

## **Roll out the red carpet and drop a curtsy, the Grand Master's Palace is back!**

The Grand Master's Palace restoration project was Heritage Malta's biggest dream since its inception, an endeavour of unprecedented vastness, and the agency has fulfilled it to the letter, giving this splendid edifice a new lease of life, to be relished like never before.

Aided by national and European Union (ERDF) funds, the bulk of the project is now completed and the palace has reopened its doors, offering visitors an entirely different experience than the one they were accustomed to before. Suffice it to say that whereas previously only the Armoury and five State Rooms were open to the public, now visitors have access to over eighty-five percent of the building's footprint.

Built by the Knights of St. John in the 1570s, the Grand Master's Palace was one of the first buildings to be constructed in the new capital city, enlarged and modified over the years. During the British period, it served as the Governor's Palace and was the seat of Malta's first constitutional parliament in 1921. Presently, the palace is the seat of the Office of the President of Malta. It is also the most visited site in Heritage Malta's portfolio, welcoming between 200,000 and 300,000 visitors each year.

The project had been in the pipeline for a number of years, but actual works started on site around April 2019. A project of such massive proportions was not without its challenges. To name but a few of them, the Palace Armoury was set to be reinstated in its original location – the former Parliament Chamber; the corridors and the Uccelliera of the Piano Nobile were to undergo a major overhaul which was to include the restoration of all artworks adorning them; a visitor centre was to be set up in the rehabilitated former Casa del Monte and Orangerie; all State Rooms and the Office of the President were to be restored; and the Prince Alfred Courtyard called for complete rehabilitation with the removal of a number of accretions.

The restoration of the corridors of the Piano Nobile was among the first works carried out. These corridors hold within them the beauty of the soffit paintings which are Niccolò Nasoni's legacy, and polychromed marble floors worthy of the grandest cathedral. Following the soffit's dismantling, the ceiling above it was found to be in a very bad state of disrepair and could collapse any minute. Fortunately, a small part of the

original ceiling was found, spurring Heritage Malta to decide to rebuild the ceiling as it was originally constructed, with beams and 'xorok'.

In the meantime, several restoration works were started simultaneously. A temporary lab was set up at the palace so that work could commence on the soffit paintings. Eventually, these were hung back in place piece by piece in such a way as to make it easy for conservators to remove them and do the necessary maintenance work when the need arises. The marble floors were consolidated and restored with original materials. The walls, on the other hand, led to a journey of discovery, with no less than 16 layers of paint uncovered in some places. Their new coat is in a colour scheme similar to what Nasoni had in mind.

As for the Armoury, housing a collection considered among the world's finest, this has been returned to its original hall after nearly 50 years. A relocation that entailed extensive renovations of the hall as well as in-depth research thanks to which the present Armoury respects its various historic phases, including the colour scheme on the walls and the display of the artefacts.

Considering the complexity of the project and the various skills and techniques required, the project was subdivided into two different phases including a number of tenders and contracts. The main contracts involved the turnkey operation, one contract for each phase. Another two restoration contracts were also signed, one focusing on the Piano Nobile corridors, whereas another focused on the restoration of all the State Rooms. Concurrently, another contract was procured for the structural consolidation and waterproofing of all roofs.

Other smaller contracts involved the museums fit-out, audiovisuals, as well as the restoration, supply and installation of the damask which adorns most of the halls. Each contractor was expected to have key experts engaged, as specified in the respective tender, depending on the specialisations required for the job and in accordance to statutory requirements, in order to ensure the required level of professionalism in all operations.

On the client's side, Heritage Malta's multi-disciplinary project team was assisted by a contacted integrated design team, which included project managers, conservation architect, engineers and museum designers.

To date, the central government has invested around €40 million in the rehabilitation and restoration of the Grand Master's Palace, €18 million of which were co-financed via the European Regional Development Fund.

The Grand Master's Palace is open daily between 09:00 and 17:00. For more information visit: <https://heritagemalta.mt/explore/grand-masters-palace/>