

Malta

From its historic North African and Arabic influences (listen carefully to the local language) to the Sicilian-inspired cuisine on its menus, Malta is a microcosm of the Med. In no other Mediterranean country will you find such concentrated history, architecture (and yes, beaches) in so tiny an area. It's perfect for travellers looking to take things easy for a week or so, do the rounds of the sights but not have to travel far.

There has certainly 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 diminutive island nation, comprising the islands of Malta, Gozo and Comino, has a quirky character all its own. From prehistoric temples to baroque architecture, feasts of rabbit or festas of noisy fireworks, rattling yellow buses and colourful wooden fishing boats, this speck on the map has loads of unique charm.

FAST FACTS

- **Area** 316 sq km
- **Capital** Valletta
- **Currency** Maltese lira (Lm), Lm1 = 100c; US\$1 = Lm0.34, €1 = Lm0.43. Euro to be introduced from January 2008.
- **Famous for** prehistoric temples, the Knights of St John, WWII heroism
- **Official Languages** Maltese, English
- **Population** 400,000
- **Phrases** *merħba* (hello), *saħħa* (goodbye)
- **Telephone Codes** country code ☎ 356; international access code ☎ 00



HIGHLIGHTS

- Take in the history, views, architecture and sights of the diminutive capital, **Valletta** (p537).
- Soak up some sun at the beach – choose between **Golden Bay** (p544) and Gozo's **Ramla Bay** (p546), or snorkelling at Comino's **Blue Lagoon** (p546).
- Toast a town's patron saint at a **fiesta** (p548), with an infectious mix of local music, food and fireworks.
- Step back in time in the silent streets of the graceful old capital, **Mdina** (p543).
- Bask in the charms of green, peaceful **Gozo** (p544), and perhaps even learn to **scuba dive** (p547).

ITINERARIES

- Three days** Start in Valletta for an overview of the country – wander the streets and soak up the history. On day two head to the Hypogeum (you'll need to have prebooked) before enjoying seafood in Marsaxlokk and nightlife in Paceville. On the third day visit Mdina and Rabat, then escape to a beach in the northwest.
- One week** As above, then on day four take a boat trip to Comino, followed by a couple of days on Gozo. Laze away your final day on a beach.

CLIMATE & WHEN TO GO

Malta is a year-round destination. Peak season is June to September, but it's best to avoid July and August, when it can get unbearably hot (35°C) and Malta is overrun with tourists. The ideal time to visit is in spring (April to June) and autumn (September and October). From October to May most hotels offer discounted rates (up to 50% below high-season prices). Winter weather is mild, but the Christmas and New Year period is busy, with room prices rising to peak-season rates.

HISTORY

Malta has a fascinating history and is crowded with physical and cultural reminders of its past. The mysterious megalithic temples built between 3600 BC and 2500 BC are the oldest surviving freestanding structures in the world, predating the Egyptian Pyramids of Giza by over 500 years. The best places to view them are on the south coast (p546) and at Xaghra (p546) on Gozo.

HOW MUCH?

- Room in guesthouse** Lm6-10 per person
- Bus trip** Lm0.20-0.50
- Cup of coffee** Lm0.60
- Day hire of sun lounge** Lm1.50
- One hour Internet access** Lm1

LONELY PLANET INDEX

- Litre of petrol** Lm0.50
- Litre of bottled water** Lm0.50
- Beer in bar** Lm0.50
- Souvenir T-shirt** Lm5
- Pastizzi filled pastry** Lm0.10-0.15

From around 800 BC 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 from North Africa arrived in AD 870 and tolerated the local Christians. The Arabs were expelled in 1090 by the Norman king, Roger of Sicily. For the next 400 years, Malta's history was linked to Sicily, and its rulers were a succession of Normans, Angevins (French), Aragóneses and Castilians (Spanish).

In 1530 the islands were given to the Knights of the Order of St John of Jerusalem by Charles V, Emperor of Spain; the local inhabitants were given no say in the matter. As soon as they arrived in Malta, the Knights began to fortify the harbour and to skirmish with Ottoman forces. In May 1565 a huge Ottoman fleet carrying more than 30,000 men laid siege to the island, but 700 knights and 8000 Maltese managed to hold them off. The Great Siege lasted for more than three months, with continuous and unbelievably ferocious fighting. After enormous bloodshed on both sides, help finally arrived from Sicily and the Turks withdrew.

The Knights were hailed as the saviours of Europe. Money and honours were heaped upon them by grateful monarchs, and the construction of the new city of Valletta and its enormous fortifications began. With fame

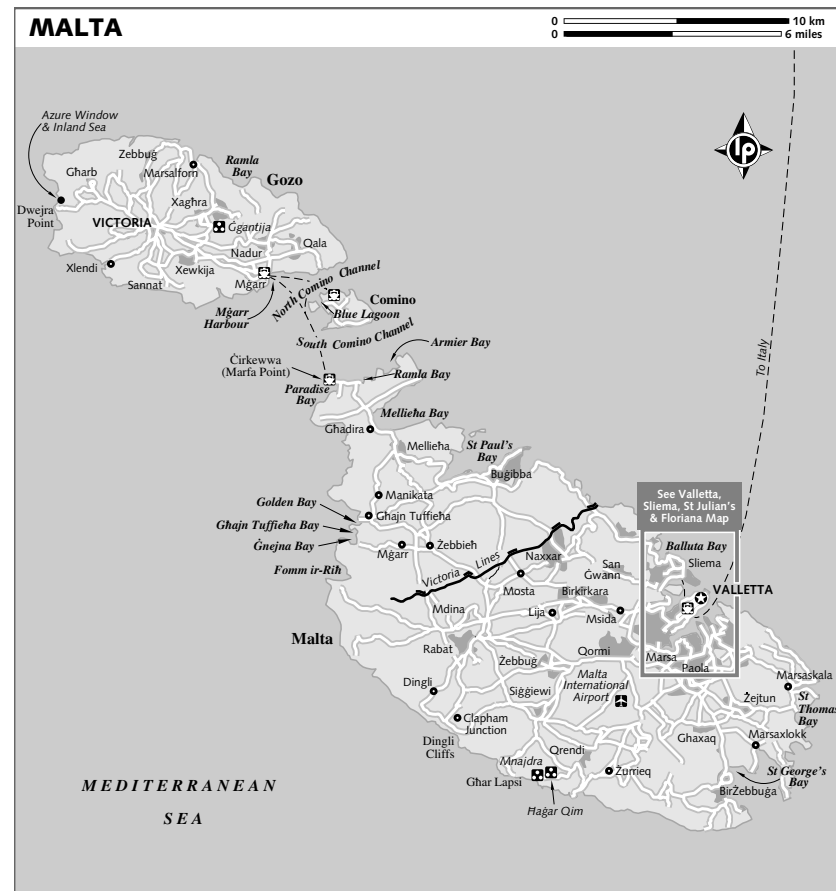
and power came corruption, and the Knights sank into ostentatious ways, largely supported by piracy. In 1798 Napoleon arrived, seeking to counter the British influence in the Mediterranean, and the Knights, who were mostly French, surrendered to him without a fight.

The Maltese defeated the French in 1800 with British assistance, and in 1814 Malta officially became part of the British Empire. The British developed Malta into a major naval base, making it an inviting target for the Axis during WWII. Considered a linchpin in the battle for the Mediterranean, Malta was subjected to a blockade. In 1942 it suffered five months of day-and-night bombing raids, which left 40,000 homes de-

stroyed and the population on the brink of starvation. Visit the National War Museum (p538) in Valletta for more information on this period.

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 recent decades, the Maltese achieved considerable prosperity, thanks largely to tourism – every summer the Maltese population triples due to an influx of tourists (and development continues unabated, much to the detriment of the environment).

