

Malta

HIGHLIGHTS

- **Valletta** Immerse yourself in the history and sights of the pint-sized capital (p757)
- **Beaches** Discover how Malta earned a reputation for beachside holidays (p763)
- **Festas** Toast a patron saint amid an infectious mix of music, food and fireworks (p764)
- **Mdina** Step back in time in the silent streets of this elegant town (p761)
- **Best journey** Head to Gozo (p762) to experience its slower pace, and maybe even learn to scuba dive (p763)

FAST FACTS

- **Area** 316 sq km (double the size of Liechtenstein)
- **ATMs** Widespread
- **Budget** Lm15 per day
- **Capital** Valletta
- **Country code** ☎ 356, international access code ☎ 00
- **Head of State** President Dr Edward Fenech Adami
- **Famous for** Knights of St John, WWII heroism
- **Languages** Malti, English
- **Money** Maltese lira (Lm); A\$1 = Lm0.25, CA\$1 = Lm0.30; €1 = Lm0.43; ¥100 = Lm0.30; NZ\$1 = Lm0.21; UK£1 = Lm0.63; US\$1 = Lm0.34; Malta plans to adopt the euro in January 2008



- **Phrases** *merħba* (hello), *saħħa* (goodbye), *grazzi* (thanks)
- **Population** 400,000
- **Time** GMT/UTC + 1
- **Visas** Not needed for most visitors for stays of up to three months.

TRAVEL HINTS

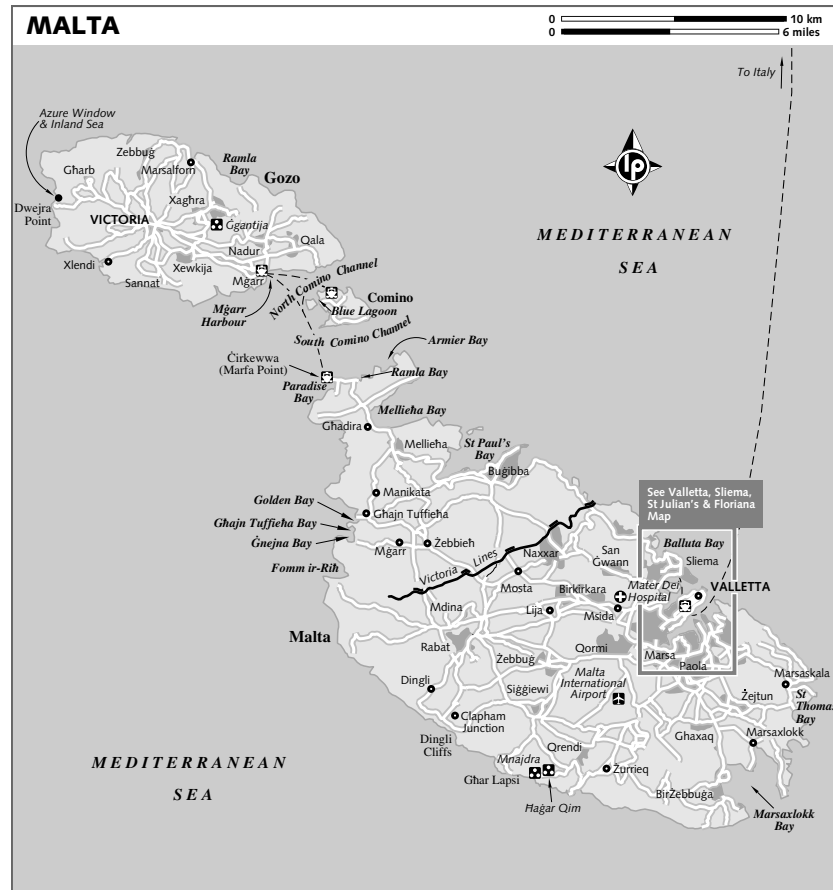
Get around on the big old buses, and sate your hunger with cheap *pastizzi* (pastries filled with ricotta cheese or mushy peas).

ROAMING MALTA

Soak up the history of Valletta and Mdina, check out the ancient temples, go diving and chill out on Gozo.

From its North African and Arabic influences (listen carefully to the local language) to the Sicilian-inspired cuisine, Malta is a microcosm of the Mediterranean. Few European countries have such concentrated history, architecture and, yes, beaches in so tiny an area.

There's been an eclectic mix of influences and a roll-call of rulers over the centuries, but be in no doubt: Malta is not just a notional outpost of Italy or a relic of colonial Britain. This island nation (all 316 sq km of it, comprising the islands of Malta, Gozo and Comino) has a quirky character all of its own. From prehistoric temples to baroque architecture, feasts of rabbit to festas of noisy fireworks, rattling buses to colourful fishing boats, this nation has loads of unique charm.



HISTORY

Malta's oldest monuments are the mysterious megalithic temples at Ġgantija near Xagħram on Gozo, and Haġar Qim and Mnajdra on the southwest coast of the main island. Built between 3800 and 2500 BC, they're the world's oldest surviving freestanding structures. From around 800 to 218 BC, Malta was colonised by the Phoenicians and Carthaginians, and then became part of the Roman Empire. In AD 60 St Paul was shipwrecked on the island, where (according to folklore) he converted the islanders to Christianity. Arabs arrived in 870 and had a considerable influence on agriculture and language. Afterwards came a succession of Normans, Angevins (French), Aragonese and Castilians (Spanish).

