

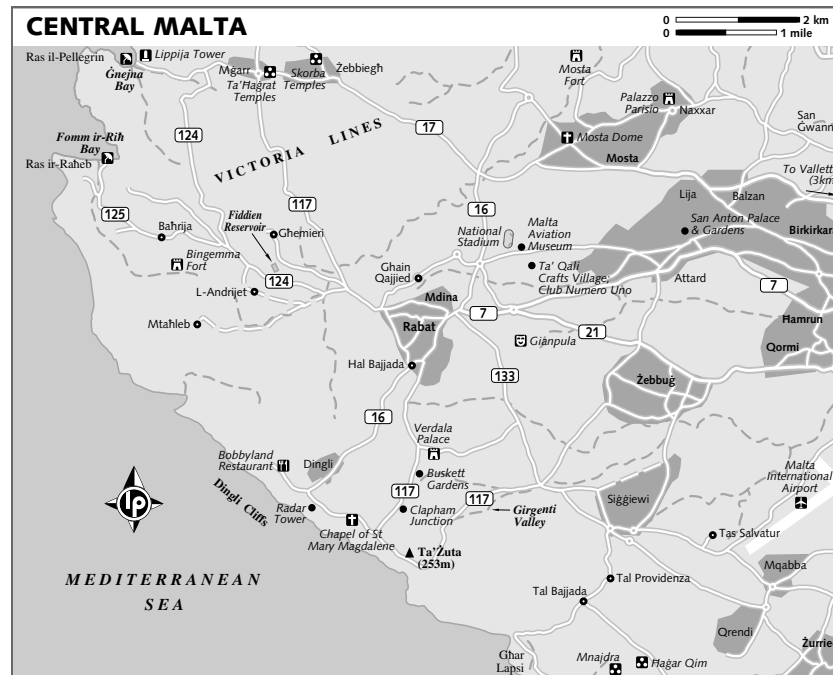
Central Malta



This small region is a grab-bag of all that's good about Malta, minus the sprawling seaside resorts. In the heart of the country you can drive through tiny villages that see few tourists on your way between traffic-clogged urban conurbations. You can visit remarkable medieval frescoes in ancient underground catacombs, marvel at one of Europe's largest church domes, then spend the night worshipping the dance gods at a huge open-air nightclub. Natural attractions include stark cliffs that are the perfect place to watch a sunset, a scenic bay ideal for swimming (if only you can find it) and the only decent patch of greenery on this rather barren island. There are sleeping and eating options ranging from luxurious five-star hotels that host dignitaries and movie stars to university residences and rustic village restaurants where locals come for their weekend feasts of rabbit.

But the jewel in the crown, and an absolute must-see, is Mdina, once the ancient walled capital of Malta. It's a stunning town perched loftily on a crag, and its quiet streets ooze history and refinement (particularly after the day-tripping busloads clear out). In the early morning and especially in the evening, this is the kind of place that has you talking in whispers so as not to disturb the peace.

Most visitors to Malta base themselves in either the capital or by the coast, but if you're after a tranquil holiday that's a little off the well-worn path, there are a few top-notch choices here.



MDINA

pop 385

Mdina is, without question, historic Malta at its most photogenic. The hidden laneways offer exquisite architectural detail and some respite from the day-tripping crowds, who largely stick to the main street. Don't be surprised if you encounter, as we did, an Italian TV crew or German fashion shoot trying to capture the town's loveliness.

The citadel of Mdina was fortified from as long ago as 1000 BC when the Phoenicians built a protective wall here and called their settlement Malet, meaning 'place of shelter'. The Romans built a large town here and called it Melita. It was given its present name when the Arabs arrived in the 9th century – *medina* is Arabic for 'walled city'. They built strong walls and dug a deep moat between Mdina and its suburbs (known as *rabat* in Arabic).

In medieval times Mdina was known as Città Notabile – the Noble City. It was the favoured residence of the Maltese aristocracy and the seat of the *università* or governing council. The Knights of St John, who were largely a sea-based force, made Grand Harbour

and Valletta their centre of activity, and Mdina sank into the background as a retreat of the Maltese nobility. Today, with its massive walls and peaceful, shady streets, it is often referred to as the Silent City – it's well worth visiting at night, when the day-trippers have left, to experience the peace and quiet.

Orientation & Information

Mdina is the walled city; Rabat is the town outside the walls. Mdina's main street, Triq Villegaignon, runs north from the Main Gate in the south to Pjazza tas-Sur (Bastion Square), passing St Paul's Cathedral on the right. The Greek's Gate, at the west corner of Mdina, is opposite the Domus Romana in Rabat.

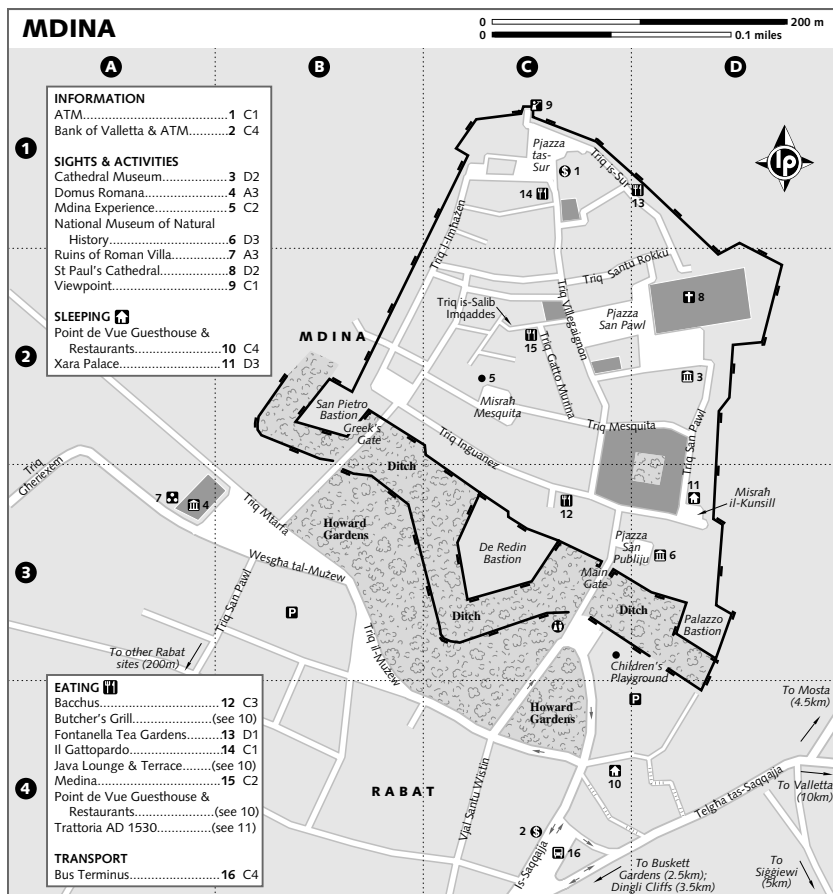
The bus terminus is outside Mdina on Is-Saqqajja, 200m south of the Main Gate. Visitors' cars are not allowed into Mdina, but there is parking outside the Main Gate and on Triq il-Mużew.