Malta became a member of the EU in May 2004, and expects to adopt the euro as its national currency in January 2008.



THE KNIGHTS OF WHO?

You'll encounter references to the Knights of the Order of St John all over Malta, so some background information is worth having. The Order of St John was founded during the Christian crusades of the 11th and 12th centuries to protect Christian pilgrims travelling to and from the Holy Land, and to care for the sick. The Knights were drawn from the younger male members of Europe's aristocratic families (those who were not the principal heirs). It was a religious order, with the Knights taking vows of celibacy, poverty and obedience, and handing over their patrimonies. The Order became extremely prestigious, wealthy and powerful as a military and maritime force, and as a charitable organisation that founded and operated several hospitals.

PEOPLE

Malta's population is around 400,000, with most people living in the satellite towns around Valletta, Sliema and the Grand Harbour. Approximately 30,000 live on Gozo, while Comino has a mere handful of farmers. More than 95% of the total population is Maltese-born.

RELIGION

Despite an easy blend of Mediterranean and British culture throughout the islands, there's still a strong feeling of tradition. The Maltese are fairly conservative in outlook, with strong family values. Around 98% of the population is Roman Catholic, and the Church wields considerable influence – most noticeable on Sundays when many shops and businesses are closed. Abortion and divorce are illegal.

ARTS

Lace-making is thought to have been introduced to the island during the 16th century when the Knights arrived. There are plenty of stalls and shops selling traditional tablecloths and such things in tourist areas. You should also keep an eye out for beautiful, intricate silver filigree – the art is thought to have come to Malta from Sicily in the 17th century. The Maltese glassblowing industry has enjoyed increasing success and many pieces are now exported.

ENVIRONMENT Environmental Issues

Malta's small surface area has been subjected to pressures of population, land use and development, a lack of protection for natural areas and, more recently, a significant increase in pollution. There is also a severe shortage of fresh water. Hunting and trapping of birds remains a (controversial) part of the Maltese way of life.

The Land

The Maltese archipelago consists of three inhabited islands: Malta (246 sq km), Gozo (67 sq km) and Comino (2.7 sq km). They lie in the middle of the Mediterranean, 93km south of Sicily, east of Tunisia and north of Libya.

The densely populated islands are formed of soft limestone, the golden building material used in construction. There are some low ridges and outcrops, but no major hills. There are few trees and little greenery to soften the sun-bleached landscape; in turn, the sparse vegetation supports little in the way of wildlife. There is almost no surface water and no permanent creeks or rivers. The water table is the main source of fresh water, but it is supplemented by several desalination plants.

FOOD & DRINK

Like the Maltese language, local cuisine has been influenced by the many foreign cultures that have ruled the country. The food is rustic and meals are based on seasonal produce and the fisherman's catch.

Malta is not known as a gourmet destination, but the food is generally good and cheap. Most restaurants offer inexpensive pizzas and pastas, and there are usually vegetarian options. The national dish is *fenek* (rabbit), and it can be fried in olive oil, roasted, stewed, served with spaghetti or baked in a pie. Make sure to try the locally caught fish and seafood.

Look out for *pastizzi*, favourite local snacks. These small parcels of flaky pastry are filled with ricotta cheese or mushy peas; you'll pay around Lm0.10 for one, so they're great for quick, budget snacks. A dish you're sure to encounter is *bragioli* – prepared by wrapping a thin slice of beef around a stuffing of breadcrumbs, chopped bacon, egg and parsley, then braising these 'beef olives' in a red-wine sauce.

Local beers are good, particularly Cisk (pronounced 'chisk'), and the range of locally produced wine is surprisingly accomplished.

VALLETTA

When Unesco granted World Heritage listing to Valletta, it called Malta's pint-sized capital 'one of the most concentrated historic areas in the world', and who are we to disagree? The city is renowned for its massive fortifications and architectural excellence, and even the neglected quarters have a dilapidated charm. Commercial activity bustles around Triq ir-Repubblika and Triq il-Merkanti, but the quiet, narrow backstreets are where you'll get a feel for everyday life. The city overlooks the impressive Grand Harbour to the southeast and Marsamxett Harbour to the northwest.

ORIENTATION

Valletta is a compact town barely 1km long and 600m wide, with a grid of narrow streets within the medieval fortifications. The main street, Triq ir-Repubblika (Republic St), runs northeast from City Gate (adjacent to City Gate bus terminus) to Fort St Elmo.

INFORMATION

Bank of Valletta (cnr Triq ir-Repubblika & Triq San Gwann) Foreign-exchange machine and ATMs.

Emergency For police, fire or ambulance call ☎ 112.

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

Post Office (Pjazza Kastilja; ☎ 8.15am-3.45pm Mon-Fri, to 12.30pm Sat)

St Luke's Hospital (☎ 2124 1251; Gwardamanga Hill, Gwardamanga) Malta's public hospital, near Pietà (about 3km southwest of Valletta); take bus 75. Note that the new hospital, Mater Dei, is scheduled to open in Tal-Qroqq (near the University of Malta) in late 2007.

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

Travellex (20 Triq ir-Repubblika; ☎ mon-sat) Currency-exchange bureau.

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

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

A walk around the city walls is a good way to get your bearings. The views are spectacular and you'll get to see many city highlights

along the way. Be sure to stop at the **Upper Barrakka Gardens** in the southwest to take in the view that puts the grand in Grand Harbour.

St John's Co-Cathedral (☎ 2122 0536; Triq ir-Repubblika; adult/child Lm1/free; ☎ 9.30am-4.30pm Mon-Fri, to 12.30pm Sat, closed Sun, public holidays & during services), built in the 1570s, dominates the centre of town with its sombre exterior. Its baroque interior is breathtaking and the floor is covered with colourful marble tombstones, marking the resting place of knights and dignitaries. Inside the cathedral is the entry to the **Cathedral Museum**, which houses two magnificent works by Caravaggio.

The 16th-century **Grand Master's Palace** (Pjazza San Ġorġ) is now the seat of the Maltese parliament. From the entrance on Triq il-Merkanti, it's possible to visit the **Armoury** (☎ 2124 9349; adult/child Lm2/0.50; ☎ 9am-5pm) and **State Apartments** (☎ 2124 9349; adult/child Lm2/0.50; ☎ 10am-4pm Fri-Wed). The corridors are lined with paintings by the Grand Masters, and there's an exquisite fresco depicting the Great Siege of 1565.

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 female figurines found at Haġar Qim, the so-called 'fat ladies'. Best of all is the *Sleeping Lady*, found at the Hypogeum and dating from around 3000 BC.

At the furthest point of Valletta is **Fort St Elmo**, built in 1552 by the Knights of the Order of St John. Its strategic location and design

VALLETTA IN TWO DAYS

Get the day started with coffee and *pastizzi* at **Caffe Cordina** (p539), then gain some insight into the country by taking in the **Malta Experience** (p539). Spend a few hours wandering Valletta's historic streets, stopping to take in the views, especially from the **Upper Barrakka Gardens** (above) over Grand Harbour. That evening, take in a show at **Mannoel Theatre** (p538) or **St James' Cavalier Centre for Creativity** (p539). On day two, spend the morning marvelling at **St John's Co-Cathedral** (above), the **Grand Master's Palace** (above) and the **National Museum of Archaeology** (above), before taking a tour of the **Hypogeum** (p540). Finish with dinner at **Fusion 4** (p539).



were vital to the island's defence. Today the fort is only open to the public for historical re-enactments, such as **In Guardia** (☎ 2369 6073; adult/child Lm2/0.50; ☹ 11am 2-3 times a month, late Sep-early Jul), a colourful military pageant in 16th-century costume.

Next to Fort St Elmo, the **National War Museum** (☎ 2122 2430; Triq il-Fontana; adult/child Lm1/0.25;

☹ 9am-5pm) commemorates Malta's heroic involvement in WWII.

