

ON THE FESTIVAL SAIL



The laid back peoples of the Mediterranean coastline are always looking for an excuse to party, and thousands of festivals take place on the shores of this almost landlocked sea. **Thomas Cabieces** picks four of his favourites.

The Mediterranean attracts hundreds of thousands of yachts each year and the beauty of some of the coastlines and archipelagos is well known. However, what is often forgotten is that the coastline is made up of 21 countries and each of them is steeped in its own local culture.

While many dream of Cannes or the Balearics when thinking of Mediterranean festivals, the real gems can be found further eastwards. The different cultures provide engrossing backdrops to cultural festivals of international class.

For thousands of years until the Ottoman Empire in the 19th century, the eastern Mediterranean was home of great civilisations and an important trading route. The region is steeped in history and culture, with incredible architectural artefacts and traditional festivals such as carnival.

This fascinating culture can still be experienced at numerous festivals that should be added to any yachting calendar. Four particularly worthwhile events are the Malta Carnival, the Aspendos Opera and Ballet Festival in Turkey, the Epidauros festival of Greek theatre and the Tabarka Music Festivals in Tunisia.

Easter street celebration in Malta

Located between Italy and Tunisia, Malta is a mid-Mediterranean gem that gets far less attention than it deserves. Every year, six weeks before Easter Sunday, the streets of every town on the islands that make up Malta fill with singing, dancing and costumed revellers. As in Venice, Maltese carnival has always involved the wearing of masks so that your identity is protected as you wreak havoc and cause mischief.

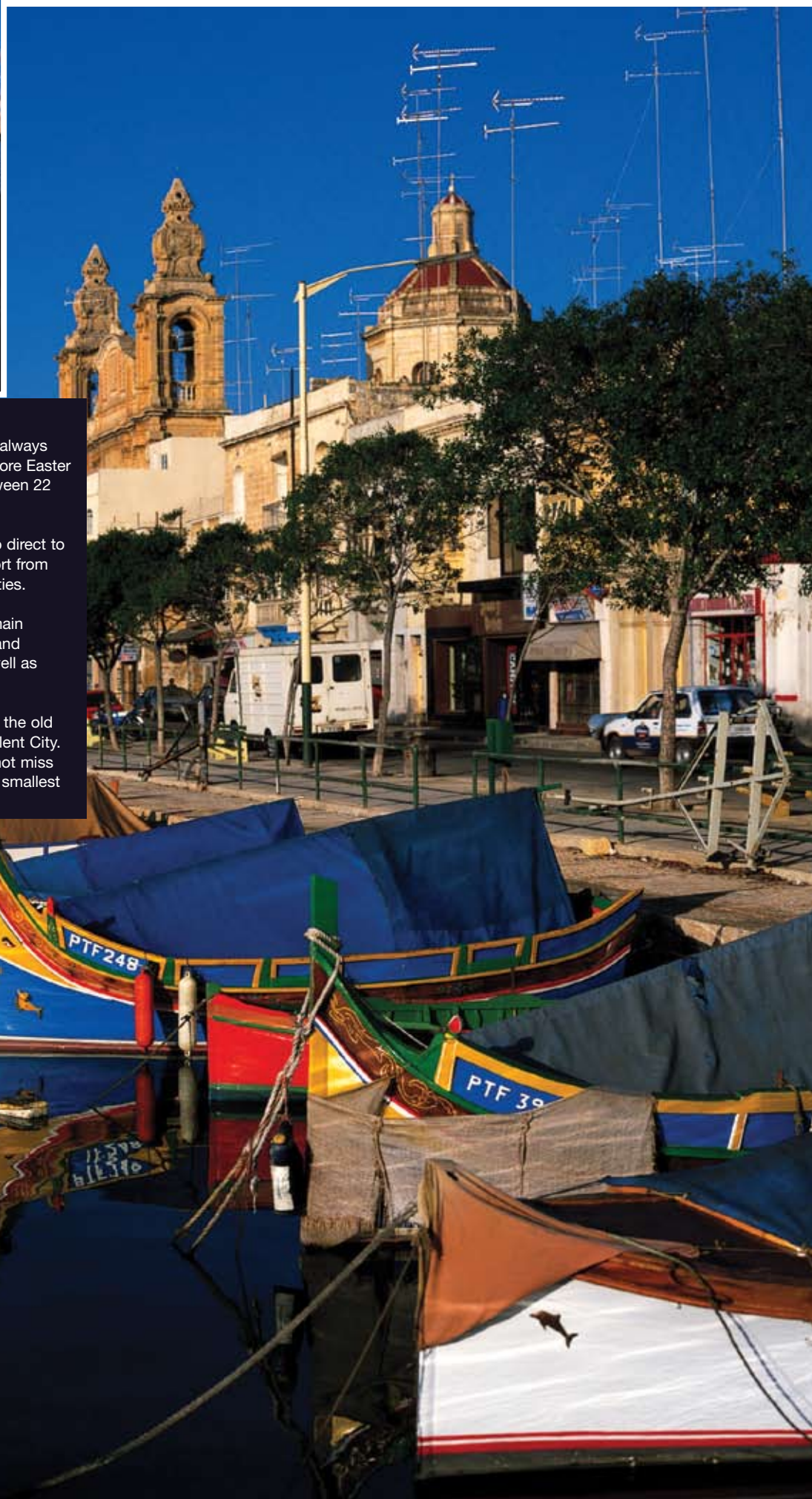
The festival is a great release, combining huge pageants with music and dancing in the streets. The festival begins with a sword dance representing the Maltese victory over the Turks in the 16th century, but the party soon gets started.



