# GoGoGordon's Guide©

## MALTA AND GOZO

Go! = You won't regret it.

Go!Go! = You'll regret it if you miss it.

Go!Go!Go! = A bucket list travel opportunity.

No!Go! = We weren't impressed, skip it.

For pictures, stories, anecdotes, and advice, see the Malta Guide at <a href="https://www.gogogordons.com">www.gogogordons.com</a>.

### MALTA SUMMARY AND GENERAL THOUGHTS

- 1. The best advice we can give for Malta is simply do not stay in the same place your entire trip. You must see Gozo, Marsaxlokk, Mdina, The 3 Cities, the Blue Grotto, the Blue Lagoon and/or Crystal Lagoon, and of course Valletta. All are completely different and amazing.
- 2. Malta has a fascinating history. It has remnants of civilizations that are thought to be among the oldest in the world, and it just gets more interesting from there. Do a little research about Malta before you go and it'll add to your enjoyment as you explore the island.
- 3. We'd also highly recommend renting a car. Now, when you rent a car in Malta, they will give you 3 choices regarding insurance options. However, it's not actually a choice, just pick the full insurance option. The main roads were in better condition than I expected, but traffic can be a nightmare so be careful on your timing. Still, both Malta and Gozo (there is a car ferry to Gozo) are small enough that a car gives you the freedom to explore and see a ton.

#### **Hotels:**

1. Go!Go!Go! Xara Hotel Relias and Chateau in a Deluxe Terrace Suite (only) –

The reason the Xara Hotel gets our highest recommendation is because of the location, the uniqueness of the property, and the terrace/view specific to the room we had – **the Deluxe Terrace Suite**. The hotel itself has a beautiful, open lobby with some gorgeous furniture and a wonderful staff, and is a "Go!Go!" regardless of room. To be fair, our bathroom was very dated, the shower pressure wasn't great, and there were some repairs going on in the dining room while we stayed. Despite those minor negatives, this property is a 5-star experience and the only real hotel located within the walls of Mdina.

While Mdina can certainly be done from anywhere on the island as a day trip, to stay there at night when the tourists leave and to walk the ancient streets lit up in yellow lighting is truly magnificent.

**Tip:** you might be tempted to splurge on the Presidential Suite...DON'T...it doesn't have the same view.

#### 2. Go!Go!Go! The Palace Hotel in their "View Suite" -

We also stayed 2 nights at the Palace Hotel. The Palace Hotel is located in Sliema, which is in between the capital city of Valletta and the party capital of Malta: St. Julian's. The "View Suite" has a balcony with probably the best view of Valletta on the entire Island of Malta.

If you can't reserve the "View Suite", you might want to look at other options. They do have a few other suites that look nicely appointed, but I couldn't confirm if they have the same view, and their standard rooms looked okay but a little dated and not very memorable. In short, if you can't reserve the "View Suite", I'd probably drop this recommendation to a "Go!", at best. Or, if you want to be short walking distance to the nightlife in St. Julians or the landmarks in Valletta, this probably isn't the right place for you.

#### 3. Casa Ellul.

Although we didn't end up staying there, if you do want to stay in Valletta and you want a boutique, luxury property, I recommend looking into the Casa Ellul. That's where we would've stayed if I hadn't come across the Palace Hotel with its "View Suite".

### THINGS TO DO BY AREA:

<u>The city of Mdina and neighboring Rabat</u> – It's the highest rated thing to do on TA in all of Malta, and deservingly so. There are amazing views, medieval streets, good restaurants, and loads of history. Further, Mdina is joined with Rabat which has some great streets to explore, some beautiful balconies, and a few interesting tourist attractions. We recommend you stay at least 1 night!

