

History

Malta has a fascinating history, and the island is crowded with physical and cultural reminders of the past, most of them easily accessible to visitors. The fossilised bones of animals found in Ghar Dalam cave (p139) in the southeast suggest that Malta was once linked by a land bridge to Sicily and southern Europe. But Malta was not big enough to support a hunter-gatherer lifestyle, and the earliest evidence of human habitation – the remains of primitive farming settlements – has been dated to the period 5200 to 4000 BC. Neolithic pottery fragments unearthed at Skorba (p116) are similar to those found in Sicily.

THE TEMPLE BUILDERS

The Maltese Islands' oldest monuments are the megalithic temples built between 3600 and 2500 BC, the oldest surviving freestanding structures in the world. About 1000 years before the construction of the Great Pyramid of Cheops in Egypt, the people of Malta were manipulating megaliths weighing up to 50 tonnes and creating elaborate buildings that appear to be oriented in relation to the winter solstice sunrise (see the boxed text, p142).

No-one knows whether the temple builders evolved from the preexisting farming communities of Malta, or whether they arrived from elsewhere bringing their architectural skills with them. Rock-cut tombs found on a hillside near Xemxija and dated to before 4000 BC display a trefoil layout which may be a precursor to the three-lobed plan seen in the temples. The remains of around a dozen megalithic temples survive today, and some of them are remarkably well preserved. The best places to view these prehistoric marvels are at Tarxien (p81), south of Siggiewi (p142) and on Gozo, near Xaghra (p161).

Whatever their origins, the temple people seem to have worshipped a cult of fertility. Archaeologists have found large numbers of figurines and statues of wide-hipped, well-endowed female figures – the so-called 'fat ladies' of Malta – that have been interpreted as fertility goddesses. These figures range in size from barely 10cm long to more than 1.5m, and the best examples can be seen at the National Museum of Archaeology in Valletta (p62).

The culmination of Malta's temple culture was the large temple complex at Tarxien and the subterranean burial chambers of the nearby Hal Saffieni Hypogeum (p80). These sites appear to have been abandoned some time after 2500 BC and then taken over by a noticeably different Bronze Age culture. The new inhabitants cremated their dead and used the Tarxien temple site as a cemetery.

PHOENICIANS & ROMANS

From around 800 to 218 BC, Malta was colonised by the Phoenicians and, for the last 250 years of this period, by Phoenicia's principal North African colony, Carthage. With their watchful eyes painted on the prow, the colourful Maltese fishing boats – the *luzzu* and the *kajjik* (check them out at Marsaxlokk, p137) – seem little changed from the Phoenician trading vessels that once plied the Mediterranean. The islands may have served as a Carthaginian naval base during the First Punic War against Rome (264–241 BC).

http://web.infnito.it/utenti/m/malta_mega_temple has everything you ever wanted to know about Malta's megalithic temples, and then some.

TIMELINE c 5200 BC

Arrival of first known inhabitants (from Sicily)

c 3600–2500 BC

Megalithic temples are built on Malta and Gozo

During the Second Punic War (218–201 BC) Rome took control of Malta before finally crushing Carthage in the Third Punic War (149–146 BC). The island was then given the status of a *municipium*, or free town, with the power to control its own affairs and to send an ambassador to Rome. However, there is evidence that Malta retained a Punic influence. The 1st-century BC historian Diodorus Siculus described the island as a Phoenician colony, and the biblical account of St Paul's shipwreck on Malta in AD 60 (see p101) describes the islanders as 'barbarous' (ie they did not speak the 'civilised' languages of Latin or Greek).

St Paul's shipwreck was certainly the most influential event of this period. According to tradition, during Paul's three-month stay both the Roman governor of Malta (later to become St Publius) and many of the islanders were converted to Christianity, making the Maltese one of the oldest Christian peoples in the world.

Malta seems to have prospered under Roman rule. The main town, called Melita, occupied the hilltop of Mdina but spread over an area around three times the size of the later medieval citadel. The excavated remains of town houses, villas, farms and baths suggest that the inhabitants enjoyed a comfortable lifestyle and occupied themselves with the production of olives, wheat, honey and grapes.

When the Roman Empire split into east and west in AD 395, Malta seems to have fallen under the sway of Constantinople. But very little is known of this period of Maltese history, when the islands seem to have been little more than a neglected Byzantine backwater.

ARABS & NORMANS

The rapid expansion of Islam in the 7th to 9th centuries saw an Arab empire extend from Spain to India. Arab armies invaded Sicily in 827 and finally conquered it in 878; Malta fell into Arab hands in 870. Both Malta and Sicily remained Muslim possessions until the end of the 11th century. The Arab rulers generally tolerated the Christian population, introduced irrigation and the cultivation of citrus fruits and cotton, and had a notable impact on Maltese customs and language. Apart from the names Malta and Gozo, which probably have Latin roots, there is not a single place name in the Maltese Islands that can be proved to predate the Arab occupation.

During the 11th century small groups of Norman adventurers from northern Europe arrived in Italy, formed allegiances with local leaders and set up a system of feudal lordships. One, Robert Guiscard, took over much of southern Italy and in 1060 his younger brother, Count Roger, captured Messina and used it as a base for the conquest of Sicily. It took 30 years of constant struggle, but by 1091 Count Roger had driven the Arabs out of Sicily. A year earlier, in 1090, he had captured Malta after a surprise attack. Tradition has it that, needing the support of the local people, Count Roger tore his red-and-white quartered banner in two and gave half to the Maltese contingent, thus inventing Malta's national flag.

For the next 400 years Malta's history was closely linked to Sicily's, and its rulers were a succession of Normans, Angevins (French), Aragonese and Castilians (Spanish). Malta remained a minor pawn on the edge of the European chessboard, and its relatively small population of downtrodden islanders paid their taxes by trading, slaving and piracy, and were repaid in

kind by marauding Turks and Barbary corsairs. During this period a Maltese aristocracy began to form, and a few of their elegant town houses survive in Mdina, Vittoriosa and Victoria. Their distinctive architectural style is referred to as Siculo-Norman (Sicilian-Norman), but it is almost entirely Sicilian – there is little if any Norman influence.

The marriage of the Catholic monarchs Ferdinand II of Aragon and Isabella of Castile led to the unification of Spain in 1479, and under their grandson, the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V, Malta became part of the vast Spanish Empire. One of the greatest threats to Charles' realm was the expanding Ottoman Empire of Süleyman the Magnificent in the east. Süleyman had driven the Knights of St John from their island stronghold of Rhodes between 1522 and 1523 (for information on the history of the Knights of St John see p22). When the Knights begged Charles V to find them a new home, he offered them Malta along with the governorship of Tripoli, hoping that they might help to contain the Turkish naval forces in the eastern Mediterranean. The nominal rent was to be two falcons a year – one for the emperor and one for the viceroy of Sicily (for more on falcons see the boxed text, p41).

THE KNIGHTS ARRIVE

Grand Master Philippe Villiers de L'Isle Adam (1530–34) of the Knights of St John was not particularly impressed by the gift of the Maltese Islands, which seemed to him barren, waterless and poorly defended. Neither were the 12,000 or so local inhabitants, who were given no say in the matter. Nor were the aristocracy, who remained aloof in their palazzi in Mdina. However, determined to make the best of a bad job and hoping one day to return to Rhodes, in 1530 the Knights decided to settle in the fishing village of Birgu (now Vittoriosa) on the south side of Grand Harbour and set about fortifying the harbour. Visitors can wander around Vittoriosa (p76) and admire the early auberges of the Knights.

In Rhodes, the Knights had developed into a formidable marine fighting force and had been a constant thorn in the side of the Ottoman Turks. Their expulsion allowed Turkish corsairs to roam the central Mediterranean at will, raiding and pillaging and carrying off Christians to serve as slaves or to hold for ransom. Short of funds and lacking any real support from European powers, the Knights became pirates themselves, attacking Turkish trading ships and raiding along the Barbary Coast of North Africa.

Their greatest adversary was Dragut Reis, the Turkish admiral, who invaded Gozo in 1551 and carried off almost the entire population of 5000 into slavery. Then in 1559 the Knights lost half their galleys in a disastrous attack on Dragut's lair on the island of Djerba off the Tunisian coast. With the power of the Knights at a low ebb, Süleyman the Magnificent saw an opportunity to polish off this troublesome crew once and for all, while at the same time capturing Malta as a base for the invasion of Europe from the south.