In 1530 the islands were given to the Knights of the Order of St John, a religious crusader organisation founded in Jerusalem. The Knights expelled invading Turks in 1565 and were considered 'saviours of Europe'. Soon afterward, though, the order declined and surrendered to Napoleon in 1798 without a fight. The British helped liberate the island in 1800 and began to develop Malta into a major naval base. The new member of the British Empire suffered greatly from WWII bombing.

In 1947 the devastated island was given a measure of self-government. The country gained independence in 1964, and became a republic in 1974. In 2004 Malta joined the EU, and plans to introduce the euro as its currency in January 2008.

READING UP

Ernie Bradford writes well about Malta in crisis. *The Great Siege* is a page-turning account of the epic 1565 battle between the Ottoman Turks and the Knights of St John. In Bradford's *Siege: Malta 1940-1943*, the role of the bad guys is played by the bomb-dropping Italians and Germans in WWII.

THE CULTURE

Malta is Europe's most densely populated country. The population is around 400,000, with most living in the satellite towns around Valletta, Sliema and the Grand Harbour; approximately 30,000 live on Gozo, while Comino's permanent population is only four. More than 95% of the population is Maltese-born.

Despite an easy blend of Mediterranean and British culture, there's still a strong feeling of tradition. Around 98% of the population is Roman Catholic. Businesses are closed on Sunday, and abortion and divorce are illegal.

ENVIRONMENT

The Maltese archipelago consists of three inhabited islands: Malta, Gozo and Comino. They lie in the middle of the Mediterranean, south of Sicily, east of Tunisia and north of Libya. These densely populated islands feature no major hills and little greenery to soften the stony, sun-bleached landscape. There is virtually no surface water and no permanent creeks or rivers.

TRANSPORT

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

Malta is well connected to Europe and North Africa. All flights arrive at and depart from **Malta International Airport** (MLA; ☎ 2124 9600; www.maltairport.com) at Luqa, 8km south of Valletta. The Maltese national airline is **Air Malta** (code KM; ☎ 2169 0890; www.airmalta.com; Misrah il-Helsien, Valletta).

Budget carriers **Ryanair** (code FR; www.ryanair.com) and **Germanwings** (code 4U; www.germanwings.com) have announced their intention to fly to/from Malta from early 2007.

Boat

Malta has regular sea links with Italy. You can also sail from Tunis to Malta (but not from Malta direct to Tunis).

Virtu Ferries (www.virtuferries.com) Malta (☎ 2122 8777); Catania (☎ 095-535 7111); Pozzallo (☎ 0932-954 062) runs fast catamaran services to/from Sicily (Catania and Pozzallo). The Pozzallo-Malta crossing operates year-round (€81/99 one way/return from Pozzallo, Lm26/35 one way/return from Malta, 90 minutes).

Ma.Re.Si Shipping (☎ 2123 3127; www.smstravel.net, click on Ferries) operates between Catania and Malta (Lm20/35 one way/return, 12 hours, weekly), and between Malta and Reggio di Calabria (Lm25/45 one way/return, 15 hours, weekly).

Grimaldi Ferries (☎ 2122 6873; www.grimaldi-ferries.com) operates a weekly service from Salerno, south of Naples, calling in at Tunis en route to Malta (ie Salerno-Tunis-Malta-Salerno). Similarly, **Grandi Navi Veloci** (☎ 2569 1600; www.gnv.it) operates a weekly Genoa-Tunis-Malta-Genoa service.

GETTING AROUND

Boat

Gozo Channel Company (☎ 2158 0435; www.gozochannel.com) runs regular car-ferry services between Ċirkewwa (northern Malta) and Mgarr (Gozo), with crossings every 45 to 75 minutes from 6am to around 10pm, and every two hours throughout the night (Lm2 per person, car including driver Lm6.75, 25 minutes). Bus 45 runs regularly from Valletta to Ċirkewwa to connect with the ferry; bus 25 runs between Victoria and Mgarr.

The **Marsamxetto ferry service** (☎ 2146 3862) crosses frequently between Valletta and Sliema (Lm0.40, five minutes). Arrival and departure points are at the Strand in Sliema and at the end of Triq San Marku in north-west Valletta.

Bus

Malta and Gozo are served by buses run by the **Malta Public Transport Association** (ATP; ☎ 2125 0007/8; www.atp.com.mt). Most of Malta's services originate from the chaotic City Gate terminus, just outside Valletta's fortifications. Fares are cheap – from Lm0.20 to Lm0.50 (be sure to

DEPARTURE TAX

All passengers leaving Malta by sea are required to pay a Lm7 departure tax, which should be added by the travel agent when you buy your ticket.

EMERGENCY NUMBERS

For all emergencies (police, fire, ambulance), call ☎ 112.

have small change for the driver when you board). Services are regular and the more popular routes run till 11pm. Ask at an ATP kiosk or tourist office for a free timetable.

On Gozo, the bus terminus is in Victoria, just south of Triq ir-Repubblika. All services depart from here and cost Lm0.20.

Car & Motorcycle

With low rental rates it might make economic sense to hire a car, but unless you're a confident driver it might not be worth the aggravation. Road rules are often ignored, roads are confusingly signposted and parking can be difficult.

All the major international car-hire companies are at the airport, and there are dozens of local agencies. Shop around – rates depend on season, length of rental, and size and make of car. Daily rates for the smallest vehicles start from around Lm8.

Taxi

Official taxis are metered but generally expensive. **Wembley Motors** (☎ 2137 4141) offers a 24-hour service.

