

# Amid sand and sea, sites date to the Stone Age

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historic world," a guide explained as he led the way into the first of three underground levels. "It is a legacy of ancient artistic and architectural achievement." Spiral designs and tinges of red ochre are still faintly visible on the walls of the Hypogeum's dimly lit chambers, which were chiseled by hand, using only stone or bone tools. The tombs were discovered in 1903, and the upper two levels of the burial complex were reopened to the public in July 2000. The famous "sleeping lady" pottery figure recovered from a "donation pit" deep in the Hypogeum is among the priceless prehistoric artifacts displayed at the National Museum of Archaeology in Valletta, the capital.

For years, Malta and its two sister islands, Gozo and Comino (the only inhabited islands of an archipelago), have been a popular vacation destination for Europeans, who flock to the golden sand beaches in Mellieha, Bugibba, and other coastal towns in the hot summer months. However, in recent times, international visitors have been equally attracted by the island's fascinating mix of mysterious medieval towns, ancient Roman catacombs and dungeons, richly endowed Renaissance cathedrals, and centuries-old fishing villages. Even Hollywood has embraced Malta as a setting for a number of thrillers. "Troy" with Brad Pitt, "Gladiator" with Russell Crowe, and "The Count of Monte Cristo" with Jim Caviezel were all filmed at a studio just a stone's throw from Valletta.

Malta is a land steeped in traditions. During Mardi Gras, colorful floats and Carnival characters parade through the stone-paved streets of Valletta. At Easter, parishioners dressed in Roman-era costumes carry life-size religious figures through small towns in solemn processions. Local fishermen still use brightly painted "luzzu," the traditional Maltese fishing boats, to bring in their daily catch, and they spend hours on the dockside mending nets by hand. On Sundays, farmers gather at a weekly outdoor market in the seaside village of Marsaxlokk to peddle fruits and vegetables.

Traveling the rutted, rock-strewn back roads of Malta affords a glimpse into everyday life. An endless maze of stone walls sections off farmland and vineyards, and villagers walk or ride horses along the dusty pathways. Historians surmise the island was once much greener and more heavily treed when the first prehistoric settlers, believed to be farmers and herders from Sicily, arrived here around 5000 BC. Starting around 3600 BC, they built megalithic stone temples and flourished



REUTERS (ABOVE), CLAUDIA R. CAPOS FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE (TOP RIGHT)

Archeologist Reuben Grima in Hal Saflieni Hypogeum, an underground temple in Paola. On Gozo island, a 90-foot rock arch.

for 1,000 years. The temple culture died out suddenly around 2500 BC, leaving little trace except for the 23 massive ruins and carved figurines and pottery shards that have been excavated.

Two of the most spectacular temple ruins are Hagar Qim and Mnajdra on Malta's southern coast. Hagar Qim is encircled by an irregular wall of giant stones, some 12 feet high and weighing 20 tons. A square entryway, constructed of two vertical stones and one horizontal slab, ushers visitors into the temple's inner chambers. Farther on, Mnajdra comprises three temples that open onto a courtyard. The outer wall of hard limestone is etched by the salty sea breezes, and the softer limestone inside is carved with spirals and other decorations. In the nearby village of Wied iz-Zurrieq, a local fisherman will take you for a ride in a small boat along the jagged coastline to the famous Blue Grotto, an immense deep-sea cave with water so clear you can see the bottom.

Malta's crown jewel is undoubtedly the fortified city of Valletta, which was built on a well-protected peninsula by the Knights of the Order of St. John after the Great Siege of 1565 by the Arabs. These crusading "monk knights," who came from the noble families of Europe, were granted possession of the island in 1530 by the Holy Roman Emperor King Charles V of Spain. The eight points of the familiar Maltese cross represent the eight nations



SOURCE: ESRI

DAVID BUTLER/GLOBE STAFF

of this Catholic military order. Valletta was named after the Grand Master Jean Parisot de la Valette.

The city offers more than you can see in a few hours. Arrive early in the morning or late in the afternoon because many stores close for siesta between 1 and 4 p.m. From the elegant Upper Barrakka Gardens 200 feet above the majestic Grand Harbour, you can gaze across at the three historic maritime towns of Vittoriosa, Senglea, and Cospicua. Just off Republic Street, St. John's Co-Cathedral reflects the untold wealth lavished upon it by the order. The cathedral floor is paved with 400 inlaid marble tombstones, and the walls are adorned with Baroque paintings, including Caravaggio's "Beheading of St. John."

A few blocks farther down Republic Street stands the yellow-stone Grand Master's Palace, now the home of the Maltese Parliament. Around back, you can enter the Palace Armoury and stroll through exhibits of antique armor and weaponry. Small coffee shops and cloistered restaurants fill the air with tantalizing aromas. Gift shops entice buyers with souvenir medieval swords and hand-blown Gozo glass. Another way to appreciate Valletta's magnificence is by sea. Daily tour boats leave from Sliema's waterfront and take you on a cruise of Grand Harbour and Marsamxett Harbour.

