

Autumn destination: Malta

“It’s too aerial to be true. A company flies you out, puts you up in a luxury hotel, pays for all of your travel experiences during FAM trip and then flies you back. Thus I got invited to Malta!”



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Last autumn Malta has been selected as the host destination for the best travel agents from the South of Russia – cities of Krasnodar, Sochi and Rostov-on-Don. Turkish Airlines was the official air carrier for the familiarization trip to Malta. The global carrier that flies to more destinations and countries than any other airline in the world provided flights for attendees and two stopovers in Istanbul with free guided tours of historical sites.

Our intensive, but enjoyable 5-day program with the staying at a fancy hotel was Courtesy of the Malta Tourism Authority (MTA). It was carefully prepared by Mr John Attard Mary, Senior Manager Marketing MTA; Mr Darrell Aquilina, Marketing Executive MTA; Julia Cherednichenko, MTA Representative in Russia and Mr. Boyko Bonkov, a professional Maltese guide. They gave us opportunity to experience first-hand why this hidden gem of the Mediterranean is so trending in the world travel market. Malta is undoubtedly a country to be seen and heard from, but why in autumn?

At this time of the year, the island calms down a bit after the turbulent summer months, prices for hotels and air tickets are falling, there is no huge crowd wanting to visit excursions, respectively, this saves both your budget and your nerves. It’s not too hot and also there are no traffic jams. Concerning the temperature, in autumn the Maltese have 25°-28° outside and 24° in the water, so out travel agents even bathed in the sea.

At a glance, Malta is like an oyster colony, where cities and towns huddle together, clinging to every piece of land. Only inveterate pirates or romantics could settle on this weathered, salted rock. The Knights of Malta are just two in one. The Knights Hospitaller, or Order of Saint John, ruled the Maltese islands for centuries and left a strong mark on the holy land, its flag and history. This

is still highly visible today in the Maltese Cross symbol, cultural aspect and beautiful architecture of the old cities. The Knights Hospitaller settled in Malta in 1530, after the Spanish king Charles V, being also king of Sicily, “sold” them Malta and Gozo for an annual fee of a single Maltese falcon, which they were to send on All Souls' Day to the King's representative. Nice bargain!

Our adventure began with a romancing the stone – Valletta and Mdina, both new and old capitals. There are cities more beautiful than Valletta, but there's no other place like it. No wonder that it has been declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site. On entering Valletta, we were greeted by massive fortifications meant to deter the enemy. The walls were excavated from the living rock and the wide and deep ditch was meant to be the main deterrent. The Upper Barrakka Gardens are situated at the highest point of the fortifications offering an excellent view of the Grand Harbour. This can be truly said to be one of the most impressive harbor views anywhere in the Mediterranean. Besides we appreciated the fortifications of Fort St. Angelo and the Three Cities, namely Vittoriosa, Senglea, and Cospicua as well.

Going back to Valletta, it looked a little more disheveled since the last time I saw her while accompanying a group of children who studied on summer English courses. But crown jewel of Valletta looked pompous as always. This is St. John's Co-Cathedral located in St. John's Square. It is much like St. Peter's Basilica in the Vatican with the difference that the Maltese Cathedral has a magnificent floor covered with some 400 multi-coloured tombstones of Knights Hospitaller. Three clocks, for the time, the date and the day of the week, on the bell tower of it, has several unusual features too. Over the large single-hand clock is a balcony from which a newly selected Grand Master would be announced.

If the Maltese people could, they would start building a house from the balcony. The balconies define the architecture of Valletta. They cling to houses like swallow's nests, they stretch along the streets like necklaces. But in Mdina, door handles are worshiped with almost the same zeal. And each door handle is a whole metal masterpiece!

The only school in Malta we have visited during our FAM trip was Gateway School of English (GSE). Travel agents experienced a school tour watching quality English Language lessons, which allowed them to see for themselves what it would be like for their students to follow a course at Gateway School of English Malta. We were pleasantly surprised by the low prices of GSE school.

My first time I saw eyed boats was in Marsaxlokk, this fishing village our travel agents visited on the third day. The “*luzzus*” is the name of the photogenic Maltese boats. Blue, red and yellow, each has a traditional amulet on its nose - the eye of Horus. Marsaxlokk is ideal for a terraced lunch on the waterfront. Eating in Malta was never a complete experience without fish dishes for all our travel agents. I highly recommend lampuki, tuna, sea bass, as well as the cerna (grouper) and dentici (dentex). For something to have with a tea, coffee or traditional Maltese drink “Kinnie”, taste the pastizzi.

And the last destination which maybe still preserves our steps beneath the sand dunes was Gozo island famous for its “Calypso Cave” and the legend of Ulysses. That was the end of our FAM trip. At the airport waiting for the flight, I packed my memories. Among all impressions I suddenly found a picture of small ladders which are almost everywhere on the Maltese islands, they invite you to go down for a bathe in the sea and get a breath of fresh air from the hustle and bustle in the world.