THE GREAT SIEGE OF 1565

Jean Parisot de la Valette (see the boxed text, p57) was Grand Master between 1557 and 1568. He was a stern disciplinarian and an experienced soldier who foresaw the threat of a Turkish siege and prepared for it well. Following the disaster of 1559, la Valette ordered the building of ditches and defensive

Get acquainted with 13 major museums and 14 heritage sites in Malta at www.heritagemalta.org, plus find out how to visit them.

The *luzzu* (traditional Maltese fishing boat) still carries the watchful 'Eye of Osiris' on its bow, a custom thought to date back more than 2500 years.

Malta Prehistory & Temples Renowned British archaeologist and scholar David H Trump has written the definitive guide to Malta's prehistory. This comprehensive book includes detailed visual treatment of 30 key sites.

800–218 BC

Malta is colonised by the Phoenicians and then controlled by the Carthaginians

218 BC–AD 395

The Romans control Malta after their success in the Punic Wars

AD 60

St Paul is shipwrecked on Malta and brings Christianity to the population

395–870

Malta falls under Byzantine rule

KNIGHTS OF ST JOHN

The Knights of who? This spiritual and military force was driven from its base in Rhodes in the early 16th century and made its new home in Malta in 1530. The knights played a starring role in Malta's development and you'll encounter references to them throughout the country, so some background info will come in handy.

Origins

The Sovereign and Military Order of the Knights Hospitaller of St John of Jerusalem – also known variously as the Knights of St John, the Knights of Rhodes, the Knights of Malta, and the Knights Hospitallers – had its origins in the Christian Crusades of the 11th and 12th centuries.

A hospital and guesthouse for poor pilgrims in Jerusalem was founded by some Italian merchants from Amalfi in 1070. The hospital, operated by monks, won the protection of the papacy in 1113 and was raised to the status of an independent religious order known as the Hospitallers. The Order set up more hospitals along the pilgrimage route from Italy to the Holy Land, and Knights who had been healed of their wounds showed their gratitude by granting funds and property to the growing Order.

Other Knights offered their services as soldiers to provide protection for pilgrims, and thus the Order's dual role of healing the sick and waging war on the enemies of Christ began to evolve. Knights of the Order kept the road to Jerusalem free of bandits. To kill an infidel was to win glory for Christ, and to die in battle in defence of the faith was to become a martyr in heaven.

When the armies of Islam recaptured the Holy Land in 1291, the Order sought refuge first in the Kingdom of Cyprus. In 1309 they acquired the island of Rhodes, planning to stay close to the Middle East in the hope of reconquering Jerusalem. But here they remained for over 200 years, building fortresses, auberges (hostels) and a hospital, and evolving from a land-based army into the most formidable naval fighting force the medieval world had ever seen.

Organisation

The Knights of St John were European noblemen who lived the lives of monks and soldiers. The objective of the Order was 'the service of the poor, and the defence of the Catholic faith'. The Order was financed by the revenue of properties and estates spread throughout Europe, which were either owned by members of the Order, or had been gifted to it.

The Knights' traditional attire was a hooded monk's habit, made of black camel hair with a white Maltese cross emblazoned on the breast. The distinctive eight-pointed cross is said to represent the eight virtues which the Knights strove to uphold: to live in truth; to have faith; to repent of sins; to give proof of humility; to love justice; to be merciful; to be sincere and wholehearted; and to endure persecution.

The Order comprised eight nationalities or langues (literally 'tongues' or languages) – Italy, France, Provence, Auvergne, Castile, Aragon, Germany and England. (The English langue was dissolved by King Henry VIII in 1540 following his breach with the Roman Catholic Church.) Each langue was led by a *pilier* (literally 'pillar'), and its members lived and dined together in an auberge, which operated a bit like an Oxford college or an American fraternity house. Each langue was assigned to a particular task or part of the city walls during battle (hence the Poste de France, the Poste d'Aragon etc on the walls of Vittoriosa), and each *pilier* had a specific duty – for example, the *pilier* of the Italian langue was always the admiral of the galley fleet.

The Order's properties and estates in Europe were managed by a network of commanderies and priories, often headed by older Knights who had retired from active service in the Mediterranean. Although the Knights were bound by vows of individual poverty, the Order as a whole was immensely wealthy. A Knight was required to bequeath four-fifths of his personal wealth to the Order.

Hospitals

The hospitals created by the Order – first in Jerusalem and the Holy Land, then in Rhodes and finally in Malta – were often at the leading edge of the development of medical and nursing science. Ironically, although the Knights had sworn to bring death and destruction to the 'infidel' Muslims, many of their medical skills and treatments were gleaned from the study of Arabic medicine.

The Sacra Infermeria in Valletta (built in the 1570s) had 600 beds – the Great Ward alone could hold 350 patients – and was famous throughout Europe. It was obliged to provide care for the sick of any race or creed, slaves included, though non-Catholics were put in a separate ward. Patients were nursed by the members of the Order – even the Grand Master tended the sick at least once a week – and treated by physicians, surgeons and pharmacists. The hospital's plates and cutlery were made of solid silver 'to increase the decorum of the Hospital and the cleanliness of the sick' and basic rules of hygiene were observed.

The hospital was overseen by the Grand Hospitaller, a post traditionally filled by the *pilier* of the French langue. The Order's surgeons performed many advanced operations including trepanation, bladder-stone removal and cataract removal as well as more commonplace amputations and wound treatments.

From 1676 onwards the study of anatomy and human dissection was taken up. Anyone particularly interested in the medical services provided by the Knights should visit the Knights Hospitallers exhibition inside the Sacra Infermeria in Valletta (p65).

After Malta

Following the loss of their French estates and their expulsion from Malta by Napoleon in 1798, the Knights sought refuge first in Russia, where they were welcomed by Tsar Paul I, and later in Italy. After several years of uncertainty, they finally made their headquarters in the Palazzo di Malta (the former Embassy of the Hospitallers) in Rome.

In the late 19th and 20th centuries the Order rebuilt itself as a religious and charitable organisation. Now known as the Sovereign Military Order of Malta, it is an internationally recognised sovereign entity that mints its own coins and prints its own postage stamps. In effect, it's a state without a territory, although its properties in Rome enjoy extraterritorial status. It concerns itself largely with providing hospitals, medical supplies and humanitarian aid in regions stricken by poverty, war and natural disasters.

The Order now has diplomatic relations with 94 countries, has legations in several countries (including France, Germany, Belgium and Switzerland) and has been a permanent observer at the UN since 1994. It continues to work in the field of medical and social care and humanitarian aid.

The Order has an embassy in Malta (housed in the Cavalier of St John in Triq l-Ordinanza in Valletta), and since 1991 it has reoccupied its old home in the upper part of Fort St Angelo in Vittoriosa. Since 1988 the Grand Master has been Englishman Fra' Andrew Bertie.

870–1090

Malta is occupied by Arab rulers

1090–1530

Count Roger captures Malta and places the country under Norman control

1530

The Knights of St John arrive after being given Malta by Emperor Charles V

1565

The Knights are victorious over the Ottomans in the Great Siege of Malta

walls around the peninsulas of Birgu and Isla. Fort St Angelo on the tip of Birgu was rebuilt and strengthened, and Fort St Michael was built on Isla. A new fortress, Fort St Elmo, was constructed on the tip of the uninhabited Scceberras Peninsula.

The Knights' galley fleet was taken into the creek below Birgu, and a great chain was stretched across the harbour entrance between Fort St Angelo and Fort St Michael to keep out enemy vessels. Food, water and arms were stockpiled, and la Valette sent urgent requests for aid to the emperor, the pope and the viceroy of Sicily. But no help came. In May 1565, when an enormous Ottoman fleet carrying more than 30,000 men arrived to lay siege to the island, la Valette was 70 years old and commanded a force of only 700 Knights and around 8000 Maltese irregulars and mercenary troops.