The beautiful **Manoel Theatre** (☎ 2124 2977; www.theatrumanoel.com.mt; 115 Triq it-Teatru l-Antik; theatre tours Lm1.70; ☹ tours 10.30am, 11.30am & 2.30pm Mon-Fri, 1.30pm Sat), built in 1731, is one of the oldest theatres in Europe. There's a varied programme of events from October to May (drama, concerts,

opera and ballet), or you can take a guided tour to see the restored baroque auditorium.

The St James' Cavalier has undergone transformation from a 16th-century fortification into a bright, modern arts centre. The **St James' Cavalier Centre for Creativity** (www.sjccv.org; Triq Nofs in-Nhar) houses exhibition spaces, a theatre for live performances, and an art-house cinema. Stop by to check out the interior and grab a programme of what's on.

Multimedia audiovisual experiences have sprung up all over Valletta, but some are better than others. The **Malta Experience** (☎ 2124 3776; Triq il-Mediterran; adult/child Lm3.50/1.75; ☹ screenings on the hr 11am-4pm Mon-Fri, 11am-1pm Sat & Sun) provides a good introduction to the country's history and culture in a number of languages. The **War-time Experience** (☎ 2122 2225; Embassy Cinema, Triq Santa Luċija; adult/child Lm2.20/1.50; ☹ screenings on the hr 10am-1pm) is a poignant 45-minute film presentation depicting Malta's struggle against the odds during WWII.

SLEEPING

Asti Guesthouse (☎ 2123 9506; http://mol.net.mt/asti; 18 Triq Sant'Orsla; B&B per person with shared bathroom from Lm7) You'll get a taste of old-school Valletta charm here, plus the best-value accommodation in town. Asti has a charming host, simple, spacious rooms (each with handbasin), and spotless shared bathrooms. The bargain prices give little indication of the guesthouse's simple elegance – breakfast is served in a vaulted dining room under a chandelier.

Osborne Hotel (☎ 2124 3656/7; www.osbornehotel.com; 50 Triq Nofs in-Nhar; d Lm28-34; ☹ ☹) The Osborne, once a hostel to the Knights of St John, deserves credit for breathing much-needed life into the Valletta hotel scene, with newly renovated rooms on its lower floors. As you move up the floors, the furniture grows darker and the fittings more dated. Still, air-con and cable TV are standard, views on request... There's character in the ground-floor lounge area, and a roof terrace with a tiny pool and city views.

Castille Hotel (☎ 2124 3677/8; www.hotelcastille.malta.com; Piazza Kastilja; d Lm33-40; ☹ ☹) There's no polite way of saying this: Valletta's handful of hotels are a lacklustre lot. The Castille is one of the best midrange choices, enjoying a grand position in an old *palazzo*; rooms are pleasant enough and have good amenities. One bonus of staying here is the cellar pizzeria, La Cave, and the rooftop restaurant with a superb view over Grand Harbour.

EATING

Agius Pastizzerija (273 Triq San Pawl; pastries from Lm0.07; ☹ from 7am Mon-Sat) Search out this hole-in-the-wall place for traditional snacks, including *pastizzi* and other carb-loaded treats, at rock-bottom prices.

Caffe Cordina (☎ 2123 4385; 244 Triq ir-Repubblika; snacks & meals Lm1-4; ☹ breakfast & lunch) There's some prime people-watching on Misrah ir-Repubblika, and the oldest (and busiest) option here is Caffe Cordina, perfect for savoury pastries and decadent sweets. Choose a table on the square or inside, or join the locals at the counter for a quick caffeine hit. And be sure to look up (the vaulted ceiling is exquisitely painted).

Café Jubilee (☎ 2125 2332; 125 Triq Santa Luċija; snacks & meals Lm1-3.50; ☹ 8am-1am) A feel-good place you can drop into anytime, for a breakfast of coffee and *pastizzi*, a lunch-time baguette, or a simple dinner of salad, pasta or risotto. It's a continental-style bistro, with low lighting, cosy nooks and poster-plastered walls. It's also a good option for a night-time drink.

Fusion 4 (☎ 2122 5255; cnr Triq il-Papa Piju V & Triq San Ġwann Kavalier; mains Lm5.50-7; ☹ noon-3pm Mon-Fri, 7-11pm Tue-Sat) For us, this stylish, well-hidden place is the culinary highlight of the capital. It houses a small bar, a dining room under vaulted ceilings and a perfect, private courtyard, plus an innovative menu featuring dishes such as nori-wrapped salmon or pork fillet on a bed of red apples.

Wembley Stores (305 Triq ir-Repubblika; ☹ 7.15am-7pm Mon-Sat) stocks a selection of groceries and there's a **fresh produce market** (Triq il-Merkanti; ☹ 7am-1pm Mon-Sat) behind the Grand Master's Palace, where you can buy fruit and vegetables, fish, meat etc.

DIY CAPITAL BUS TOUR

Fancy a cheap, quick, DIY bus tour of the capital? Bus 98 is a circular route departing 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). You'll see the periphery of the capital from the bus, but you'll need to 'fill in the gaps' on foot. A complete circuit takes around 15 to 20 minutes; the fare is all of Lm0.15.

DRINKING & ENTERTAINMENT

For years Valletta seemed half-dead of an evening and those seeking nightlife automatically headed to Paceville (p540). But Valletta is now home to a few bars where you can eat and drink among in-the-know locals – you just need to know where to look. Decent venues include Café Jubilee (p539), plus **Maestro e Fresco** (☎ 2123 3801; 8 Triq Nofs in-Nhar) and **Trabuxu** (☎ 2122 3036; cnr Triq Nofs in-Nhar & Triq id-Dejqa). The last two bars open around 5.30pm (catering to the after-work crowd) and offer platters and snacks; there's live music at Maestro e Fresco on Friday and Saturday.

Film-buffs should raise a glass in memory of the late Oliver Reed in his favourite drinking spot, simply named **The Pub** (☎ 2123 7525; 136 Triq l-Arcisqof; ☎ 11.30am-11pm). Night owls will enjoy the dimly lit hidey-holes of **Labyrinth** (☎ 2122 0499; 44 Triq id-Dejqa), a bistro/wine bar/club offering edibles and DJ entertainment. There's also plenty of action (restaurants and bars) at the new Pinto Wharf waterfront development, under Valletta's bastions in Floriana.

See p538 for information on theatres in Valletta.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

The City Gate bus terminus has services to all parts of the island (see p550). Bus 8 runs between the City Gate bus terminus and Malta's airport (Lm0.20) approximately every half-hour. On the return trip, the bus leaves from outside the departures hall. To do the airport-Valletta trip by taxi, arrange and pay at the designated booth in the arrivals hall (the official rate is Lm6.50). Ferries from Italy (p549) dock southwest of Valletta at the Sea Passenger Terminal, near Pinto Wharf; from here the set taxi fare is Lm4.

AROUND VALLETTA

The town of Paola, about 4km south of Valletta, is home to the magnificent **Hal Saffieni Hypogeum** (☎ 2180 5018/9; Triq ic-Cimiterju; adult/child Lm4/2; ☎ tours 9am, 10am, 11am, 1pm, 2pm, 3pm & 4pm), usually referred to simply as the Hypogeum, a complex of underground burial chambers thought to date from 3600 BC to 3000 BC. Excellent 50-minute tours of the complex are available, but the number of visitors has been restricted in order to preserve this fragile Unesco World Heritage site. Prebooking is therefore *essential* (usually a couple of weeks before you wish to visit); tickets are avail-

able in person from the Hypogeum and the National Museum of Archaeology in Valletta (p537), or online at www.heritagemalta.org. Note that kids under six are not permitted.

