



Malta's magic

Situated in the eastern Mediterranean, between Sicily and Tunisia, the Maltese islands of Malta, Gozo and Comino are blessed with an idyllic climate and fascinating history that draw English language students from around the world. BETHAN NORRIS finds out more.

Malta is a unique destination, which has a definite Mediterranean charm,” asserts Emma McEwen from the European Centre of English Studies in St Julians. “It has untapped potential that visitors really appreciate. Malta has everything from sun and sand to the oldest free-standing man-made structures in the world – even older than Stonehenge and the Egyptian pyramids.”

John Dimech, General Manager at the Institute of English Language Studies in Sliema, agrees that Malta offers a distinct experience to language travellers. “Owing to the island’s unique location, you can swim here almost all year round and the island offers a wide variety of sporting activities on land and at sea,” he says. “Malta’s unique character lies in the interesting mixture of cultural and historical influences undergone by the island in the course of its history.”

The islands’ geographical position, which

is responsible for the year-round mild climate, has also played a part in establishing the roots of Malta’s history and culture. Occupying a strategic position in the Mediterranean, the islands have been subject to numerous occupations and only became fully independent from the English in 1964. The influences of these past occupations inevitably remain and can be seen and heard in the language and culture of the country’s inhabitants. Traces of Italian, Jewish, Arabic, French and Spanish influences can be found throughout the country, while English remains an official language and is spoken by everyone.

With its array of attractions, Malta’s potential for offering interesting extra-curricular and sight-seeing activities for students is huge, says



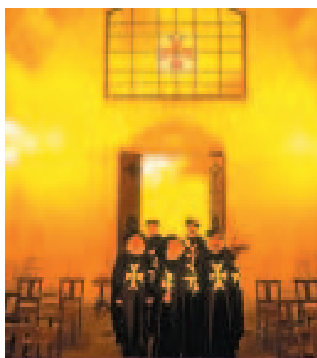
Dimech. “For those interested in the cultural side of our islands, Malta’s rich history is a source of fascination,” he says. “The islands of Malta and Gozo have innumerable monuments,

temples and churches that allow the visitor to appreciate Malta’s past.”

Keith Zammit from the European School of English in St Julians says that their school offers students excursions on a daily basis. “Excursions vary from cultural visits to the silent city of Mдина and the capital Valletta to the world heritage site temples [and] the Hypogeum,” he says.

As the Maltese islands are quite small, getting around to see all the sights is particularly easy. Jeremy Torregiani of am Language Studio in Sliema points out, “The size of the island makes it an ideal location for students to maximise their time here as they manage to get around without too many obstacles.”

Students also enjoy spending time on the water, says McEwen. “Our boat cruises are a hot favourite,” she claims. The trips take in Malta’s coastline and some take students



Knights of St. John
The Knights of St John used Malta as one of their bases to defend Christian Europe against the Ottoman Turks. After the Great Siege in 1565, Grand Master Jean la Vallette built the city of Valletta

Traditional fishing boats called 'Luzzu's – picture taken in Marsaxlokk (main picture)

further afield, such as the catamaran trip to Sicily including a guided tour of Mount Etna, Ragusa and Taormina.

St Julians is one of the bigger towns on Malta and "is known as the best entertainment area", according to Zammit. The town has many cafés, restaurants, bars and clubs as well as an Imax cinema, so there are plenty of opportunities for students to unwind and socialise in the evenings.

Much of the coastline around the St Julians area is rocky, but Zammit explains that a new attraction has been added to the shoreline. "Now there is also a sandy beach which has been transformed and will be the only such beach situated in central Malta," he says, adding, "Sandy beaches are mostly found in the north of the island."

The island of Gozo can be reached by ferry or helicopter from the main island of Malta and it offers a more relaxed pace of life than the mainland. Donald Brincat, Director of Bels language school in Kercam, says, "The island [of Gozo] has a totally different environment to Malta with [fewer]

inhabitants, more countryside and it may be more suitable for the student who prefers working hard and appreciates peace and tranquility."

Brincat adds that boat rides through the caves and lagoons of Gozo and around-the-island boat excursions, as well as fishing trips, windsurfing and paragliding "are the pride and joy of the island".

