

Malta: Always an Ideal Destination

The Mediterranean island nation offers year-round immersive vacation experiences that cater to the interests of any tourist.

By Sally Crail

Located at the heart of the Mediterranean, the Maltese archipelago is increasingly on the radar of global travelers.

According to Malta Tourism Authority (MTA) CEO Carlo Micallef: “We welcomed 3 million tourists in 2023, surpassing our previous record of 2.75 million in 2019 by 9 percent. Notably, we increased our winter tourism numbers by 31 percent.” This rise reflects the fact that the European country is now recognized as an ideal year-round destination.

The archipelago’s three islands—Malta, Gozo and Comino—offer fabulous sandy beaches, calm blue seas and stunning landscapes that can be enjoyed in any month. “Malta’s vibrant beauty surprises many, as do its diverse attractions. There’s something for everyone here, despite it being one of the smallest nations in the Mediterranean,” Micallef added. “For example, the country contains many layers of history dating back 7,000 years to our Neolithic temples, through to the Knights of Saint John who arrived in the 1500s and World War II. Thanks to their rich heritage, our islands have served as backdrops for film and television productions set in various historical eras and countries. Malta was even used as a setting for *Game of Thrones*.”

Numerous civilizations have settled in Malta over the millennia, and it is full of architectural and cultural reminders of their presence. As an illustration, Malta is home to about 360 churches and other religious buildings. “Faith tourism is a significant focus for us. We promote Malta as a pilgrimage destination and highlight attractions in our churches, such as works by Caravaggio and Mattia Preti,” he noted.

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Carlo Micallef, CEO, Malta Tourism Authority

Lovers of the outdoors are equally well catered for, with the islands being well known for diving, yachting, hiking, cycling and adventure sports. “Malta also hosts competitive sporting events, such as triathlons and obstacle races,” Micallef noted. “These are conveniently located, so that participants’ travel partners can enjoy sightseeing, shopping or dining while the events are taking place.”



Carlo Micallef
CEO, Malta Tourism Authority



The historic city of Birgu is located on Valletta's Grand Harbour.

Discovering the country’s unique cuisine should be an unmissable element of any trip to Malta. It fuses Mediterranean, Arab and North African flavors, utilizes locally sourced foods and wines, and can be sampled in a vast range of outlets, including Michelin-starred restaurants.

Beyond leisure tourism, “Malta’s appeal extends to business, conference and incentive travel, with a steady flow of groups throughout the year being drawn to our safe, multicultural and English-speaking environment,” he said.

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Carlo Micallef, CEO, Malta Tourism Authority

MTA is responsible for regulating and developing the nation’s tourism sector, as well as marketing it. “In recent years, our focus has been on sustainable tourism. Our strategy is to promote year-round, low-impact tourism that emphasizes greener practices,” Micallef explained. “For instance, we’ve diversified our marketing efforts to showcase lesser-known aspects of Malta. Encouraging visitors to explore the entire country has helped to avoid overconcentration in specific areas. Another example is that hotels mandated by MTA must now comply with the environmental standards of the Global Sustainable Tourism Council.”

Expanding Malta’s air connectivity with North America is the next priority for the authority. “We’re aiming to double our current U.S. tourist numbers from 60,000 a year to 120,000,” he said.

All flights land at Malta International Airport, which is conveniently located a few miles from the country’s capital, Valletta. The airport already has excellent flight connections with cities across Europe, including Paris, Amsterdam, London, Rome, Milan, Dublin and others that act as efficient transfer hubs for U.S. travelers. MTA is engaged in discussions to bolster those hubs and to establish direct flights with American carriers. It is also looking to attract more U.S. cruise ships to Valletta’s Grand Harbour, one of the Mediterranean’s most popular maritime destinations that welcomed over 900,000 cruise passengers in 2023. Another focus for the authority is getting additional luxury U.S. hotel brands to invest in Malta.

“Our goal is to enhance product and destination experiences. We prioritize quality over quantity,” Micallef said. “Malta doesn’t compete on price but on value, offering a high-quality meaningful vacation experience that allows visitors to fully immerse themselves in Maltese society.”

