So you think you know…Malta

Forget your misconceptions about Malta, it’s an island on the up, says Katie McGonagle

“IT’S MALTA, BUT NOT AS YOU KNOW IT. WHETHER YOU’VE NOTICED IT OR NOT, THIS TINY ARCHIPELAGO IN THE SOUTHERN MEDITERRANEAN HAS SET ABOUT QUIETLY REINVENTING ITSELF OVER RECENT YEARS.

FIRST HOLLYWOOD CAME TO STAY. RUSSELL CROWE, BRAD PITT, SHARON STONE, SEAN CONNERY AND MADONNA ALL RESIDED ON THE ISLAND WHILE FILMING THE LIKES OF GLADIATOR, TROY AND, MORE RECENTLY, CULT TV HIT GAME OF THRONES.

THEN CAME THE MUSIC. EACH YEAR SINCE 2007, THE ISLE OF MTV FESTIVAL HAS UNDERLINED THE ISLANDS’ TRANSFORMATION INTO A PLACE WORTHY OF ATTENTION WITH APPEARANCES BY STARS INCLUDING LADY GAGA, FLO RIDA, WILL.I.AM AND DAVID GUETTA.

WHERE THE STARS GO, TOURISTS ARE SURE TO FOLLOW, BUT WHILE SOME HOLIDAYMAKERS HAVE COTTONED ON TO MALTA’S MANY CHARMS – NOT ONLY ITS YEAR-ROUND WARM WEATHER, HISTORIC CITIES AND SENSE OF SECLUSION BUT ALSO ITS WORLD-CLASS DIVING, CYCLING AND SAILING – OTHERS ARE YET TO BE CONVINCED. THAT’S WHY WE ASKED OPERATORS FOR THEIR HELP WITH TACKLING THE OUTDATED IDEAS THAT MIGHT CONCERN POTENTIAL CLIENTS, FOR A FRESH TAKE ON MODERN-DAY MALTA.

• ISN’T MALTA JUST FOR OLD PEOPLE?
“NOT IN THE SLIGHTEST!” SAYS SUNSPOT TOURS’ ONLINE OPERATIONS DIRECTOR EMMMA BUGEJA. “STARTING IN JUNE AND CONTINUING INTO SEPTEMBER, MALTA HAS AN ARRAY OF MUSICAL EVENTS WHICH ATTRACT A YOUTHFUL AUDIENCE FROM ALL OVER EUROPE.

“FROM THE ISLE OF MTV CONCERT IN JUNE TO CALVIN HARRIS IN JULY AND EVEN THE LEGENDARY CREAMFIELDS IN AUGUST, MALTA HAS REALLY PUT ITSELF ON THE MUSICAL MAP.”

EVEN IF THEY HAVEN’T GOT TICKETS TO THE LATEST GIG, VISITORS SHOULD MAKE TIME FOR LAID-BACK COCKTAILS AND CHILLED-OUT TUNES AT LOCAL HANGOUT THE LIDO IN TIGNE BEACH, SLIEMA, ACCORDING TO BUGEJA.

THAT’S JUST ONE OF THE BUZZING BARS AND CLUBS THAT ARE HELPING TO DRAW A YOUNGER CROWD TO HOLIDAY IN MALTA. IT’S NO IBIZA – AND PROBABLY WOULDN’T WANT TO BE, EITHER – BUT BARFLIES WON’T BE SHORT OF STOPS AS THEY HEAD UP THE COAST FROM SLIEMA TO THE NIGHTSPOTS OF ST JULIAN’S AND PACEVILLE.

PRESTIGE HOLIDAYS CHAIRMAN AND MANAGING DIRECTOR JOHN DIXON AGREES: “THERE’S A LOT MORE TO MALTA THAN GREAT WEATHER AND TOP-QUALITY HOTELS. VALLETTA AND SLIEMA HAVE A STRONG CAFE CULTURE AND FANTASTIC RESTAURANTS FOR ALL BUDGETS, AND THE LOCAL WINE IS MUCH IMPROVED!

“AS FOR THE ISLAND ONLY APPEALING TO THE OVER-50S, THAT IS SIMPLY NOT THE CASE. IF YOU SPEND 10 MINUTES IN PACEVILLE, YOU WOULD KNOW WHAT I MEAN. IT’S PACKED FULL OF NIGHTLIFE APPEALING TO A YOUNG, LOCAL AND INTERNATIONAL CLIENTELE. ST PAUL’S BAY ALSO HAS A LIVELY NIGHTLIFE.”

• AREN’T THE HOTELS CHEAP AND CHEERFUL?
MALTA CERTAINLY OFFERS GOOD VALUE FOR MONEY SO IT CAN BE A GOOD SPOT FOR BARGAIN-SEEKERS, BUT ITS HIGHER-END HOTELS RIVAL ANY IN THE MEDITERRANEAN.

FROM THE ELEGANT PHOENICIA HOTEL AND EXCLUSIVE GRAND HOTEL EXCELSIOR, BOTH JUST A STONE’S THROW FROM VALLETTA, TO QUIRKY...
MY MTV: AGENT’S FESTIVAL VISIT

Jessie J, Rita Ora, Rudimental – it doesn’t get much better for music fans than winning a trip to see these headline acts at Malta’s Isle of MTV festival. That’s why Sharon Frame, assistant manager at Kuoni’s High Street Kensington store in London, was so delighted to win the top prize in Travel Weekly’s exclusive competition, courtesy of Malta Tourism Authority, to enjoy VIP entry to this year’s festival in June, easyﬂight tickets and three nights of luxury at the five-star Palace Hotel in Sliema. Here’s Sharon’s report from the trip:

“I had always wanted to go and see Malta, and I absolutely loved it. Isle of MTV was wonderful, though mental at the same time – I’ve never seen so many people! ‘Jesse J was my favourite – I wasn’t a huge fan before, but she was amazing live.