Carnival colour (clockwise from above): the opening ceremony of the Maltese carnival; sailing off the coast of Malta; traditional fishing boats in Msida Marina; the carnival parade



Photo credits: Malta Tourism Authority



MALTA

When: Carnival Sunday always occurs seven weeks before Easter Sunday, which falls between 22 March and 25 April.

Getting there: Flights go direct to Malta International Airport from most major European cities.

Marina: There are two main marinas, Msida Marina and Portomaso Marina, as well as Mgarr Marina in Gozo.

Don't miss: Visit Mdina, the old capital, known as the Silent City. If you are yachting, do not miss Blue Lagoon on Malta's smallest island, Comino.



The grotesque masks are works of art and the array of floats and costumes created by the local people put most festivals to shame.

Drinking is obviously encouraged, as are special carnival treats such as almonds coated in coloured sugar and the *prinjolata*, an Italian cake that for some reason is better in Malta.

The main celebrations take place in the capital, Valletta, but for something slightly darker, I would recommend Nadur on the smaller island of Gozo, where the masks are all the more grotesque and the carnival takes on a macabre feel.

The idea of remaining anonymous is taken seriously, to the point where residents won't talk to each other, which is why it is known to some as the Silent Carnival. The spontaneity of the costumes and celebrations due to the lack of an organising committee gives it a distinctly anarchic flavour.

Turkey's cultural high

It is thanks to the Ottoman Empire that Greek literature, science and philosophy still exists, and a reverence for culture remains deeply embedded in the Turkish mindset. The Aspendos Opera and Ballet Festival in Antalya is a celebration of some of the world's finest compositions.

The Aspendos amphitheatre is probably the best-preserved Roman theatre in the world. Unlike the Greeks, the Romans closed off their amphitheatres behind the stage, forming a sort of horseshoe with a seal on the bottom. This theatre was built in 180AD under the reign of the enlightened Marcus Aurelius and designed by the architect Zeno. It holds an astonishing 9,000 people. The seats rise steeply from the sandy floor and the views of the stage are wonderful.

The repertoire each year will be familiar to all opera and ballet lovers, and different companies from all over the world perform. These include the Antalya State Opera and Ballet, the National Opera of Greece and the National Academic Ballet Theatre of the Republic of Belarus performing works from Bizet to Verdi, from Tchaikovsky to Prokofiev.

Antalya is a great starting point for exploring the Turkish coastline, which is dotted with historical references to the Greeks, Romans, Arabs, Seljuk Turks, Armenians, Crusaders and Byzantines. With a coast lined with forested beaches and unspoilt fishing villages, such as Üçagiz on Kekova Sound, the region provides idyllic sailing.

Classically Greek

The names Aeschylus, Euripides, Sophocles and Aristophanes conjure up images of classical

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Discovering the past (clockwise from above): the Turkish coast offers sailors a wealth of exploration opportunities; ballet at the Aspendos Opera and Ballet Festival; a dazzling performance at the Aspendos amphitheatre

ASPENDOS

When: The festival takes place every June and July.

Getting there: Planes fly to Antalya International Airport, normally via Istanbul. The town is also served by a train service.

Marina: Turban Kaleici Marina.

Don't miss: The town has many ancient sites apart from the Aspendos amphitheatre and several interesting museums, including one of the best archaeological museums in Europe.