A Digitally Enabled Economy

Maltese businesses across sectors as diverse as tourism and energy are embracing technology to enhance customer experiences.

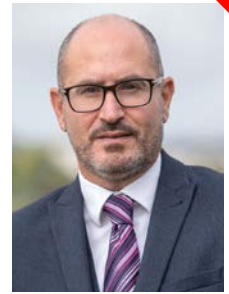
By Sally Crail



Pierre Fenech
CEO, Mediterranean
Conference Centre



Ryan Fava
Executive Chairman
Enemalta



Kenneth Brincat
CEO, Malta Digital
Innovation Authority

Business travel is an expanding part of Malta's tourism sector. Pierre Fenech is CEO of the Mediterranean Conference Centre (MCC), one of the country's most important venues for business-related events. He explained: "Recently improved flight connections now ensure easy access for attendees from around the world. We've seen significant growth in all segments of meetings, incentives, conferences and exhibitions."

MCC is a preferred destination for those activities. Constructed 430 years ago by the Knights of Saint John as a hospital, the state-owned 86,000-square-foot venue occupies an unbeatable site on the coast of Valletta, the country's capital. It contains a wide variety of rooms and has catering capabilities to accommodate anything from small groups to 1,400 guests, with its main auditorium being among the nation's largest theaters.

"We also have three spaces that can host seated events for 900 to 1,200 people, including our flagship, the Grand Harbour Terrace, which offers stunning views of Valletta's harbor," Fenech said. "Top global businesses choose our center for its spectacular historical venue and magnificent interiors, which create a 'wow' effect that impresses attendees from the moment they arrive."

In April, the government completed a 10-year restoration and modernization project on the building that cost \$11.4 billion. "The biggest challenge was that the city of Valletta is a UNESCO World Heritage Site and MCC is a listed building. Every intervention required careful planning and approval to preserve this building for future generations," he said. "My vision is to continue investing and expanding our footprint. We're in talks with the government to restore nearby historic buildings, integrating them into MCC to provide our clients with more options."

While protecting the venue's heritage was a core element of the project, so was incorporating the latest technology. As Fenech pointed out, "In the conference business, digital connectivity is crucial. We've invested heavily to meet demands for powerful connections as the center hosts significant events, including meetings bringing together international heads of state and ministers. We have dual fiber optic cables to guarantee uninterrupted service, while our electrical system includes generation capacity."

Power is a key concern in a nation transitioning to electrification and clean energy. According to Ryan Fava, executive chairman of the country's electricity distribution system operator, Enemalta, "Over the past

year, we faced a 14.1 percent increase in demand, surpassing the typical 3.5 percent annual rise." To supply that demand, Enemalta invested almost \$60 million in infrastructure upgrades. "This year, we'll commission 68 new substations, and we're working on new distribution centers," Fava said. "We're also preparing for a second interconnector with Sicily."

Around 20 percent of Malta's electricity comes from its first interconnector with the Italian island, 10 percent from renewables and most of the rest from plants powered by liquefied natural gas. The government wants renewables to contribute 25 percent by 2030 and is encouraging investments in wind and solar. Enemalta is committed to this target and is embracing technologies such as artificial intelligence to integrate more renewables into its grid. "We're also investing in AI, programming and software to minimize downtime and enhance customer service," he added.

Technology uptake is characteristic of the country's wider economy. In 2018, the government put digitalization at the heart of its economic strategy when it established the Malta Digital Innovation Authority to regulate and promote emerging technologies. MDIA CEO Kenneth Brincat said: "Malta is at the forefront of digital innovation and a thriving digital tech hub, with supportive policies, an agile legislative framework and initiatives to attract companies and talent."

The country was one of the first in Europe to launch an AI strategy and sandboxes for testing AI and blockchain technologies. "To stay ahead, we've amended our law to allow MDIA to support any future technologies and to incentivize innovation. For instance, we provide grants, and our new European Digital Innovation Hub will offer workshop spaces, startup incubators and a high-performance computer," he explained. Brincat sees huge potential for U.S. entities within the nation's digital economy: "Malta's stable political environment, favorable tax regime and skilled workforce make it an attractive destination. Whether you're an investor, entrepreneur or tech enthusiast, Malta will welcome you."



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