

MALTA: A unique and tantalizing destination

Unveiling Malta's unique journey and transformation into one of Europe's tech-focused economies.

MALTA



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Becoming a truly exceptional destination

Clayton Bartolo, Minister for Tourism, explains how the Maltese government is ensuring that the country's tourism industry continues to flourish

Malta received 2.3 million visitors last year, 83% of its pre-pandemic number. What were some of the factors that contributed to this quick recovery and has the sector continued to perform well in 2023?

We planned ahead during the pandemic and launched a \$22-million recovery plan with the primary goal of reestablishing connectivity — as Malta is an island nation, connectivity is crucial because 99% of tourists arrive by plane. We made investments in air-transportation infrastructure and our connectivity has now returned to pre-COVID levels.

During the first quarter of this year, we witnessed our best-ever numbers in terms of tourist arrivals. Compared to 2019, we've seen increases in tourist arrivals, guest nights and a significant 15% increase in spend. This is an important achievement for us because our aim is not only to increase the number of tourists, but also to attract high-quality tourists who will spend more during their stay. Malta doesn't aim to be the cheapest destination available: our commitment is to provide enhanced value through our services and our goal is to position Malta as a destination that offers high-quality, holistic experiences for discerning travelers.

Additionally, we initiated the development of various tourism niches — such as sports, diving and faith tourism. For example, this year Malta has hosted several sports events that attracted international participants and spectators, and we're making substantial investments in our renowned diving sector. This strategy is generating positive results and has resulted in excellent rates and occupancy for our local businesses. As tourists' preferences have evolved following the pandemic, they're seeking better value for their money and they'll find that in Malta.

How is the government encouraging environmental sustain-



Clayton Bartolo
Minister for Tourism

ability within Malta's tourism sector?

We recognize the importance of sustainability and responsible travel. In line with this, we're engaged in discussions with eco-label organizations that will certify our hotels and accommodations to ensure their ecological sustainability.

Additionally, we're encouraging and supporting local establishments to invest in renewable energies and water-saving initiatives. We also understand the importance of addressing environmental concerns in wider practices, such as laundry processes. It's by making small changes in areas like this that we can collectively make a significant difference.

What measures are being taken to address any skills gaps that exist in the Maltese hospitality industry?

As an industry centered around people, human resources are critical in the tourism sector. Even if a destination boasts the best hotels and finest restaurants in the world, without a strong emphasis on delivering high-quality service, it will fall short of being a truly exceptional destination.

To help address any gaps, the government is working closely with the Maltese Institute of Tourism



Malta offers 2,000 thrilling rock-climbing routes

Studies (ITS) to provide businesses with immediate support in upskilling existing employees and equipping new entrants with skills.

We have committed to addressing the long-term needs of the industry by investing in a new state-of-the-art campus for the ITS, which is a multi-million-dollar project that will expand the institute's capacity. In addition, we aim to foster stronger ties with the local industry to ensure that the ITS's curriculum remains relevant and aligned with requirements.

Nowadays, tourism isn't just about food service, it encompasses areas

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as diverse as events, airlines, cruises and film tourism — all of these domains require specialized knowledge and skills and the ITS will be providing that level of education.

Malta is at the forefront of the digital revolution in tourism, having launched Marija, a virtual assistant for visitors based on artificial intelligence (AI) last year. Can you expand on the government's approach toward incorporating technology into the sector?

We're collaborating with local stakeholders to embrace digital tourism's potential. One example is the development of virtual assistants, which can enhance the visitor experience. Through a mobile app, for instance, people walking around Valletta can now navigate the city and

access information about places of interest without the need for a guide.

Within the government, we're also exploring the utilization of AI for monitoring tourism flows and other relevant data. This will provide valuable insights to aid in planning and making informed decisions for the future of the tourism industry in Malta.

What are your current top priorities as Minister for Tourism and what vision do you have for the sector?

The most important aspect is to ensure sustainability for the future

and that means ensuring long-term profitability, rates of returns on investments and good working conditions for employees, because they play a vital role in delivering the quality service that tourists desire when they visit Malta.

As a country, we should continue to progress in tourism by introducing new untapped niche markets that hold great potential as well, with one good example being World War II military tourism.

