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# SEA, SAND AND FILM STARS

A film buff's guide to holidaying in Malta.

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The American epic war film *Troy* (2004) was shot in Malta

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With its amazing architecture, breathtaking scenery,

stunning beaches and historic sites, Malta has for centuries captivated the imagination of artists, writers and other creative souls. It was here that Caravaggio fled from justice in 1607 and was later commissioned to work for the Oratory of St John's Co-Cathedral in Valletta. His *Beheading of St. John the Baptist*, still on display at the cathedral today, was once described as "the" painting of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. More recently, at the end of the 1960s, British novelist Anthony Burgess spent some time in the small village of Lija, writing his masterly novel *Earthly Powers*.

During even more recent times, Malta has become a prime magnet for Hollywood filmmakers who take advantage of the country's favourable tax rates and tempting financial incentives. They can receive up to 27% in cash rebates to create the "stuff dreams are made of," a Shakespearean quote mentioned by the legendary Humphrey Bogart in the iconic film *The Maltese Falcon*.

"The film industry in Malta goes back to 1925," explains Josephine Vassallo Parnis from the Malta Film Commission, "when the first film *Sons of the Red Sea* was partially filmed in the area of Ghajn Tuffieha. In 2000, however, following the simultaneous productions of *Gladiator* and *U-571*, the Malta Film Commission was set up and in 2005 we were able to

introduce financial incentives that were instrumental in attracting more film productions to our country."

Today, the list of blockbusters filmed in Malta over the decades is long and impressive: three James Bond films (*The Spy Who Loved me*, *For Your Eyes Only* and *Casino Royale*), *World War Z* and *Troy*, *Midnight Express*, *The Da Vinci Code*, *Gladiator*, *U-571*, *The Count of Monte Cristo*, *Cutthroat Island*, *Munich*, *Agora*, *Marco Polo*, *By the Sea* (due to be released this year, starring Angelina Jolie and Brad Pitt) and the multi-awarded global phenomenon *Game of Thrones*, to name but a few.

Strategically located between Sicily and North Africa, Malta has been dubbed the Mediterranean's mini Hollywood by *The Times*. With its impressive coralline limestone archipelago, more than 3,000 hours of sunshine per year, 7,000 years of intriguing history and three UNESCO World Heritage Sites, it is not hard to see why. Filmmakers from all over the world have fallen in love with these islands, which cover only 316 square kilometres and whose versatile landscapes have been used to represent Iraq, Kuwait, Egypt, Israel, Turkey, Palestine and Italy, to name but a handful of other countries.

"Malta has been described as one big open-air museum but it is also an open-air film set," says Paul Bugeja, the CEO of the Malta Tourism Authority. "Most of the film locations are not artificially constructed studio sets, but real places and fully accessible by all."



## FAVOURITE HOT SPOTS

Take a tour of the Island of Malta's scenic natural landmarks and architectural treasures to find out what the camera loves so much about them.

### Valletta

A UNESCO World Heritage Site, the island's Baroque capital, Valletta, is steeped in history, but with a strong cosmopolitan vibe. Here you can stroll along the waterfront and enjoy views of the Grand Harbour or relax at the Upper Barrakka Gardens, once the retreat of the Knights of Malta, or climb to the highest point of the Valletta City Walls.

St. John's Co-Cathedral, a Baroque masterpiece dating back to the 16<sup>th</sup> century, is known for its ornate frescoes by Caravaggio, while the Grandmaster's Palace is home to the president's office and the old houses of Parliament. Take a moment to catch your breath from this sensory overload of art and culture (Valletta will be an official European Capital of Culture in 2018) and you may recognise some of these spots as backdrop locations for *Captain Phillips*, *World War Z*, *Alexander, The Saint*, *Midnight Express* and *Malta Story*, among other films.

For another cinematic experience, visit the Lascaris War Rooms, used in the 1953 British war film *Malta Story*. Here, in deep tunnels and chambers several metres below the Upper Barrakka Gardens, you will find the faithfully restored secret bunker from where the defence of Malta and later the Allied invasion of Sicily in 1943 were managed.



Valletta coastline



Door knocker



Religious symbol



Gate décor



Historical balconies



Window shutters



Coastline of Valletta in the evening



**Vittoriosa** (also known in Maltese as Il-Birgu)

Vittoriosa is known as one of the Three Cities that face Valletta, together with Cospicua and Senglea. Its long, straight waterfront stretch named Xatt Ir Risq has been used as a backdrop for numerous films, including *The Count of Monte Cristo*, *Swept Away* (starring Madonna) and the exciting chase sequence of *Cutthroat Island*. The 2006 blockbuster *The Da Vinci Code* also used Vittoriosa as one of its Malta locations. Here you can visit Hagar Qim, a prehistoric megalithic temple complex dating back to 3,600 BC, as well as St. Lawrence's Church and the Inquisitor's Palace. To enjoy an iconic view of Vittoriosa from the water, jump into a *dghajsa* while you are still in Valletta, less than 8 kilometres away. Pronounced "daysa", this is a traditional Maltese fishing boat similar to a gondola.



The traditional Maltese fishing boat is a cousin to the Venetian gondola



Historic Vittoriosa waterfront



Mdina stands out with a spellbinding mix of medieval and Baroque architecture

## Mdina

Once the capital of Malta, the tiny walled town of Mdina is also known as the Silent City. With fewer than 400 inhabitants and very few cars, it seems to take its silent status quite seriously. The white town looks like a layered cake from a distance, but a closer look reveals a spellbinding mix of medieval and Baroque architecture. Winding cobbled streets offer mesmerizing views, thanks to the town's strategic position on the highest point in the centre of the island.