The Turkish force, led jointly by Admiral Piali and Mustafa Pasha, dropped anchor in the bay of Marsaxlokk, and its soldiers set up camp on the plain of Marsa. The entire population of Malta took refuge within the walls of Birgu, Isla and Mdina, taking their livestock with them and poisoning the wells and cisterns they left behind. The Turks took their time, digging out gun emplacements and setting up batteries, before beginning their campaign with an attack on Fort St Elmo, which guarded the entrance to both Grand and Marsamxett Harbours. The fort was small and held a garrison of only 60 Knights and a few hundred men. Mustafa Pasha was confident that it would fall in less than a week.

Dragut Reis, the wily old corsair who had always been the scourge of the Mediterranean sea lanes, was now, like la Valette, an old man. The 80-year-old ex-pirate was in the employ of Sultan Süleyman and arrived in Malta a few weeks into the siege to advise Mustafa and Piali. He was unhappy with their decision to concentrate first on the taking of St Elmo, but preparations were too far advanced to change plans. Dragut tirelessly went around the Turkish positions, inspiring his men and helping to set up batteries on Dragut Point and Ricasoli Point to increase the pressure on the tiny garrison. It was while setting up one such battery on Mt Scceberras that he was struck in the head by a splinter of rock thrown up by an enemy cannonball and retired, mortally wounded, to his tent.

Dragut's fears over the wisdom of besieging St Elmo were proved right. Despite continuous bombardment and repeated mass assaults on its walls, Fort St Elmo held out for over four weeks, and cost the lives of no fewer than 8000 Turkish soldiers before it was finally taken; not one of the Christian defenders survived. On receiving the news that the fort had been captured, old Dragut smiled, and died. Looking across at the looming bulk of Fort St Angelo from the smoke and rubble of St Elmo, Mustafa Pasha is said to have muttered, 'Allah! If so small a son has cost us so dear, what price shall we have to pay for so large a father?'

Hoping to intimidate the already demoralised defenders of Fort St Angelo, Mustafa Pasha ordered that several of the leading Knights should be beheaded and their heads fixed on stakes looking across towards Birgu. The Turks then nailed the decapitated bodies to makeshift wooden crucifixes and sent them floating across the harbour towards St Angelo. La Valette's response was immediate and equally cruel. All Turkish prisoners were executed and decapitated. The Knights then used their heads as cannonballs and fired them back across the harbour to St Elmo.

Then began the final Turkish assault on the strongholds of Birgu and Isla. Piali's fleet moved from Marsaxlokk to Marsamxett Harbour to unload heavy artillery, and several ships were dragged across the neck of the Scceberras Peninsula – the entrance to Grand Harbour was still commanded by the guns of Fort St Angelo – to aid the ground forces with fire from the sea. Through the heat of summer, the Turks launched at least 10 massed assaults on the walls of Birgu and Isla, but each time they were beaten back. On 18 August, when a large section of wall was brought down and it looked as though the Turkish troops were on the verge of fighting their way into the town, Grand Master la Valette himself joined his Knights in the breach. The day was saved.

Turkish morale was drained by the long, hot summer, their increasing casualties, and the impending possibility of having to spend the entire winter on Malta (the Mediterranean sailing season traditionally ended with the storms of late September). The ferocity of their attacks decreased. Then on 7 September the long-promised relief force from Sicily finally arrived. Twenty-eight ships carrying some 8000 men landed at Mellicha Bay and took command of the high ground around Naxxar as the Turks scrambled to embark their troops and guns at Marsamxett.

Seeing the unexpectedly small size of the relief force, Mustafa Pasha ordered some of his troops to land again at St Paul's Bay, while the rest marched towards Naxxar from Marsamxett. But the tired and demoralised Turkish soldiers were in no mood to fight these fresh and ferocious Knights and men-at-arms, and they turned and ran for the galleys now anchored in St Paul's Bay. Thousands were hacked to pieces in the shallow waters of the bay as they tried to escape. That night the banner of the Order of St John flew once again over the battered ruins of St Elmo, and in their churches the Knights and the people of Malta gave thanks for the end of the siege.

The part played in the Great Siege by the ordinary people of Malta is often overlooked, but their courage and resilience was a deciding factor in the Turkish defeat. The defence force was made up of some 5000 or 6000 Maltese soldiers. Local women and children contributed by repairing walls, bringing food and ammunition to the soldiers and tending the wounded. Although their names do not appear in the official accounts, local heroes like Toni Bajada – who has streets named after him in Valletta, St Paul's Bay and Naxxar – live on in Maltese legend. The date of the end of the siege, 8 September, is still celebrated in Malta as the Victory Day public holiday.

AFTER THE SIEGE

The Knights of Malta, previously neglected, were now hailed as the saviours of Europe. Money and honours were heaped on them by grateful monarchs, and the construction of the new city of Valletta – named after the hero of the siege – and its enormous fortifications began. Although sporadic raids continued, Malta was never again seriously threatened by the Turks. Süleyman the Magnificent died in 1566, and much of the Turkish fleet was destroyed by a magazine explosion in the Istanbul dockyards. What remained of Ottoman naval power was crushed at the Battle of Lepanto in 1571, a victory in which the galleys of the Order of St John played an important (and enthusiastic) part.

The Great Siege
Marauding Muslims vs crusading Christians – a clichéd plotline, you have to admit. This is a page-turning account of the epic 1565 battle between the Ottoman Turks and the Knights of St John, by Ernie Bradford.

Malta Convoy More WWII drama. This book, by Peter Shankland and Anthony Hunter, describes the famous Operation Pedestal that succeeded in resupplying Malta at its lowest point in 1942.

1566

Valletta is founded by the Knights' Grand Master Jean Parisot de la Valette

1798–1800

The French occupy Malta after Napoleon's conquest in 1798

1814

Malta is formally recognised as a British colony after British forces help drive the French from Malta in 1800

1814–1964

The British rule Malta, allowing varying levels of Maltese self-government

Knights of St John – www.orderofmalta.org covers the long, illustrious history of the Knights, as well as information about present-day knightly activities.

The period following the Great Siege was one of building – not only of massive new fortifications and watchtowers, but of churches, palaces and auberges. The military engineer Francesco Laparelli was sent to Malta by the pope to design the new defences of Valletta, and Italian artists arrived to decorate its churches, chapels and palazzi. An influx of new Knights, eager to join the now prestigious Order, swelled the coffers of the treasury.

The pious Grand Master Jean de la Cassière (1572–81) oversaw the construction of the Order's new hospital – the Sacra Infermeria (p65) – and the magnificent St John's Co-Cathedral (p60). The cathedral replaced the old Conventual Church of St Lawrence in Birgu (renamed Vittoriosa, or Victorious, after the siege). La Cassière's successor, Hugues Loubeux de Verdalle (1581–95), was more inclined to enjoy the privileges rather than the responsibilities of power and built himself the grandiose Verdala Palace near Rabat (p131).

Alof de Wignacourt (1601–22) initiated many worthy projects, including the construction of an aqueduct to bring water to Valletta from the hills near Mdina. In contrast, the decadent Antoine de Paule (1623–36) built the San Anton Palace (p133) as a summer retreat for hedonistic parties, an unchivalrous tendency which was to increase in the ensuing century. Grand Master Antonio Manoel de Vilhena (1722–36) adorned Malta with many magnificent buildings, including the Manoel Theatre (p64), Fort Manoel (p87) and the Palazzo de Vilhena (p125), but the long reign of the haughty Emanuel Pinto de Fonseca (1741–73), who considered himself on a level with the crowned heads of Europe, epitomised the change that had come over the Order. One glance at the portrait of Pinto in the museum of St John's Co-Cathedral in Valletta (p60) will reveal how far the Order had strayed from its vows of poverty, chastity and obedience.

With the Turkish threat removed, the Knights occupied themselves less with militarism and monasticism, and more with piracy, commerce, drinking and duelling. Although the Order continued to embellish Valletta, the Knights sank into corrupt and ostentatious ways.

NAPOLEON IN MALTA

In the aftermath of the French Revolution, Grand Master Emmanuel de Rohan (1775–97) provided money for Louis XVI's doomed attempt to escape from Paris. By the late 18th century around three-quarters of the Order's income came from the Knights of the French langue, so when the revolutionary authorities confiscated all of the Order's properties and estates in France, the Order was left in dire financial straits.