VALLETTA

pop 7000

When Unesco granted World Heritage listing to Valletta, it called Malta's wee capital 'one of the most concentrated historic areas in the world', and the city is certainly renowned for its massive fortifications and architectural excellence. Activity bustles around Triq ir-Repubblika and Triq il-Merkanti, but walk the quiet, narrow back streets to get a feel for everyday life. The city overlooks the impressive Grand Harbour to the southeast and Marsamxett Harbour to the northwest.

INFORMATION

Bank of Valletta (cnr Triq ir-Repubblika & Triq San Ġ)

Police Station (☎ 2122 5495; Triq Nofs in-Nhar)

Post office (Pjazza Kastilja)

Royal Pharmacy (☎ 2123 4321; 271 Triq ir-Repubblika)

St Luke's Hospital (☎ 2124 1251; Gwardamanġġ)

About 3km southwest of Valletta. Note that a new hospital, Mater Dei, is scheduled to open in Tal-Qroqq (near the University of Malta) in late 2007.

Tourist Office Malta International Airport (☎ 2369 6073; ☎ 10am-9pm); Valletta (☎ 2123 7747; Misrah il-Helsien ☎ 8.30am-6pm Mon-Sat, 8.30am-2pm Sun, closed public holidays) In the City Arcade on the right as you enter through City Gate.

TravelEx (20 Triq ir-Repubblika) Currency exchange.

Ziffa (194 Triq id-Dejqa; per hr Lm1; ☎ 9am-11pm) Internet access, plus good rates for international phone calls.

SIGHTS

A walk around the bulky city walls features spectacular views – be sure to stop at the **Upper Barrakka Gardens** in the southwest for a vista that puts the grand in Grand Harbour.

Check out the breathtaking baroque interior of **St John's Co-Cathedral** (☎ 2122 0536; entrance on Triq ir-Repubblika; adult/child Lm1/free; ☎ 9.30am-4.30pm Mon-Fri, 9.30am-12.30pm Sat, closed Sun, public holidays & during services), built in the 1570s. Inside is the **Cathedral Museum**, which houses two magnificent works by the Italian painter Caravaggio.

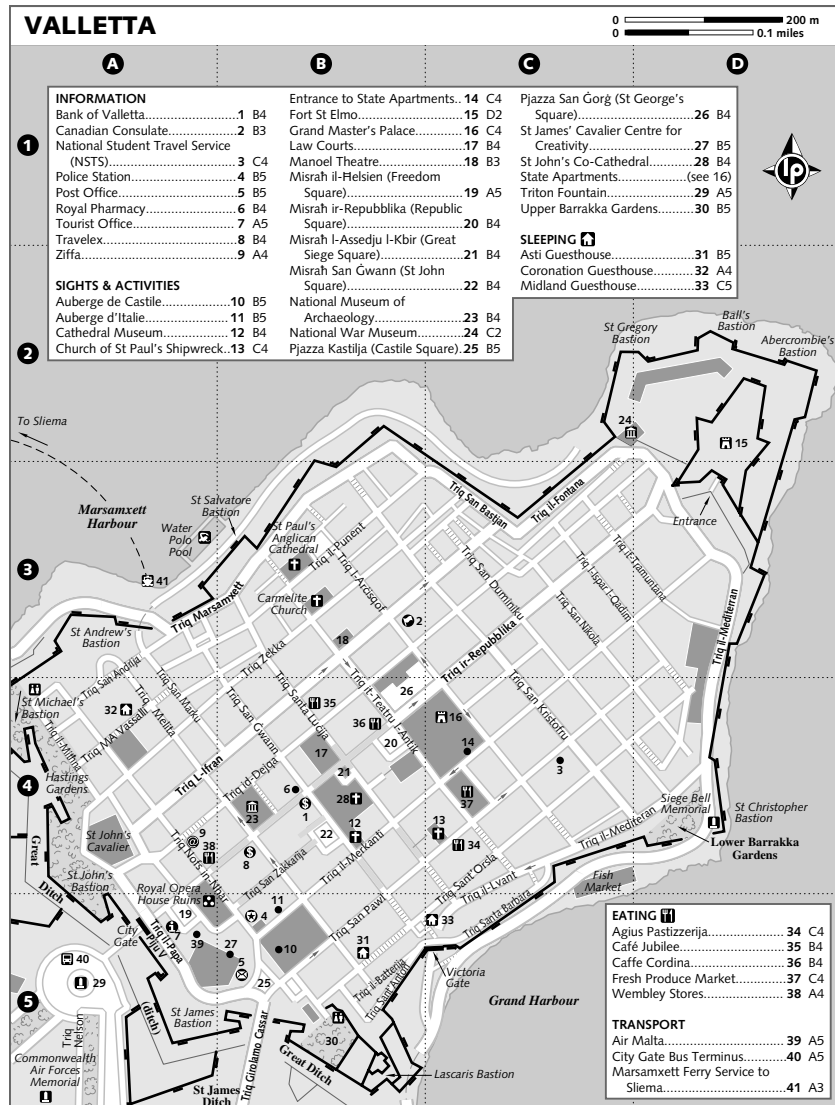
The 16th-century **Grand Master's Palace** (Pjazza San Ġ) is now the seat of the Maltese parliament. From the public entrance on Triq il-Merkanti, it's possible to visit the **State Apartments** (☎ 2124 9349; adult/child Lm2/0.50; ☎ 10am-4pm Fri-Wed), full of works of art. The apartments are closed when official state visits take place.