A half-dozen buses pass through Paola, including 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 18, 19 and 27. Get off at the main square, Pjazza Paola – the Hypogeum is a five-minute signposted walk south.

AROUND MALTA

SLIEMA, ST JULIAN'S & PACEVILLE

The cool kids of Malta flock to Sliema, St Julian's and Paceville, north of Valletta, 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 number of high-rise hotels, apartment blocks, shops, restaurants, bars and nightclubs.

Information

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

MelitaNet (Triq Bali, 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 Ġorġ & Triq Elija Zammit)

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

Sights & Activities

There's not a lot to see in Sliema itself, but there are good views of Valletta from **Triq ix-Xatt** (the Strand), especially at dusk as the floodlights are switched on. Triq ix-Xatt and Triq it-Torri (Tower Rd) make for a pleasant waterfront stroll, with plenty of bars and cafés in which to quench a thirst. **Beaches** in the area are mostly shelves of bare rock, and clambering in and out of the sea can be a bit awkward. There are better facilities at the many private **lidos** along the coast, offering swimming pools, sun lounges, bars and water sports; admission costs around Lm2 to Lm3 per day.

Captain Morgan Cruises (☎ 2346 3333; www.captainmorgan.com.mt) operates from the waterfront area of Sliema know as The Ferries. The Captain has been restricted in order to preserve this fragile Unesco World Heritage site. Prebooking is therefore *essential* (usually a couple of weeks before you wish to visit); tickets are avail-

day trips to the Blue Lagoon, a sunset cruise, a sailing cruise on a catamaran or an 'underwater safari' on a glass-bottom boat. There are also popular 4WD jeep safaris (Lm23/26 to explore Malta/Gozo). Tickets can be purchased at any of the travel agencies on the waterfront.

Sleeping

NSTS Hibernia Residence & Hostel (☎ 2133 3859; www.nsts.org; Triq Mons G Depiro, Sliema; dm Lm3.70-5.10, studio Lm9-14; ☎) Malta's only true hostel is perfect for those after quality budget accommodation and a ready-made crowd (it's popular with English-language students). As well as the roll-call of facilities (laundry, kitchens, breakfast room/cafe/terrace, TV lounge, rooftop sun terrace), there are dorms, or twin 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.

Hotel Juliani (☎ 2138 0000; www.hoteljuliani.com; 12 Triq San Ġorġ, Spinola Bay; r from Lm55; ☎) Juliani scores points for introducing Malta to the boutique hotel concept. That it's superbly located in Spinola Bay, houses top-notch eateries and is heavily design driven means its overall satisfaction scoresheet is high. There's no beating the views from the gorgeous rooftop pool and terrace, all gleaming white tiles and glass.

Also recommended are the following:

Comfort Inn (☎ 2133 4221; www.comfortinnmalta.com; 29 Triq tal-Katidral, Sliema; B&B per person Lm6-8.50; ☎) Homely, family-run guesthouse; all rooms have bathrooms.

Sliema Hotel (☎ 2132 4886; www.sliemahotel.com; 59 Triq ix-Xatt, Sliema; d Lm16-35; ☎) Nondescript but excellent value. It's worth paying extra for front rooms with views to Valletta.

Hilton Malta (☎ 2138 3383; www.malta.hilton.com; Portomaso, St Julian's; r from Lm114; ☎) So seriously swish and amenity laden you may never want to leave.

Eating

While there are plenty of places cranking out so-so meals, you shouldn't need to look hard to find some gems. Fertile hunting grounds include Spinola Bay and the sleek Portomaso complex. At the former you should angle for an outdoor table and bay view; at the latter you can travel your tastebuds – from Italian to Thai, Japanese, Moroccan and even Korean (in a gorgeous nightclub setting).

Gigi's Concept Café (☎ 2135 9865; 23 Triq San Ġorġ, Spinola Bay; snacks & mains Lm1-5) Gigi's concept is not

AUTHOR'S CHOICE

Hotel Valentina (☎ 2138 2232; www.hotelvalentina.com; Triq Schreiber; d Lm16-32; ☎) Prices at split-personality Valentina are shockingly reasonable and the location is fab. There's a boutique-y feel, but just what the 'design story' is depends on your room number: older rooms have a handsome, rustic feel; newer rooms have contemporary lines and splashes of colour. Rooms aren't huge but then neither are prices, and facilities include air-con and satellite TV. A bargain.

that revolutionary, but it is mighty appealing: café by day, wine bar by night, then throw in some funky artwork, interesting décor and windows opening on to the street.

The Avenue (☎ 2131 1753; Triq Gort, Paceville; mains Lm1.25-6; ☎ noon-3pm Mon-Sat, 7-11pm nightly) Now spread over a growing number of dining rooms (thanks to its enduring popularity), the Avenue is cheap and cheerful, always bustling, and perfect for families. Simple, well-priced meals of meat and fish, plus huge portions of pizza and pasta, keep the fans happy.

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

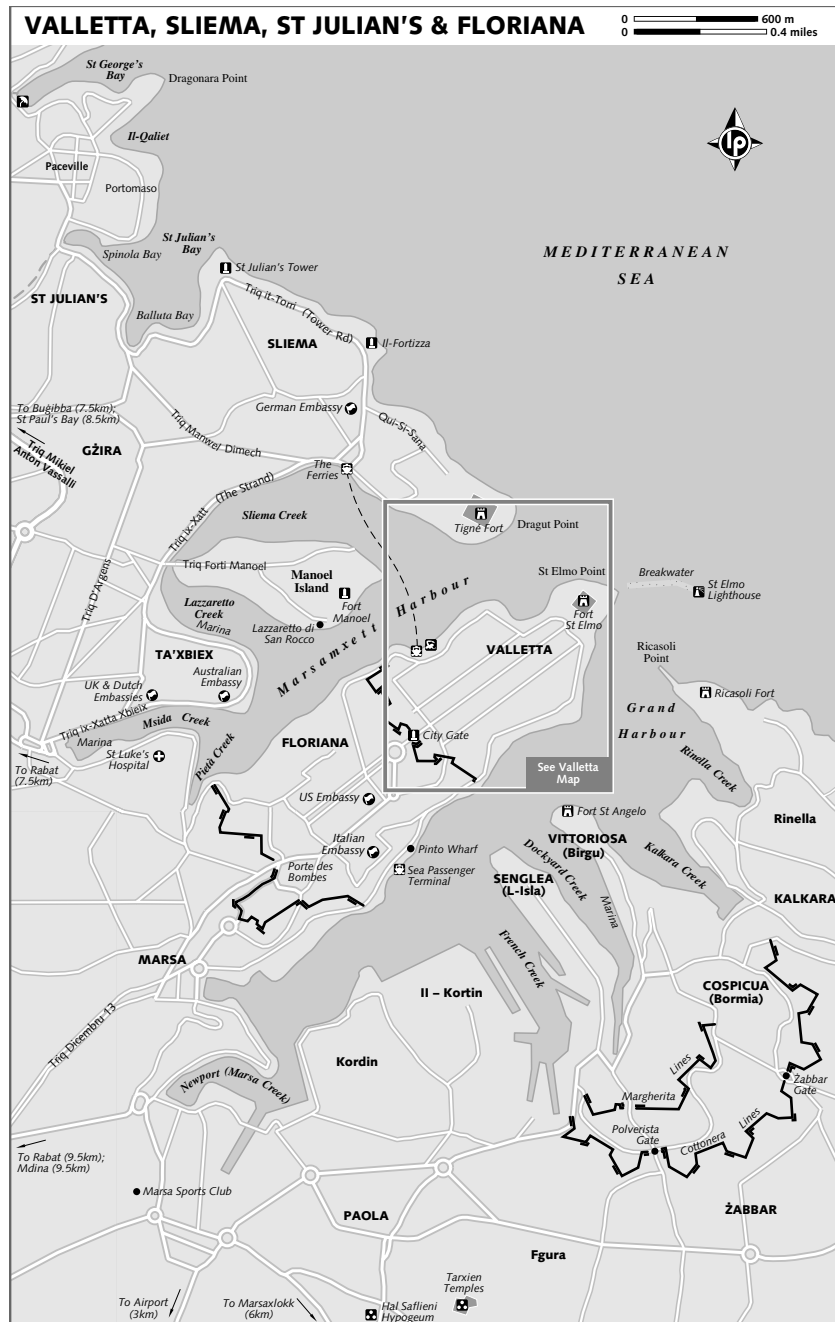
Paranga (☎ 2137 7600; St George's Bay; snacks & mains Lm2.50-8) On a wooden deck built over the water's edge, this new and stylish outfit (run by the InterContinental Hotel) offers plenty of cocktail options and a full menu of pizza, pasta, seafood etc. A cool option for a sunny afternoon or sundowner drinks.