In 1798 Napoleon Bonaparte arrived in Malta aboard his flagship *L'Orient* at the head of the French Navy, on his way to Egypt to counter the British influence in the Mediterranean. He demanded that he be allowed to water his ships, but the Knights refused. The French landed and captured the island with hardly a fight – many of the Knights were in league with the French, and the Maltese were in no mood for a battle. On 11 June 1798 the Order surrendered to Napoleon. Although the French Knights were allowed to remain, the German Grand Master Ferdinand von Hompesch (1797–98) and the rest of the Order were given three days to gather what belongings they could and leave.

Napoleon stayed in Malta for only six days (in the Palazzo de Parisio in Valletta), but when he left, *L'Orient* was weighed down with silver, gold, paintings and tapestries looted from the Order's churches, auberges and infirmary. (Most of this treasure went to the bottom of the sea a few months later when the British Navy under Admiral Nelson destroyed the French fleet at the Battle of the Nile.) The French also abolished the Maltese aristocracy, defaced coats of arms, desecrated churches and closed down monasteries.

Napoleon left behind a garrison of 4000 men, but they were taken unawares by a spontaneous uprising of the Maltese people (see the boxed text, p125) and had to retreat within the walls of Valletta. A Maltese deputation sought help from the British, and a naval blockade was enforced under the command of Captain Alexander Ball, who was sympathetic to the islanders' aspirations. The French garrison finally capitulated in September 1800, but having taken Malta the British government was unsure what to do with it.

The Treaty of Amiens (March 1802) provided for the return of Malta to the Order of St John (then taking refuge in Russia and Naples), but the Maltese did not want them back and sent a delegation to London to petition the British to stay. Their pleas fell on deaf ears, and arrangements had been made for the return of the Order when war between Britain and France broke out again in May 1803. Faced with the blockade of European ports against British trade, the British government soon changed its mind regarding the potential usefulness of Malta. Even Admiral Nelson, who had previously dismissed the islands, wrote: 'I now declare that I consider Malta as a most important outwork...I hope we shall never give it up.'

While the latter stages of the Napoleonic Wars wore on, Malta rapidly became a prosperous entrepôt, and with the Treaty of Paris in 1814 it was formally recognised as a Crown Colony of the British Empire, with Lieutenant-General Sir Thomas Maitland as its first governor and commander in chief.

CROWN COLONY

The end of the Napoleonic Wars brought an economic slump to Malta as trade fell off and little was done in the way of investment in the island. But its fortunes revived during the Crimean War (1853–56) when it was developed by the Royal Navy as a major naval base and supply station, and with the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 Malta became one of the chief coaling ports on the imperial steamship route between Britain and India.

The early 19th century also saw the beginnings of Maltese political development. In 1835 a Council of Government made up of prominent local citizens was appointed to advise the governor and a free press was established. The constitution of 1849 allowed for eight elected representatives to partake in the government of Malta, but it was not until 1887 that the elected members constituted a majority.

In the second half of the 19th century vast sums were spent on improving Malta's defences and dockyard facilities as the island became a linchpin in the imperial chain of command. The Victoria Lines (see p99) and several large dry docks were built during this period. Commercial facilities were also improved to cater for the busy trade route to India and the Far East. In 1883 a railway was built between Valletta and Mdina (it was closed down in 1931). Between 1800 and 1900 the population of Malta doubled to 200,000.

www.my-malta.com is a website chock-full of interesting articles. Click on the 'Our Rich History' section for a good overview and links to more detailed history pages.

Malte Tricolore – The Story of a French Malta 1798–1964 Didier Destremau, former French ambassador to Malta, has written a lighthearted, satirical history of Malta 'as it might have happened', had Napoleon not got the boot and the country remained under French rule.

1853–56

Malta is used as a base and supply station of the Royal Navy during the Crimean War

1914–18

Malta serves as a military hospital during WWI

1919

Riots against British rule demonstrate a growing desire for self-government

1921

A new constitution grants a limited form of self-government

THE BRITISH LEGACY

For 150 years, from 1814 to 1964, Malta was part of the British Empire. The legacy of British rule takes many forms, most noticeably in the fact that almost everyone speaks English as well as Malti. But there are many others – the Maltese drive on the left, and many of the vehicles on the road are vintage British models from the 1950s, '60s and '70s; the local football teams have typically British names like United, Hotspurs, Wanderers, Rangers and Rovers; cafés serve sausage, egg and chips and pots of tea; and beer is sold in pints and half-pints. Traditional items of British street furniture – red telephone boxes, red pillar boxes, and blue lamps outside police stations – persist in Malta, though they have largely disappeared from British towns. And conversations in Malti are liberally sprinkled with the English expression 'Awright?' and various other forms of 'Manglish'.

During WWI Malta served as a military hospital – it was known as the 'Nurse of the Mediterranean' – providing 25,000 beds for casualties from the disastrous Gallipoli campaign in Turkey. But prices and taxes rose during the war and the economy slumped. During protest riots in 1919, four Maltese citizens were shot dead by panicking British soldiers and several more were injured.

The British government replied to the unrest by giving the Maltese a greater say in the running of Malta. The 1921 constitution created a diarchic system of government, with a Maltese assembly presiding over local affairs and a British imperial government controlling foreign policy and defence. The 1921 elections saw Joseph Howard of the Unione Politica (which later merged to become the Nationalist Party) take his place as the first prime minister of Malta.

The interwar years were marked by economic depression and political turmoil (the constitution was revoked in 1930 and again in 1933) and by growing tensions with Italy. Emigration became an increasingly attractive option, and many Maltese moved to Britain, Canada, the USA and Australia. Emigration to Canada and Australia increased after WWII, and today Australia has one of the largest Maltese communities in the world.

In 1930s Malta, Italian was the language of law and of polite conversation among the upper classes. Malti was the everyday language of the common people, and an increasing number could also speak English. Mussolini made the ridiculous claim that Malti was merely a dialect of Italian and that the Maltese Islands rightly belonged within his new Roman Empire. In 1934 Britain decreed that Malti would be the language of the law courts, and that henceforth Malti and English would be Malta's official languages.

FORTRESS MALTA

The outbreak of WWII found Britain undecided as to the strategic importance of Malta. The army and air force felt that the islands could not be adequately defended against bombing attacks from Sicily and should be evacuated. However, Winston Churchill (then First Lord of the Admiralty) insisted that possession of Malta was vital to Britain's control of supply lines through the bottleneck of the central Mediterranean. As a result of this decision Malta was unprepared when Mussolini entered the war on 10 June 1940. The very next day Italian bombers attacked Grand Harbour.

The only aircraft available on the islands on 11 June were three Gloster Gladiator biplanes – quickly nicknamed *Faith*, *Hope* and *Charity* – whose pilots fought with such skill and tenacity that Italian pilots estimated the strength of the Maltese squadron to be in the region of 25 aircraft! (What remains of *Faith* can be seen in Malta's National War Museum, p63.) The Gladiators battled on alone for three weeks before squadrons of modern Hurricane fighters arrived to bolster the islands' air defences.

Malta effectively became a fortified aircraft carrier, a base for bombing attacks on enemy shipping and harbours in Sicily and North Africa. It also harboured submarines which preyed on Italian and German supply ships. These operations played a vital part in reducing the supplies of fuel and materiel to the Panzer divisions of Rommel's Afrika Korps, which were then sweeping eastwards through Libya towards British-held Egypt. Malta's importance was clear to Hitler too, and crack squadrons of Stuka divebombers were stationed in Sicily with the objective of pounding the island into submission.

Malta's greatest ordeal came in 1942, when the country came close to starvation and surrender. It suffered 154 days and nights of continuous bombing – in April alone some 6700 tonnes of bombs were dropped on Grand Harbour and the surrounding area. By comparison, at the height of London's Blitz there were 57 days of continuous bombing. On 15 April 1942 King George VI awarded the George Cross – Britain's highest award for civilian bravery – to the entire population of Malta. The citation from the king read: 'To honour her brave people I award the George Cross to the island fortress of Malta to bear witness to a heroism and devotion that will long be famous in history.' The award can be seen at the National War Museum in Valletta.

