



Maltese Icon

THE PHOENICIAN

| BY CHRISTOPHER KANAL

PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF THE PHOENICIAN

Malta's most revered hotel, that was a favourite of the Queen Elizabeth II, is a spectacular starting point to explore the ancient Maltese capital of Valletta, where history is writ large and small.

In the heart of the ancient city of Valletta is Malta's finest hotel. The Phoenix stands in front of Valletta's City Gate, the magnificent 16th-century bastion walls and Triton Fountain. This veritable Grande Dame of a hotel has breathtaking views of the city and harbours.

The Phoenix is a gorgeous luxury home-from-home from which to explore this fascinating, engaging and warm city. Within a short walking distance of The Phoenix is Renzo Piano's City Gate consisting of the Maltese Parliament, an open-air theatre set in the ruins of the old opera house. A few minutes walk beyond and you are in the ancient narrow streets of Valletta, once trod by Crusaders, and the harbour that connects to the luxury Three Cities and Sliema.

Valletta is a trove of history from its immaculately kept churches and chapels to its evocative gardens - Upper Barrakka Gardens - is serene any time of the year and of course the spectacular Valletta Waterfront at the Grand Harbour.

Built in the 1930s by the British, The Phoenix is an institution. Queen Elizabeth II once danced in the ballroom at The Phoenix. When the Hollywood blockbuster *Gladiator* was filmed in Malta in 1999, many of the cast, such as the late Oliver Reed and Joaquin Phoenix, stayed here.

OLD SCHOOL MEDITERRANEAN HOSPITALITY

A lift brought us up several floors. Our double room was at the end of a delicately decorated and nicely lit long corridor. Opening the door led us into the sunshine. The double room was decorated in classic Mediterranean design that does not stray from the rest of the hotel - simple white and cream walls with azure blue details and patterns with traditional Maltese tiled floors. The room had a terrace that overlooked the dramatic city and the hills beyond. The bed was roomy and very comfortable with big oversized goose feather pillows. There was an LCD TV and a complimentary mini-bar. The compact en-suite bathroom had a bath and shower with toiletries courtesy of The White Company. Two lovely touches were a pillow menu and a personalised hand written weather forecast for the upcoming 24 hours written on a card and left discretely every afternoon.

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THE PHOENIX RESTAURANT

The main lounge and bar area is the delightful Palm Court, a large oval space showcasing classic 1930s design. Blue and White decor matched with tall, majestic emerald coloured plants create a cool, airy Mediterranean atmosphere with a real touch of class. A great place to relax with a newspaper and take afternoon tea as many were on the day we arrived.

The Phoenix is the The Phoenix's fine dining gourmet restaurant. The night we dined an autumnal storm outside added a bit of extra drama and kept the pleasant and relaxed waiters on their toes. Malta has the best weather in the Mediterranean but we were told every October the weather becomes very unsettled for a few weeks. As driving rain and almost gale force winds drove hard against the ornate windows of the The Phoenix, we relaxed with glasses of the local sparkling chardonnay, Cassar de Malte. Very agreeable, dry and crisp, we were told by our waiter that Maltese refuse to export it as it is so loved. Wine production in Malta dates back over 2,000 years to the time of the Phoenixians.

We chose starters of a vegetarian dish of local Gozo asparagus wrapped in venison ham with smoked mayonnaise and quail eggs and another of tuna carpaccio, melons, ginger and rose vinegar. We were told that the tuna had been caught off the coast earlier this morning. The Asparagus was tasty and left us wanting more. The tuna was fresh and meaty and matched nicely with the sharp vinegar. The mains of local octopus, Nduja (a spreadable salami made from pork shoulder, belly cuts and tripe), samphire and french beans and veal ribeye, ricotta with tonka beans, pistachios with green beans were both delicious and filling and showcased contemporary Maltese cuisine. Both dishes were paired with local wines - The veal was washed down with La Valette, a fine medium-bodied red.







Afterwards we headed to the smaller wood panelled bar off the restaurant which felt like a member's club off the Mall. Snug and elegant with leather furniture and sepia photos of Malta's illustrious past, it retains an air of exclusivity but refreshingly without the stuffiness.

The Phoenician has a relaxed bistro with a terrace that overlooks The Mall serving good quality dishes and snacks at reasonable prices. There is a bar at the bistro run by affable, engaging staff.

Breakfast is impressive and will satisfy every palette. The buffet on offer includes ham carved directly from the bone. The anchovies and salmon was a treat as were the freshly made omelettes.

A DIP IN THE POOL

A meandering walk through the seven acres of lush gardens past ornate chess tables brings you to the pool area. A large infinity pool sits beneath the fortifications of Valletta and looks out over Marsamxett Harbour. The view is spectacular with the added bonus that this is the only heated outdoor hotel pool of any hotel in Malta. Friendly pool staff were at hand to serve from the outside cocktail bar. During the golden hour of the hot early evening we were there a fashion shoot was taking place around the pool with the dramatic skyline as a backdrop.



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Tel: +356 21225241 / Web: www.phoenicia.com
Superior double room from €200 excluding breakfast.