Hugo's Lounge (☎ 2138 2264; Triq San Ġorġ, Paceville; mains Lm4-6) At Hugo's you can choose from a menu of well-executed Asian food – sushi, Thai soups and curries, noodles and stir-fries – or simply pull up a pew for cocktails and snacks at the bar, on the sofas or at the al-fresco area on Triq San Ġorġ, Paceville's party street.

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 & Entertainment

This area has a bar for everyone. 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 at the weekends year-round (nightly in summer), and all bars and clubs stay open until late. Wander until you find something to your taste (or quiet enough that you can get in the door). Families might prefer Paceville's cinema and 10-pin bowling alley; Paranga, Gigi's and Hugo's Lounge (see p541) are good grown-up drinking venues without the noisy nightclub atmosphere.

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

Fuego (☎ 2138 6746; www.fuego.com.mt; Triq Santu Wistin, Paceville; admission free) Get hot and sweaty dancing up a storm at this popular salsa bar – head first to its free salsa-dancing classes (Monday to Wednesday from 8.30pm).

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

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 providing party space for over 3000 punters. There's usually an entrance fee.

Getting There & Away

Bus 62, 64 and 67 run regularly between Valletta and Sliema, St Julian's and Paceville (Lm0.20). The **Marsamxetto ferry service** (☎ 2146 3862) crosses frequently between Sliema and Valletta (Lm0.40, five minutes); boats operate from 8am to 6pm. Arrival and departure points are at the Strand in Sliema and at the end of Triq San Marku in northwest Valletta.

MDINA & RABAT

Elegant, aristocratic Mdina, once the capital of Malta, is perched on a rocky outcrop in the southwest of Malta. It has been a fortified city for over 3000 years and was the island's political centre before the Knights arrived and chose to settle around Grand Harbour. You can spend hours wandering around the quiet, narrow streets, and admiring the exquisite architectural detail. Despite the small honey pots of tourist bustle that have inevitably developed, the city has retained its historical

charm. It's at its best at an evening, when the tour buses have gone and you can see just how the town got one of its nicknames – the 'Silent City'.

The name Mdina comes from the Arabic for 'walled city'. Rabat is the sprawling town settlement outside the walls to Mdina's south.

Sights

Mdina's main square is dominated by **St Paul's Cathedral** (Pjazza San Pawl; admission free; ☎ 9.30-11.45am & 2-5pm Mon-Sat, 3-4.30pm Sun). It's not as impressive as St John's in Valletta, but it's still worth visiting to see the marble tombstones covering the floor and the huge fresco of St Paul's Shipwreck. The **Cathedral Museum** (☎ 2145 4697; Pjazza San Pawl; adult/child Lm1/free; ☎ 9.30am-4.30pm Mon-Fri, 9.30am-3.45pm Sat), opposite, is housed in a baroque 18th-century palace originally used as a seminary. It contains collections of coins, silver, vestments, manuscripts and religious paintings.

Outside Mdina's Greek's Gate, **Domus Romana** (☎ 2145 4125; Wegħa tal-Mużew; adult/child Lm2.50/0.75; ☎ 9am-5pm) is a museum incorporating the excavated remains of a large Roman townhouse dating from the 1st century BC and featuring impressive mosaics.

From Domus Romana, head into Rabat by walking south along Triq San Pawl. Stop in to see **St Paul's Church** and **St Paul's Grotto** (Misraħ il Parroċċa; admission free; ☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Sat), a cave where St Paul is said to have preached during his stay on the island. Further south you'll come across **St Paul's Catacombs** (☎ 2145 4562; Triq Sant'Agata; adult/child Lm2/0.50; ☎ 9am-5pm), a series of rock-cut tombs thought to date back to the 3rd century. Entry includes an audio guide. More interesting are the nearby **St Agatha's Crypt & Catacombs** (☎ 2145 4503; Triq Sant'Agata; adult/child Lm1/free; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri, to 1pm Sat Jul-Sep, 9am-noon & 1-4.30pm Mon-Fri, to 12.30pm Sat Oct-Jun), an underground complex of burial chambers boasting some amazing Byzantine frescoes. Wait by the entrance to the museum for the next guided tour.

Sleeping & Eating

Point de Vue Guesthouse & Restaurants (☎ 2145 4117; www.pointdevue.com; 5 Is-Saqqaġja, Rabat; B&B per person Lm10-12; ☎) This guesthouse scores goals with a combination of affordable rates and a privileged position, just metres from Mdina's town walls. Downstairs from the large, spotless rooms are a café and restaurant with some unexpected African accents, thanks to the new South African-Maltese management.

Fontanella Tea Gardens (☎ 2145 0204; Triq is-Sur; snacks & meals Lm0.20-3; ☎ 10am-6pm winter, to 11pm summer) With a dazzling array of cakes (Lm0.80 per slice) to accompany the views from its terrace, it's a shame about the ordinary service.

Il Gattopardo (☎ 2145 1213; 20 Triq Villegaignon; light meals Lm1.50-4; ☎ noon-3pm Mon-Fri year-round, 7-11pm Fri & Sat summer) The name (meaning 'The Leopard') may be Italian, but this charming gallery-café serves up a Greek-inspired menu in its shady courtyard.

Medina (☎ 2145 4004; 7 Triq is-Salib Imqaddes; mains Lm3-8; ☎ dinner Mon-Sat) This pretty-as-a-picture romantic venue is a medieval townhouse with vaulted ceilings and has fireplaces for cooler evenings, and a leafy courtyard for warmer months. The menu offers a mix of Maltese, Italian and French dishes (including good vegetarian selections).

Getting There & Away

From Valletta, take bus 80 or 81 to reach Rabat (Lm0.20); from Sliema and St Julian's bus 65 (Lm0.50); from Bugibba bus 86 (Lm0.50). The bus terminus in Rabat is on Is-Saqajja, 150m south of Mdina's Main Gate.

SOUTHWEST COAST

The views are fantastic from the top of **Dingli Cliffs**, south of Rabat. While you're here, stop by **Bobbyland Restaurant** (☎ 2145 2895; mains Lm4-7; ☎ noon-3pm Tue-Fri & Sun, 7-11pm Tue-Sun), a favourite weekend venue for locals. It's regularly crowded with diners munching contentedly on house specialities like rabbit and lamb.

To the southeast, you'll find the village of Qrendi and the nearby prehistoric temples of **Haġar Qim & Mnajdra** (☎ 2142 4231; adult/child Lm3/1 to visit both temples, Lm2/0.50 to visit one; ☎ 9am-5pm). Built between 3600 BC 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).

For a quick dip, call in to **Għar Lapsi**, a cove in the low cliffs that's a popular locals' spot for bathing and picnicking. If swimming has given you an appetite, there are two restaurants above the cove. No buses run to Għar Lapsi.