Just as Malta's importance to the Allies lay in disrupting enemy supply lines, so its major weakness was the difficulty of getting supplies to the island. At the height of the siege in the summer of 1942 the governor made an inventory of remaining food and fuel and informed London that if more supplies did not get through before the end of August then Malta would be forced to surrender. A massive relief convoy, known as Operation Pedestal, consisting of 14 supply ships escorted by three aircraft carriers, two battleships, seven cruisers and 24 destroyers, was dispatched to run the gauntlet of enemy bombers and submarines. It suffered massive attacks, and only five supply ships made it into Grand Harbour – the crippled oil tanker *Ohio*, with its precious cargo of fuel, limped in, lashed between two warships on 15 August. This date, the Feast of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary, led to the Maltese christening the relief ships 'The Santa Marija Convoy'.

In the words of Winston Churchill, 'Revictualled and replenished with ammunition and essential stores, the strength of Malta revived', and it was able to continue its vital task of disrupting enemy supply lines. The aircraft and submarines based in Malta succeeded in destroying or damaging German convoys to North Africa to the extent that Rommel's Afrika Korps was low on fuel and ammunition during the crucial Battle of El Alamein in October 1942, a situation that contributed to a famous Allied victory and the beginning of the end of the German presence in North Africa.

In July 1943 Malta served as the operational headquarters and air support base for Operation Husky, the Allied invasion of Sicily. By coincidence, the date

The Malta Story (1953) Surprisingly the only movie made about the dramatic WWII events in Malta. Men in spiffy uniforms fight dangerous battles, perform heroic acts and win hearts (of course). Stars Alec Guinness and Jack Hawkins.

The day after Mussolini's Italy entered WWII, one of that country's first acts of war was to bomb Malta.

A Concise History of Malta It's no small feat to cover a country's past in under 300 pages. This book, by Carmel Cassar, is a readable introduction to Maltese history.

1920s–30s

Economic depression and political turmoil result in large numbers emigrating

1940–43

Malta experiences heavy bombing and great hardship during WWII

1942

The people of Malta are awarded the George Cross for civilian bravery

1947

Self-government is restored

on which the Italian Navy finally surrendered to the Allies – 8 September – was the same as that on which the Great Siege had ended 378 years previously. As the captured enemy warships gathered in Marsaxlokk Bay, Admiral Cunningham, commander in chief of Britain's Mediterranean Fleet, cabled the Admiralty in London: 'Be pleased to inform their Lordships that the Italian battle fleet now lies at anchor under the guns of the fortress of Malta.'

For a better understanding of this tumultuous period in Maltese history, travellers should visit the National War Museum (p63) and Lascaris War Rooms (p64), which housed the headquarters and operations rooms of the Royal Air Force and Royal Navy. Both sights are in Valletta.

INDEPENDENT REPUBLIC

After 1943 Malta's role in the war rapidly diminished. WWII left the islands with 35,000 homes destroyed and the population on the brink of starvation. In 1947 the war-torn island was given a measure of self-government and a £30 million war-damage fund to help rebuilding and restoration. But the economic slump that followed Britain's reductions in defence spending and the loss of jobs in the naval dockyard led to calls either for closer integration with Britain, or for Malta to go it alone. On 21 September 1964, with Prime Minister Dr George Borg Olivier at the helm, Malta gained its independence. It remained within the British Commonwealth, with Queen Elizabeth II as the head of state represented in Malta by a governor general.

Borg Olivier's successor as prime minister in 1971 was the Labour Party's Dominic (Dom) Mintoff, whose name was rarely out of the news headlines in the 1970s. Mintoff was a fiery and controversial politician who was not afraid to speak his mind. During his period as prime minister (1971–84) Malta became a republic (in 1974, replacing the queen as head of state with a president appointed by parliament). In 1979 links with Britain were reduced further when Mintoff expelled the British armed services, declared Malta's neutrality and signed agreements with Libya, the Soviet Union and North Korea.

In 1987 the Nationalist Party assumed power under the prime ministership of Dr Eddie Fenech Adami, and won a second term with a landslide victory in 1992, when one of the party's main platforms was Malta's application to join the EC (European Community; now the EU). The 1996 general election saw the Labour Party, led by Dr Alfred Sant, narrowly regain power with a one-seat majority. One of its main policies was to suspend the country's application for full EU membership. However, in 1998, during a debate on development of the Vittoriosa waterfront into a marina for private yachts, Dom Mintoff, then 82 years old but still capable of causing controversy, crossed the floor of the house to vote with the opposition. A snap general election in September 1998 was effectively a vote of confidence in the Labour government. Labour lost, Fenech Adami's Nationalist Party was returned to power, and under the Nationalist Party, Malta's bid for EU membership was revived.

THE 21ST CENTURY

In 2002 Malta was formally invited to join the EU and in March 2003 the country voted in a referendum on the matter. Ninety-two percent of eligible voters cast their vote and, in a close result, just over 53% voted in favour of

EU membership. This pro-EU result was confirmed when Fenech Adami's Nationalist Party won a general election one month later, in April 2003. Malta became a member of the EU on 1 May 2004, and at the time of research was preparing for the adoption of the euro as the new national currency, scheduled for 1 January 2008.

In early 2004, upon reaching his 70th birthday, Fenech Adami resigned as Nationalist Party leader and retired from parliament. Soon after, he took on the figurehead position of president of Malta. Fenech Adami's deputy prime minister, Lawrence Gonzi, was elected leader of the ruling party and hence became the country's new prime minister. The next general election isn't due until August 2008, but may be called before that time.

As the Maltese prepare to enter the euro zone (see p176 for more information), they also confront a number of economic and social challenges, including over-development of the land and chronic environmental abuse, a decline in tourist numbers, and the recent wave of immigrants from northern Africa arriving by boat on Malta's shores and placing a strain on resources (and triggering an unpleasant outburst of racism among many locals). For more on these topical issues, see p18.

**'In 2002
Malta was
formally
invited to
join the EU'**

When Malta gained independence in 1964 it was the first time since prehistory that the country had been ruled by the native Maltese and not by some outside power.

1964

Malta becomes independent, with Queen Elizabeth II still the head of state

1974

Malta becomes a republic

2004

Malta joins the EU

2005

Around 1800 asylum-seeking irregular immigrants arrive on Maltese shores

The Culture

THE NATIONAL IDENTITY

When Malta gained its independence in 1964 it was the first time since prehistory that the islands had been ruled by the native Maltese, and not by some outside power. Since early in the 1st millennium BC Malta had been occupied successively by Phoenicians, Carthaginians, Romans, Byzantines, Arabs, Normans, Sicilians, the Knights of St John, the French and the British. All of these temporary powers have influenced Maltese culture to varying degrees, yet through all this time the population has managed to preserve a distinctive identity and a strong sense of continuity with the past. Despite an easy blend of Mediterranean and British culture in the islands today, there's still a strong feeling of tradition. The people remain fairly conservative in their outlook; the Catholic Church still exerts a strong influence, the church's buildings and parish activities remain at the core of village life, and family values are held in high regard.

The locals do talk about the slightly claustrophobic feeling of living in a tiny country with the population of a midsize regional town: on one hand, there's a great sense of community; on the other, a lack of privacy, and a tendency for gossip (everyone seems to know everyone else's business). People speak of 'six degrees of separation', but in Malta, given the small population, it's invariably two degrees – if I don't know you, I'm bound to know someone who does...

The Maltese are justifiably proud of their small country's historical importance and the local grit and determination (well demonstrated during WWII). Understandably, they have relished their independence since 1964 and the vast majority of the population takes great interest in political matters (one local spoke of a reverence for authority among many locals – perhaps a by-product of centuries of foreign rule, or of the strongly religious nature of the population). The people love discussing politics – a small population and the accessibility of politicians probably plays a large part. And the locals put their money where their mouth is too: voter turnout is very high (around 90%) but, interestingly, margins are usually very close – the country seems fairly evenly split on major issues.

The Maltese are friendly, laid-back and generally welcoming of tourists. As in most southern European countries, things can move slowly here, but this is tempered by an efficiency that may be a result of British rule. People are a little more reserved than you might expect for a Mediterranean country (in comparison to, say, Italians and Greeks) – again, this may be a direct result of the British influence.

Visitors will easily be able to observe the very Maltese quirks that have withstood globalisation and continue to make the country unique and fascinating – among them the language, the village festa, and the love of cars, sport, politics, fireworks and lotteries.