You'll find banks and ATMs in Rabat, opposite the bus stop, and an ATM (nicely camouflaged) on Pjazza tas-Sur. **Point de Vue** (p127; pèrhlml) has internet access. There are public toilets outside the Main Gate.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Enjoying the almost-spooky evening silence of beautiful **Mdina** (opposite)
- Going underground to admire the frescoes of **St Agatha's Catacombs** (p128) in Rabat
- Lunching among the locals at Bobbyland Restaurant, followed by a stroll along the top of the **Dingli Cliffs** (p130)
- Tucking into rabbit or cheering on the donkey races at the annual **L-Imnarja festival** (p131) in Buskett Gardens
- Questioning divine intervention while marvelling at the unexploded bomb in **Mosta Dome** (p131)
- **Partying** (p129) in an open-air club into the early morning to the soundtrack of an international DJ





Sights

ST PAUL'S CATHEDRAL

The **cathedral** (Pjazza San Pawl; admission free, donations welcome; ☎ 9.30-11.45am & 2-5pm Mon-Sat, 3-4.30pm Sun) is said to be built on the site of the villa belonging to Publius, the Roman governor of Malta who welcomed St Paul in AD 60.

The original Norman church was destroyed by an earthquake, and the restrained baroque edifice you see today was built between 1697 and 1702 by Lorenzo Gafa. Note the fire and serpent motifs atop the twin bell-towers, symbolising the saint's first miracle on Malta (see the boxed text, p101).

Echoing St John's Co-Cathedral in Valletta, the floor of St Paul's is covered in the polychrome marble tombstones of Maltese nobles

and important clergymen, while the vault is painted with scenes from the life of St Paul. The altar painting *The Conversion of St Paul* by Mattia Preti survived the earthquake, as did the apse above it with the fresco *St Paul's Shipwreck* and the beautifully carved oak doors to the sacristy on the north side.

CATHEDRAL MUSEUM

Housed in a baroque 18th-century palace originally used as a seminary is the **Cathedral Museum** (☎ 2145 4697; Pjazza San Pawl; adult/child Lm1/free; ☎ 9.30am-4.30pm Mon-Fri, to 3.45pm Sat). It contains important collections of coins, silver plate, vestments, manuscripts and religious paintings, as well as a series of woodcut and copperplate prints and lithographs by the

German Renaissance artist Albrecht Dürer. There is an interesting collection of weird and wonderful olive-wood carvings by Maltese artist Anton Agius.

NATIONAL MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY

The displays of the **National Museum of Natural History** (☎ 2145 5951; Pjazza San Publiju; adult/child Lm1/0.25; ☎ 9am-5pm), though housed in the elegant Palazzo de Vilhena, look a tired and the era when museums were simply full of stuffed animals in dusty glass cabinets. The most interesting section is the geology exhibit, which explains the origins of Malta's landscape and displays the wide range of fossils that can be found in its rocks. The tooth belonging to the ancient shark *Carcharodon megalodon*, found by Agassiz, is food for thought – measuring 18cm on the edge, it belonged to a 25m monster that prowled the Miocene seas 30 million years ago. Also on display (in the Seashells Room) is the pickled body of a 16kg squid found at Xemxija in St Paul's Bay. The dusty collection of stuffed mammals and birds can be safely ignored.

AUDIOVISUAL SHOWS & EXHIBITIONS

A worthwhile 25-minute audiovisual show, the **Mđina Experience** (☎ 2145 4322; Misraħ Mesquita; adult/child Lm1.65/0.80; ☎ Mon-Sat) does for Mđina's history what the Malta Experience in Valletta (p65) does for Malta's. The show begins roughly every half-hour from 10.30am to 4pm Monday to Friday, and 10.30am to 2pm Saturday.

Unfortunately, the Silent City appears to be succumbing to a rising tide of tawdry tourist

traps, all hitching a ride on the back of the successful Mđina Experience show. You can soak up enough history from the streets and stones without paying to see endless gory tableaux of dying knights and tortured prisoners. Don't be forced into buying tickets to other 'visual attractions' by the pushy staff at the Mđina Experience.

Walking Tour

Enter Mđina by the **Main Gate (1)**, built in 1724 and bearing the arms of Grand Master Manoel de Vilhena. The outline of the original gate can be seen in the wall to the right of the bridge. Immediately inside the gate on the right are the **Mđina Dungeons (2)**; ☎ 2145 0267; www.dungeonsmalta.com; Pjazza San Publiju; adult/child/family Lm1.60/0.80/3.80; ☎ 9.30am-4pm), which house a series of gruesome tableaux depicting torture and dismemberment, accompanied by a rather wearing soundtrack of screaming, groaning, chopping and choking noises. It's a last resort for a wet day or as entertainment for bored kids.