SOUTHEAST COAST

Marsaxlokk is a small fishing village that's home to a photogenic harbour littered with colourful fishing boats. It's renowned for its seafood restaurants – a magnet for long-lunching locals and tourist busloads.

Duncan Guesthouse (☎ 2165 7212; http://duncan.malta.com; 33 Xatt is-Sajjieda; d from Lm14) is a friendly, family-run place offering superb-value rooms, each with bathroom and kitchenette. Locals trust **Ir-Rizzu** (☎ 2165 1569; 52 Xatt is-Sajjieda; mains Lm3-7) for their fresh fish feasts.

There are a few good swimming places on the eastern side of the nearby Delimara Peninsula, including the tricky-to-find **Peter's Pool**.

Bus 27 runs frequently from Valletta to Marsaxlokk (Lm0.20); bus 627 runs from Bugibba via Sliema to Marsaxlokk (Lm0.50).

NORTH COAST

The overdeveloped sprawl of **Bugibba** and **Qawra** in the northeast is the heartland of Malta's cheap-and-cheerful package-holiday trade, and it's absolutely mobbed in summer. It's crammed full of hotels, bars and restaurants – fine if you want a week or so of hedonism, but rather lacking in local charm. Buses 49 and 58 run frequently between Valletta and Bugibba (Lm0.20).

The north is also home to a handful of excellent beaches. Beachbums should make a beeline for **Mellieħa Bay** (also known as Ghadira Bay), or **Golden Bay** if you like your facilities and water sports laid on thick, or **Għajn Tuffieħa Bay** or **Gnejna Bay** if you're after something more low-key.

For Mellieħa Bay, take bus 44 or 45 from Valletta (Lm0.25), bus 645 from Sliema/St Julian's (Lm0.50) and bus 48 from Bugibba (Lm0.50); for Golden Bay you'll need bus 47 from Valletta (Lm0.25), and bus 652 from Sliema/St Julian's and Bugibba (Lm0.50).

GOZO

Smaller, quieter and greener than the large island to its south, Gozo provides soothing respite from the crowded resorts and manic drivers of Malta. Fewer tourists venture over to Gozo and if they do, it's usually on a day trip. The sights can be crammed into one day, but the island's real charm is best appreciated at a slower pace.

Gozo is a favourite place for scuba diving (p547) and there are several dive operators around the island. You can also take a cruise from resorts such as Marsalforn and Xlendi; this is the best way to enjoy the breathtaking coastline, including the Azure Window and Inland Sea at Dwejra on the west coast.

TOP TEN SWIMMING SPOTS

There are some great swimming spots scattered around Malta and Gozo, but don't expect to have them all to yourself in high season. The first six in this list are sandy beaches; the remainder offer rocky ledges for sunbathing; take a snorkel along.

- Għajn Tuffieħa Bay, North Coast (p544)
- Golden Bay, North Coast (p544)
- Ramla Bay, Gozo (p546)
- Mellieħa Bay, North Coast (p544)
- Gnejna Bay, North Coast (p544)
- Xlendi Bay, Gozo (p546)
- Għar Lapsi, Southwest Coast (p544)
- Peter's Pool, Southeast Coast (p544)
- Blue Lagoon, Comino (p546)

VICTORIA (RABAT)

Victoria, also known as Rabat, is the chief town of Gozo and sits in the centre of the island, 6km from the ferry terminal at Mgarr. Victoria's main attraction is the compact and photogenic Citadel, with its cathedral and museums.

Information

Aurora Opera House (Triq ir-Repubblika; per hr Lm1) Has computers for internet access in its foyer; purchase vouchers from the bar.

Bank of Valletta (Triq ir-Repubblika)

Police station (☎ 2156 2040; Triq ir-Repubblika)

Post office (127 Triq ir-Repubblika; ☎ 8.15am-4.30pm Mon-Fri, to 12.30pm Sat)

Tourist office (☎ 2156 1419; Tigrija Palazz, cnr Triq ir-Repubblika & Triq Putirjal; ☎ 9am-12.30pm & 1-5pm Mon-Sat, 9am-12.30pm Sun & public holidays) On the lower level of a shopping arcade, near the bus station.

Travellex (cnr Triq ir-Repubblika & Telgħa Tal-Belt; ☎ Mon-Sat) Currency-exchange bureau.

Sights

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

Victoria is built on a hill, 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 of the island. The **Cathedral of the Assumption** (Misraħ il-Katidral; adult/child Lm1.25/free; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Sat)

was built between 1697 and 1711. Its elegant design is marred only by the fact that funds ran out before completion and the structure remained flat-topped. This can't be detected from inside due to an elaborate trompe l'oeil painted on the ceiling. Entry includes an audio guide (deposit required), and admission to the nearby cathedral museum.

The handful of small **museums** inside the Citadel display reasonable collections, but if you're pushed for time, don't feel as though you've missed out – the museums in Valletta are better. Do make time to stop in at the unassuming **Ta'Rikardu** (☎ 2155 5953; 4 Triq il-Fossos; ☎ 10am-6pm), where you can pick up souvenirs as well as local produce bursting with flavour. Enjoy a platter (Lm3.60 for two people) that includes cheese, bread, tomatoes, capers and olives, and wash it down with a glass of Gozitan wine.

Getting There & Away

See p550 for details of ferry services between Malta and Gozo.

Gozo's bus terminus is on Triq Putirjal in Victoria, south off Triq ir-Repubblika and about 10 minutes' walk from the Citadel. All the island's bus routes are circular, starting and finishing at Victoria; the flat fare is Lm0.20.

MARSALFORN

Marsalforn is built around a cove and, with its good facilities, is the favoured choice for tourists in the summer months, despite there being nothing to see in the town itself. At the head of the bay is a tiny scrap of sand; better swimming and sunbathing can be found on the rocks out to the west. Hike eastward over the hills to Ramla Bay in about 45 minutes.

Maria Giovanna Hostel (☎ 2155 3630; www.tamaria.gozo.com/hostel.htm; Triq ir-Rabat; B&B per person Lm6-8) is the pick of budget accommodation on Gozo is this small, welcoming hostel just back from the waterfront. There are five rooms (two with en suite) with pretty, rustic décor, plus a living room, guest kitchen and obliging owners. It operates more like a guesthouse, with rooms rented out individually (no room-sharing necessary). **Hotel Calypso** (☎ 2156 2000; www.hotelcalypsogozo.com; Triq il-Port; d Lm23-36; ☎ ☎) boasts fresh, stylish décor and modernised facilities, plus an array of eateries and a pool, bar and sun terrace on the roof. You'll pay a little extra for a sea-view room. See what the fuss is about at **Ta'Frenč Restaurant** (☎ 2155 3888;

Triq ir-Rabat; mains Lm5-10; ☺ limited hr Jan-Mar), about 1.5km south of Marsalforn en route to Victoria. According to recent polls it's the most popular eatery in the country. Service is top-notch, as is the menu of local dishes and international cuisine. Bookings advised.

Marsalforn is a 4km walk from Victoria, or you can catch bus 21 (Lm0.20).

XAGHRA

The early-19th-century **Church of Our Lady of Victory** looks down on the village square of Xaghra, where old men sit and chat in the shade of the oleanders. Close by are the megalithic temples of **Ggantija** (☎ 2155 3194; access from Triq L-Imqades; adult/child Lm1.50/0.50; ☺ 9am-5pm), with a splendid view over most of southern Gozo and beyond. As the name implies (*ggantija* means 'giantess'), these are the largest of the megalithic temples found in the Maltese Islands – the walls stand over 6m high, and together the two temples are 40m wide. It's not far from here to one Gozo's best beaches – **Ramla Bay** has a beautiful red-sand stretch perfect for sunbathing. Follow the signposts from town (bus 42 runs from Victoria to Ramla from July to September).

