

# colours of malta



travel and incentives

"The difference between the ordinary and extraordinary is the little 'extra' "- colours of malta

# The infamous St.John's co-Cathedral and Museum

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**St John's Co-Cathedral, Malta's most impressive church**, was designed by the architect Gerolamo Cassar. It was built between 1573 and 1578, taking over from the Church of St Lawrence in Vittoriosa as the place where the Knights would gather for communal worship. It was raised to a status equal to that of St Paul's Cathedral in Mdina – the official seat of the Archbishop of Malta – by a papal decree of 1816, hence the term 'co-cathedral'.

Visitors should dress appropriately for a house of worship. Stiletto heels are not permitted, to protect the marble floor.

The plain facade renders the interior even more of a surprise: it's a colourful treasure house of Maltese baroque. The nave is long and low and every wall, pillar and rib is encrusted with rich ornamentation, giving the effect of a dusty gold brocade. The floor is a vast patchwork quilt of marble tomb slabs, and the vault is covered in paintings by Mattia Preti illustrating events from the life of St John the Baptist. The altar is dominated by a huge marble sculpture depicting the Baptism of Christ, with a painting, St John in Heaven, by Preti above it.

There are six bays on either side of the nave, eight of which contain chapels allocated to the various langues (or divisions, based on nationality) of the Order of St John and dedicated to the patron saint of the particular langue. The first bay you'll encounter upon entering and walking to your right is the Chapel of Germany.

Opposite is the Chapel of Castille & Portugal, with monuments to Grand Masters Antonio Manoel de Vilhena and Manuel Pinto de Fonseca.

Next is the Chapel of Aragon, the most splendid of all. The tombs of the brothers (and consecutive Grand Masters) Rafael and Nicolas Cotoner compete for the title of most extravagant sculpture.

The last bay in this aisle, past the Chapel of Auvergne, contains the Chapel of the Blessed Sacrament (also known as the Chapel dedicated to the Madonna of Philermos), closed off by a pair of solid silver gates. It contains a 15th-century crucifix from Rhodes and keys of captured Turkish fortresses.

Opposite is the dark, moody Chapel of Provence, containing the tombs of Grand Masters Antoine de Paule and Jean Lascaris Castellar. The cathedral crypt (usually closed to the public) can be reached by the stairs at the back. Here the first 12 Grand Masters of Malta – from 1523 to 1623 – are interred. The reclining effigies include Jean Parisot de la Valette, hero of the Great Siege and the founder of Valletta, and his English secretary Sir Oliver Starkey, the only man below the rank of Grand Master to be honoured with a tomb in the crypt. Darker still is the Chapel of the Holy Relics (also known as the Chapel of the Anglo-Bavarian Langue), which contains a wooden figure of St John that is said to have come from the galley in which the Knights departed from Rhodes in 1523.

The austere Chapel of France, with a Preti altarpiece of St Paul, was stripped of its baroque decoration in the 1840s. Preti's painting, The Mystic Marriage of St Catherine, hangs in the Chapel of Italy, looking down on a bust of Grand Master Gregorio Carafa.

The first bay in the south aisle of St John's gives access to the Cathedral Museum, the first room of which is the Oratory, built in 1603. It is dominated by its altarpiece, the menacing Beheading of St John the Baptist (c 1608) by Caravaggio, which is the artist's largest painting. The executioner and Salome with her platter are depicted with chilling realism (note that the artist signed his name in the blood seeping from St John's severed neck). On the east wall hangs Caravaggio's St Jerome, another work of great power and pathos.

The rest of the Cathedral Museum houses some beautiful 16th-century illuminated manuscripts and a fine collection of Flemish tapestries based on drawings by Rubens.





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