At the **National Museum of Archaeology** (☎ 2122 1623; Triq ir-Repubblika; adult/child Lm1/0.25; ☎ 9am-5pm) you can admire beautiful objects that have been found at Malta's prehistoric sites – check out the intriguing female figurines (the so-called 'fat ladies').

GETTING INTO TOWN

The airport is 8km south of Valletta. Bus 8 runs between the City Gate bus terminus and the airport (Lm0.20, half-hourly). The bus leaves from outside the departure hall at the airport.

Ferries from Italy dock at the Sea Passenger Terminal beside Pinto Wharf in Floriana, southwest of Valletta. Public transport links from here are poor – you can either catch a taxi (Lm4/7 to Valletta/Sliema) or make the steep 15-minute climb to Valletta. If you walk, follow the waterfront northeast, under the Lascaris Bastion, then veer left and climb the steps up at Victoria Gate.



At the furthest point of Valletta is **Fort St Elmo**, built in 1552 by the Knights of St John and generally closed to the public. Next to the fort, the informative **National War Museum** (☎ 2122 2430; adult/child Lm1/0.25; ☎ 9am-5pm) commemorates Malta's heroic involvement in WWII. The entrance to the museum is from Triq il-Fontana.

Built in 1731, the beautiful **Manoel Theatre** (☎ 2124 2977; www.teatrumanoel.com.mt; 115 Triq it-Teatru l-Antik; theatre tours Lm1.70; ☎ tours 10.30am, 11.30am & 2.30pm Mon-Fri, 1.30pm Sat) is one of the oldest theatres in Europe. There's a varied programme of events October to May, or you can take a guided tour to see the baroque auditorium. The transformed 16th-century **St James' Cavalier**

Centre for Creativity (www.sjcv.org; Triq Nofs in-Nhar) now houses exhibition spaces, a theatre and an art-house cinema.

SLEEPING, EATING & DRINKING

Asti Guesthouse (☎ 2123 9506; http://mol.net.mt/ast; 18 Triq Sant'Orsla; B&B per person from Lm7) Old-school Valletta allure, plus the best-value accommodation in town. Asti has a charming host, simple, spacious rooms, and spotless shared bathrooms. Breakfast is served in a vaulted dining room under a chandelier.

Standby options include **Coronation Guesthouse** (☎ 2123 7652; 10E Triq M A Vasalli; B&B per person Lm5-6), a cheap and cheerful place with shared bathrooms, and **Midland Guesthouse** (☎ 2123 6024; 255 Triq Sant'Orsla), with decent rooms with shared bathroom, close to Grand Harbour.

Agus Pastizzerija (273 Triq San Pawl; pastries from Lm0.07; ☎ from 7am Mon-Sat) Traditional *pastizzi* and other snacks available at rock-bottom prices from this hole-in-the-wall place.

Café Jubilee (☎ 2125 2332; 125 Triq Santa Lucija; snacks & meals Lm0.90-3; ☎ 8-1am) Low lighting, cosy nooks and poster-plastered walls feature at feel-good Jubilee. Drop in any time for coffee and a *pastizzi*, a lunchtime baguette, cheap pasta dinner or late-night vino.

Caffe Cordina (☎ 2123 4385; 244 Triq ir-Repubblika; snacks & light meals Lm1-4; ☎ breakfast & lunch) An institution, established in 1837 and offering great people-watching on a bustling square. Perfect for coffee, snacks and decadent sweets.

Wembley Stores (305 Triq ir-Repubblika; ☎ 7.15am-7pm Mon-Sat) stocks groceries and there's a **fresh produce market** (Triq il-Merkant; ☎ 7am-1pm Mon-Sat) behind the Grand Master's Palace.

There are a couple of low-key bars on Triq Nofs in-Nhar, but if you're after something brighter, head to Paceville (see p761).

GETTING THERE & AWAY

The City Gate bus terminus has services to all parts of the island, and there's a convenient ferry service to Sliema (see p1207).

AROUND MALTA

SLIEMA, ST JULIAN'S & PACEVILLE

The cool kids of Malta flock to Sliema, St Julian's and Paceville to promenade, eat, drink, shop and play. As well as being a local playground for the cashed-up, it's where many tourists base themselves, among the growing

DIY CAPITAL BUS TOUR

Fancy a cheap, quick, DIY bus tour of the capital? Bus 98 is a circular route departing from City Gate on the hour from 7am to 6pm. It does a clockwise loop around the bastions of Valletta and through Floriana, so you can take in harbour views, Fort St Elmo and the start of the new Valletta Waterfront area (encompassing Pinto Wharf). A complete circuit takes around 15 to 20 minutes; the fare is all of Lm0.15.

number of high-rise hotels, apartment blocks, shops, restaurants, bars and nightclubs.

Information

Magic Kiosk (cnr Triq ix-Xatt & Triq it-Torri; per hr Lm1; ☎ 10am-10pm) Internet access plus good rates for international calls.

MelitaNet (Triq Ball, Paceville; per hr Lm1; ☎ 24hr) Large internet café inside Tropicana Hotel. Also offers good-value rates for international calls.

Post Office Sliema (118 Triq Manwel Dimech); Paceville (cnr Triq San Gorg & Triq Elija Zammit)

Tourist Office (☎ 2316 0420; Palazzo Spinola, St Julian's; ☎ 8am-12.30pm & 1.15-5pm Mon-Fri) Enter from Triq Ross.