- <u>Go!Go!Go!</u> Explore Mdina and Rabat One of the most in-tact, impressively preserved medieval cities we've ever visited. A time warp. Magical. See it in daylight and at night.
- Metropolitan Cathedral If you walk through Mdina, you will see the Cathedral. This cathedral is unusual in that it charges 5 euro to enter, although that fee also gets you into the museum.
- Casa Bernard (in Rabat) tour of restored palazzo in Rabat. We ended up skipping this in the interest of time and went to a similar attraction in Valletta (Casa Rocca Piccola).
- St. Pauls Catacombs (in Rabat). We skipped this as well since we have done catacombs in other European cities.
- St. Agatha's Crypt, Catacombs and Museum In Rabat. Skipped.
- **No!Go!** Most of the other "attractions" we saw in Mdina were cheesy tourist traps... medieval dungeons, and other makeshift businesses trying to capitalize on Mdina's history. Skip, unless you're there with children that you think would enjoy it.

<u>Valletta</u> – Valletta is very walkable and while you can see the highlights in a day, we highly recommend extra time to really soak in the views, the balconies, and the countless historical sites. Most of all, SEE

VALLETTA FROM THE WATER! There are a ton of group tours if you want a party boat or reasonably priced private tours, or you can just hire a local water taxi or even just take the cheap shuttle. Somehow or another, get out onto the water and see this city from that vantage point.

- Go!Go!Go! St. John's Co-Cathedral Closed Sunday. They are strict about dress code. They
  don't have "skip the line" tickets, but there is one line for individuals and one line for groups,
  be sure to go individual to save time or travel off season. This is truly the only no-brainer in
  Valletta. Don't miss it.
- <u>Go!Go!</u> Upper Barrakka Gardens An amazing view spot! Every day at noon, members of the Malta Heritage Society fire a salute. Find it, take pictures, and then take the new elevator down to the lower lever and catch the ferry over to the 3 Cities!
- <u>Go!Go!</u> Church of Saint Paul's Shipwreck —They have some amazing artifacts, artwork (including
  the statue that is paraded in the streets annually) and relics, and it's located on one of my
  favorite streets to walk in Malta. While not quite as overwhelming and on the same scale as the
  Co-Cathedral, it's a wonderfully decorated church that we recommend visiting. Depending on
  your level of religious interest, this one could easily be a "Go!Go!Go!"
- <u>Go!</u> Casa Rocca Piccola We chose this stop over a similar attraction named the Bernard House in Rabat. Most European cities have a few old mansions that are part museum part time-travel HGTV show that we enjoy walking through as if it were an open house. They are typically guided, which sometimes frustrates us, but this one moved along very well and took 45 minutes total. We were glad we went.
- Go! Valletta City Gate –Unless you arrive by ferry, you'll likely enter Valletta through the city gate. This is a good thing, as it was extraordinarily impressive even though it was still under construction during our visit. I got an adrenaline rush walking into this amazing city.
- <u>Go!</u> Take a boat or a ferry to the 3 Cities —As you'll see if you look through our pictures, we missed the ferry to the 3 cities but found a local guy that shuttled us over for 5 Euro. We wished we had more time in the 3 cities area as the streets and buildings looked beautiful and less crowded, and there are a few restaurants facing the water and the yachts that would be perfect for a drink or two before heading back to Valletta.
- The balconies I don't need to recommend this as you can't escape it. The unique and lovely balconies are littered throughout every street in Valletta, and we spent some time hunting down a few we had seen on blogs and trying to find a few of the more special ones. We particularly liked Republic Street, St. Ursula street (the one with the entrance to St. Paul's Shipwreck Church, and Straight Street.
- No!Go! Valletta Waterfront Place for shops and strolling. It's newly renovated so it's visually appealing, has good views of the 3 cities, and some of the online pictures made it look like a fun area. However, it has basically been built to greet all the cruise passengers so it's stereotypically full of tourist traps and bad restaurants. I wouldn't recommend going here as there are plenty of other places to enjoy a drink, meal and view, but if you do want to check it out the only two restaurants that are worth going to are:
  - Brown's Kitchen: We ate here, it was pretty good.
  - Q Bar and Restaurant

- Lascaris War Rooms (We didn't go, but it was on our list) The tour takes you on a two hour tour of the WW2 and Cold War War HQ rooms and tunnels including the St. Peter & Paul counter-guard and the Victorian Gun Powder Magazine.
- The Knights Hospitallers history museum (We didn't get to go, but it was on our list). This one's easy, if you're interested in the Knights Hospitallers, go see it, if not, skip it.
- St George's Square The main square of any city in Europe is worth a look. This is not one of the better ones, but you'll likely walk through it at some point and it has some nice balconies.
- Siege Bell War Memorial Worth a walk over here if you have time. While not quite as dramatic of a view as the Upper Barrakka Gardens, it has a commanding view of the 3 cities. If you're a photographer, I change my answer to "Go!"

