

MALTA'S CITY OF THE KNIGHTS

Malta's capital Valletta boasts splendid Baroque architecture – the proud legacy of the Knights of St John

SURROUNDED ON three sides by the Mediterranean, the city of Valletta is one of Europe's finest historic attractions. Here visitors enjoy sumptuous palaces, theatres, gardens and churches that recall the heyday of the Knights of St John.

The Knights were founded in Jerusalem in the 11th century as a multi-national Christian medical order, providing assistance to pilgrims. During the Crusades the Order expanded and took on a military role. They later moved to Rhodes but in 1521 were besieged by the Ottomans and forced to flee. The Holy Roman Emperor granted the Knights the Maltese archipelago in 1530. There they withstood

another Ottoman siege in 1565, thanks to the leadership of their Grand Master Jean de la Valette, and remained until 1798 when Napoleon invaded.

Valletta was built shortly after the siege and named in honour of la Valette. Initially it was constructed as a fortified town to deter the Ottomans. Unlike most other cities it was designed from scratch – by architect Francesco Laparelli, who created an early example of a gridiron street plan. In time the city grew more lavish, with stunning Baroque design embodied in the homes and places of worship of the Knights.

Remarkably Valletta has hardly been altered since the Order left and is now one of the world's best-conserved cities. UNESCO recognised it as such in 1980, granting World Heritage Status. For centuries tourists have marvelled at the city. When Disraeli visited in 1830, he wrote: "Valletta equals in its noble architecture, if it does not excel, any capital in Europe".

FACTFILE

Travel: The Maltese islands are only 3 hours away from the UK with flights leaving from most UK airports throughout the year. Air Malta www.airmalta.com and British Airways www.ba.com offer regular services. Malta International Airport is five miles from Valletta

Accommodation: Visitors to Valletta can enjoy a luxurious stay in two five-star hotels: the Grand Hotel Excelsior www.excelsior.com.mt and the Phoenicia www.phoeniciamalta.com

Contact: The Malta Tourist Office can provide information on the islands and their history. Please call **020 8877 6990** or visit www.visitmalta.com/bbchistory

Suggested reading: *The Shield and the Sword* by Ernie Bradford (Penguin, 2002)



VALLETTA'S HIGHLIGHTS: FIVE PLACES WHERE THE KNIGHTS LEFT THEIR MARK

↓ St John's Co-Cathedral

Described as the first complete example of the high Baroque anywhere, this magnificent church was built between 1573 and 1578. Among its many treasures are two works by Italian artist Caravaggio, including his masterpiece *The Beheading of St John*.



2

↓ The Manoel Theatre

Grand Master Antonio Manoel de Vilhena oversaw the construction of this majestic, still working, theatre in 1731, to provide "honest entertainment" for the Maltese public. It played a major role in the country's cultural history and remains a jewel in Valletta's crown.



4

↓ Valletta's fortification walls

To protect themselves against further Ottoman attacks after the siege of 1565, the Knights of St John encased Valletta with these massive, sturdy defensive walls. These days the well-preserved fortifications serve a more ornamental purpose and can be best enjoyed on a boat cruise.



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↑ The Grand Master's Palace

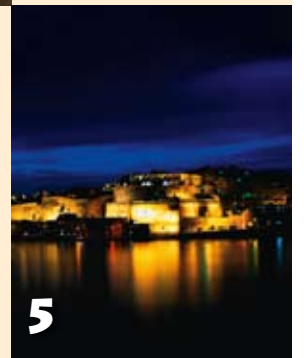
Designed by Maltese architect Gerolamo Cassar, the palace was home to all of the Grand Masters from 1574 until 1798 and now hosts the Maltese president and House of Representatives. The interiors are opulently decorated and feature many noteworthy frescoes and tapestries.



3

↑ The Armoury

Situated in the Grand Master's Palace since 1604, the Armoury's extensive collection of weaponry and armour reflects the Order's military past. The pieces on show were crafted all over Europe and range from the ceremonial armour of the nobility to the more prosaic equipment of ordinary soldiers.



5