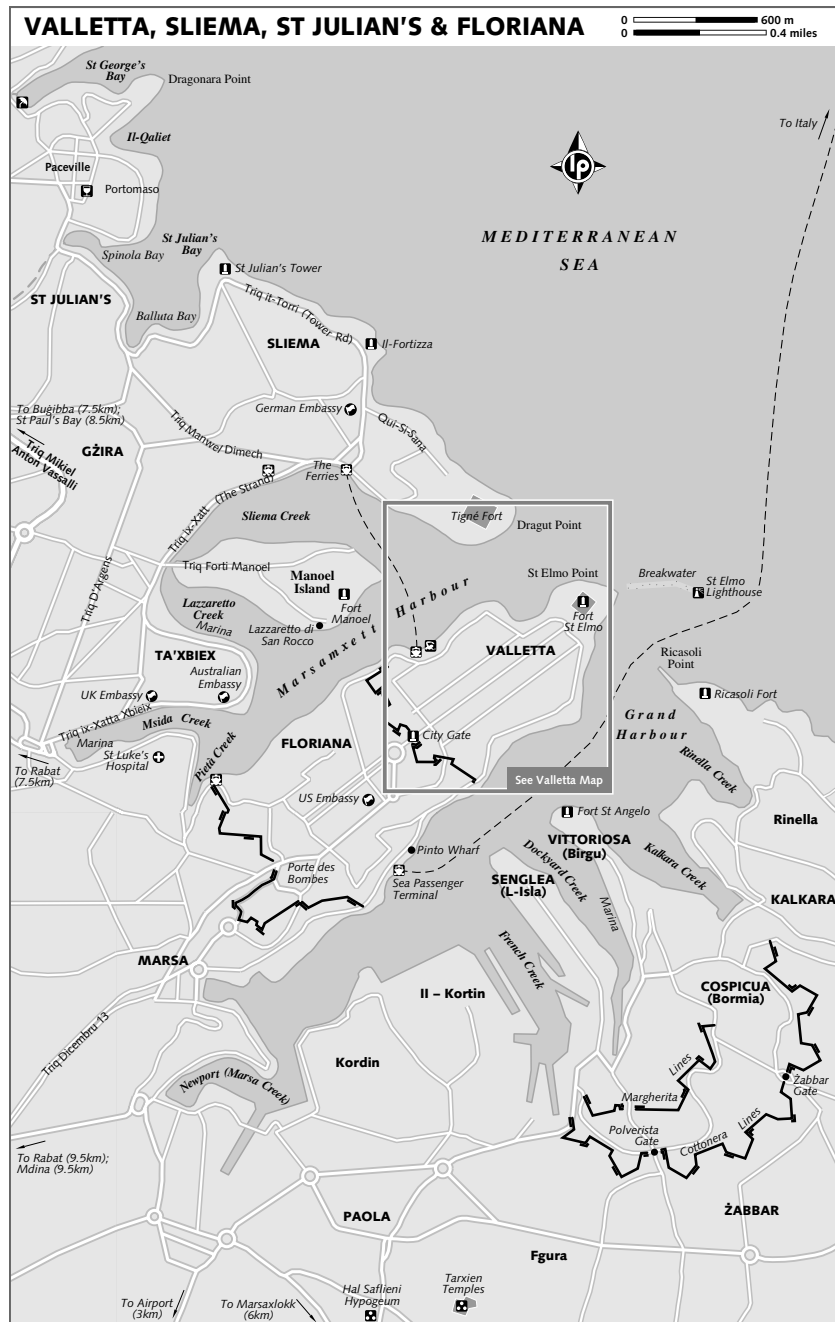
Sights & Activities

There are good views of Valletta from Triq ix-Xatt (The Strand), even if there's not much to see in Sliema itself. Triq ix-Xatt and Triq it-Torri (Tower Rd) make for a perfect waterfront stroll, with plenty of bars and cafés en route. **Beaches** in the area are mostly shelves of bare rock; there are better facilities at the private **lidos** along the coast, which include swimming pools, sun-lounges, bars and watersports (admission costs around Lm2 to Lm3 per day).

Captain Morgan Cruises (☎ 2346 3333; www.captainmorgan.com.mt) operates from the waterfront area of Sliema known as The Ferries and has a boat trip for every traveller's taste and budget, including a popular tour of Grand Harbour (Lm6.75). Shop around – there are lots of competitors along the waterfront.

Sleeping

NSTS Hibernia Residence & Hostel (☎ 2133 3859; www.nsts.org; Triq Mons G Depiro, Sliema; dm Lm3.70-5.10, tw studio Lm9-14; ☎) Malta's only true hostel. As well as dorms and the roll-call of facilities



(including cafeteria, TV lounge and rooftop sun terrace), there are studios (sleeping up to four) with private bathroom and kitchenette. From Valletta, take bus 62, 64 or 67 to Balluta Bay and walk 300m up Triq Manwel Dimech; Triq Mons G Depiro is on the left.

Comfort Inn (☎ 2133 4221; www.comfortinnmalta.com; 29 Triq tal-Katidral, Sliema; B&B per person Lm6-8.50; ☑) A budget gem in the heart of Sliema. This homy, family-run guesthouse offers spic-and-span rooms, each with en suite. On the ground level is a comfy TV lounge; on the roof a sun terrace.