Overall, the Maltese tourism sector has the opportunity to flourish. I'm confident we can continue to achieve favorable results and growth will be pursued in a sustainable manner, ensuring a fair rate of return for investors who may be interested in further investment opportunities that exist here. I invite everyone to come and visit Malta.

A country that delivers remarkable vacations

Carlo Micallef, CEO of the Malta Tourism Authority, discusses a well-coordinated approach to enhancing quality at every level in the sector

What is tourism's role within the Maltese economy and what impact did the COVID-19 pandemic have on the sector?

In 2019, the tourism sector in Malta witnessed a record year with remarkable achievements, experiencing a surge in number of visitors, bed nights and income. The sector has always been an important pillar for the Maltese economy, but some had perhaps taken it for granted.

The perspective changed when the pandemic struck, leading to the closure of the airport and causing businesses to scale down or shut down. This brought to light the sector's true significance for the country: not only does it generate foreign income and drive economic growth, but it also plays a vital role in funding essential social systems, including free education up to university level and free healthcare.

During the downtime, Malta continued to actively promote itself as a destination, kept in contact with our partners such as airlines, tour operators, travel agents and digital entities, and invested in human resources.

Our dedication and preparation paid off when the world reopened for tourism in 2022. Thanks to the well-implemented strategy, advertising campaigns, and strong overseas networks, Malta experienced a rapid recovery. Initially anticipating around 1.8-1.9 million tourists, the country actually received 2.3 million, despite some restrictions in the first three months. This positive trend has continued into 2023, with the first six months surpassing equivalent months in 2019 by about 5%.

How diverse are the Maltese tourism sector's target markets?

The tourism industry in Malta embraces diversity, appealing to various demographics and catering to different travel motivations. We have recently reevaluated our tourism strategy and our vision moving



Carlo Micallef
CEO, Malta Tourism Authority

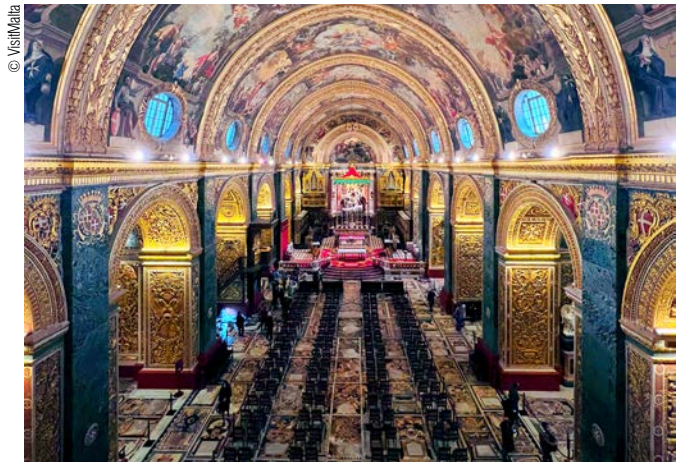
forward revolves around elevating the overall quality of our tourism offerings across the board, not just restricted to five-star accommodations, but encompassing all aspects of the visitor's journey.

We seek to enhance the quality of every scale within tourism, ensuring that even three-star accommodations deliver exceptional experiences that encourage travelers to spend more.

Why is Malta the ideal destination for any traveler?

Many visitors might envision Malta as a typical Mediterranean island catering to older tourists seeking beautiful seas. In reality, Malta has the energy of a vibrant modern city and the charms of a Mediterranean island. The country embraces a cosmopolitan identity and is always open for business, making it an attractive destination for a wide range of travelers all year round.

Our strategic location ensures excellent connectivity with the Middle East, Europe and Africa, and we anticipate further developments that will enhance our connectivity with Africa and North America. This global accessibility reinforces Malta's appeal as a destination for both leisure and business travelers from all corners of the world. In fact, the meetings, incentives, conferences



Although small, the Maltese islands contain an astonishing 365 churches

and exhibitions sector constitutes about 15% of our overall tourism.

Adaptability is one of Malta's key strengths as a nation: we constantly adapt our packages to align with current trends and invest in enhancing our offerings. While we encounter challenges, our focus remains on elevating Malta to become a center of excellence for tourism.