“We stayed at a beautiful hotel. The Palace Hotel had a boutique style with lots of cobbled streets around it, and a lovely rooftop pool and a nice restaurant, plus it was only five or six minutes’ walk down to the harbour. I was very impressed with Sliema – it’s got all the shops you need, but it’s also very beautiful as you walk along the promenade. We walked down to the harbour and had dinner on the seafront every night.

“Sliema would suit couples or friends travelling together, because it has quite a lot of bars and restaurants around the harbourside, and the food has quite an Italian inﬂuence.

“Since I came back, I’ve recommended Malta more to clients and colleagues – and I’m deﬁnitely going back to the same hotel next year, plus I’d like to go and explore more of Valletta. It was the perfect trip.”

bouquets or international brands such as the Westin Dragonara in St Julian’s and Radisson Blu in Mellieha. Malta has its fair share of luxury.

Half of Belvoir’s Holiday programme is based in four and ﬁve-star hotels, and the operator offers private transfers from the airport for clients booking half a week or more.

Refurbishment is also ongoing: the all-inclusive Seafront Resort & Spa in Mellieha Bay reopened this year with 492 modern rooms, six restaurants and a fully-equipped spa after being converted from a hotel.

Speaking of spas, this niche market is growing in tandem with the number of high-quality hotels, for which a wellness centre is now a must-have. Fortina Spa Resort, for example, invested £9 million in its facilities just a few years ago, giving it one of the largest spas on the island. It’s one of the top picks for Olympic Holidays among its 30 and 40-something customers, offering views across Marsamxett Harbour to Valletta, and a large spa complex with thalassotherapy centre. Commercial director Photos Lambriandes says: “The Fortina has an excellent reputation. It’s a great choice for couples – the hotel is really not for children – and as well as the facilities, it’s a great base from which to sightsee with Valletta just across the bay.”

AREN’T SANDY BEACHES FEW AND FAR BETWEEN? Malta isn’t famed for its beaches – the main coastal towns tend to have promenades or rocky shores – but there are stretches of sand if you know where to look.

The best beaches are clustered in the north, at Ghadira Bay in Mellieha on the northeast coast, and Golden Bay on the western side. There are a few fair hotels in these areas so beaches can get busy, but the upside is there are plenty of facilities and cafés – an essential consideration for families.

Emma Yorke, national sales manager at Belvoir Holidays, says the latter is her favourite, and suggests making the most of the fabulous waterfront schools based there for boat rides and activities such as parasailing.

Ghajn Tuffieha is next to Golden Bay and a pleasant spot for sunseekers, but young families might prefer to avoid it due to the steep climb down and occasional nude sunbathers.

Neighbouring Gnejna Bay on the west coast and Paradise Bay in the northern tip of the island tend to be a little quieter, while visitors to the south of the island can bag themselves a spot on the aptly named Pretty Bay in Broxbugs. Of course, it’s not all about the mainland: Prestige Holidays reports 18% of its clients choose a twin-centre holiday. Dixon says: “There is no need to stay on Malta. Its sister island Gozo is great for a day trip or as part of a two-centre stay. Much smaller and cleaner, it offers some gorgeous beaches, the best being Ramla Bay.”

“It’s also now possible to arrange two-centre holidays with Sicily following the launch of our specialist programme to the island.”

IS THERE ANYTHING TO DO BEHINDS THE SUNBATHER? There’s no excuse for being bored here, whether clients like to exercise their minds or bodies.

For the former, Valletta’s naming as European Capital of Culture for 2018 serves to underline its existing offering, as well as holding out the prospect of investment over the coming years in its historical and cultural heritage. That includes the Manoel Theatre, one of the oldest working theatres in Europe, built in 1731 by the grand master of the Knights of St John, plus the magnificent...
St John’s Co-cathedral, Cathedral Museum and the Palace of the Grand Masters, now the Maltese parliament. Belleair Holidays offers a pre-bookable Malta Pass with entry to more than 40 attractions from £23. Stepping outside the capital, fortress and former capital Mdina is an absolute must for anyone with even the slightest stirrings of interest in history ancient or modern, while those who prefer archaeology can check out Gozo’s ancient Ggantija Temples, which pre-date Stonehenge and the pyramids of Egypt. There’s no shortage of adventure, either. Malta, Gozo and Comino are home to some of the best diving sites in the world. The clear, gentle waters make it an excellent spot for beginners, while underwater caves and the number of wreck sites mean there’s plenty to keep more advanced divers interested. Specialist operators such as Dive Worldwide and Regaldive have a host of options. Venturing out into the countryside also makes for a pleasant pursuit, whether clients want a short trip (Attraction World has full-day jeep safaris on both Malta and Gozo, from £56 for the former, or £64 for the latter) or fancy a full-on activity-focused break. Hiking and biking are core to group adventure tours such as the Malta and Gozo Family Adventure from Exodus, The Adventure Company’s Malta and Gozo Adventure, and the Malta and Gozo Discovery tour from Explore, which comes with a Sicily extension. TW