Hotel Valentina (☎ 2138 2232; www.hotelvalentina.com; Triq Schreiber, Paceville; d Lm16-32; ☑) The colourful modern rooms at boutique Valentina aren't huge, but then neither are prices. The party-central location is fab, and facilities include air-con and satellite TV. A bargain.

Eating

This area is Malta's gastronomic heartland. Fertile hunting grounds for top eats include Spinola Bay and the sleek Portomaso complex.

Gigi's Concept Café (☎ 2135 9865; 23 Triq San Ġorġ, Spinola Bay; snacks & meals Lm1-5; ☑ lunch & dinner) Gigi's 'concept' is not that revolutionary, but it is mighty appealing: café by day, wine bar by night, then throw in some funky artwork and interesting décor.

The Avenue (☎ 2131 1753; Triq Gort, Paceville; mains Lm1.25-6; ☑ lunch Mon-Sat, dinner nightly) Cheap, cheerful and always bustling. Well-priced meat and fish dishes, plus huge serves of pizza and pasta, keep its many fans happy.

Paparazzi (☎ 2137 4966; 159 Triq San Ġorġ, Spinola Bay; mains Lm2.50-7; ☑ lunch & dinner) The sunny terrace here is a prime people-watching spot, with a fine view of Spinola Bay. Fight your way through the hearty portions on the cheeky, crowd-pleasing menu. Veg-friendly.

Self-caterers should head to **Arkadia Foodstore** (Triq il-Knisja, Paceville; ☑ 8am-8pm Mon-Sat) or **Tower Foods Supermarket** (46 Triq il-Kbira, Sliema; ☑ 8am-7.30pm Mon-Sat).

Drinking & Clubbing

The St Julian's and Sliema waterfronts have everything from chichi wine bars to traditional British pubs. Paceville is the place for partying, with wall-to-wall bars and clubs, especially around the northern end of Triq San Ġorġ. Paceville is jam-packed on weekends year-round (nightly in summer) – wander until you find something to your taste (or for

a more low-key night, check out the cinema and ten-pin bowling).

Fuego (☎ 2138 6746; www.fuego.com.mt; Triq Santu Wistin, Paceville) Get hot and sweaty dancing up a storm at this popular indoor-outdoor salsa bar. Free entry.

Havana Bar (☎ 2137 4500; www.havanamalta.com; Triq San Ġorġ, Paceville) Free entry, six bars and a menu of R&B-soul keeps the crowds happy here.

BJ's (☎ 2137 7642; Triq Ball, Paceville) An offbeat club featuring live music nightly (primarily jazz) and drawing a more mature crowd.

Axis (☎ 2138 2767; www.axis.com.mt; Triq San Ġorġ, Paceville) Malta's biggest and best nightclub (and one that's managed to stand the test of time) houses three separate clubs (commercial house is usually served up) and seven bars for over 3000 punters. There's usually an entrance fee.

Getting There & Away

Buses 62, 64 and 67 run regularly between Valletta and Sliema, St Julian's and Paceville (Lm0.20). There's also a ferry service between Sliema and Valletta (see p756).

MDINA & RABAT

Elegant, aristocratic Mdina (aptly nicknamed the Silent City) is perched on a rocky outcrop in the country's southwest. Fortified for over 3000 years, it was Malta's old political centre; today visitors can spend hours wandering the quiet, narrow streets. Rabat is the town settlement outside the walls.

Mdina's main square is dominated by **St Paul's Cathedral** (Pjazza San Pawl; admission free; ☑ 9.30am-11.45pm & 2-5pm Mon-Sat, 3-4.30pm Sun), worth visiting for the huge fresco of St Paul's shipwreck. Outside Mdina's Greek's Gate, **Domus Romana** (☎ 2145 4125; Wesgħa tal-Mużew; adult/child Lm2.50/0.75; ☑ 9am-5pm) is a museum incorporating the remains of a Roman town-house (from the 1st century BC) and featuring impressive mosaics.

Sleeping & Eating

Point de Vue Guesthouse & Restaurants (☎ 2145 4117; www.pointdeuemalta.com; 5 Is-Saqqajja, Rabat; B&B per person Lm10-12; ☑) Scores goals with affordable rates and a privileged position, just metres from Mdina. Downstairs from the large, spotless rooms (with en suite) are a café and restaurant with some unexpected African accents.

Fontanella Tea Gardens (☎ 2145 0204; Triq is-Sur; snacks & meals Lm0.20-3) Fontanella has a dazzling array of cakes (Lm0.80 per slice) to accompany the sweeping views from its terrace. Shame about the ordinary service.

Il Gattopardo (☎ 2145 1213; 20 Triq Villegaignon; light meals Lm1.50-4) The name may be Italian, but this charming gallery-café serves up a Greek-inspired menu in its shady courtyard.

Getting There & Away

From Valletta, take bus 80 or 81 to reach Rabat (Lm0.20); from Sliema and St Julian's bus 55 (Lm0.50). The bus terminus in Rabat is on Is-Saqqajja, 150m south of Mdina's Main Gate.

SOUTHWEST COAST

The views are fantastic from the top of **Dingli Cliffs**, south of Rabat. To the southeast are the prehistoric temples of **Ħaġar Qim & Mnajdra** (☎ 2142 4231; s-temple entry adult/child Lm2/0.50, both temples Lm3/1; ☎ 9am-5pm). Built between 3600 and 3000 BC, these are perhaps the best preserved and most evocative of Malta's prehistoric sites. Buses 38 and 138 run from Valletta to the temples (Lm0.50).