#### **Southern Malta**

- Go!Go!Go! Marsaxlokk –VISIT MARSAXLOKK!!! This is a postcard perfect little fisherman town that somehow merges Aladdin architecture with a Cuban vibe in a colorful, hypnotic, welcoming kind of way. Go here for lunch as there are a dozen highly rated fresh seafood restaurants with views of the harbor. As a suggestion for a great day, start early at the Blue Grotto, then stop at Hagar Qim, then head to Marsaxlokk to have a leisurely fresh seafood lunch and a stroll, then finish up by heading over to St. Peter's Pool to relax and swim before heading back to your hotel to get ready for dinner.
- Go!Go!Go! Hagar Qim Temples & Mnajdra Temples Highly recommend...these are the oldest known human settlements on the planet and they are wonderfully set-up. The area also has newly built roads in good condition and with great views of the water. This place feels like the kind of place where you touch the wrong rock and get sent to another dimension, place or time.
- **Blue Grotto** –It's weather dependent, and unfortunately although the skies were blue and the temperature was wonderful the waves were a little too rough so we didn't get to go.
- **Popeye's village** Very, very touristy, so we didn't go, but if you're a fan of the original Popeye with Robin Williams or if you have kids it does get decent reviews so it might be worth stopping by for a look. Pay attention to the hours, it closes early.
- **St. Peter's Pool** Unfortunately we didn't go since it was a little too cold to swim, but if you go in the summer or warm weather and you're a water or beach person, just do a quick Google Image and you'll see the appeal.
- **Dingli Cliffs** We love a good hike, and my research pointed me in this direction. We ended up getting plenty of steps in during our stay, but didn't make it here. If you're looking for a nearby hike with some Ireland-like cliff views, try the Dingli Cliffs.

<u>Go!Go!Go! Comino/Blue Lagoon/Crystal Lagoon</u> – In November, most of the tours to this area are closed, but if you go during the late spring into the early fall, this is one of the top tourist attractions in Malta. If you came to the island for that jet-setter Mediterranean fantasy where you sail around picturesque islands having a few drinks before jumping into crystal blue water and partying with the cool crowd, this is where you go for that experience.

#### **Gozo Island**

The top thing to do in Gozo, and the reason most tourist took the ferry from the main Island of Malta is – or was – Dwejra Bay, commonly known as the Azure Window. Unfortunately, this breathtaking natural landmark was completely destroyed in a storm in March of 2017. That said, the Dwejra Bay area is still a place of expansive views and it is definitely still worth visiting to hike, swim, snorkel or dive. Most importantly, do NOT let the destruction of the Azure Window prevent you from visiting Gozo altogether. It's unique, spectacular, and you can drive the entire Island on a day trip.