An imposing gateway on the right leads into the courtyard of the **Palazzo de Vilhena (3)**, built as a summer residence for the Grand Master in the early 18th century. The palace served as a hospital from 1860 until 1956, and since the 1970s has housed the **National Museum of Natural History (4)**, left). Go left onto Triq Inganeuz and then right onto Triq Villegaignon. On the right-hand corner of the street is **St Agatha's Chapel (5)**, which dates from the early 15th century. The entire block on the right here is occupied by the **Nunnery of St Benedict (6)**, whose members live in strict

THE MĐINA UPRISING

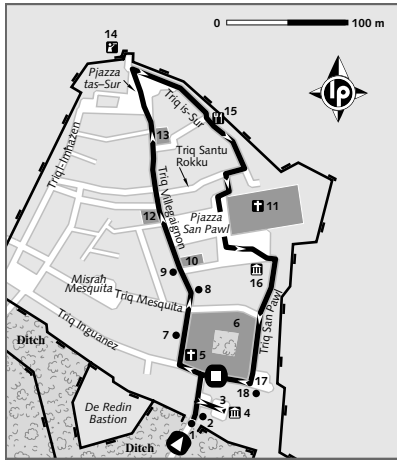
After the French invasion of Malta in June 1798, Napoleon stayed on the island for only six days before continuing his journey to Egypt, where his fleet was defeated by the British Navy at Aboukir. He left behind a garrison of only 4000 troops under the command of General Vaubois.

With revolutionary fervour, the French tried to impose their ideas on Maltese society. They abolished the nobility, defaced their escutcheons, persecuted the clergy and looted the churches. But on 2 September 1798, when they attempted to auction off the treasures of Mđina's Carmelite Church – on a Sunday – the Maltese decided that enough was enough. In a spontaneous uprising, they massacred the French garrison at Mđina, throwing its commander, Capitaine Masson, off a balcony to his death.

The French retreated to the safety of Valletta, where the Maltese, under the command of Canon Caruana of St Paul's Cathedral, besieged them. Having learnt of Napoleon's misfortune in Egypt, the Maltese asked for help from the British, who imposed a naval blockade on Malta under the command of Captain Alexander Ball. The Maltese forces suffered two hard years of skirmishing and stand-off until the French finally capitulated on 5 September 1800.

WALK FACTS

Start Main Gate
Finish Misraħ il-Kunsill
Distance approx 750m
Duration 30 minutes



seclusion. No man is permitted to enter the convent and the sisters are not allowed to leave.

On the left is the **Casa Inguanez (7)**, the ancient seat of Malta's oldest aristocratic family, who have lived here since the 14th century. Further along Triq Villegaignon on the right, the **Casa Testaferrata (8)** is the residence of the Marquis of San Vincenzo Ferreri, another member of the Maltese nobility; the title was created by King Philip V of Spain and donated to the family in 1716. Across the street on the left is the **House of Notary Bezzina (9)**. It was from Bezzina's balcony that the French commander Masion was lobbed to his death in 1798 (see the boxed text, p125).

THE TRAGEDY OF ST AGATHA

St Agatha was a 3rd-century Christian martyr from Sicily – Catania and Palermo both claim to be her birthplace – who fled to Malta to escape the amorous advances of a Sicilian governor. On returning to Sicily she was imprisoned and tortured, and her breasts were cut off with shears – a horrific punishment gruesomely depicted in many paintings and statues in Malta. She was then burnt at the stake. There is a chapel dedicated to St Agatha in Mđina (p125) and catacombs in Rabat (p128) that are said to have been her hiding place in Malta.

Next up on the right is the beautiful baroque façade of the **Banca Giuratale (10)**, built in 1730, which once housed Mđina's city council and is now home to the National Archives. Beyond that, Pjazza San Pawl opens out, dominated by the elegant baroque façade of **St Paul's Cathedral (11)**; p124). Facing it is the **Palazzo Santa Sophia (12)**, which bears a stone tablet with the date 1233. Though this year is probably inaccurate, the building is still the oldest in Mđina.

Keep on along Triq Villegaignon past the Carmelite Church and monastery to the **Palazzo Falzon (13)**, also called the Norman House. The building dates from 1495 and was used for a time by Grand Master de L'Isle Adam when the Knights first arrived in Malta in 1530. Look up to see the beautiful medieval windows. The ground floor houses a private museum; at the time of research it was closed as the palazzo (mansion) undergoes extensive restoration and modernisation. The much-delayed reopening is now scheduled for late 2006; read about the restoration at www.patrimonju.org.mt.

Triq Villegaignon ends at Pjazza tas-Sur. The **views (14)** from the city walls take in all of northern and central Malta, including St Paul's Bay, Mosta Dome and the Valletta bastions. On an exceptionally clear day, you might even see the peak of Mt Etna in Sicily, 225km away to the north-northeast (scan the horizon just to the left of Mosta Dome).

Follow the walls to the right along Triq is-Sur, pausing for a cuppa and cake at the **Fontanella Tea Gardens (15)** if you wish, and bear right at Triq Santu Rokku into Pjazza San Pawl. The entrance to the cathedral is on the far side, and opposite the entry is the **Cathedral Museum (16)**, housed in the former seminary.

Go to the left of the Cathedral Museum along Triq San Pawl, which leads to the pretty little square of **Misraħ il-Kunsill (17)**. Facing the Xara Palace Hotel is the **Corte Capitanale (18)**, the former Court of Justice – note the

figures on the balcony representing Justice and Mercy. Once back on Triq Inguanez, turn right to return to the Main Gate, or continue to the end of Triq Inguanez and exit through the Greek's Gate, and the 'ditch', to visit the Domus Romana (p128).

Sleeping

There are only two sleeping options in Mđina (and none in neighbouring Rabat); both are excellent.