GOZO

The island of Gozo is much more tranquil than its big sister Malta. Fewer tourists venture over and, if they do, it's often on a day trip. The sights can be packed into one day but the island's real charm is best appreciated at a slower pace – visit the beaches, learn to dive, take a boat trip or simply relax.

VICTORIA (RABAT)

Victoria, also known as Rabat, is the chief town of Gozo and sits at the centre of the island, 6km from the ferry terminal at Mgarr. All bus routes originate and finish at the terminus on Triq Putirjal, about 10 minutes' walk from the Citadel.

Pjazza Indipendenza, the main square of Victoria, is a hive of activity with open-air cafés, craft shops and traders peddling fresh produce.

Victoria is crowned by the **Citadel** (also known as Il-Kastell, or Citadella), a miniature version of Malta's Mdina. A stroll around the Citadel offers panoramic views across the island. The **Cathedral of the Assumption** (Misraħ il-Katridral; adult/child Lm1.25/free; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Sat)

was built between 1697 and 1711. Entrance includes an audio guide. Call into nearby **Ta'Rikardu** (☎ 2155 5953; 4 Triq il-Fossos; ☎ 10am-6pm) for local produce chock-full of flavour. Order a platter (Lm3.60 for two people) and wash it down with Gozitan wine.

Gozo is a better option than Malta for cyclists as it is much smaller and quieter. You can rent a bike from **Victoria Garage** (☎ 2155 6414; Triq Putirjal, Victoria; per day from Lm1.50).

MARSALFORN

Marsalforn is built around a cove and is the favoured choice for tourists in summer, so it has decent facilities despite there being nothing to see in the town itself. You can hike eastwards a couple of kilometres over the hill to Ramla Bay in about 45 minutes, or west to swimming holes and salt pans.

our pick The best budget accommodation in Malta is found at **Maria Giovanna Hostel** (☎ 2155 3630; www.tamariagozo.com/hostel.htm; Triq ir-Rabat; B&B per person Lm6-8), a small, welcoming guesthouse just back from the Marsalforn waterfront. There are five rooms (two with en suite) with pretty, rustic décor, plus a living room and guest kitchen. For a small fee, the friendly owners can arrange all sorts of extras: laundry, home-cooked meals, taxi service, a water taxi to Comino etc. The hostel operates more like a guesthouse, with rooms rented out individually (no room-sharing necessary).

Cool little **Il-Kartell** (☎ 2155 6918; Triq il-Port; mains Lm4-5.50; ☎ lunch & dinner) is housed in a couple of old boathouses. The menu includes budget-friendly pasta dishes around the Lm2 mark, along with fresh fish, traditional dishes and daily specials.

Marsalforn is a 4km walk from Victoria, or catch bus 21.

XAGHRA

Xaghra conforms to the classic Mediterranean image of the tree-lined village square where old men sit and chat in the shade of oleanders. Close by are the megalithic temples of **Ġgantija** (☎ 2155 3194; access from Triq L-Imqades; adult/child Lm1.50/0.50; ☎ 9am-5pm), dating from 3600 BC. Along with the Ħaġar Qim and Mnajdra temples on Malta's southwest coast (left), these temples are the oldest freestanding stone structures in the world, predating the pyramids of Egypt by more than 500 years. The purpose of these structures is the subject of much debate; the best place to learn

about them is at Valletta's National Museum of Archaeology (p757).

It's not far from here to one of Gozo's best beaches. **Ramla Bay** has a beautiful red-sand strand perfect for sunbathing. Follow the signposts from town.

Xaghra Lodge (☎ 2156 2362; www.gozo.com/xaghra lodge; Triq Dun Ġorġ Preċa; B&B per person Lm0.50-12.50; ☎ ☎) has excellent facilities, including en suite, balcony and cable TV in all rooms, plus a pool and an adjacent Chinese restaurant. It's a five-minute walk east of the town square.

Buses 64 and 65 run between Victoria and Xaghra.

COMINO

Tiny Comino, once reportedly the hideout of pirates, now hosts boatloads of sun-seeking invaders. The island's biggest attraction is the photogenic **Blue Lagoon**, a sheltered cove with a white-sand seabed and clear turquoise waters. You can take a boat trip here from many resort areas in Malta and Gozo; hordes of day-trippers will sadly put paid to any desert-island fantasies.

Comino Hotels (☎ 2152 9821; www.cominohotel.com; half-board per person Lm17-28; ☎ Apr-Oct; ☎ ☎ ☎) provides the only accommodation on the island, but its prices don't exactly fit a shoe-string budget. The hotel runs a ferry service from Ċirkewwa in Malta and Mgarr in Gozo (Lm3.50 return). Independent water taxis also operate regularly to the island from these two ports; from Mgarr it's usually Lm3 return; from Ċirkewwa it's Lm4 return.

MALTA DIRECTORY

ACCOMMODATION

Accommodation is plentiful and the **Malta Tourism Authority** (www.visitmalta.com) can provide listings. There is one camping ground, but its shadeless grounds and remote location render it unappealing. There is a handful of hostels and an array of guesthouses that offer great value. Rates are significantly reduced during off-peak periods. The high season is generally June to September, as well as the Christmas–New Year period.

The **National Student Travel Service** (NSTS; ☎ 2558 8000; www.nsts.org; 220 Triq San Pawl, Valletta)

manages Malta's only true hostel, the Hibernia in Sliema (p759).