Among the most iconic buildings are the 18<sup>th</sup>-century Vilhena Palace, St. Paul's Cathedral, the Carmelite Priory, the Palazzo de Piro and the Mdina Dungeons. Parts of *Cutthroat Island*, *Gladiator* and *The Count of Monte Cristo* were filmed there. For an unforgettable experience, go on a carriage ride in a traditional *karrozzin*. The scenic route departs from the city's gate, which *Game of Thrones* fans will immediately recognise as the backdrop for King's Landing in the TV show's first series.



Religious symbol



A theatre stands hidden behind these walls





Stunning Ramla Bay

© Samson Leguesse, Viewingmalta.com

as a backdrop for BBC's *Byron*, while the nearby sandy beach at Ramla Bay was used for Percy Shelley's funeral pyre scene in the same series. The Blue Lagoon in Comino was used for a diving scene in *Swept Away* among other films. And finally, the opulent 19<sup>th</sup>-century stately home in Naxxar has featured in *The Count of Monte Cristo* and the BBC dramas *Byron* and *Daniel Deronda*.

## Mellieha

Mellieha, in the northwest of the island, is particularly popular among families thanks to its long, sandy beaches with shallow water. Here you will find St. Agatha's Tower, also known as the Red Tower, built in the 17<sup>th</sup> century by Grand Master Lascaris of the Knights of Malta and manned during both World Wars. Wildlife lovers can enjoy themselves in the Il-Majjistral Nature and History Park. Mellieha is also where *Troy* was filmed. If you are heading northwest with your family, stop to visit Popeye Village. Built originally as the film set of the 1980 film *Popeye*, starring Robin Williams, it was later turned into a tourist attraction.

## Gozo and more

Other breathtaking locations around the Maltese Islands include an impressive limestone natural arch known as the Azure Window on the island of Gozo. Possibly the island's most iconic landmark, it appeared in the American mini-series *The Odyssey* as well as in *Game of Thrones*. Gozo's medieval hilltop Cittadella served



Sanctuary of Our Lady of Mellieha

© Mario Galea, Viewingmalta.com



Azure Window on the island of Gozo

© Viewingmalta.com



The design of the Palazzo Parisio in Naxxar is a fusion between Maltese and Italian culture

© Palazzo Parisio, Viewingmalta.com

## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Situated right in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea, the Maltese Islands have been coveted by many a seafaring people throughout the centuries. The Phoenicians, the Carthaginians, the Romans, the Arabs and the Normans were the first to put their cultural stamp

on the islands, as can be witnessed today in the local architecture and exotic Maltese language. From 1530 and for nearly three centuries, the islands were ruled by the Order of Knights of Saint John, also known as the Knights of Malta. Their home rule came to an end in 1798, when the island was conquered by Napoleon. After Napoleon, Malta became

a British crown colony for 160 years. During World War II, Malta was heavily bombed, allegedly to an even greater extent than London during the Blitz. Such was the strength and the courage of the Maltese people that in 1942, King George VI awarded Malta with the George Cross for bravery. In 1964, Malta gained its independence from the United Kingdom.



## EAT LOCAL

Invasions by different civilisations over thousands of years have resulted in a spellbinding mosaic of cultures that has heavily influenced the local cuisine. When dining out, make sure that the following are not missing from your table.

### Hobza

Available in bakeries, grocery stores and restaurants, this is Malta's traditional baked bread. As the locals will tell you, no dish can be truly enjoyed without a hearty loaf of hobza. For a true Maltese bread experience head (or follow your nose) to Nenu Debono's *The Artisan Baker*, a restaurant and bakery in Valletta that still uses a wood-fired oven ([nenuthebaker.com](http://nenuthebaker.com)). Here you can also try the traditional *ftira* bread topped with delicious local ingredients.



### Pastizzi

Sold by street vendors, this is the ultimate savoury snack, made from filo or puff pastry with a ricotta or mushy pea filling.



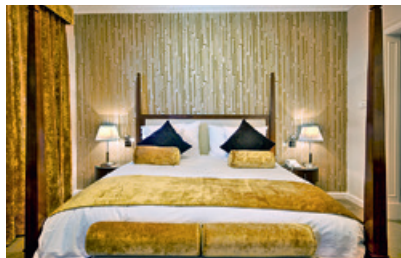
### Bragioli or Maltese beef olives

A tip from the top; there are no olives in this popular dish. Bragioli contains slices of beef stuffed with minced veal, herbs and flavourings braised in a tomato or wine sauce.



### Maltese *fenek* or rabbit stew

Said to be Malta's national dish, it dates back to the era of the Knights of Malta.



## WHERE TO STAY

True film lovers will want to stay at the *Phoenicia Hotel* (rooms start at 75 euros per person; [phoeniciamalta.com](http://phoeniciamalta.com)), the first luxury hotel to open in Malta back in 1947. A personal favourite among Hollywood celebrities, the *Phoenicia* hosted its first A-listers in 1952, when Alec Guinness and Jack Hawkins filmed *Malta Story*. Since then, hundreds of illustrious guests have been added to the hotel's logs.

"Over the years, we have hosted Charlton Heston, Joan Collins, Isabella Rossellini, Geena Davis, Jeff Bridges, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Roberto Benigni, Pierce Brosnan, Gérard Depardieu, Ridley Scott, Joaquin Phoenix and Rachel Weisz, to name just a few," the *Phoenicia Hotel's* general manager Charles Azzopardi explains proudly. "Brad Pitt also visited the hotel while filming *Troy*," he adds.