Point de Vue Guesthouse & Restaurants (☎ 2145 4117; www.pointdevuemalta.com; 5 Is-Saqqajja; B&B per person Lm10-12; ☑) This guesthouse scores goals with a combination of affordable rates and a privileged position, just metres from the walled city. The large, spotless twin and double guest rooms are simply furnished, with tiled floors, whitewashed walls and recently modernised private bathrooms. They're comfy enough, although the new managers (a South African-Maltese couple) have plans to rejuvenate the décor in the not-too-distant future, now that the renovations of the property's lower levels are complete. And it's here where the Point de Vue's new persona is shining through: after stripping back the walls to their original stonework, some quirky African accents have been added (see above).

our pick Xara Palace (☎ 2145 0560; www.xarapalace.com.mt; Misraħ il-Kunsill; r from Lm85; ☑) If money is no object and your splurge inclinations lean towards history and refinement rather than modern-day glitz, the five-star Xara Palace is for you. Not only is the building (a 17th-century palazzo) superb, but the location is beyond compare. That it has only 17 individually designed suites and is filled with antiques and original artworks should give you an idea of the hotel's exclusivity, and regular guests include well-heeled Americans, Europeans, honeymooners and the odd celeb. You can choose to unwind in your warm, soft-toned duplex room or suite (all have a generous sitting area), in the sunny atrium courtyard, or at the rooftop fine-dining restaurant (mains Lm10 to Lm11), which takes in sweeping views across Malta. This is without doubt Malta's most elegant hotel.

Eating

Fontanella Tea Gardens (☎ 2145 4264; Triq is-Sur; snacks & meals Lm0.20-3; ☑ 10am-6pm winter, to 11pm summer) Fontanella – a Maltese institution – has a wonderful setting on top of the city walls. It serves delicious home-baked cakes (Lm0.80

per piece), sandwiches and light meals and passable coffee, and you'll have ample time to admire the sweeping views from its terrace – service is ordinary.

our pick Il Gattopardo (☎ 2145 1213; 20 Triq Villegaignon; light meals Lm1.50-4; ☑ lunch Mon-Sat year-round, dinner Fri & Sat summer) The name may be Italian ('the Leopard', after the famous Italian novel by Giuseppe di Lampedusa), but this charming gallery-café serves up a Greek-inspired menu in its shady courtyard, accompanied by classical music. Great choices include soups, dahl, salads and a mean baklava.

Point de Vue Guesthouse & Restaurants (☎ 2145 4117; 5 Is-Saqqajja; meals Lm1.20-6; ☑ lunch & dinner) Just outside the city walls, Point de Vue offers an unexpected 'aristocratic-Malta-meets-African' experience. The casual Java Lounge & Terrace features soft leather lounges and zebra- and leopard-print cushions. At the rear, the more formal Butcher's Grill has a team of Tanzanian chefs preparing local standards and more exotic fare from a huge menu. Sure, it sounds kinda out of place, but it seems to work.

Trattoria AD 1530 (☎ 2145 0560; Misraħ il-Kunsill; mains Lm2.50-7; ☑ lunch & dinner) Next door to the entrance to Xara Palace, this stylishly casual trattoria offers outdoor seating on the pretty square, and warm, yellow-washed walls inside. There's a kids' menu, and the grown-ups can choose from pizza and pasta choices, plus more substantial mains of fish and meat.

Bacchus (☎ 2145 4981; Triq Inguanez; snacks & lunch Lm2-3.50, dinner mains Lm3-7; ☑ 10am-11.30pm) The property (and gardens) of this impressive restaurant and function centre takes up one-twelfth of the town of Mđina! The main restaurant is built into a vault beneath the De Redin Bastion and retains a medieval atmosphere in its vaulted ceilings and stone floors. The menu reads like a glossy magazine, with pics of each dish. Snacks and lunch dishes such as minestrone or a Maltese platter are good and reasonably priced; at dinner time choose from carefully presented French-influenced meals.

Medina (☎ 2145 4004; 7 Triq is-Salib Imqaddes; mains Lm3.50-8; ☑ dinner Mon-Sat) The Medina (not to be confused with Caffé Medina on the main street) is a pretty-as-a-picture romantic venue – a medieval townhouse with vaulted ceilings and fireplaces for cooler evenings, and a leafy garden-courtyard for alfresco dining in warmer months. The menu offers a mix of Maltese, Italian and French dishes, with good vegetarian selections.

Getting There & Away

See opposite for information on getting to Rabat. The bus terminus in Rabat is on Is-Saqqajja, 200m south of Mdina's Main Gate.

You're best off ignoring the guys touting rides in a *karrozin* (traditional horse-drawn carriage) at Mdina's Main Gate – a 35-minute spin costs a steep Lm12 to Lm15. You'll soak up far more atmosphere on foot.

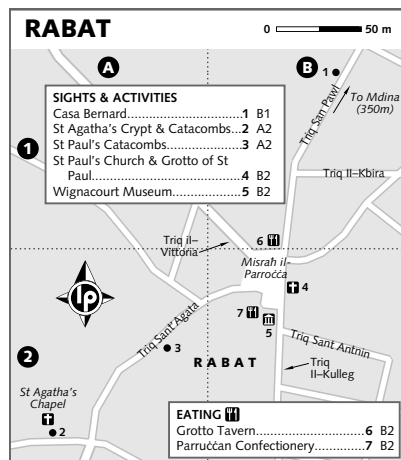
RABAT

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The town of Rabat sprawls to the south of Mdina and is worth a wander to check out the numerous sites of historical interest. Triq San Pawl is the street to follow – it begins opposite Mdina's Greek's Gate and runs south to St Paul's Church and the town square.

Sights

Domus Romana (Map p124; ☎ 2145 4125; Wiegħa tal-Mużew; adult/child Lm2.50/0.75; ☎ 9am-5pm) This site, also called the Roman Domus, was built in the 1920s to incorporate the excavated remains of a large Roman townhouse from the 1st century BC. The centrepiece is the original peristyle court (formerly an open courtyard surrounded by columns). The mosaic floor has a geometric border around an image of two birds perched on a water bowl, known as the *Drinking Doves of Sosos*; a cistern in one corner collected rainwater. There are additional mosaic fragments and artefacts from Malta's Roman period, including sculptures, amphorae, pottery fragments and oil lamps.