With little traffic and the principle occupation of the inhabitants being fishing or farming, students staying on Gozo have plenty of opportunities to soak up the is-



Diving off the coast of Malta

Malta is a great destination for experienced divers and novices, as there is visibility of up to 30 metres in Maltese waters. Marine life includes flying fish, octopi, corals and the rare sea perch

land's rustic charm.

"[There are] scenic trekking routes in many places on the island, or just a stroll through the narrow streets of the villages offers exercise and beauty," says Brincat.

Corinne Xuereb, from International House (IH) Malta-Gozo in Gharb,

also on Gozo, says that the location and decor of their school is designed to be a "retreat venue, where one is not reminded of a school environment that an adult student might feel they have outgrown".

She adds, "Gozo is steeped in myth. Thought to be the legendary Calypso's isle

Agent viewpoint



"We have observed an increasing number of students visiting the islands of Malta and Gozo. Since Malta has joined the European Union, the island has become very well known by Germans. Most of the clients like the mixture of friendly well-run schools and the possibility of enjoying the sun and the rich history of Malta and Gozo. The Maltese and Gozitan people are so friendly and open that the clients come often for a second time [to meet] their old friends. During the days,

all activities in the sun and in the sea are possible, eg. diving, swimming and watersports or just relaxing in the sun. During the evenings, our clients go out for a drink or to Malta and Gozo's popular discos. Besides that, most of our clients like the Mediterranean flair of the country. Particularly, the host families integrate the clients in the Maltese and Gozitan way of life so the clients enjoy staying with a family."

Wolfgang Schmeink, Calypso-Sprachreisen, Germany

of Homer's Odyssey, it is peaceful and mystical."

Malta's small size means that mixing with the local people is easy for language students and, according to Xuereb, this is

particularly true on Gozo. "The island is so small it is easy to socialise and mix with the local community," she says. "If students go to the market square for Saturday breakfast or Sunday brunch in the old citadel, there's no turning back, you are one of the locals."

Another way of integrating with local life is by joining in with community celebrations and undertaking volunteer work, as McEwen explains. "Students and visitors are encouraged to join in the summer fiestas

"An Italian student was offered the catch of the day, 'lampuki', for his dinner. He was so interested in the way the fish is caught that he got invited on a fishing trip. The highlight of his trip was eating his catch for breakfast while cruising back to shore."

Corinne Xuereb, IH Malta-Gozo, Gharb

students organise sporting events including football tournaments."

In Sliema, students studying at Inlingua Malta are encouraged to make the most of the local nightlife to meet new people and other students. "In the evenings students like to go to Paceville – a main

where villages and towns celebrate their local saint," she says. "Students can also get involved with volunteer work [such as] at the YMCA. [And] long-term

area for nightclubs and bars," comments Lorinda Theuma at the school. "We like to organise meetings for them so that they can meet other students."

Wherever they stay in Malta, students will be sure of a warm welcome, vouches

Dimech. "The friendly and open nature of the Maltese people will certainly allow students to enjoy their English language course to the fullest." Torregiani adds, "We offer a cultural diversity that mirrors the global village. In Malta we say *il paese e il mondo* [meaning] the village is our world."



Mnajdra megalithic temple

Mnajdra is one of the seven megalithic temples on the islands that have been designated a world heritage site by Unesco. They represent the world's most ancient stone architecture



"Swiss students appreciate Malta as a destination for being easy to access from our country. One can reach Malta on a direct flight within a couple of hours and with no time change. Malta offers a great mixture of Mediterranean lifestyle, professional teachers and caring homestays in an international environment. The quality in price is another important factor for making Malta very popular. Gozo is very popular for Business English [courses] and appreciated for being so

tiny and safe. St Julians, St Pauls Bay and Gozo [are all popular with students]. That is where most of the schools are situated and where most host families live close to. Malta is definitely becoming more popular in Switzerland. Most people know about the fact that in Malta, English is spoken, and with the establishment of a new Malta tourism office [in Switzerland], more people know about the island of Malta."

Claudio Cesarano, Globo-study Sprachreisen, Switzerland



"Malta is a perfect place for combining English language learning and a vacation by the sea. One of the most important advantages for Russian students has been the possibility of getting visas at Malta Airport on arrival. However, we are expecting some decline in bookings for summer 2005 due to the introduction of a more strict visa regime and the necessity to get visas in advance in Moscow."

Grigory Ugarov, Open World Education Group, Russia