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## DIVERSIONS



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### Stuff of Fairytales...

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Malta is a throwback to a long-forgotten era when knights roamed the countryside and romance was for real

Imagine a fairy tale land by the sea where the knights ruled once upon a time. A place of lush open fields and honey-coloured rocks, punctuated by deep blue waters. Many, many palaces and churches that have references to an era full of war, love and faith. And if you thought that such a place exist as a figment of fantasy, then think again.

Now, an Emirates flight from Dubai can take you to Malta — a beautiful Mediterranean island in Europe where narratives of history are etched in its grand stony structures. Touted by its natives as the most European place of all Europe, the Maltese Islands — Malta, Gozo and Comino — are truly the stuff romance and fantasies are made of. The country, where *Troy* and *Gladiator* were shot, literally looks like a scene out of an epic movie.



When I landed in Malta, I felt as if I had travelled back in time. From a world of skyscrapers, big highways and a fast-paced life, I had come to a place full of cosy cottages, meandering roads and centuries-old buildings.

#### Mdina, and the corridors of silence

One of the first things planned on my itinerary was the trip to Mdina, the walled city which was Malta's capital till the mid-16th century. Mdina literally means 'city' in Arabic and was named by Arabs who ruled Malta in the 10th century.

Ironically, once a centre of warfare and retribution is now referred to as 'The Silent City' – the quiet mainly due to the limited number of residents and the constraints on the passage of traffic through the area. But the silence also eerily alludes to the terrifying secrets of the mysterious dungeons and underground passageways of this noiseless city.

As I walked down alleys between tall limestone walls speckled with tiny windows, I mentally pictured historical moments: invading armies, battles and executions in this territory of baroque churches and palaces. I absolutely loved the aerial view of the island, lit up at night time, from atop Mdina's grand ramparts.

#### Valetta, and the lanes of history



Valetta, constructed in the 16th century, is the bustling capital of Malta. It was interesting to note that the Prime Minister's House sported baroque Maltese architecture: a stony edifice and signature green windows. In the previous centuries, the premier's residence used to be the *Auberge* (hostel) of the ruling knights and is famously remembered as the place where Napoleon Bonaparte spent six days after the French army invaded the country in 1798. Only the security cameras perched on the walls of this grand building, so utterly mismatched with its surroundings, is a sole reminder that it is currently the 21st century.

At the Casa Rocca Piccola, a 400-year old ancestral home of Don Pietro La Rocca, one of Malta's knights, I was amazed at the meticulous preservation of antiques. And yes, the guided tour explaining the history behind all the artefacts was provided by none other than the Marquis himself, the descendant of Don Pietro, and now the last remaining Maltese knight.

As I strolled lazily across the streets of Valetta after the tour, I could see the mild waves of the shimmering sea crash into the indented coastline in the far horizon. The scene was beautiful enough to inspire a tale of intense romance.

#### Gozo, a quixotic dreamland

I imagined the ferry which had to take me from Malta to its sister island in Gozo to be a medium-sized boat. But it turned out to be a mini-ship with a full-blown café and washrooms, and the capacity to house dozens of cars. Gozo is a quixotic dreamland, with evenly terraced fields and rolling hills marked by a thick growth of wild flowers and cacti. The houses have names (Aussie, Holy Mary and Angel Eyes were some of the titles I came across), and here people feel secure enough to leave their main doors unlocked. The Azure Arch — a rock formation in the shape of an arch overlooking the blue sea — is a big tourist draw. It was interesting to see the white skeletal remains of sea creatures deeply embedded in the rock.



The Ggantija Temples, a UNESCO World Heritage site boasting the oldest unsupported rocks in the world dating back to 5000 BC, have their own stories to tell. According to local legends, giants had lifted the mammoth-sized rocks to form this awe-inspiring site of worship.

Observing the Ggantija Temples, Gronet de Vassé, a noted Maltese architect of the 19th century, was convinced that Malta was Atlantis — the mythical land in the Atlantic Ocean which mysteriously disappeared. One would not want to dispute his belief. It's easy to confuse Malta for a lost, marvellous land which exists only in fables and myths.

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(Maria went on a press trip hosted by the Consulate-General of Malta in Dubai, and Malta Trade Centre.)

#### Three Minute City

*Kandy: Eye Candy*

Home to some of Sri Lanka's sacred heritage sites, Kandy is famed for its temples such as the Temple of the Tooth as well as the Lankatilaka temple, that displays some impressive mural arts. The Knuckles Mountain range have a number of trails which are ideal for trekking and a treat for nature buffs. A visitor to the heritage city during the months of July or August also gets a rare chance to be a part of the annual festival known as the Esala Perahera, a grand procession where one of the inner caskets used for covering the Tooth Relic is taken out on a royal tusker. The Royal Palace, once the residence of the custodian of the Tooth Relic, is yet another must-visit site.



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In an era where airlines charge for everything from bottled water to biscuits, it makes sense to save costs wherever you can. One commonsense way is avoiding excess baggage and [www.travelite.org](http://www.travelite.org) shows you exactly how. Something of a cult favourite among travelers, the 13-year-old website does a good thing from showing the best in carry-on luggage to palm-sized toiletries, and sheds those extra kilos for a worry-free destination trip.

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**Park is the place**

Families are going back to the basics. Rather than take a two-week vacation to Europe, they're opting for the national park. People continue to visit theme parks — by simply selecting parks closer to home. While for years, park operators have used special offers, promotions and discounts to encourage families to visit at a specific time, the deals may be easier to find this year, especially when it comes to packages that include accommodations.

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