From the Domus Romana, walk south along Triq San Pawl for around 200m to reach **Casa Bernard** (☎ 2144 4373; 46 Triq San Pawl; admission Lm3; ☎ morning tours Mon-Sat). You'll be personally guided through this privately owned 16th-century *palazzo* by one of the home's charming owners, who will explain the history of the mansion and the impressive personal collection of art, *objets d'art*, furniture, silver and china. Phone ahead for tour times.

Another 200m along the street you'll encounter **St Paul's Church**, built in 1675. Beside the church, stairs lead down into the **Grotto of St Paul** (Misraħ il-Parroċċa; admission free, donations welcome; ☎ 9.30am-5pm Mon-Sat), a cave where the saint is said to have preached during his stay in Malta. The statue of St Paul was gifted by the Knights in 1748, while the silver ship to its left was added in 1960 to commemorate the 1900th anniversary of the saint's shipwreck. Come in the early morning or late afternoon to avoid the tour groups that congest the narrow space.

From the church, numerous signposts point the way across the parish square and along Triq Sant'Agata towards two groups of early Christian underground tombs. First up, on the left, are **St Paul's Catacombs** (☎ 2145 4562; Triq Sant'Agata; adult/child Lm2/0.50; ☎ 9am-5pm), which date from the 3rd century AD and were rediscovered in 1894. There's not a lot to see in the labyrinth of rock-cut tombs, narrow stairs and passages, but it's fun to explore (note that there are a number of uneven surfaces, so mind your step). Admission includes a self-guided, 45-minute audio tour available in a handful of languages.

Another 100m down the street and on the right are **St Agatha's Crypt & Catacombs** (☎ 2145 4503; Triq Sant'Agata; adult/child Lm1/free; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri, to 1pm Sat). These catacombs are more interesting than St Paul's as they contain a series of remarkable frescoes dating from the 12th to the 15th centuries. According to legend, these catacombs were the hiding place of St Agatha when she fled Sicily (see the boxed text, p126). Tours of the catacombs are conducted regularly explain the history of the site and point out features of the artwork. Back at ground level is a quirky little museum containing everything from fossils and minerals to coins, church vestments and Etruscan, Roman and Egyptian artefacts. Note that from October to June the complex is closed between noon and 1pm.

OPEN-AIR CLUBBING

There are lots of reasons to visit this part of Malta, and refined pastimes such as museum-going and architecture-admiring are major drawcards. After dark, however, it's another story. In summer (June to September), the area around Rabat is home to some of Malta's best nightlife.

The Ibiza-styled **Gianpula** (☎ 9947 2133; www.gianpula.com), a few kilometres east of Rabat (signposted en route to Żebbuġ), is a huge open-air club that kicked off in 1980 and is still going strong. It hosts big-name events showcasing top international DJs, as well as tours from megaclubs such as Cream, Godskitchen and Ministry of Sound. As well as staging these one-off nights and the odd music festival, Gianpula is open every Friday and Saturday night from June to September. Join up to 4000 others in a huge field complete with swimming pool and seven bars.

Club Numero Uno is another open-air hot spot, found near the Ta'Qali Crafts Village. It's open on Saturday and Sunday nights in summer and its Sunset Sunday sessions are legendary, drawing over 2000 clubbers each week (check out www.pureruby.com for details).

Flyers around town advertise one-off and regular events, and keep an eye on websites mentioned here, as well as sites like www.clubbinmalta.com and www.manicmalta.com for word on the latest happenings.

Signposted from the main square is the **Wignacourt Museum** (Triq il-Kulleg; adult/child Lm1/free; ☎ 10am-3pm Mon-Sat), a real hotchpotch collection that's worth a browse. It encompasses more Christian catacombs from around the 4th century, a WWII air-raid shelter, a baroque chapel, religious icons and vestments, and changing art exhibitions.

Sleeping & Eating

See p127 for details of hotels and restaurants in Mdina.

There are some authentic hole-in-the-wall café-bars at the top of Triq San Pawl, frequented by local characters. If the smell tempts you, pick up a fresh-from-the-oven *pastizza* (ricotta- or pea-filled flaky pastry) as you wander past. You might also like to peruse **Parruċċan Confectionery** (Misraħ il-Parroċċa; ☎ closed Sun) on the main square and pick up samples of Maltese specialities like nougat, nut brittles and fig rolls.

Grotto Tavern (☎ 2145 5138; Misraħ il-Parroċċa; lunch mains Lm2-5, dinner Lm4-8; ☎ lunch daily, dinner Tue-Sat), owned by a friendly French-Maltese couple, offers wining and dining on the main square. The menu waves the *tricolore* with dishes such as frogs' legs or duck à l'orange, plus fondues and raclettes perfect for sharing (Lm5 to Lm7 per person). Leave room for crêpes, chocolate fondue or *tarte aux pommes* (apple tart).

Getting There & Away

From Valletta, take bus 80 or 81 (one way Lm0.20); from Sliema and St Julian's take the direct bus 65 (Lm0.50); and from Buġibba and St Paul's Bay take bus 86 (Lm0.50).

By car, the road from Valletta is well signposted. From St Paul's Bay, begin by following signs to Mosta.

AROUND RABAT Ta'Qali Crafts Village

The scruffy arts and crafts workshops at Ta'Qali are housed in the old Nissen huts on this WWII RAF airfield. Thankfully, the village is scheduled for a long-overdue makeover, which should make it a more attractive place to visit and browse. Despite the obvious signs of neglect, the workshops here are worth a look. You can watch glass-blowers at work, and shop for gold, silver and filigree jewellery, paintings by local artists, leather goods, Maltese lace, furniture, ceramics and ornamental glass.

