

## SAINT JOHN'S CONVENTUAL CHURCH

The conventual church of St John personifies the multi-nationality of the chivalric Order of St John. It is also the prime testimony to the inherent religious and aristocratic nature of the brethren, and the final resting place of its illustrious Grand Masters and distinguished members. Besides the communal central nave, each of the eight langues had its own chapel in the flanking aisles.



### CONVENTUAL CHURCH

As the Knights' religious headquarters until 1798, St John's served as seat of the Grand Prior, the spiritual leader of the Order. He resided in the palatial residence on the right hand side of the church. The administration of the church was entrusted to a Chapter of ordained members of the Order known as cappellani maggiori.



Detail of gold gilt wall carving



### CONSTRUCTION

Built entirely of Globigerina Limestone, this church took four years to construct. Works were taken in hand in 1572, a few months after the election of Grand Master Jean l'Eveque de La Cassiere (1572-1581). It was eventually solemnly consecrated in February 1578. The lions displayed in the dome of each side chapel attest to the keen interest and contribution of the Grand Master in its realisation.

### LAYOUT

When completed, St John's was by far the grandest and most conspicuous building on the island. Designed by the Order's resident engineer Geronimo Cassar, it boasts of a 64 metres long and 20 metres wide nave roofed by a giant barrel vault divided in six bays. In turn, the side aisles are divided in a matching succession of chapels.

### FAÇADE

The façade manifests fortress-like qualities, in sync with the mood of the Order in the aftermath of the Great Siege of 1565. It is divided in five bays and is punctured by a large central door and two flanking niches. The projecting balcony dates to the 1660s. Solid and lofty bell towers topped by octagonal spires stand on either side.

### A WORLD OF WONDERS

Its interior is mesmerising. The dramatic ceiling painting by Mattia Preti, the gold gilt wall carvings, the intricate inlaid marble flooring and the imposing monuments of the Grand Masters have no parallels in the central Mediterranean. St John's is also home to other priceless works of art, including the outstanding beheading by Caravaggio and the majestic tapestries based on cartoons by Peter Paul Rubens.

### CO-CATHEDRAL

Following the ousting of the Knights, Bishop Vincenzo Labini (1780-1807) claimed the church, and Napoleon Bonaparte decreed that St John's was to serve as the Co-Cathedral and be under the spiritual responsibility of the Bishop.