

# Malta gets a long overo

Good taste has put the island back on the map, reports **Paul Murphy**

BRAD PITT may have summered there last year while filming *Troy*, but many of us still regard Malta as a cheap bucket-and-spade holiday island. Which is ironic, as most of its coastline is bereft of sand and soon there will be no fewer than 13 five-star hotels — not bad for an island the size of the Isle of Wight.

Malta's most popular resort areas, St Julian's, Sliema and St Paul's Bay, lack both beaches and, until recently, sophistication. Build 'em high and sell 'em cheap was the policy, resulting in a glut of mediocre package accommodation and bars and restaurants to fit. Upmarket tourism was restricted to the capital, Valletta, with its Baroque architecture, and Mdina, one of Europe's best preserved medieval walled towns.

For older visitors Malta was the last great naval base of the Empire, complete with "Hello Sailor" trimmings. Strait Street, nicknamed "The Gut" by the British servicemen who once made this red light district tick, is a long, dark, narrow alleyway that cuts through the bowels of Valletta. When I was last here, five years ago, I was approached by a couple of weary looking prostitutes who looked as if they hadn't done much trade since our boys weighed anchor for the last time in 1975.

Post-millennium Strait Street is still a considerable way short of being a *des res* but it is a sign of the times that where once there were seedy bars and tattoo parlours there are now internet cafés and lively wine bars. And just around the corner, Malta's first Russian restaurant has recently opened, adding yet more cosmopolitan flavours to Valletta.

Top-end hotels are redefining Malta's resorts: the elegant Le Meridien Phoenicia in Valletta will soon have a sister, the Le Meridien St Julian's, opening this November. It will incorporate the late 19th-century Villa Cassar Torregiani, on the waterfront of Balluta Bay, just around the



The spectacularly luxurious Hilton Malta



Hotel Juliani: Malta's first boutique hotel

corner from St Julian's proper. The hotel promises a stunning façade of balconies for all rooms, drawing on the distinctive classical Maltese architecture of this area. It will also feature a contemporary Mediterranean brasserie with a menu created by a two-star Michelin chef, Michel Rostang.

In the neighbouring bays of St Julian's and St George's are five more five-star hotels, the most impressive the luxurious Hilton Malta, the anchor point of the up-and-coming Portomaso marina.

The five-star Radisson Hotel and Spa Resort will open at Golden Bay in 2005 and in Vit-

ALPIX



The gloriously Baroque architecture of Valletta. Top-class hotels

toriosa a five-star hotel is also proposed which will cater for "super-yachties" berthing at the Port Cottonera marina.

Back in St Julian's, I was hardly slumming it at the Hotel Juliani, Malta's first boutique accommodation. What it lacks in Corby trouser presses it makes up for with minimalist decor and the obligatory lobby water feature.

For real hydromania, however, book one of the new spa suites at the Fortina Spa resort in Sliema, opening in the autumn. This really is the new wave in spa and wellness resorts, being the first hotel in the world to offer full spa

facilities in the bedroom.

Is this the way Malta tourism is heading? I put the question to John Montague, director of the Malta Tourism Authority. "We have always had the history and the welcome, but we are realising the potential of what we have. Our spa hotels and diving sites are attracting a different type of guest. Last year Brad Pitt and Peter O'Toole were drinking in their hotel bar at 3am when the barman called last orders. Pitt offered his whole fee, \$10m (£5.5m), to buy the hotel and keep the bar open."

Now that really is a different type of guest.