The opening hours of the individual workshops vary, but most are open from 9am to 4pm Monday to Friday. Try to get here early (before 10am) if you want to avoid the coach-tour crowds.

Take bus 80 or 81 from Valletta (Lm0.20 one way). Bus 65 operates between Sliema and Rabat and calls in at Ta'Qali, as does bus 86 between Buġibba and Rabat (Lm0.50). It's about 2km from the bus terminus in Rabat to the crafts complex.

Malta Aviation Museum

Tucked away in an unassuming shed between Ta'Qali Crafts Village and the National Stadium is the **Malta Aviation Museum** (☎ 2141 6095; www.maltaaviationmuseum.com; adult/child Lm1.75/0.50; ☎ 9am-5pm), 2km northeast of Mdina. It's a

real enthusiast's museum, with bits of engines, airframes and instruments lying around, and numerous restoration projects underway – including a WWII Hawker Hurricane IIa, salvaged in 1995 after 54 years at the bottom of the sea off Malta's southwest coast. You can watch locals working on the aircraft and other exhibits. Star of the show here is a WWII Spitfire Mk IX; other aircraft on display include a vintage Flying Flea, a De Havilland Vampire T11, a Fiat G91R and a battered old Douglas Dakota DC-3. To visit the museum, catch a bus to the neighbouring Ta'Qali Crafts Village (see above for route numbers).

Fomm ir-Riĥ

Fomm ir-Riĥ (meaning 'mouth of the wind') is the most remote and undeveloped bay on Malta. During rough weather it can be a drab and miserable place, the grey clay slopes and limestone crags merging with the grey clouds and the wave-muddied waters. But on a calm summer's day it can be a beautiful spot, with good swimming and snorkelling in the clear blue waters off the southern cliffs, and few other people to disturb the peace.

It's a long hike to get here – and locals will marvel at any nonlocals who manage to find it! From central Rabat, follow Triq Gherixem (passing to the left of Domus Romana) to the roundabout on the edge of town; this can also be reached via the bypass from the roundabout on the Rabat–Mosta road. Follow signs for Bahrija (they can be a bit hard to spot). After the roundabout, head left at the first fork and right at the next (Fiddien Bridge), passing Fiddien Reservoir on the right. Continue straight and after about 3km bear left towards Bahrija (signed). After passing through the centre of Bahrija village, fork right, then right again.

About 1.2km from Bahrija's town square the road drops into a valley; you need to turn right into a potholed road indicated by low brick gateposts (but no gate), labelled RTO. This track ends 600m downhill above the

southern cliffs of Fomm ir-Riĥ. This is best accessed by car – on foot it's an 8km hike (about 1¼ hours) from the bus terminus in Rabat.

But you're not there yet! To reach the head of the bay, you need to follow a precarious footpath across a stream bed and along a ledge in the cliffs. Locals say that former Maltese prime minister Dom Mintoff used to ride his horse along this path – today posts have been cemented in place to prevent horses and bicycles using it.

From here, you can hike north to the wild cape of Ras il-Pellegrin and down to Gnejna Bay (p116), or west to Ras ir-Raĥeb and south along the top of the coastal cliffs to the tiny village of Mtaħleb and back into Rabat. Be aware that this area is a favourite haunt of bird-hunters – you'll spy their stone shacks all over the countryside. See p171 for tips on dealing with them.

The village of Bahrija is perfect if you're looking for somewhere well off the tourist trail in which to participate in the true Maltese Sunday lunch ritual, dining with the locals on authentic dishes (including horse meat and rabbit). Be aware, however, that unfamiliar faces in town may cause a bit of a stir! There are a handful of unassuming options on the village square, including **Ta'Gagin** (☎ 2145 0825) and **North Country Bar & Restaurant** (☎ 2145 6688).

Dingli Cliffs

Named after the famous Maltese architect Tommaso Dingli (1591–1666) – or possibly his 16th-century English namesake Sir Thomas Dingley, who lived nearby – Dingli is an unremarkable little village. But less than a kilometre to the southwest the land falls away at the spectacular 220m-high **Dingli Cliffs**. A potholed tarmac road runs along the top of the cliffs. There are also some great walks south, past the incongruous radar tower to the lonely little **Chapel of St Mary Magdalene**, built in the 17th century, and onwards to Ta'Zuta (253m) the highest point in the Maltese Islands. Here, you'll enjoy excellent views along the coast to the tiny island of Filfla.

Heading northwest along the cliffs you'll find **Bobbyland Restaurant** (☎ 2145 2895; mains Lm4-7.50; ☒ closed Mon year-round, also closed dinner Sat summer & dinner Sun winter), where you can chow down with the locals before walking off your meal with a postprandial cliff-top stroll. This friendly, rustic place is 500m from the Dingli

THE FESTIVAL OF L-IMNARJA

L-Imnarja (sometimes spelt Mnarja), held on 28 and 29 June (the feast day of Sts Peter and Paul), is Malta's biggest and most boisterous festival. Its origins lie in a harvest festival dedicated to St Paul – the name is probably a corruption of the Italian *luminaria*, meaning 'illuminations', after the traditional bonfires that once lit up Rabat during the festival.

The festivities begin on 28 June with a huge party in Buskett Gardens, complete with folk music, singing and dancing. Vast quantities of rabbit stew are consumed, washed down with plenty of local wine. The carousing continues well into the small hours and many people end up spending the entire night in the gardens.

The following day, a public holiday, continues with an agricultural show at Buskett Gardens, where farmers and gardeners exhibit their produce, accompanied by local band performances. In the afternoon, bareback horse and donkey races are held at Telgha tas-Saqqajja (Saqqajja Hill) in Rabat, attended by crowds from all over the island. The winners are awarded with *palji* (colourful brocade banners), which are taken home to adorn the victor's village.

junction; on Sundays in particular the indoor and outdoor tables are crowded with diners munching contentedly on house specialties like rabbit pan-fried in garlic, onions and herbs, or roast fillet of lamb, wrapped in puff pastry and served with garlic and rosemary sauce. Vegetarians will struggle here.