- <u>Go!Go!</u> Xlendi and the Xlendi Tower Just 15 minutes from centrally located Victoria is Xlendi, with a precious little harbor overlooking a calm cove with people kayaking and swimming even in November. There are a few good restaurants here and it makes a great lunch stop. After you eat, if you want to burn off a few calories, hike up to the Xlendi Tower, or you can drive if you're running short on time. The views are like a golden yellow version of the Cliffs of Moher.
- <u>Go!</u> The Citadel in Victoria –Victoria is the main "city" on Gozo located right in the center. There are a few good coffee shops and restaurants but we stopped here so we could run up and explore the Citadel. You can see the entire island from the top of the Citadel.
- Wied II-Mielah Nowhere near the size of the Azure Window, but in a pretty area and nice to see. I wouldn't go out of my way to get here, but if you have time or end up nearby, it's worth it.
- **Ta'Pinu** If you haven't had your fill of churches, take a stop here. The views are amazing and it is yet another stunning gem to admire. We saw it as we drove but didn't stop as we were running short on daylight.
- Wied il-Ghasri Was on the list and a short drive from Wied Il-Mielah, but we didn't get to make it. It's an isolated spot perfect for a quick dip if you're visiting in the warm months.
- The Salt Pans This was on our list but pretty low priority. It gets pretty high reviews but you might want to look at pictures and read a little more before deciding whether or not to go.
- Ta'Mena Estate or the Tal-Massar Winery unfortunately they were both closed in November when we visited, but if they were open you could bet we would've planned a stop. If you're a wine lover, it's a no brainer!
- **Prehistoric Monuments Hal Saflieni and Ggantija** We didn't go since we went to the ones on the Island of Malta and we figured they couldn't be any better than those, but if you really love the history you might want to look into visiting here as well.
- If you end up spending extra time in Gozo, there are plenty of boating, hiking and adventure travel options. Or, if you like churches, see the Church of St. John the Baptist, The Cathedral of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary and the Xaghra Parish Church.

### **FOOD & DRINK**

Malta didn't finish very high on our "best of" food or beverage list, but there were definitely some highlights. The beer and wine were fine, and to be fair we didn't get to try much wine and the wineries were closed during our November visit, but frankly this destination does not need world class dining to justify a trip.

We always try to find items to eat and drink that we can't find in the states. In other words, unless you're really a picky eater or just a boring traveler, try to find a few items that are local specialties and that are hard to find in the US. The list below is of traditional Island of Malta food items to try. Look for restaurants in **BOLD** for recommendations on the best place to try these local specialties:

- 1. **GoGo! Maltese ftira** –Pizza with a hole in the middle... tomatoes, eggplant, olives, capers. If you're a little worried about the seafood, this is a very safe and American-friendly dish! The best place to try this is in Gozo at **Maxokk Bakery.**
- GoGo! "pastizzi" –Every country in Europe has their own unique pastry item and we try our best to find and try them all. In Malta, a pastizzi is a flaky pastry filled with ricotta or mushy peas.
   Don't miss trying one at the Crystal Palace in Rabat.
- 3. <u>Go!</u> "Zalzett" coriander flavored Maltese sausage. We tried some of this on a pizza and at dinner on our first night. While not on par with the Polish or German version, we enjoyed it. Hard to go wrong with sausage, especially when on a pizza.
- 4. **Kapunata** Maltese version of ratatouille.
- 5. **Bigilla** Thick pate of broad beans with garlic.
- 6. **"hobz biz-zejt"** unfortunately we didn't get to try this, but it sounds similar to the version in Spain which we LOVE. Its round bread dipped in olive oil, rubbed with ripe tomatoes and filled with a mix of tuna, onion, garlic, tomatoes and capers. Try it at **Ta' Doni in Rabat** walking distance from Xara Palace!
- 7. **Aljotta** fish soup
- 8. "Gbejniet" local sheep's cheese

### DESSERTS

- No!Go! Around Christmas time, they make qagnaq tal ghazel (honey rings). We tried them but neither of us liked them at all.
- Kannoli Just like the Sicilian version, this one's a winner.
- Semi-freddo deserts (mix of sponge, ice cream, candied fruits and cream). Didn't get to try this, but sounds great.
- Helwa tat-tork: sweet sugary mixture of crushed and whole almonds. Didn't get to try this, but also sounds great.

WINE: If you want to try a few grapes you can't find many other places, the indigenous varieties are Gellewza and Girgentina.

