family-run Ta' Rikardu, hidden in Victoria's tiny alleyways,

and sample Gozitan cuisine from the owner's farm and vineyards.

**14.30** Take a brief bus drive to Xaghra to soak up the atmosphere while wandering around the Ggantija ('giantess') temples – possibly the oldest free-standing megalithic structures in the world.

**15.30** Explore nearby Ta' Kola Windmill and Ninu's Cave before making the brief journey to the north-east coast to see the legendary cave of Calypso, perched on the cliff edge on the outskirts of Xaghra.

**18.00** Return to the hotel for a relaxing treatment at the hotel's spa before dinner.



Photo opportunity: Victoria's impressive old town

**20.00** Dine at upmarket restaurant Ta' Frenc, a former 17th-century farmhouse, where dishes made with home-grown produce can be served in private function rooms or outside on the terrace. Enjoy a candlelit banquet for up to 32 delegates in the wine cellar.

## DAY 2

**9.00** After breakfast at the hotel, head for the west coast and the foot of the cliffs at Dwejra to admire the yellow limestone rock formations.

**11.30** Take a boat trip on the Inland Sea lagoon. Set off from the small lake carved out of the cliffs, sailing through a narrow tunnel and making for the dramatic, arched rock known as Azure Window. Delegates can snorkel or dive from the boat to see the island's marine life.

**13.00** Return to land for a picnic lunch, which includes the local snack *pastizza*, then take the bus to a Gozitan farm, part of an island-wide eco-tourism initiative.

**15.00** Experience the daily rituals of an authentic local farm, milking sheep or goats and taking part in the cheese-making process for the Gozitan culinary staple, *għejniet*. As it's a hands-on, back-to-basics experience, groups could also feed livestock, collect eggs or harvest fruit and vegetables.

**17.00** En route back to the hotel, call in at the massive Magro Brothers tomato factory at Savina. Its shop offers an excellent selection of premium produce, some of which is stocked in Harrods, and which makes excellent souvenirs and gifts. It also has live demonstrations of Gozitan crafts, such as lace making and pottery.

**20.00** After some rest and relaxation at the hotel, meet for a lively gala dinner in the style of one of the many annual local festas – feasts for patron saints – in the hotel's Il-Kappella banqueting room, which resembles a medieval chapel.



Crystal clear: diving options

## DAY 3

**10.00** Check out of the hotel and board the bus for the attractive fishing village of Xlendi. Watch the colourful boats offload the catch of the day, or take the last opportunity to sit and enjoy the Gozitan sunshine and relaxed lifestyle.

**12.30** Enjoy lunch at Zafiro restaurant, either outside or inside, at the family-run San Andrea Hotel, which is in a great location overlooking the bay.

**14.30** Board the bus to move east to Gozo's main harbour at Mgarr. Take a short walk to the ramparts of Fort Chambray for a final view of the coast and the tiny sister island of Comino, before catching the ferry for the 25-minute crossing to Malta for the flight home.



## DIRECTORY MALTA

### Visit Malta

**Contact** Marie Anne Barthet Brown, 020 8877 6993

**Email** marieanne.barthetbrown@visitmalta.com

**Web** www.visitmalta.com





# Island cuisine

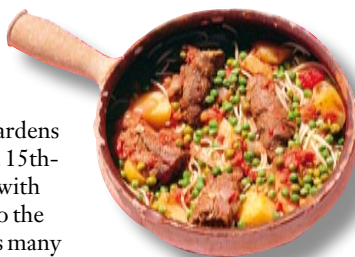
Menu ideas that will compliment the island's premier venues for hosting corporate events



**Former Malta Chef of the Year Oliver Grech is a specialist in Mediterranean fusion cuisine. He is celebrated for his original dishes, using a variety of ingredients from various Asian regions and combining them with a contemporary twist on Maltese dishes. He runs a catering company in Malta for private functions and weddings. Among previous positions, he was head chef at the casino and sous-chef at the Hilton. C&I/T asks Grech to share some of his favourite venues and the menus he would match them with.**

## Olive Gardens, Rabat, Malta

The perfect venue for large parties is the Olive Gardens in Rabat, outside the walls of historic Mdina. It's a 15th-century farmhouse and the gardens are fabulous, with facilities that include indoor and outdoor pools, so the ambience is always great. I have done events for as many as 500 seated guests, as well as theme nights. It's secluded and very atmospheric because of its age and setting. A menu including our national dish of rabbit cooked in herbs with fresh vegetables would work well here.



**Fresh local produce in picturesque locations will appeal to everyone**

## Saluting Battery, Valletta, Malta

This venue is located at the Upper Barrakka Gardens, with magnificent views of the Grand Harbour and the creeks and dockyards of Vittoriosa and Senglea. I have catered for seated functions and corporate receptions here, and they have all been very successful because the location encapsulates the culture, history and tradition of the island. The menu for a reception here would depend on the season and requirements of the client, but with any of my dishes I try to incorporate local wine, which is of a very good standard and sadly generally underrated elsewhere.

## Aboard a yacht

Last September, when the weather was still warm, sunny and calm here, I held a corporate event aboard a ship sailing from the Maltese capital Valletta to the barely inhabited, tiny island of Comino. It was the perfect setting for an *al fresco* meal on board, sampling all the local delights of Maltese gastronomy, such as our celebrated goat's cheese *gbejniet* served with freshly baked *bruschetta*, sun-dried tomatoes and bottles of the home-grown wine. ■

## VOX POPS: A TASTE OF MALTA

**Malta Tourism Authority held its Taste of Malta event in London on 26 March. It showcased the destination's DMCs, properties and venues, among other suppliers, to some 190 UK-based C&I buyers. Four of the guests give their views on the networking night itself and the Mediterranean destination's appeal**

**Martina Aberle**, *account director, Conference Line*

The event was very well organised. There was a good mix of hotels and DMCs, and a whole range of suppliers, including Air Malta.

**Gerry Dawson**, *business development director, Intelligent Sport*  
Malta is a great destination. They are a

very helpful people, nothing is too much trouble and the hotel rates are competitive. A Taste of Malta has been great. I like the style of it – you can get a feel for the hotels and follow up with them later.

**Andrew Hinton**, *operations manager, Euromoney Training EMEA*  
I run training events for

the company and always look for four- or five-star properties. I have not been to Malta yet but from what I have seen at this Taste of Malta event, I am definitely going to consider it as a destination.

Our delegates come from throughout the world, and Malta is in a convenient location with excellent access.

**Rachelle Jailer Valladares**, *director of training and events, Helms Briscoe*  
I have managed to meet properties that I have never before encountered at A Taste of Malta – the event is great. Malta is such an amazing destination and I always find new venues for events; they have every flavour under the sun.