Our aim is to provide a remarkable vacation package at competitive rates, providing an exceptional experience that exceeds expectations.

Could you highlight a few of the niche tourism areas that Malta Tourism Authority (MTA) is developing and promoting?

Certain segments allow us to be more productive during different seasons. One such niche is active tourism, which plays a pivotal role during the winter season: Malta's climate remains pleasantly warm with abundant sunny days in winter, when it's an ideal location for sports

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activities, including football tournaments, training camps, water polo, aquatic sports, sailing and cycling.

Collaborations with esteemed partners such as the Eolo-Kometa Cycling Team and sponsorship of globally televised events like the Giro d'Italia bicycle race have granted us extensive exposure in this area.

Gastronomy is another niche we are vigorously promoting, given its significant role in our cultural heritage. Our culinary offerings are un-

deniably excellent and we now boast six Michelin-starred restaurants, while a total of 35 Maltese restaurants are featured in the Michelin guide. This impressive accomplishment holds particular significance in a small country like Malta.

How high is the level of cooperation between public and private sectors in developing the Maltese tourism sector?

The executive board of the Malta Tourism Authority (MTA) is structured to foster strong collaboration between government-appointed experts and individuals from the industry. This approach ensures a comprehensive understanding of the sector's dynamics and allows for well-informed decision-making. For instance, our board includes highly respected personalities from various sectors, such as the CEO of Malta International Airport and representatives from the hotel, catering and diving sectors.

This blend of expertise and representation enables a holistic approach to shaping tourism policies and strategies. The close-knit community within the board also facilitates effective communication and fosters a sense of unity in working toward common goals. By bridging the gap between government bodies and industry professionals, the MTA can guarantee a well-coordinated and synergistic effort to promote and sustain the country's tourism sector.

One of the best places in the world to visit

Malta's wealth of heritage, culture, natural beauty and hospitality offerings make it the perfect destination for all travelers, whatever their interests

Malta should be at the top of tourists' bucket lists say international travel experts like Forbes and Lonely Planet, both of which named the fabulous Mediterranean island nation as one of the best places in the world to visit this year. "Malta's profile in the tourism world is rapidly gaining the strong reputation it truly deserves," concludes Minister for Tourism Clayton Bartolo.

Explaining its decision, Forbes highlighted the country's wealth of history and culture, excellent food and great climate. Lonely Planet, on the other hand — which selects its much-anticipat-

of three distinctly different but equally gorgeous islands, which lie less than 30 minutes from each other at the heart of the glittering, cobalt-blue Mediterranean Sea and are connected by various ferries and smaller sea vessels.

The vast majority of the country's 500,000-strong cosmopolitan population lives on the main island of Malta, while smaller, magical Gozo is more rural and tranquil. In between the two is tiny Comino that is home to only one family of residents and is protected to conserve its outstanding biodiversity.



Malta is home to some of the world's oldest freestanding temples

tonishing Bronze Age temples of Ggantija on Gozo, which predate Egypt's pyramids and the U.K.'s Stonehenge. Another of the country's three World Heritage Sites is the Hal Saflieni Hypogeum, an amazing rock-cut underground labyrinth dating from about 3,600-2400 BC that probably served as a temple and burial location.

Among the nation's other unmissable experiences for history lovers are walks around the medieval town of Cittadella that sits at the top of a hill above Gozo's capital, and the walled city of Mdina, Malta's capital in ancient times. Also packed with magnificent architecture and art is the current capital, Valletta, the country's third UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Covering just 0.3 square miles, this easily traversable fortified city is the first stop for many visitors to Malta. Most people fly in to the state-of-the-art international airport that lies a few miles from its center and which hosts direct flights from over 100 global destinations. However, it is also possible to arrive by sea, with international cruises and catamarans from Sicily landing at the historic port in Valletta's breathtaking Grand Harbour.

Built by the Knights of St. John in the 16th century, Valletta's treasures include Europe's oldest fully operating theater and the world's only painting by Caravaggio to be signed by the artist, a masterpiece depicting John the

Baptist that can be admired in St. John's Co-Cathedral.