#### WHERE TO EAT IN MDINA AND RABAT:

- <u>Go!Go!</u> Crystal Palace in Rabat –The very definition of a hole in the wall. Take a look at the pictures. You'll be scared to enter, but go in and to the left of the counter you'll see an oven that has spent a lifetime making nothing but pastizzi's. They are practically free, and they were the best we had on the trip by a mile. They are walking distance from Xara Palace and the entrance to Mdina. A perfect afternoon snack!
- Go!Go! Fior Di Latte I had the dark chocolate and it was mind-blowing. Having done the gelato tour when we were in Florence we think of ourselves as fairly well-credentialed gelato snobs, and this place seriously wowed us! As a bonus, the square where Fior Di Latte is located is one of our favorite spots in Mdina.
- Go! Coogi's Not too casual, not too fancy...good wine menu, and right in Mdina. If the weather is nice, they have a very quaint and romantic courtyard, and the atmosphere inside is equally pleasant. They have lots of American-friendly items on the menu, including maltese sausage, tiramisu, burgers, swordfish and steak. We had dinner here our first night and it was very reasonably priced, tasty, and enjoyable.
- **Publius Cutajar Parruccan Confectionery** Cute place in a cute square that is locally owned selling all kinds of local sweets. We bought a couple of pastries here but they weren't our favorite. Still, they have a ton of options and we might simply have chosen poorly, and they get amazing reviews on all review sites, so I'd recommend going by here if in Rabat.

### Places we had on our list but didn't get to try:

- **Ta' Doni in Rabat** One of the reviews mentions hobz biz-zejt. Reviews also mention ice cream, craft beer, great coffee, great lunch...
- **Medina Restaurant** Cozy, right in the heart of Mdina, romantic.
- DaLuigi 4.5 circles, 270 reviews. Safe bet if you want pizza or Italian while still having some more authentic Maltese options on the menu
- **Grotto Tavern** Italian, seafood, Mediterranean.
- Fontanella Tea Garden
- Toffee & Co WINE BAR! cakes, quiet street, maltese platter looks amaing.....lovely café...
   sandwiches, cheap...

#### WHERE TO EAT IN MARSAXLOKK

- <u>Go!</u> La Reggia We had lunch here and the calamari was the second best we've ever had. Great views right on the harbor. Shea's fish was also delicious but my crab ravioli was a bit fishy tasting for me and I didn't enjoy it. Olive oil cake is recommended...
- Filippo Italian Restaurant Pasta, fresh seafood good views of water.
- Terrone Maybe a little more casual compared to others. Daily changing menu, fresh seafood...

#### WHERE TO EAT IN GOZO

- GoGo! Maxokk Bakery Oven baked maltese pizzas. Gotta go! St James Street in Nadur.
- The Boat House It was okay, but not great and didn't live up to our expectations based on the number of quality reviews they have on TripAdvisor®. They have fresh seafood with a nice water view. If you do decide to eat here or at Ta'Karolina in Xlendi, you might call to make reservations. We were there in late November, far from tourist season, and still got lucky by getting the last unreserved table (by the kitchen entrance).

#### Places on our list for Gozo but that we didn't get to try:

- Sofia Bar and Restaurant: It was the highest rated restaurant on TripAdvisor in the area, at least when we were there, but the downside here is it's not on the water. In retrospect, we probably would've preferred to try this place as it was less crowded and had better reviews, and then walked along the harbor afterwards. Try the moussaka, meat platter, baklava, bean salad, mixed grill, eggplant, or smoked cheese.
- Ta'Karolina On the water's edge, beautiful view of the sea...
- Ta' Tona #1 place in Mgarr, which is the main port where the boat lands in Gozo. Fresh seafood, right by the docs.
- Country Terrace- near Mgarr harbor. Beautiful views. Noon-12:30 and 6pm-10pm.
- Café Jubilee very cool art deco bar/café with fresh food and great coffee.