Bus 81 runs every half-hour or so from Valletta to Dingli (one way Lm0.20) via Rabat.

Buskett Gardens & Verdala Palace

The fertile valley about 2km south of Rabat (east of Dingli) harbours the only extensive area of woodland in Malta. Known as **Buskett Gardens** (from the Italian *boschetto*, meaning 'little wood'), the gardens were planted by the Knights as a hunting ground. Today they are a hugely popular outing for the Maltese, and the groves of Aleppo pine, oak, olive and orange trees provide shady picnic sites in summer and orange-scented walks in winter. Buskett Gardens is the main venue for the L-Imnarja festival, held on 28 and 29 June (see the boxed text, above). The gardens are open at all times and entry is free. Bus 81 from Valletta to Dingli via Rabat stops at the entrance. Buskett is well signposted from Rabat.

En route to Buskett you'll pass the grand **Verdala Palace**, built in 1586 as a summer residence for Grand Master Hugues Loubeux de Verdalle. It was designed by Gerolamo Cassar in the form of a square castle with towers at each corner, but only for show – it was intended to be a hunting retreat, not a defensible, fortified position. The British used Verdala Palace as the Governor of Malta's summer residence and today it's the summer residence of the Maltese president. It's not open to the public.

Clapham Junction

Continue past the entrance to Buskett Gardens and follow the signs to reach a rough track signposted 'Cart Tracks'. To the right (west) of this track is a large area of sloping limestone pavement, scored with several sets of intersecting prehistoric 'cart ruts' (see the boxed text p133). The ruts are about 1.5m apart and up to 50cm deep. The name Clapham Junction – a notoriously complicated railway junction in London – was given to the site by British visitors.

MOSTA

pop 17,700

Mosta is a busy and prosperous town spread across a level plateau atop the Victoria Lines escarpment. It is famous for its Parish Church of Santa Maria, better known as the Rotunda or **Mosta Dome** (☎ 2143 3826; Piazza Rotunda; admission free, donations welcome; ☎ 9-11.45am & 3-5pm), which was designed by the Maltese architect Giorgio Grognet de Vassé and built between 1833 and 1860 using funds raised by the local people. A visit is worthwhile to admire the stunning blue, gold and white interior, and also to check out the bomb that fell through it in 1942 (see the boxed text, p132); be sure to dress appropriately for a place of worship.

The church's circular design with a six-columned portico was closely based on the Pantheon in Rome, and the great dome – a prominent landmark (its external height is 61m) that is visible from most parts of Malta – is said to be one of the broadest unsupported domes in Europe. Its diameter of 39.6m is exceeded only by the Pantheon (43m) and St Peter's (42.1m) in Rome. But dome comparison

FOMM IR-RİĤ BY BOAT

If the directions to Fomm ir-Riĥ sound far too complicated, you can take the easy option and view the bay from the water, on a boat trip out of Golden Bay (see p115 for more details).

THE MIRACLE OF MOSTA

On 9 June 1942, during WWII, three enemy bombs struck the Mosta Dome while around 300 parishioners waited to hear Mass. Two bounced off and landed in the square without exploding. The third pierced the dome, smashed off a wall and rolled across the floor of the church. Miraculously, no one was hurt and the bomb failed to detonate. A replica of the bomb can be seen in the church sacristy, to the left of the altar.

plenty of choice on the à la carte menu. The food is highly rated by locals – in the 2006 *Definitive(ly) Good Guide to Restaurants in Malta and Gozo*, Ta'Marija wins the gong for best Maltese food and best local wine list. And the entertainment? Wednesday and Friday see traditional Maltese folk dancing and singing; Thursday is country music night (complete with line dancing!), and Saturday is 'party night' with a DJ and local singer. Sunday lunch is family-oriented, with kids' toys and games.

A number of buses pass through Mosta. From Valletta take bus 47, 49 or 58. From Sliema and St Julian's you can reach Mosta on bus 65, and from Bugibba and St Paul's take bus 86.

NAXXAR

pop 10,600

Naxxar, a couple of kilometres northeast of Mosta (and more or less joined by the urban sprawl), is another bustling town worthy of a visit for its few interesting attractions, the highlight of which is the lavish **Palazzo Parisio** (☎ 2141 2461; www.palazzoparisio.com; Pjazza Vittorja; adult/child Lm3.50/1.75; 🕒 tours on the hr 9am-3pm Mon-Fri). Originally built in 1733 by Grand Master Antonio Manoel de Vilhena, it was acquired by a Maltese noble family in the late 19th century. The new owners set about refurbishing and redecorating, and the end result was a stately home unique in Malta – the magnificent interior and baroque gardens have been described as a 'miniature Versailles'.

The entrance to the palazzo is directly opposite the **Parish Church of Our Lady**, one of the tallest baroque edifices on Malta. Construction was started in the early years of the 16th century according to the designs of Vittorio Cassar (son of the more famous Gerolamo Cassar, who designed Verdala Palace, p131).

To get to Naxxar, take bus 55 or 56 from Valletta (one way Lm0.20), or bus 65 from Sliema (Lm0.50).

THE THREE VILLAGES

The main road from Valletta to Mosta passes through the town of **Birkirkara** (population 22,000), one of the biggest population centres on the island and part of the huge conurbation that encircles Valletta and the Three Cities. Birkirkara's **Church of St Helen** is probably the most ornate of Malta's churches, a late flowering of baroque exuberance built in

the mid-18th century. On the strength of his performance here, the designer, Domenico Cachia, was given the job of remodelling the façade of the Auberge de Castille in Valletta.

Just west of Birkirkara is an upmarket suburban area known as the **Three Villages**, centred on the medieval settlements of **Attard**, **Balzan** and **Lija**. Although modern development has fused the three into a continuous urban sprawl, the old village centres still retain their parish churches and narrow streets, and there are some interesting historical sites to visit.