ACTIVITIES

The website of the **Malta Tourism Authority** (www.visitmalta.com) showcases activities available in Malta. Click the 'What to Do' pages.

Diving

Water babies are well catered for. Diving conditions are excellent: visibility often exceeds 30m and there's a variety of marine life. The Mediterranean's warm temperatures mean that diving is possible year-round. There are more than 40 diving schools; the majority are members of the **Professional Diving Schools Association** (PDSA; www.pdsa.org.mt). See also www.visitmalta.com/en/diving for details of dive sites, regulations and operators.

Swimming

The best sandy beaches on Malta are Gnejna Bay, Ghajn Tuffieha Bay and Golden Bay, all in Malta's northwest (bus 47 from Valletta or bus 652 from Sliema); and Mellieħa Bay in the north (bus 44 or 45 from Valletta, and bus 645 from Sliema/St Julian's). The best sandy beaches on Gozo are Ramla Bay (bus 42) and Xlendi Bay (bus 87).

There are some excellent rocky swimming spots on Comino (the Blue Lagoon) and in Malta's south (Għar Lapsi). Gozo has some good rocky sites too, including Dwejra in the west.

BUSINESS HOURS

Standard opening hours:

Banks 8.30am-12.30pm Mon-Fri and 8.30am-11.30am Sat.

Government museums 9am-5pm daily; closed major public holidays

Eating Noon-3pm and 7pm-11pm.

Shopping 9am-1pm and 4pm-7pm Mon-Sat; closed Sun and public holidays. Some shops stay open all day in summer, especially in tourist areas

CUSTOMS

If you're entering Malta from outside the EU, the duty-free allowance per person is 1L of spirits, 1L of wine and 200 cigarettes.

EMBASSIES & CONSULATES

Full lists of Maltese embassies abroad and foreign embassies in Malta can be found at www.foreign.gov.mt.

Embassies & Consulates in Malta

Countries with representation in Malta:

Australia (☎ 2133 8201; Villa Fiorentina, Rampa Ta'Xbiex, Ta'Xbiex)

Canada (☎ 2552 3233; 103 Triq l-Arcisqof, Valletta)

UK (☎ 2323 0000; www.britishhighcommission.gov.uk/malta; Whitehall Mansions, Xatt Ta'Xbiex, Ta'Xbiex)

USA (☎ 2561 4000; http://valletta.usembassy.gov; 3rd fl, Development House, Triq Sant'Anna, Floriana)

Maltese Embassies & Consulates Abroad

Diplomatic representation abroad includes the following:

Australia (☎ 02-6290 1724; 38 Culgoa Circuit, O'Malley, ACT 2606)

UK (☎ 020-7292 4800; Malta House, 36-38 Piccadilly, London W1J 0LE)

USA (☎ 202-462 3611/2; 2017 Connecticut Ave NW, Washington DC 20008)

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

Each village has a *fešta* (feast day) honouring their patron saint, and you can't avoid getting caught up in the celebrations. The streets are illuminated and the festivities culminate in a huge procession, with fireworks, marching brass bands and a life-size statue of the patron saint. *Fešta* season runs from May to September – but these aren't the only excuse to throw a party in Malta. The website www.maltafestivals.com lists what's on, where and when (including links to *fešta* dates and locations).

HOLIDAYS

New Year's Day 1 January

St Paul's Shipwreck 10 February

St Joseph's Day 19 March

Good Friday March/April

Freedom Day 31 March

Labour Day 1 May

Commemoration of 1919 Independence Riots 7 June

Feast of Sts Peter and Paul (L-Imnarja Festival) 29 June

Feast of the Assumption 15 August

Victory Day 8 September

Independence Day 21 September

Feast of the Immaculate Conception 8 December

Republic Day 13 December

Christmas Day 25 December

INTERNET RESOURCES

About Malta (www.aboutmalta.com) Directory of Malta sites.

Gozo (www.gozo.com) Gozo-specific travel information.

Malta Tourism Authority (www.visitmalta.com) Huge official site.

MONEY

The Maltese lira (Lm), plural liri, is divided into 100 cents (c). In English, the currency is often referred to as the pound. Malta plans to adopt the euro as of 1 January 2008; prices in this chapter are listed in lira.

Banks usually offer better exchange rates than hotels. There is a 24-hour exchange bureau and ATMs at the airport and at Pinto Wharf. ATMs can be found in most towns.

It's a good idea to round up a taxi fare or restaurant bill to leave a small tip. Shops have fixed prices; hotels and car-hire agencies offer reduced rates in the low and shoulder seasons (October to May).

POST

Malta Post (www.maltapost.com) operates a reliable postal service. Branches are found in most towns and villages; stamps are often available from hotels and souvenir shops. A letter or postcard sent airmail to the UK or Europe costs Lm0.16, to the USA Lm0.22 and to Australia Lm0.27.

TELEPHONE

The international direct dialling code is ☎ 00. To call Malta from abroad, dial the international access code, ☎ 356 (Malta's country code) and the eight-digit number (there are no area codes). Local mobile numbers begin with 79 or 99. For overseas enquiries, call ☎ 1152.

Card-operated public telephones are widely available; buy phonecards at kiosks, post offices and souvenir shops. Local calls cost Lm0.10.

VISAS

Visas are not needed for visits of up to three months by nationals of most Commonwealth countries (excluding South Africa, India and Pakistan), most European countries, the USA and Japan. Full details (and visa application forms) are on the website of Malta's **Ministry of Foreign Affairs** (www.foreign.gov.mt).

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