Xaghra Lodge (☎ 2156 2362; www.gozo.com/xaghra lodge; Triq Dun Gorġ Preċa; B&B per person Lm10.50-12.50; ☺ ☎) is a cosy guesthouse with excellent facilities, including air-con, bathroom, balcony and cable TV in all rooms, plus a swimming pool and an adjacent bar, and vegetarian-friendly Chinese restaurant. It's a five-minute walk east of the town square. **Oleander** (☎ 2155 7230; Pjazza Vittorija; mains Lm3.50-6; ☺ Tue-Sun) is a good place to try authentic Maltese cuisine – regulars rave about the rabbit dishes at this fixture on the pretty village square. The menu has an array of local favourites, including pastas, *bragioli*, fresh fish and local lamb.

Buses 64 and 65 run between Victoria and Xaghra.

XLENDI

Xlendi is a former fishing village on a deep, rocky inlet on the southwest coast. Development has turned the place into a popular resort town. Sure, it's busier now – but the bay is still quite beautiful. **San Antonio Guesthouse** (☎ 2156 3555; www.clubgozo.com.mt; Triq it-Torri; B&B per person Lm6.50-13; ☺ ☎) has marvellously affordable rates that get you one of 13 rooms – surprisingly (given the price), air-con, cable TV, big private bathrooms and balconies/

terraces are standard, and there's a pool. **Stone Crab** (☎ 2155 6400; Triq ix-Xatt; meals Lm1.85-7; ☺ lunch daily, dinner Jun-Oct) This cheerful place right on the waterfront serves up lots of seafood, local dishes and popular pizzas. Bus 87 runs between Victoria and Xlendi.

COMINO

The wee island of Comino, smack-bang between Malta and Gozo, was once reportedly the hideout of pirates and smugglers, but now hosts boatloads of sun-seeking invaders. Comino is tiny (2.5km by 1.5km; permanent population: four), but hordes of day-trippers will put paid to any desert-island fantasies.

The island's biggest attraction is the photogenic **Blue Lagoon**, a sheltered cove between the west end of the island and the uninhabited islet of Cominotto, with a white-sand sea bed and clear turquoise waters. The bay is usually inundated with people enjoying top-notch swimming and snorkelling. Take care in the shadeless summer heat – most sunbathing is done on the rocky ledges surrounding the cove. There are public toilets, deckchairs for hire, and kiosks selling drinks and snacks.

Comino Hotel (☎ 2152 9821; www.cominohotel.com; half-board per person Lm17-28; ☺ Apr-Oct; ☺ ☎ ☎) is the only accommodation on the island, with bright, simply furnished rooms, restaurant, café and bar, private beach, swimming pools and tennis courts. They also have bike rentals, dive instruction and assorted water sports.

The hotel runs its own ferry service, with crossings from Ċirkewwa in Malta and Mġarr in Gozo; nonresidents of the hotel can use the service too (Lm3.50 return). Independent water taxis also operate regularly to the island from these two ports – from Mġarr is usually Lm3 return, from Ċirkewwa is Lm4 return. Day trips operate to the Blue Lagoon from tourist areas like Sliema and Bugibba in Malta, and Xlendi and Marsalforn in Gozo.

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's a handful of hostels and an array of family-run guesthouses that usually represent great value for money. Hotels in Malta range from crumbling, characterful old townhouses to modern palaces of five-star luxury. Rates are significantly reduced during off-peak periods. The high season is generally June to September, as well as the Christmas–New Year period.

ACTIVITIES

The website of the **Malta Tourism Authority** (www.visitmalta.com) showcases activities available in Malta, and organisations that can help you pursue them. Click the 'What to Do' pages.

Diving

Water babies are well catered for in Malta. 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. Favourite dive spots include Ċirkewwa on Malta, Dwejra on Gozo and various spots around Comino.

There are more than 40 diving schools to choose from. The majority are members of the **Professional Diving Schools Association** (PDSA; www.pdsa.org.mt). See also www.visitmalta.com/en/diving for comprehensive details of dive sites, regulations and operators.

Most schools offer a half-day 'taster course' or 'beginner's dive' costing around Lm15. A course that will give you an entry-level diving qualification (eg PADI Open Water Diver) should take three to five days and cost around Lm150. Experienced divers can hire equipment and arrange accompanied or unaccompanied dives with most operators.

Potential divers will need to answer a medical questionnaire and may be required to undergo a medical examination (dive centres will help arrange this). If you plan to dive, make sure your travel insurance covers this.

BUSINESS HOURS

The standard opening hours for banks are 8.30am to 12.30pm Monday to Friday and 8.30am to 11.30am Saturday. There are slightly longer hours from June to September. Government museums open 9am to 5pm daily (last entry at 4.30pm); closed major public holidays. Eateries open from noon to 3pm and 7pm to 11pm, while shops open from 9am to 1pm and 4pm to 7pm Monday to Saturday; closed Sundays and public holidays. Some shops stay open all day in summer, especially in tourist areas.

CUSTOMS

Duty-free goods are not sold to those travelling from one European Union country to another. If you are entering Malta from anywhere outside the EU, the duty-free allowance per person is 1L of spirits, 1L of wine and 200 cigarettes.

ELECTRICITY

Malta's electricity supply is 240V/50Hz and plugs have three flat pins as in the UK. Adaptors for Continental European appliances (plugs with two round pins) are widely available.

EMBASSIES & CONSULATES

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

Maltese Embassies & Consulates

Diplomatic representation abroad includes the following:

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

France (☎ 01 56 59 75 90; 92 Ave des Champs Élysées, 75008 Paris)

Germany (☎ 030-26 39 110; Klingelhofstrasse 7, 10785 Berlin)

Ireland (☎ 01-676 2340; 17 Earlsfort Tce, Dublin 2)

Italy (☎ 06-687 99 90; 12 Lungotevere Marzio, 00186 Rome)

Netherlands (☎ 070-356 1252; Scheveningsweg 2, 2517 KT, The Hague)

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

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

Embassies & Consulates in Malta

Countries with representation in Malta include the following:

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

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

France (☎ 2123 3430; 130 Triq Melita, Valletta)

Germany (☎ 2133 6531; www.valletta.diplo.de; Il-Piazzetta, Entrance B, 1st fl, Triq it-Torri, Sliema)

Italy (☎ 2123 3157/8/9; 1 Triq Vilhena, Floriana)

Netherlands (☎ 2131 3980; www.netherlandsembassy.org.mt; Whitehall Mansions, Xatt Ta'Xbiex, Ta'Xbiex)

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)

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

Each village has a *fešta* (feast day) honouring its patron saint, and you can't avoid getting caught up in the celebrations. Religious enthusiasm starts in the days leading up to and during the *fešta* as families flock to the churches to give thanks. The streets are illuminated and the festivities culminate in a huge procession, complete with fireworks, marching brass bands and a life-size statue of the patron saint. *Fešta* season runs from May to September – but a *fešta* isn't the only excuse to throw a party in Malta, and 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 16 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 ACCESS

Malta has numerous internet cafés, while many hotels have a computer available for guests' use. Typical hourly charges are Lm1. Many computers belong to the **MelitaNet** (www.internetcafe.com.mt) or **Yellow Blue** (www.yellowblue.net) networks – if you purchase a voucher for one network, you receive a password allowing the voucher to be used at any of their computers throughout Malta. The websites for each network list computer locations.

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.

Maltese Islands (www.malteseislands.com) Extensive travel information.

Search Malta (www.searchmalta.com) Directory of links to Malta-related websites.

StarWeb Malta (www.starwebmalta.com) Malta's 'first on-line concierge' with great listings.

MONEY

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

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

It's a good idea to round up a taxi fare or restaurant bill in order 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).