Overall, the islands are thought to contain a remarkable 365 churches ranging from imposing cathedrals to humble places of worship in villages that are all worth exploring. And while Christianity has played an important role in Malta's history and traditions for 2,000 years, the diversity of people that have lived there since then also makes it an extraordinary destination of discovery for those interested in other faiths, such as Judaism and Islam.

Tradition mixed with modernity

The impact of the islands' multicultural heritage is reflected in the unique delights of Maltese gastronomy, which melds Mediterranean influences from Italy, as well as Arabic and North African countries.

From street stalls, family-run restaurants and modern seafood eateries to the 35 restaurants that appear in the latest Michelin guide, Maltese chefs are dedicated to creating delectable dishes from fresh, seasonal ingredients that have been harvested from the country's bountiful seas and farms. Local specialties to look out for in shops include olive oil, sheep and goat cheeses, honey, pastries, fira flatbread that is cooked over wood and Maltese wines, which are increasingly receiving international acclaim.

A number of Malta's traditional foods are only prepared to



Maltese chefs are passionate about using seasonal local ingredients

mark specific religious events or one of the colorful community fiestas that take place in villages, towns and cities throughout the year and which are accompanied by brass bands, fireworks and immersive cultural activities.

Far from being a nation that is only focused on its past, a wide variety of festivals and events involving modern culture take place on the islands as well. To illustrate the breadth of scale these encompass: Valletta's open-air opera house offers regular contemporary dance performances, while Malta was also chosen to host this year's huge EuroPride celebrations on its streets.

According to Bartolo, "Across the globe, Malta is recognized as a champion when it comes to LGBTIQ rights. The progressive and liberal program that the Maltese government embarked on has shifted the Maltese islands into a welcoming country to visitors coming from every strata in society all year round."

The nation's renowned hospitality and safety — coupled with

its use of English as an official language and the high standards of its competitively priced education institutions — have also made it a preferred location for learning English as a foreign language, particularly with parents concerned about sending teenage children abroad alone.

World of adventure or relaxation

Malta is a world-famous diving destination, with its crystal-clear, calm seas containing a cornucopia of underwater caves, natural

The perfect marriage of almost infinite experiences and opportunities, Malta truly has a wide appeal, with something for everyone and all within moments of each other."

Carlo Micallef, CEO, Malta Tourism Authority

reefs and shipwrecks from across the ages that all abound with marine life. Those blue waters and the country's almost constant good weather mean that the islands are a hugely enjoyable base for kayaking, sailing and other water sports too.



Caravaggio's masterful depiction of John the Baptist in St. John's Co-Cathedral

On land, the opportunities for participating in, watching or training for sporting activities are possibly even greater: golf, tennis, soccer, basketball, hockey, horse racing, cycling, mountain biking, 4x4 driving and trekking are all popular pastimes that are well catered for. In addition, thrill seekers have 2,000 rock-climbing routes to pick from and the chance to zipline between cliffs.

Not all visitors to Malta are interested in adventure, however — a considerable number

type of tourist when it comes to accommodation, with some of the more unforgettable examples being old palaces and villas that have been lovingly restored into boutique hotels to provide guests with the best of modern comforts and luxuries.

That heterogeneity of hospitality offerings, combined with the islands' seemingly endless variety of incredibly romantic landscapes and venues, mean that Malta is an ideal location to hold the perfect wedding — whether a couple is looking for a simple beach-based ceremony, a flamboyant celebration in a historic castle or anything in between.

Like all other visitors to the islands, be they solo travelers, families, friends or business people, couples choosing Malta as a destination will find its unique blend of natural beauty, heritage, diverse attractions and warm, welcoming population make the Mediterranean nation an unparalleled location that deserves exploration.

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Clayton Bartolo, Minister for Tourism

ed annual roundup of must-visit destinations on the basis of their topicality, unique experiences and wow factor, as well as their commitment to sustainability, community and diversity — noted that "laid-back Malta is attracting more visitors from around the world, beckoned by its prehistoric temples, fantastic scuba diving and buzzy Valletta, its beautiful capital."

Carlo Micallef, CEO of Malta Tourism Authority, summarizes the universal allure of a nation that sits at the southern tip of Europe and has a land mass of just 122 square miles: "The perfect marriage of almost infinite experiences and opportunities, Malta truly has a wide appeal, with something for everyone and all within moments of each other. There is more to explore in Malta."