Photo credit: European Festivals Association



Photo credit: Rosino

GREECE

When: The Epidaurus festival of Greek theatre takes place every Friday and Saturday evening throughout summer from 1 June until 31 August. Tickets can be booked up to three weeks in advance from www.hellenicfestivals.gr, which also has details of all festivals in Greece.

Getting there: Epidaurus is approximately 40km east of Nafplion and 145km south west of Athens. You can

drive or take a bus tour from Athens. Most hotels can arrange tickets and transport.

Marina: Epidaurus does not have a marina, although there is a port at Nafplion, which may provide mooring facilities. There is, however, a good marina at Athens.

Don't miss: To make the performance even better, take a translation of the play, something warm to wear and a cushion to sit on.

Classic theatre: the breathtaking Epidaurus amphitheatre commands a stunning view

Athens, togas, the Republic, democracy and philosophy, and the Epidaurus festival of Greek theatre is about as close as you can get over 2,000 years later.

Set in the incredible Epidaurus amphitheatre, it is part of the larger Hellenic Festival across Greece and aims to recreate Ancient Greek theatrical classics as authentically as possible.

The Epidaurus amphitheatre is no reconstruction – it's the real thing: a breathtaking semicircle of 15,000 marbled seats cut into the hillside. It is just two hours from Athens where the ancient Greek soap opera of royal passion, conquest and retribution, both tragic and comedic, has been played out over 2,000 years.

It was here that Sophocles, Aristophanes and others performed their dramas around 400BC and the amphitheatre's proportions have inspired several modern auditoria, including the Olivier in the National Theatre.

The performances are in Greek, so get your hands on a translation before watching the performance, but the setting, surrounded by reminders of the powerful and poignant drama of ancient Greece makes this festival something special. It takes place every summer, which means it fits in perfectly with a sun-drenched wander around the Greek islands.

Nights in Tunisia

The south coast of the Mediterranean receives much less attention than the north, and unfairly so. Tabarka, on the north west tip of Tunisia, is a small town sitting at the foot of lush mountains. It fills to the brim with musicians over the summer, coming together for a series of music festivals that provide the perfect soundtrack to sultry evenings.

The Jazz, Rai, Latin and World Music festivals attract an amazing collection of artists from all around the world. Combined with North African artists, they produce a unique and exciting line-up. The concerts heave as Tunisians and visitors alike enjoy the sounds of greats such as Cesaria Evora, Randy Weston, Cheb Bilal and Buena Vista Social Club.

The coastline of Tunisia has seen the Romans, Arabs, Phoenicians and Genoese as its masters, which has left an interesting mix of cultural references. From the Genoese fort looming over Tabarka to the Roman colosseum of El-Djem further down the coast, as well as the Saharan desert below, Tunisia offers an ideal sailing stop. ■

Historically rich: Tunisia's coastline bears witness to the great Mediterranean civilisations

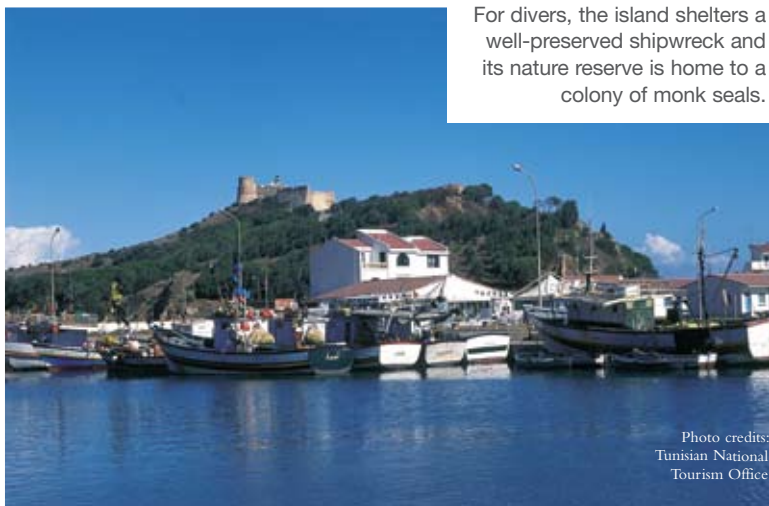


Photo credits: Tunisian National Tourism Office

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TABARKA, TUNISIA

When: The festival takes place between June and July.

Getting there: Direct flights go to Tabarka from the UK, Brussels, Milan, Paris and Zurich. It is about 170km or three hours by car from Tunis via Mateur.

Marina: Tabarka Marina

Don't miss: The La Galite Islands, 35 miles from the coast. For divers, the island shelters a well-preserved shipwreck and its nature reserve is home to a colony of monk seals.