LIFESTYLE

Malta is a conservative country, with traditions and attitudes similar to those of southern Italy. Under the Maltese constitution, Roman Catholic Christianity is the official state religion and must be taught in state schools, but the constitution guarantees freedom of worship. Although its influence is waning, the Roman Catholic Church still plays an important part in everyday life. A Sunday Mass attendance census held in Malta in 2005 showed that just over half the population (52.6%) attend Mass on Sunday – a drop of

For aspiring anthropologists, Tarcisio Zarb's book, *Folklore of an Island – Maltese Threshold Customs*, covers Maltese traditions related to all of life's big occasions, including birth, puberty, marriage and death.

An estimated crowd of 100,000 people (one quarter of the population) attended the Mass celebrated by Pope John Paul II on his visit to Malta in 2001.

MALTI – A LINGUISTIC MELTING POT

The native language of Malta is called Malti (also called Maltese). Some linguists attribute its origins to the Phoenician occupation of Malta in the 1st millennium BC, but most link it to North African Arabic dialects. The language has an Arabic grammar and construction but is a melting pot of influences, laced with Sicilian, Italian, Spanish, French and English loan-words.

English is taught to schoolchildren from an early age, and almost everyone in Malta speaks it well. Many also speak Italian, helped by the fact that Malta receives Italian TV. French and German are also spoken, though less widely.

See also the Language chapter, p195.

around 11% in 10 years. Church ceremonies are still quite sombre affairs, full of tradition and reverence, and this may explain why many of the younger generation prefer not to attend every week. Still, baptisms, first communions, weddings and funerals continue to be celebrated in church (weddings in the parish where the bride was born), and the most important event in the calendar is the annual parish festa (p172), which is held on different dates, depending on the village. The sheer number of churches in the country is also a noticeable feature. Divorce and abortion are illegal; the possibility of divorce being legalised is a widely discussed issue, but seems unlikely. Still, family values are very important, as is the love of socialising common to southern European countries – Sunday in particular is the day to gather with family and friends and enjoy good food and company.

Statistically, the Maltese enjoy a good standard of living, low inflation (around 2% to 3%) and relatively low unemployment (around 7%). Schooling is compulsory between the ages of five and 16 and is provided free in state and church schools (church schools are subsidised by the government). A university education is also free to Maltese citizens and students receive an annual stipend. Statistics are only part of the equation – positive elements such as the warm climate, a strong connection to the land and a healthy sense of tradition and community also play their part in creating what to many might seem an enviably relaxed lifestyle. Dutch sociologist Professor Ruut Veenhoven (of Erasmus University in Rotterdam) created the World Database of Happiness, which includes the Happiness in Nations survey and compares happiness levels in 90 countries based on data collected between 1946 and 1992. According to the database, Malta is ranked the happiest country in the world in which to live (tied with Denmark and Switzerland). But can happiness really be measured? For those looking to unlock the secrets of happiness, the scientific explanations are at www1.eur.nl/fsw/happiness/.

WOMEN IN MALTA

Malta is a conservative country and, as in many staunchly Catholic, Mediterranean countries, women have been expected to stay at home to look after their children (or their elderly parents). Childcare costs are high, if childcare exists at all – there simply hasn't been the culture of paying for such a service in such a traditional, family-oriented society. The country consequently has an employment rate for women of only 34%, the lowest in the EU. Attempts to identify reasons why about 110,000 females of working age are not in employment are underway as part of an EU program, and plans will be made to make workforce reentry more accessible for women through improved education, vocational training, employment opportunities and the expansion of affordable childcare.

A study compiled in 2003 showed that the main reasons for women not working was to look after their families and because they were happy at

Malta is the only country in Europe where divorce is not legal.

home, taking care of the family. Moral imperatives, resistance by close family members and the overbearing pressure of household chores came a distant third, fourth and fifth as explanations. Moral imperatives is an interesting facet – reports indicate that women are pressured to go to work by governments, and pressured not to by the church. Among the more conservative members of Maltese society (and society in general), women who go out to work are not only seen as failing their families, but are also held responsible for most that is dysfunctional in modern society.

However, the statistics don't paint the full picture. Locals talk of low official wages spurring the creation of a parallel economy of cash work on the side. Second jobs are common (ie teachers giving private lessons, policemen working as house painters on their days off), and many qualified people work from home, in positions such as hairdressers and dressmakers – these are some reasons for such a low percentage of women in official employment.

ECONOMY

Malta produces only about 20% of its food needs, has limited fresh water supplies and has no domestic energy sources. Tourism is the most vital component of the island's economy, generating around a quarter of Malta's GDP. Recognising that Malta's traditional offerings of sun and sea are under siege from new and often cheaper competitors (such as North African or Eastern European destinations), the Malta Tourism Authority (MTA) and its private-sector partners are turning their attention to promoting niche products such as cultural tourism, family travel, diving holidays and meetings and conventions.

Over the past 10 years, investors, developers and international hotel chains have constructed over 30 five- and four-star properties, up from only five luxury hotels in 1996.

The country is otherwise dependent on foreign trade, ship building and repair, construction, and manufacturing (especially electronics and textiles).

POPULATION

Malta's population is around 400,000, with most people living in the satellite towns around Valletta, Sliema and Grand Harbour. Approximately 30,000 live on Gozo, while Comino has a mere handful of farmers in winter and a couple of hundred tourists in summer. Around 90% of the population lives in urban areas and only 10% in rural areas. Some 97% of the population is Maltese-born.

The number of foreigners residing in Malta has almost doubled in the past 15 years – but this number still only amounts to just under 3% of the population. The foreign community in Malta is predominantly British. Most foreigners live in Sliema and its surrounding modern suburbs. There is also a growing North African Muslim community of over 2000, who are married to Maltese nationals. Unfortunately, some racism exists, with occasional reports of owners of some bars and clubs periodically discouraging or prohibiting darker-skinned persons, especially of African or Arab origin, from entering their establishments. This racism has been more evident since the recent arrival on Maltese shores of many hundreds of irregular immigrants (see p18) from Africa.

SPORT Football (Soccer)

The Maltese are great football fans and follow the fortunes of local sides and international teams (especially British and Italian) with equal fervour; countless bars televise matches. The local football season runs from October

It is estimated that there are as many Maltese living abroad as there are in Malta.

Malta is among the most densely populated countries in the world, with 1266 people per sq km (the comparable figure for the Netherlands, the secondmost populous country in the EU, is around 400).

There are 359 Catholic churches in Malta, serving around 392,000 people – the 98% of Malta's population who are Catholic.

till May, and there is a Maltese Premier League with 10 teams. League and international matches are held at the National Stadium at Ta'Qali, which is situated between Mosta and Rabat; results are reported in the local newspapers.

More information can be obtained from the website of the **Malta Football Association** (www.mfa.com.mt), which details the leagues, teams and fixtures. Another website, www.maltafootball.com, is also a good resource for information.

Water Polo

As the heat of summer increases, football gives way to water polo, with its season lasting from July till September. The fans who were shouting on the terraces now yell from the pool sides. Games are hard fought and physical, and it's worth trying to take in a match during your stay in Malta. The important clashes are held at the National Swimming Pool Complex on Triq Maria Teresa Spinelli in Gżira. Further information is available from the **Aquatic Sports Association** (☎ 2132 2884; www.asaofmalta.org).

Horse Racing

Horse racing is one of the Maltese Islands' most popular spectator sports, with race meetings held at the Marsa Racecourse, part of the Marsa Sports Complex outside Valletta (see p168), every Sunday from October to May. Races are mostly trotting – where the jockey rides a light two-wheeled gig drawn by the horse – and the betting is frantic. Some tour operators offer a day trip to the races (in season).

ARTS Crafts

Malta is noted for its fine crafts – particularly its handmade lace, handwoven fabrics and silver filigree. Lace-making probably arrived with the Knights in the 16th century. It was traditionally the role of village women – particularly on the island of Gozo – and, although the craft has developed into a healthy industry, it is still possible to find women sitting on their doorsteps making lace tablecloths.

The art of producing silver filigree was probably introduced to the island in the 17th century via Sicily, which was then strongly influenced by Spain. Malta's silversmiths still produce beautiful filigree by traditional methods but in large quantities to meet tourist demand.