Other towns around the island are well worth visiting. Horse carriages wait outside the main gate of Mdina to transport visitors

across the stone bridge and through the maze of narrow alleyways built by the Arabs in the ninth century. A 15-minute ride or walk through the "Silent City" leads to Bastian Square for a commanding view of the surrounding countryside. If you dare, descend into the town's Roman dungeons where commoners were imprisoned for even minor infractions. In nearby Rabat, you can tour St. Paul's and St. Agatha's catacombs and then see the grotto in St. Paul's Church, where the apostle Paul, Malta's patron saint, hid for three months after he was shipwrecked on the island in 60 AD. The town of Mosta is best known for the dome of the golden-hued rotunda Church of St. Mary, the third-largest church in Europe.

On the weekend, do as the Maltese do and go to Gozo. A car ferry to the island departs hourly from Cirkewwa. If you are driving yourself, you can easily see the island's highlights in a single day. Walk through the Ggantija temple ruins (built in 3600 BC), climb up to the walled citadel in Victoria, and stop for a picnic lunch overlooking the 90-foot rock arch called the Azure Window, just outside San Lawrenz. The people are friendlier and time moves more slowly on this pastoral island. It's no wonder the Maltese themselves consider it their favorite leisure-time retreat.

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## If you go . . .



### How to get there

Fly to Europe and take a connecting Air Malta flight to Malta International Airport. Details available at [visitmalta.com/flights](http://visitmalta.com/flights).

### What to do

#### Captain Morgan Cruises

Dolphin Court, Tigne Seafront Sliema

011-356-2346-3333

[captainmorgan.com.mt](http://captainmorgan.com.mt)

Take a leisurely cruise around the impressive walled city of Valletta. Adults about \$22, children under age 12 about \$17.

#### The Mdina Experience

7 Mesquita Square, Mdina

011-356-2145-4322

[themdinaexperience.com](http://themdinaexperience.com)

Mdina's history in a lively audio-visual presentation; adults about \$5, children about \$2.50.

### Where to stay

#### Selmun Palace Hotel

Selmun Road

Selmun L/O Mellieha

011-356-2152-1040

[selmunpalacehotel.com](http://selmunpalacehotel.com)

Luxury suites in the 18th-century castle and air-conditioned rooms and suites in the free-standing hotel. Doubles about \$33-\$66, with breakfast.

#### Westin Dragonara Resort

Dragonara Road, St. Julian's

011-356-2138-1000

[westinmalta.com](http://westinmalta.com)

An exclusive resort with magnificent seaside views. Doubles about \$255-\$315.

### Where to eat

#### Medina Restaurant

7 Holy Cross St., Mdina

011-356-2145-4004

[mol.net.mt/medina/](http://mol.net.mt/medina/)

Maltese and Mediterranean specialties. Dinners about \$12-\$22.

#### Guiseppe's Wine Bar

Borg Olivier Street, Mellieha

011-356-2157-4882

Call to reserve a candlelit table in this intimate restaurant specializing in Mediterranean dishes. Dinners \$18-\$28.

#### Giannini

23 Windmill St., Valletta

011-356-2123-7121

Creative Mediterranean fusion dishes with a panoramic harbor view. Lunch and dinners about \$19-\$26.

## If you go . . .

### How to get there

Visitors to Russia must obtain a **visa** and an official letter of invitation from a company, hotel, or other group. Tourist visas are valid for 30 days and cost \$100-\$300. For **information**, contact the consular section of the Embassy of Russia at 202-939-8907, (-8913, -8918), or the nearest Consulate General in New York, at 212-348-0926 (-0955, -0626), or visit [russianembassy.org](http://russianembassy.org).

### Where to stay

Hotels in Moscow are anything but cheap, especially inside the Garden Ring, or the center of the city. The **priciest** hotels can cost more than \$500 a night, while many **mid-level** hotels cost \$150-\$200. Budget-minded travelers might consider renting **apartments**; visit [apartmentres.com](http://apartmentres.com) or [enjoymoscow.com](http://enjoymoscow.com).

**Top hotels** include the new Ararat Park Hyatt (4 Neglinnaya St., [moscow.park.hyatt.com](http://moscow.park.hyatt.com), 011-7-495-783-1234); Hotel Metropol (Teatralny proezd 1/4, 011-7-499-501-7800, [metropol-moscow.ru](http://metropol-moscow.ru)); and Hotel Savoy (ul Rozhdestvenka 3).

### Where to eat

**Petrovich**  
Ul Myasnitskaya 24/1  
011-7-495-923-0082  
Designed by the cartoonist Andrey Bilzho. Features music, nostalgia, and moderately-priced, bland food. Entrees \$12-\$15.  
**Tiffis**  
Ul Ostozhenka 32  
011-7-495-290-2897  
Gourmet Caucasian cuisine. Entrees \$15-\$20.

# Their special forces require war

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the train lurched to a halt.

What I didn't know that early morning was that I would spend the day trying to steer clear of many of the drunk man's comrades, thousands of beret-wearing veterans who wrought a measure of chaos at nearly every corner of the capital, from metro stations and markets to parks and Red Square. I would learn later that this disjointed legion of large men — many of whom were trained to kill — were celebrating a peculiar holiday here called Paratroopers Day, which seemed like a mix of St. Patrick's Day and Veterans Day, with more alcohol and more belligerence. The holiday marks the birth 77 years ago of the Soviet Union's airborne assault troops called the Vozdushno-Desantnye Vojaska, or VDV, the proud, highly trained force that helped lay waste to much of Chechnya after years of Cold War preparation to fight US troops in Europe.