TELEPHONE

Public telephones (mostly card-operated) are widely available; buy phonecards at kiosks, post offices and souvenir shops. Local calls cost Lm0.10. International calls are discounted after 6pm weekdays and all day Saturday and Sunday. For local telephone inquiries, call ☎ 1182; for overseas inquiries, call ☎ 1152.

The international direct dialling code is ☎ 00. To call Malta from abroad, dial the international access code, ☎ 356 (the country code for Malta) and the eight-digit number (there are no area codes in Malta).

Most of the population have mobile phones; these numbers begin with either 79 or 99.

TOURIST INFORMATION

There are local tourist offices at Valletta, Malta International Airport, St Julian's, and Victoria on Gozo.

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 (excluding Russia), the USA and Japan. Full details of visa requirements (and visa application forms) are on the website of Malta's **Ministry of Foreign Affairs** (www.foreign.gov.mt).

TRANSPORT IN MALTA

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 airport has good facilities, including ATMs and currency exchange, a tourist office and a cheap bus service to/from Valletta. Gozo has a **heliport** (code GZM; ☎ 2156 1301) with a helicopter link to Luqa (p549).

The Maltese national airline is **Air Malta** (code KM; ☎ 2169 0890; www.airmalta.com), with a good safety record. Other airlines flying to and from Malta include the following:

Alitalia (code AZ; ☎ 2123 7115; www.alitalia.com)

Hub Rome.

British Airways (code BA; ☎ 2124 2233; www.ba.com)

Hub London.

BritishJet (code BJC; ☎ 2157 9350; www.britishjet.com)

Low-cost airline operating between Malta and various British airports.

Egyptair (code MS; ☎ 2132 2256; www.egyptair.com)

Hub Cairo.

Emirates (code EK; ☎ 2557 7255; www.emirates.com)

Hub Dubai.

JAT Yugoslav Airlines (code JU; ☎ 2133 2814; www.jat.com)

Hub Belgrade.

KLM Royal Dutch Airlines (code KL; ☎ 2133 1010; www.klm.com)

Hub Amsterdam.

Libyan Arab Airlines (code LN; ☎ 2122 2735) Hub Tripoli.

Lufthansa (code LH; ☎ 2125 2020; www.lufthansa.com)

Hub Frankfurt.

Ryanair (code FR; Ireland ☎ 353 1 249 7791; www.ryanair.com)

Swiss International Air Lines (code LX; ☎ 2180 2777; www.swiss.com)

Hub Geneva/Zürich.

Tuninter (code UG; ☎ 2132 0732) Hub Tunis.

Sea

Malta has regular sea links with Sicily (Pozzallo and Catania), southern Italy (Reggio di Calabria and Salerno) and northern Italy (Genoa). You can also sail from Tunis to Malta (but not, strangely, from Malta direct to Tunis). Ferries dock at the Sea Passenger Terminal beside Pinto Wharf in Floriana, southwest of Valletta.

Virtu Ferries (www.virtuferries.com; ☎ Malta 2122 8777, Catania 095-535 711, Pozzallo 0932-954 062) offers the shortest, fastest Malta–Sicily crossing with

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.

its catamaran service to/from Pozzallo and Catania. The Pozzallo–Malta crossing takes only 90 minutes and operates year-round. High-season passenger fares one way/return from Pozzallo are €81/99, one way/return from Malta Lm26/35, plus departure tax.

Ma.Re.Si Shipping (☎ 2123 3127; www.smstravel.net) has a ferry making weekly trips year-round between Malta and Catania (Lm20/35 one way/return, 12 hours), and between Malta and Reggio di Calabria (Lm25/45 one way/return, 15 hours).

Grimaldi Ferries (☎ 2122 6873; www.grimaldi-ferries.com) operates a weekly service year-round 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.

At the time of research, public transport links with the ferry terminal in Floriana were poor. With luggage, you'll probably need to catch a taxi to your destination – set fees are established (to Valletta is Lm4, to Sliema/St Julian's is Lm7).

Tours

There are loads of companies offering tours around the islands, by boat/bus/4WD or a combination of the three. Half-day tours cost from Lm4 but prices vary, so shop around. If you're pushed for time they can be a good way to see the highlights, but itineraries can often be rushed, with little free time. Day trips to Gozo and Comino are also common.

Captain Morgan Cruises (☎ 2346 3333; www.captainmorgan.com.mt) runs a range of sailing trips, cruises and jeep safaris, primarily out of Sliema. See p540 for information on harbour tours.

Virtu Ferries (☎ 2122 8777; www.virtuferries.com) operates day trips to Sicily, travelling on its catamaran services to Pozzallo or Catania then by bus to some of Sicily's east-coast attractions, including Mt Etna. The cost is Lm39; you can book a trip through most hotels and travel agents.

GETTING AROUND

Boat

Gozo Channel Company (www.gozochannel.com; ☎ Ċirkewwa 2158 0435; ☎ Mgarr 2156 1622) runs regular car ferry services between Ċirkewwa (Malta) and Mgarr (Gozo), with crossings every 45 to 75 minutes from 6am to around 10pm (and every two hours throughout the night). The journey takes 25 minutes, and the return fare for an adult/child is Lm2/0.50; transporting a car (including driver) is Lm6.75. Bus 45 runs regularly from Valletta to Ċirkewwa to connect with the ferry to Gozo. Bus 25 runs between Victoria and Mgarr on Gozo.

There's also a ferry service between Valletta and Sliema (p543).

Bus

Malta and Gozo are served by a network of 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 city gates. The buses are bright yellow and many are relics of the 1950s. Fares are inexpensive, but make sure you have small change for your ticket, which you purchase from the driver when boarding. Fares from Valletta cost Lm0.20 to Lm0.25; direct services between tourist areas that bypass Valletta (eg Sliema–Rabat/Mdina, Bugibba–Golden Bay) cost Lm0.50.

Services are regular and the more popular routes run until 11pm (with night buses operating to/from Paceville until 3am on weekends). Most services between any two points take between 30 minutes and an hour – Malta's not big enough for bus journeys longer than that, although traffic congestion has an impact. Ask at the tourist office or bus terminus for a free timetable.

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

Car & Motorcycle

Considering the low rental rates it may 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. Distance isn't a problem, however, since the longest distance on Malta is 27km, and the widest point is around 15km. On Gozo it's half that!

All the major international car-hire companies are at the airport; there are also dozens of local agencies. Shop around – rates depend on season, length of rental period and the size and make of car. Daily rates for the smallest vehicles start from around Lm8 (for rental of seven days or longer). The age limit for rental drivers is generally 21 to 70, but drivers between 21 and 25 may be asked to pay a supplement.

ROAD RULES

The Maltese drive on the left. Speed limits are 80km/h on highways and 50km/h in urban areas, but they are rarely observed. The wearing of seat belts is compulsory for the driver and front-seat passenger. The maximum blood-alcohol concentration (BAC) level Zallowed in drivers is 0.08%.

Road conditions are invariably poor with lots of potholes and inadequate markings. There are no right-of-way rules at roundabouts and at intersections priority is given to whoever gets there first. Any accidents must be reported to the nearest police station (and to the rental company) – don't move your vehicle until the police have arrived.

Helicopter

Malta's only internal air service is the regular **helicopter link** (☎ 2156 1301; www.airgozo.com; adult one way/return Lm30/50) between Malta international airport and the heliport on Gozo. Concession fares are available.

Taxi

Official Maltese taxis are white (with a taxi sign on top) and fitted with meters. Fares are generally expensive. If you arrive at the airport or port, there are kiosks where you pay the set tariffs upfront.

Black taxis (no sign) are privately owned and usually offer cheaper rates than official taxis. To order a taxi by phone, ask at your hotel's reception or try **Wembley Motors** (☎ 2137 4141) for 24-hour service.

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