The first thing to be aware of when exploring the Maltese archipelago is that it consists

All three islands bask in around 300 days of sunshine a year and share an array of stunning landscapes, including lush green interiors, dramatic cliffs, golden-sanded beaches and hidden coves.

7,000 years of history

Over the millennia, the islands have attracted numerous civilizations to their shores — from the Phoenicians, Romans, Byzantines and Arabs, to the Knights of St. John, the Napoleonic French and the British, from whom Malta gained its independence in 1964. One of the country's many claims to fame is that it boasts countless well-preserved reminders of this rich heritage.

The oldest of its relics are seven awe-inspiring megalithic temples. Jointly recognized as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, they include two of the world's earliest freestanding monuments: the as-

Top 5 things to enjoy in diverse and hospitable Malta



History

From neolithic temples to WW2 bases



Culture

From 365 churches to modern art and music



Gastronomy

From family-run restaurants to Michelin-starred outlets



Activities

From world-class diving to rock climbing



Relaxation

From basking on the beach to luxurious spas

Enemed fuels Malta's economic engine

With the countdown to its tenth anniversary well underway, now is the appropriate time to recognise the success and progress of one of the nation's most important enterprises

Bearing responsibility for the import, distribution and wholesale of petroleum products, Enemed is key to the economy, as Kevin Chircop, Executive Chairman, details.

How do you see Enemed's role as Malta's downstream petroleum company and what are its key objectives and achievements?

Our primary role is to ensure the continuous flow of the nation's energy resources. While fuel may be considered a necessary commodity, it's our responsibility to guarantee that the country never faces a shortage or depletion of fuel supplies. We had our usual operational targets, but our top priority lies in ESG aspects.

We're conducting an ESG gap analysis and starting next year, we'll address the identified gaps. While we've always considered these three pillars crucial, we lacked a systematic approach. We aim to establish a comprehensive framework and commence implementation. Another goal is the redevelopment of a marine terminal for future renewable fuels.

Upcoming regulations will push the marine industry toward cleaner fuels. To enhance customer interactions, we're introducing paperless software applications for aviation fuel supply, streamlining operations.



Kevin Chircop
Executive Chairman, Enemed

rine industry, particularly bunkering, there remains untapped potential. However, our facilities require upgrades before we can effectively capitalize on these opportunities.

In terms of profitability, our primary focus has always been on maintaining price stability. We employ hedging strategies, particularly for inland fuel markets and diesel products used in the industry. We utilize financial instruments to ensure price stability, a policy that has proven effective for the past eight years.

This approach has allowed industries to plan and budget more effectively, helping them absorb market energy price fluctuations.

While fuel may be considered a necessary commodity, it's our responsibility to guarantee that the country never faces a shortage or depletion of fuel supplies."

Kevin Chircop, Executive Chairman, Enemed

How has this strong performance been reflected in your market share and profitability?

We command 90-95% of the aviation industry market share, firmly maintaining our leadership despite competition. In the inland fuel sector, we hold over 85% market share and in petrol, we're at 100%, while in diesel, we have an 85% share.

In these areas, further substantial growth is limited. Regarding the ma-

Is there any progress or innovation in your technology?

In recent years, we've undergone significant transformations in our fleet of fuel-carrying equipment which has ensured a reduction in our carbon emissions.

Regarding our infrastructure, over the past four years, we've invested heavily in several key projects. We established a new national distribution center at a cost of €85 million.



Enemed exists to ensure the availability of vital fuel supplies around the clock

And a final message for readers?

The notion that fuels like petrol, diesel and gas oil will be entirely eliminated is a misconception. Energy remains a vital requirement for developed and developing nations. While these fuels may persist, the focus should be on continuous improvement in their quality and the implementation of stricter regulations to curb highly polluting variants.

Organizations like the International Maritime Organization (IMO) are

already imposing stringent restrictions to promote the use of cleaner fuels. It's essential for the world to acknowledge that these fuels, although a necessary evil, will still be required. However, our collective efforts should be directed towards using the highest quality fuels available to promote a healthier planet.

Let's remain committed to evolving for the better and embracing change as our actions today may become obsolete tomorrow.



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powering your drive

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