Having managed to pass by the paratrooper without incident, I found my way out of the station on one of its many escalators, which travel about twice the speed of their US counterparts and rise from what seems like a mile below ground. I emerged into a cold drizzle next to the massive, neo-Gothic Foreign Ministry Building, which could pass for the Legion of Doom, and trudged through the sodden streets, passing everything from a McDonald's to vendors hawking trinkets bearing likenesses of Lenin and Marx.

As morning blurred into afternoon, I wandered the city, from the ornate metro stations to a grit market where Asian-featured

men from the former Soviet republics in the Caucasus sold imitation Nike sneakers, oversized watermelons, and all kinds of gewgaws. I rubbed elbows with grimacing babushkas and beautiful young women who flaunted their long hair, short skirts, and stiletto heels, a perilous choice on cobblestoned streets. I dined on pelmeni (Russian dumplings), borscht, stuffed cabbage, and black bread, though sushi, pizza, and lots of gourmet imports were widely available.

I visited the old Lubyanka prison, where Stalin jailed thousands of dissidents, potential counter-revolutionaries, and innocent victims in the 1930s. The imperious building is now headquarters of the Federal Security Service, the successor of the KGB. When a guard gestured for me to stop snapping pictures of the weathered, gray stones and many surveillance cameras, I crossed the street and found a tiny park, home to the relatively invisible Memorial to the Victims of Totalitarianism, a patch of garden with little more than a commemorative rock from a labor camp where the Soviets worked untold thousands, or millions, to death.

A block away, I stumbled upon Moscow's premier science museum, which highlights the country's contributions to everything from chemistry to rocketry. There were some of the world's first spacesuits, an exhibit about how Dmitri Mendeleev developed the periodic table, some early radio receivers, and a model of the Soviet Union's first atomic bomb.

Afterward, as I passed the scaffold-covered Bolshoi Theatre and neared the red brick gates of the

Kremlin, I began to realize something was different about this day from my previous days in Russia. Nearly everywhere I turned, I saw the men in the blue berets and striped shirts, or telynyashka, a signature part of the uniform of Russia's navy and special forces.

Few of them seemed approachable, but I was curious. I decided to try out the few words of Russian I had picked up.

I went up to one paratrooper walking with a woman and asked, in about as awful an accent as possible, if he spoke English: "Izvinitsia, vi gavarite pa angliyski?"

The woman responded: "A little."

"Can you explain," I said, "why so many people are wearing berets today?"

I added with a smile: "Spasiba," or thank you. They didn't return the smile. She looked blankly at me and said something about it being a holiday. Then she made a puzzling gesture, which I now think referred to men parachuting.

No better informed, I walked to Red Square, where hundreds of on-duty servicemen in green fatigues kept a close watch on their retired brethren, who ambled about waving their blue and green flags and yelling, "Slava, VDV!" or "Glory to the Airborne Troops!"

I prodded a friend, an expatriate living in Russia, to ask a police officer what was happening. She was reluctant, because of the advice about not approaching those wearing uniforms. He looked coldly at her, or through her, refusing to say anything.

With the area crowded with similarly unfriendly men and the sun finally peeking through the



NATALIA KOLESNIKOVA/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

On Paratroopers Day at Gorky Park in Moscow last August, a few used some of their armed services skills to hang a flag.

dark clouds, I thought it would be a good time to visit Gorky Park, which my guidebook described as "one of Moscow's most festive places to escape the hubbub of the city."

There was definitely a party. On the metro ride to the park, scores of disheveled, red-eyed men in berets held each other up, sang, and hugged comrades, even those who appeared to be strangers.

Outside the station near the park, a group of paratroopers stood around a buddy lying motionless, half on the sidewalk, half on the street. He looked as if he were dead, until they pulled him up and his eyes rolled open.

I crossed a bridge over the Moscow River and watched as other paratroopers ran into traffic waving flags, butted chests with comrades, and hurled vodka bottles and beer cans everywhere.

I thought once I crossed the bridge I'd be in the clear, but their numbers were only growing. It was as if I had walked onto a base after a victorious battle.

It turned out the park was the epicenter of the paratroopers'

drunken festivities, the place where they congregate to observe their day of mayhem.

When I passed through the columned entrance of the park, which has old carousels, roller coasters, and remnants of the Soviet Union's failed effort to copy the Space Shuttle, the paratroopers were everywhere.

They were strumming guitars, and videotaping each other dancing and wrestling. Some disrobed to their tattoos and splashed through the park's fountains. Some urinated on the benches. Others ended up half naked, passed out on the muddy grass.

The year before, when local media reported that authorities had arrested five paratroopers and some 20 others had been taken to hospitals, The Moscow Times described the day as "relatively uneventful."

On this day, to make sure I didn't end up like the men splayed on the grass, I decided to explore a different part of town.

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