#### WHERE TO EAT IN VALLETTA

- <u>Go!Go!</u> Il-Kapitali By far the best draft beer menu we saw in Malta, and their sandwiches are amazing. Granted we had a good beer buzz going by the time we arrived here (this was our last meal on our last night in Malta), but we both agreed that overall it was one of, if not the best meal we had during our stay.
- Go! Wild Honey: We loved this tiny bar. Fun place and good vibe.
- Go! Café Jubillee Valletta –Walk into this adorable pub and feel like you stepped into a Parisian pub in the 1920s. A great place to eat or just have a beer or two they have a few rare brews as well as popular ones.
- Go! Caffe Cordina: We highly recommend a stop here if you enjoy a mid-afternoon coffee and dessert, as we do when traveling. This is an absolutely beautiful café with dome ceilings and chandeliers reminiscent of somewhere in Vienna. Huge selection, great location, but you might have to speak up a little when you're ready for your check!
- **Nenu the Artisan Baker** The place to get traditional Ftira maltese pizzas. A bit touristy but plenty of tables and very family friendly.

### Places on our list but that we didn't get to try:

- The Submarine: Hole in the wall cheap sandwich place. Hard to beat for lunch.
- Piadina Caffe Sandwiches, café, coffee...sandwiches look great.
- Legligin Good wine selection; Mediterranean and some Maltese dishes
- Zero Sei Trattoria Romana Straight up Italian! Pastas, wine...
- Gugar Hangout & Bar Laid back bar/café/pub for drinks and sandwiches
- Waterfront Area (be careful, this area is full of overpriced, cheesy tourist restaurants...this is where the cruise boats let passengers out, so it's a gauntlet of tourist targets)
  - Brown's Kitchen: It was nice but I'd only eat here if you're in the area and need something quick with a nice view.
  - o Q Bar and Restaurant: Italian, Mediterranean, European, Seafood.

#### WHERE TO EAT IN SLIEMA

Go!Go! Ta'Kris – We didn't plan on eating in Sliema, but we got in later than we thought to our hotel and that's precisely why I had done some research ahead of time. A short walk from the Palace Hotel was the Ta'Kris restaurant, tucked away in an alley as many special restaurants tend to be. Anytime a restaurant has 2200 people that have reviewed it and it still averages a 4.5 score on TripAdvisor, you don't have to worry, it'll be good. It was.

### Other places on our list that we didn't get to try:

- UC Café: Bar/Café
- Mint: Bakery, café... perfect lunch spot or if you need a snack.
- L'Artist Seafood; Mediterranean; European.

### **Other Island of Malta Information**

### **GOZO DRIVE TIMES**

- 1. Xara Palace to Cirkewwa (ferry) = 30 mins
- 2. Ferry Terminal to Victoria = 13 mins
- 3. Victoria to Xlendi Tower = 9 mins
- 4. Xlendi Tower to Azure Window = 20 mins
- 5. Azure Window to Wied Il-Mielah = 15 mins
- 6. Wied Il-Mielah to Wied il-Ghasri = 10 mins
- 7. Wied II Ghasri to Salt Pans = 4 mins
- 8. Salt Pans to Maxokk = 21 mins
- 9. Maxokk to Harbour = 7 mins

#### **GOZO FERRY TIMES**

Departure – Gozo: 1:30; 3:30: 5; 6; 6:45; 7:30; 8:15; 9; 9:45; 10:30; 11:15; 12; 12:45; 13:30; 14:15; 15:00; 15:45; 16:30:17:15; 18; 18:45; 19:30; 20:15; 21; 22:30; 23:45

Departure – Cirkewwa, Malta: 02:15; 04:00; 05:45; 06:45; 07:30; 08:15; 09:00; 09:45; 10:30; 11:15; 12:00; 12:45; 13:30; 14:15; 15:00; 15:45; 16:30; 17:15; 18:00; 18:45; 19:30; 20:15; 21:00; 21:45; 23:05 00:20

As I said earlier, anyone visiting Malta really needs to see it from the sea perspective. If you want a private, peaceful, relxing experience, use Malta Rib Cruises or Harbor Cruises (info below):



Or,

HARBOUR CRUISES	
Malta's Gallant History	
Join us on a Harbour Cruise and witness Malta's living past. Cruise around Malta within the two natural harbours on either side of Valletta Marsamxetto Harbour and the Grand Harbour.	
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Adults: €16.00 incl. VAT	
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