



MALTA

READY FOR ITS CLOSE-UP

This film location deserves a starring role on your next Mediterranean escape

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Top left, Valletta's Marsamxett Harbour and the Cathedral of St Paul; below left, Popeye village; below right, the tunnel entrance leading to the St James Cavalier Centre for Creativity

1 Kings landing

Known as the Silent City, the beautifully preserved Mdina is Malta's former capital and one of its most atmospheric destinations. To stroll its narrow, honey-coloured streets, passing limestone buildings that have remained unchanged for centuries, is to feel as though you have wandered on to an enormous outdoor film set. It's no wonder that the grand Mdina Gate appeared as the entrance to King's Landing in *Game of Thrones* or that Ridley Scott used Mdina to capture the historical ambience of ancient Rome in *Gladiator II*. With almost no traffic and a pedestrian-first policy, exploring is especially peaceful. Arrive early or return at dusk, when the crowds have dispersed and local ghost stories – including one about a woman who beckons before disappearing into a wall – turn up the eerie charm.

visitmalta.com

2 Centre stage

Founded in the 16th century by the Knights of St John, Malta's magnificent UNESCO World Heritage-listed capital Valletta has become one of Europe's busiest outdoor film studios. Its compact grid of cobbled streets, colourful enclosed timber balconies, imposing bastions and magnificent baroque architecture – elegant palaces, hidden squares and the spectacular St John's Co-Cathedral, home to Caravaggio's masterpiece *The Beheading of St John the Baptist* – have provided the backdrop to many productions. The flower-filled Upper Barrakka Gardens offer sweeping views across the naturally



deep waters of the Grand Harbour (a lift connects the gardens to the waterfront) and towards the Three Cities, the fortified harbour towns that have watched over the port for centuries. Most days at noon and 4pm, the 16th-century Saluting Battery stages a ceremonial cannon firing. Afterwards, grab a coffee at one of the many cafes or browse in the boutiques.

whc.unesco.org

3 Gladiator fort

Few locations have appeared in as many historical epics as Fort Ricasoli. Malta's largest fort was built between 1670 and 1698 to guard the Grand Harbour and has since witnessed some of the island's defining moments, from Napoleon's arrival in 1798 to fierce aerial bombardments during World War II. Today, although it is closed to the public while restoration continues, the fort remains one of Europe's most sought-after film locations, providing the backdrop for both *Gladiator* films, Brad Pitt's *Troy*, *Assassin's Creed* and many others. Admire it from the Upper Barrakka Gardens or take a traditional dghajsa water taxi or harbour cruise: the views from the water are jaw-dropping.

ricasoli.com

4 Popeye village

When Paramount Pictures built an entire wooden fishing village on the cliffs above Anchor Bay for the Robin Williams 1980 musical *Popeye*, nobody imagined it would still be standing more than 40 years later. Today Popeye Village is one of Malta's most unusual attractions. The colourful cottages – including Popeye's original cabin – have been lovingly preserved and now house exhibitions, restaurants (yes, spinach is on the menu) and a museum filled with film memorabilia. Below, the shimmering bay is perfect for a summertime swim, with boat rides and inflatable water attractions adding to the fun. Staff even perform skits celebrating Popeye's spinach-fuelled strength.

popeyemalta.com

5 Island idyll

For a change of pace, venture beyond Malta to its sister islands, Gozo and Comino, which offer some of the country's most breathtaking scenery. Greener and more rural than the main island, Gozo is dotted with baroque churches, traditional stone farmhouses and sleepy villages. The se-

cluded inlet at Mgarr ix-Xini featured in Angelina Jolie's *By the Sea*, while local legend identifies Gozo as the mythical island of Ogygia, where the nymph Calypso detained Odysseus in *The Odyssey*. Just offshore, the tiny Comino is famed for the dazzling Blue Lagoon, whose crystalline waters make it one of the Mediterranean's most photographed seascapes. These islands have also appeared onscreen, including in *The Count of Monte Cristo*. Their dramatic coastlines are best appreciated from the water – whether by boat or kayak, exploring secluded coves and hidden sea caves before enjoying a long seafood lunch on Gozo's lively waterfront at Mgarr Harbour.

visitgozo.com

6 And, action

Each June, Valletta's Mediterranean Film Festival celebrates Malta's century-long relationship with filmmaking through talks, masterclasses, location tours and open-air screenings in stunning heritage settings, including the Upper Barrakka Gardens, with its panoramic evening views, and

