

# Malta doing well

The outlook for Malta's language schools is largely positive, despite the challenges in the international travel industry in recent years. As BETHAN NORRIS reports, student markets for Malta are diversifying, and schools are encouraging this trend.

Language schools in Malta reported another good year in 2002, with overall student numbers reaching 57,630, up by 10 per cent on 2001, according to the Malta Tourism Authority. Malta's success is even more impressive when compared to other English-speaking countries around the world, which have seen a slowdown in numbers.

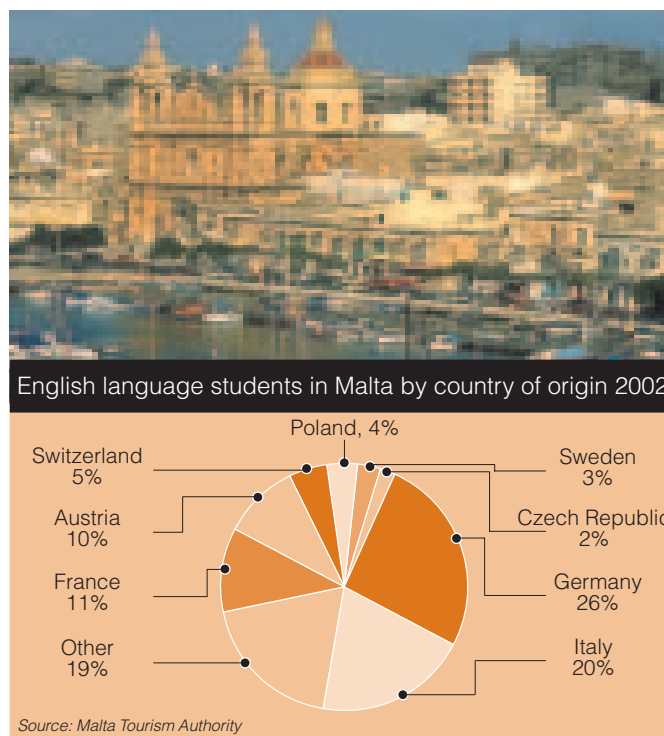
Many schools in Malta are also optimistic about the 2003 summer season, although the challenges of Sars and the conflict in Iraq mean that some schools are reporting slowing enrolments.

"Bookings for this year are down by six percentage points when compared to [the same time - July] last year," reports John Dimech from the Institute of English Language Studies in Sliema. "Following the Iraqi war and Sars, we experienced a drop, [and], although bookings have stepped up recently, it seems rather difficult to catch the momentum we had last summer."

Other schools in Malta, however, point to more promising trends for the 2003 summer season. "The number of students coming to learn English at Clubclass has shown a marked increase over the same period last year – approximately a 35 per cent increase," says Joe Aquilina from Clubclass Language School in St Andrews.

Corinne Xuereb, from Academy Business Language Connection on the island of Gozo, adds that the experience at their small school is that "every market has increased by 50 per cent, especially the French, Italian and Spanish markets". But she adds, "A marked degree of late bookings is very evident."

Europe continues to be the most important student provider region for Malta (see above), but the recent economic difficulties in



some European countries and increased marketing outside of Europe by Maltese schools are helping to diversify the student base. As Dimech testifies, "Our dominance in the German market has dealt us a blow this year as, in view of the current economic slowdown, Germany is not performing well this summer [down by 21 per cent]."

He continues, "Other markets have fared very well over the past few years and continue to do so, particularly China – up 1,423 per cent – Turkey, the Czech Republic, Japan and Russia."

Aquilina too has seen increasing enrolments from Japan, South Korea and South America, "especially for long stays", although European students continue to represent the majority of students at his school.

Despite many language schools reporting large increases in the number of enrolments from Chinese students, the outbreak of

Sars had a devastating effect on student numbers from this country as the Maltese government stopped issuing visas to students travelling from affected areas in April. Dimech says, "China would have fared even better had it not been for Sars." Overall, Chinese numbers remain small at Maltese schools, according to Malta Tourism Authority figures.

In terms of marketing, schools in Malta are well aware of the importance of diversity in their student base. Louiseanne Mercieca, from English Language Academy in Sliema, says that in the first half of the year "we were targeting Polish, Austrian and Russian [student markets], mainly due to the fact that we welcomed only a low percentage of students from these countries".

Xuereb adds that the biggest challenge next year for her school is to put its name, and the island of Gozo, on the map in Asia and South America.

## Selling points

In May this year, four new schools were licensed to operate by the Department of Education, bringing the total number of English language schools in Malta to 38.

"Retaining our market share has always been our biggest challenge, and with more schools cropping up every year, it is becoming more and more difficult to stay in the lead," testifies John Dimech at the Institute of English Language Studies in Sliema.

The introduction of regulations governing the provision of host family accommodation in Malta last year affected all language schools offering this service and helped enhance the country's international reputation as a destination with an eye on quality standards.

However, the new regulations also mean that good host families are in demand. "The introduction of host family regulations have meant that the bed stock of host families in the traditional Sliema/St Julian's area has gone down," says Dimech, "but the quality has definitely improved, and agents and students are bound to have more faith in this product."

Individual schools are now promoting unique selling points to stay ahead of the competition. For example, schools are introducing new courses or extending seasonal courses to attract more students year-round.

"A new very specific course in English for tourism and the hospitality industry is popular," relates Joe Aquilina from Clubclass Language School in St Andrews, who notes that general English, business English and exam courses are also popular.

At English Language Academy in Sliema, the popularity of business English courses has led to a shift in programme availability. "[We are planning] more intensified marketing and extending the period of availability of the business English group to all year," states Louiseanne Mercieca.