Other handicrafts include weaving, knitting and glass-blowing; the latter is an especially healthy small industry that produces glassware exported throughout the world. Head to Ta'Qali Crafts Village near Rabat (p129) or its smaller Gozitan equivalent, Ta'Dbiegi (p156) for the opportunity to see locals practising their craft and to buy souvenirs.

Literature

Pietro Caxaro's *Cantilena*, an epic poem composed in the mid-15th century, is the earliest known literary work in Malti but Italian remained the language of literature in Malta until the late 19th century. Important writers of this period include Gan Anton Vassallo (1817–67) and Guże Muscat Azzopardi (1853–1927). *Inez Farruġ* by Anton Manwel Caruana (1838–1907), published in 1889, is considered to be the first literary novel written in Malti.

Probably the best-known and best-loved of Maltese writers is Carmelo Psaila (1871–1961). Under his pen name of Dun Karm he became Malta's national poet, movingly chronicling the island's sufferings in WWII. Anton Buttigieg (1912–83) was another important poet, who captured the essence

www.maltaculture.com
The Press & News section of the website of the Malta Council for Culture & the Arts is a great starting point for information about all sorts of forthcoming cultural events, including literary recitals, traditional folk music performances and lunchtime concerts.

LOCALS TO LISTEN OUT FOR...

- **Joseph Calleja** is one of the most promising young tenors around today, winning international acclaim. Born in Attard in 1978, this guy has a voice that belies his tender years and he looks set for a long and illustrious career. Check out www.josephcalleja.com.
- **Miriam Gauci** was born in 1958 and has since become the most successful Maltese soprano, enjoying an international career and reputation.
- **Ira Losco**, born in Sliema in 1981, is a talented young singer-songwriter who has already been the best-selling artist in Malta for three consecutive years, and has supported artists such as Katie Melua and Elton John. Her most recent album, *Accident Prone*, is in her true pop-rock/alternative style and is a hit at home for its powerful guitars, edgy riffs and strong melodies. See www.iralosco.com.

of the Maltese landscape and the human relationship with nature in his lyric poetry and tightly written vignettes.

Among modern writers, the playwright and novelist Francis Ebejer (1925–93), who wrote in both Malti and English, stands out. His novels deal with the tensions between tradition and modernity. *For Rozina...a Husband* is a collection of short stories (in English) that attempt to capture the essence of Maltese village life. Oliver Friggieri (b 1947), Professor of Maltese at the University of Malta, is Malta's best-known and most prolific living novelist.

Music

The Maltese are great music lovers and the *ghana* (*ah-na*; folk song) is Maltese folk music at its most individual and traditional. A tribute to Malta's geographic location, *ghana* verses are a mixture of a Sicilian ballad and the rhythmic wail of an Arabic tune, and were traditionally viewed as the music of the farmers, labourers and working classes. In its truest form, lyrics are created fresh each time and tell stories of village life and events in local history. The verses are always sung by men with guitar accompaniment.

Some band clubs and bars, especially in the centre and south of Malta, organise *ghana* nights or you might chance upon an impromptu *ghana* in a rural bar. The St James' Cavalier Centre for Creativity in Valletta (p63) occasionally holds *ghana* nights and you may see performances at various heritage events.

Etnika is a traditional folk group reviving ethnic Maltese musical forms and instruments. Their music, using traditional bagpipes, horns and drums, was once part of Malta's daily life, and was used in a variety of social contexts – from weddings to funerals. Etnika reinterpret this musical heritage for a contemporary audience and sometimes fuse it with *ghana*, jazz and flamenco for a unique sound – you should be able to pick up a CD of their music at music stores throughout Malta. See also www.etnika.com.mt for information.

Band music is one of the most popular traditions on the islands. Every town and village has at least one band club (sometimes two, and they are often engaged in strong rivalry). Bands play a vital role in the village festa and other open-air events.

There is also a strong modern music scene and live music is featured in many pubs and clubs. The Eurovision Song Contest may be derided in large parts of Europe but it is taken *very* seriously in Malta. Don't upset a local by mentioning Malta's worst-ever result at the 2006 competition (they came a dismal last) after the country came a close second in 2005.

Intrigued by *ghana*?
Read all about it (and listen to samples) at www.allmalta.com.

The highs! The lows!
The bright outfits and big hair! Read all about Malta's performance at Eurovision over the years at www.eurovisionmalta.com.

Architecture

Malta's architectural heritage is dominated by two influences – the Knights of St John and the Roman Catholic Church. Together they created a distinctive variation of the baroque style of architecture that swept across Europe between the end of the 16th century and the 18th century.

The greatest Maltese architect of the 16th century was Gerolamo Cassar (1520–86). He was born in the fishing village of Birgu 10 years before the Knights of St John arrived from Rhodes, and he worked as an assistant to Francesco Laparelli, the military engineer who designed the fortifications of Valletta. He studied architecture in Rome and was responsible for the design of many of Malta's finest buildings, including the Grand Master's Palace, the façade of St John's Co-Cathedral, and many of the Knights' auberges.

The prolific architect Tommaso Dingli (1591–1666) created many of Malta's parish churches. His masterpiece is the Church of St Mary in Attard, which he designed when he was only 22 years of age. Lorenzo Gafa (1630–1704) designed many of the Maltese Islands' finest examples of Maltese baroque, among them the cathedrals of Mdina and Gozo.

Other important architects who also worked in the Maltese baroque style were Giovanni Barbara (Palazzo de Vilhena, Mdina; 1730), Giuseppe Bonnici (the Old Customs House, Valletta; 1747) and Domenico Cachia (the Auberge de Castile, Valletta; 1744).

In modern times, Malta's best-known architect is Richard England, a practising architect of international reputation, and also a sculptor, painter, photographer and poet. See www.richardengland.com.

Painting

As in architecture, Maltese art was much influenced by neighbouring Italy. Many Italian artists worked in Malta (most famously Caravaggio) and most Maltese artists went to study in Italy.

The greatest Maltese painter of the 17th century was Mattia Preti (1613–99). Preti was a painter from Calabria, Italy, who lived and worked in Malta for 30 years. In 1661 he was commissioned by Grand Master Rafael Cotoner to decorate the vault of St John's Co-Cathedral in Valletta (see p60). The 18 vivid scenes depicting events in the life of St John the Baptist – from Zachary

The website, www.angel.fire.com/ma/architecture, has loads of information on the various eras of architecture in Malta, with good accompanying photographs and useful links.

5000 Years of Architecture in Malta, by Leonard Mahoney, provides comprehensive coverage of the topic, from Neolithic temples to the auberges of the Knights and beyond.

CARAVAGGIO IN MALTA

Michelangelo Merisi (1571–1610), better known by the name of his home town, Caravaggio, was a revolutionary Italian painter whose naturalistic representation of religious subjects replaced the traditional symbolism of 16th-century art. In particular, he introduced the bold use of shadow and selective lighting to dramatise his subjects.

He made his name in Rome with a series of controversial paintings, but also earned a reputation as a wild man, and numerous brawls and encounters with the law culminated in Caravaggio murdering a man during an argument over a tennis game. He fled Rome and went into hiding in Naples for several months. Then, towards the end of 1607, he moved to Malta.

In Malta, Caravaggio was welcomed as a famous artist and was commissioned to produce several works for the Knights of St John, including the famous *Beheading of St John the Baptist*, now on display in the oratory of the cathedral in Valletta (p61). In July 1608 he was admitted into the Order as a Knight of Justice, but only two months later he was arrested for an unspecified crime – it may be that news arrived of the murder he had committed – and he was promptly imprisoned in Fort St Angelo.

He escaped to Sicily, but was expelled from the Order and spent the next two years on the run. He created some of his finest paintings during this period, before dying of exhaustion and fever before the age of 38.

MALTA'S CHURCHES

The Maltese claim to be one of the oldest Christian peoples in the world, having been converted by St Paul after his shipwreck on Malta in AD 60. Maltese society remains deeply influenced by the Roman Catholic Church. Although local festas are a noisy and colourful expression of worship, church services are largely solemn experiences, full of reverence and Catholic ritual. If you are visiting a church, dress accordingly.