Triq il-Mdina, the main road that skirts the southern edge of Attard, follows the line of the **Wignacourt Aqueduct**, built between 1610 and 1614 to improve the water supply to Valletta. Substantial lengths of the ancient structure still stand beside the road. The **Church of St Mary** (Pjazza Tommaso Dingli) in Attard, designed by Tommaso Dingli and built around the same time as the aqueduct, is one of the finest Renaissance churches on the island (see the boxed text, p38). Lija's **Church of St Saviour** (Misrah it-Trasfigurazzjoni), designed in 1694, is the focus of one of Malta's liveliest festas (feast

days), famed for its spectacular fireworks, on 6 August.

The main attraction in this area is the **San Anton Palace & Gardens** (palace closed to public; gardens admission free; 🕒 dawn-dusk), which lies between Attard and Lija. The palace was built in the early 17th century as the country mansion of Grand Master Antoine de Paule. It later served as the official residence of the British Governor of Malta, and is now the official residence of the Maltese president. You can cop a lungful of cleanish air inside the lovely walled gardens that stretch between the palace and the main entrance on Triq Birkirkara; they contain groves of citrus and avocado, as well as a bird aviary. The Eagle Fountain, just inside the main gate, dates from the 1620s. The Mask Fountain is surrounded by unusual floss-silk trees with thick, thorn-studded trunks and beautiful pink flowers.

A plethora of buses runs to this area. To get to the San Anton Gardens, take bus 40 from Valletta (Lm0.20); this service passes through Attard, Balzan and Lija. Birkirkara is best reached on bus 71 from Valletta.

THE RIDDLE OF THE RUTS

One of the biggest mysteries of Malta's prehistoric period is the abundance of so-called 'cart ruts' throughout the islands. In places where bare limestone is exposed, it is often scored with a series of deep parallel grooves, looking for all the world like ruts worn by cartwheels. But the spacing of the ruts varies, and their depth – up to 60cm – means that wheeled carts would probably get jammed if they tried to use them.

A more likely explanation is that the grooves were created by a travois – a sort of sled formed from two parallel poles joined by a frame and dragged behind a beast of burden, similar to that used by the Plains Indians of North America. The occurrence of the ruts correlates quite closely to the distribution of Bronze Age villages in Malta.

This still leaves the question of what was being transported. Suggestions have included salt and building stone, but it has been argued that whatever the cargo was, it must have been abundant, heavy and well worth the effort involved in moving it. The best suggestion to date is that the mystery substance was topsoil – it was carted from low-lying areas to hillside terraces to increase the area of cultivable land, and so provide food for a growing population.

In some places the ruts are seen to disappear into the sea on one side of a bay, only to re-emerge on the far side. In other spots they seem to disappear off the edge of a cliff. These instances have given rise to all sorts of weird theories, but they are most convincingly explained as the results of long-term erosion and sea-level changes due to earthquakes – the central Mediterranean is a seismically active area and Malta is riddled with geological faults.

An ongoing study (entitled 'The significance of cart ruts in ancient landscapes') is endeavouring to document and interpret the ruts at Malta's Clapham Junction and at a second site in Spain. Perhaps one day soon we'll better understand the how, when and why of the ruts... In the meantime, documents explaining the methods and aims of this study can be found at www.heritagemalta.org/significance_of_cart_ruts.html.

Good places to see the ruts and come up with your own theories include Clapham Junction near Buskett Gardens and the top of the Ta'Čenč cliffs on Gozo (see p154).

Sleeping & Eating

University Residence (☎ 2143 6168 or 2143 0360; www.university-residence.com.mt; Triq R M Bonnici, Lija; dm from Lm3/5 low/high season; 📺 📶) About 200m north of the San Anton Gardens is the official student residence for the University of Malta, 4km away and connected by a free bus service. It's a well-equipped, well-run facility, and a good place to meet local and international students – beware, though, that securing short-term accommodation here can be tough (especially from June to September). The residence sleeps a few hundred students and is in a residential area. There are self-catering facilities, tennis courts, large grounds, a minimarket, a café-bar and a laundrette. There's a three-night minimum on stays and a variety of good accommodation available, including hotel-standard rooms from Lm16. To get here, catch bus 40 from Valletta.

Corinthia Palace Hotel (☎ 2144 0301; www.corinthiahotels.com; Vjal de Paule, Attard; r from Lm80; 📺 📶) On the other side of the San Anton Gardens, and at the other end of the accommodation spectrum to the uni residence, the five-star Corinthia Palace is popular with conference organisers and official delegations, and appeals to an older crowd who enjoy the discreet location, lush gardens, health spa

and upmarket onsite restaurants. That the complimentary shuttle bus calls regularly at Malta's only golf course should give you some idea of the clientele. All rooms have a decent-sized balcony – request a pool view. There are often good deals available on room rates – it pays to ask, or check the website.

Melita Gardens (☎ 2147 0663; Triq id-Dmejda; mains Lm2-7.50; 🍴 lunch & dinner) Taking the effort out of deciding where to dine is this all-pleasing option, right by the entrance to the San Anton Gardens. The complex houses an atrium café, large courtyard, restaurant, wine bar, pizzeria and even an internet café (and everything on the menu is available to take away). You're bound to find something here to suit your fancy.

You can buy drinks and ice creams for your garden stroll from the kiosk beside the entrance to the San Anton Gardens.

A good option of an evening is to frock up a little and visit one of the highly regarded restaurants at the Corinthia Palace Hotel – the elegant **Corinthia Room** (🍴 dinner nightly) for fine dining; **Rickshaw** (🍴 dinner Mon-Sat) offering pan-Asian cuisine, and **Pizza, Pasta e Basta** (🍴 dinner nightly May-Oct), a seasonal alfresco pizza and pasta eatery. There's also an all-day café in the hotel's lobby, where a decent lunch buffet costs Lm3.75.