There are 64 Catholic parishes and 313 Catholic churches on Malta, and 15 Catholic parishes and 46 Catholic churches on Gozo. These range from full cathedrals down to tiny wayside chapels and were built between the 15th and 20th centuries. The main period of church-building in Malta took place after the arrival of the Knights of St John, in the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries. The oldest surviving church in Malta is the tiny medieval Chapel of the Annunciation at Ħal Millieri near Żurrieq (p141), which dates from the mid-15th century and is in Maltese vernacular style.

The 16th century saw the Renaissance style imported from Italy by the Knights, followed by the more elaborate forms of Maltese baroque which evolved throughout the 17th century and culminated in the design of St Paul's Cathedral in Mdina. The 19th and 20th centuries saw the addition of several large churches in the neogothic style, including St Paul's Anglican Cathedral in Valletta (1839–41) and the Church of Our Lady of Lourdes in Mġarr, Gozo (1924–75). Two huge rotundas were also built by public subscription: the Church of St Mary at Mosta (1833–60) and the Church of St John the Baptist (1951–71) at Xewkija on Gozo.

The following list includes some of Malta's most impressive examples of church and cathedral architecture.

St John's Co-Cathedral, Valletta (p60)

(1573–77; Gerolamo Cassar, interior by Mattia Preti) The austere Renaissance façade of St John's – the Conventual Church of the Order of St John from 1577 to 1798 – conceals a richly ornamental interior. The tombs of Grand Masters Nicolas Cotoner and Ramon Perellos in the Chapel of Aragon are floridly baroque.

Church of St Paul's Shipwreck, Valletta (p64)

(c 1580; Gerolamo Cassar, remodelled by Lorenzo Gafa in 1680) Don't be fooled by the largely 19th-century façade on Triq San Pawl – this is one of Valletta's oldest churches. The wooden statue of St Paul was carved in 1657 by Melchiorre Gafa, Lorenzo's brother, and is paraded through the streets on the festa day (10 February).

Church of St Mary, Attard (p133)

(1613–16; Tommaso Dingli) This is one of the finest examples of Renaissance-style architecture in Malta, built on a Latin cross plan with an elegant and restrained façade adorned with statues of the saints.

in the Temple to the beheading of St John – took five years to complete. Preti also designed the ornately carved decoration on the walls and pillars of the cathedral – a rich confection of gilded leaves, scrolls, flowers, Maltese crosses and coats of arms – and painted several of the altarpieces in the side chapels. Some of his best work can be seen in Valletta's National Museum of Fine Arts (p63). Preti was eventually accepted into the Order of St John and came to be known as *Il Cavalier Calabrese* – the Calabrian Knight.

Giuseppe Cali (1846–1930) was a portraitist and religious artist who painted altarpieces for parish churches and also created the murals in the Mosta Dome (p131).

Exhibitions by contemporary Maltese artists are regularly held in the Museum of Fine Arts in Valletta, and a great spot to check out what's happening on the local scene is the St James' Cavalier Centre for Creativity (p63).

Church of St Lawrence, Vittoriosa (p79)

(1681–97; Lorenzo Gafa) St Lawrence's occupies the site of a small church built by Count Roger in 1090. It was enlarged and taken over by the Knights of St John as their original conventual church in Malta in 1530 and houses relics brought from Rhodes, a silver processional cross, and a fine altarpiece by Mattia Preti showing the martyrdom of St Lawrence. The dome was rebuilt after being damaged by a bomb in 1942.

St Paul's Cathedral, Mdina (p124)

(1697–1702; Lorenzo Gafa) Designed by Gafa at the height of his career, this is probably the finest example of the Maltese baroque style (rather more restrained and less florid than the baroque of Italy). The cathedral occupies the site of a Norman church built in the 1090s, and there may have been a church here since the 4th century.

Cathedral of the Assumption, Victoria, Gozo (p146)

(1697–1711; Lorenzo Gafa) Gozo's cathedral is another fine example of Maltese baroque designed by Gafa. Lack of funds meant the dome was never built, but an 18th-century trompe l'oeil painting looks convincingly like one on the inside. The cathedral occupies the site of an older Norman church, and possibly of a Roman temple.

Church of Sts Peter & Paul, Nadur, Gozo (p162)

(1760–80; Giuseppe Bonnici) The extravagance of Bonnici's original design has been tempered by a more sober 19th-century façade, but the beautiful and ornate marble interior is pure baroque. The twin statues of its patron saints have given it the nickname *iz-Zewġ* (the pair, or the twins), and its festa (29 June) is one of the liveliest on the islands.

Church of Santa Maria, Mosta (p131)

(1833–60; Giorgio Grognet de Vassé) The circular design of this church, better known as the Rotunda or Mosta Dome, closely resembles that of the Pantheon in Rome, but it's the church's great dome – visible from most parts of Malta – that is its most notable asset. Inside is a lovely calming interior of blue, gold and white, and remarkable evidence of the hand of God (perhaps?) in a little piece of WWII history.

Church of St John the Baptist, Xewkija, Gozo (p154)

(1951–71; Joseph D'Amato) This huge rotunda was built with money and labour donated by the parishioners of Xewkija. It is the biggest church in the Maltese Islands, and can seat up to 4000 people.

Sculpture

Antonio Sciortino (1879–1947) was the leading Maltese sculptor of the 20th century. Born in Żebbuġ, he spent 25 years in Rome before returning to Malta and creating lively and thrusting compositions like the *Arab Horses*, which is displayed in the National Museum of Fine Arts in Valletta (p63). You can see other examples of his fine work outdoors in Valletta's public spaces.

Vincent Apap (1938–2003) also created many of the sculptures that adorn public spaces in Malta, notably the Triton fountain in the centre of the City Gate bus terminus between Valletta and Floriana.

At the Cathedral Museum in Mdina (p124) you can view a permanent display of the clever, contemporary olive-wood sculptures created by Anton Agius (b 1933).

Environment

THE LAND

The Maltese Islands cover a total area of only 316 sq km – less than the Isle of Wight in the UK or Martha's Vineyard in the USA. There are three inhabited islands – Malta, Gozo and Comino – and two uninhabited islets, Cominotto and Filfla. They lie in the central Mediterranean Sea, 93km south of Sicily, 290km east of Tunisia and 290km north of Libya.

There are no mountains on the islands. The highest point is Ta'Zuta (253m) on the southwest coast of Malta. This high plateau is bounded on the southwest by sea cliffs, and drops away gradually towards rolling plains in the south and east. Northwest Malta is characterised by a series of flat-topped ridges running generally northeast to southwest – the Victoria Lines escarpment, the Wardija Ridge, the Bajda Ridge, the Mellicha Ridge and the Marfa Ridge – separated by broad valleys. The landscape of Gozo is greener than Malta and consists of flat-topped hills and terraced hillsides, with high cliffs in the south and west. The highest point is Ta'Dbiegi (190m) to the south of Gharb.

The soil is generally thin and rocky, although some valleys are terraced and farmed intensively. There are few trees and, for most of the year, little greenery to soften the stony, sun-bleached landscape. The only notable exception is Buskett Gardens (see p131), a lush valley of pine trees and orange groves protected by the imposing Dingli Cliffs of the south coast.

There is virtually no surface water and there are no permanent creeks or rivers. The water table is the main source of fresh water, but it is supplemented by several large desalination plants – a good 60% of all tap water is desalinated seawater, produced by means of a reverse osmosis operated by electricity. So please use water carefully while here (and you may prefer to drink bottled water).

Geology

Geologically speaking, the Maltese Islands are lumps of the Mediterranean sea bed that have been warped upward until they are poking above sea level. The warping was caused by the collision between the African tectonic plate to the south and the European plate to the north. This collision is ongoing and is also responsible for the volcanoes of Etna and Vesuvius, and for the earthquakes which occasionally strike southern Italy and Malta.

The rocks that make up Malta are between seven million and 30 million years old, and are layered one on top of the other. From the bottom up, there are four main layers – the Lower Coralline Limestone, the Globigerina Limestone, the Blue Clay and the Upper Coralline Limestone. The limestones are rich in fossils, especially at the junction between the Lower Coralline and Globigerina Limestones, where there is a huge concentration of fossil scallop shells and sand dollars (flat, disc-shaped relatives of sea urchins).

The Upper and Lower Coralline Limestones are hard and resistant to weathering – they form the great sea cliffs of southwest Malta and Ta'Ċenċ, and the crags that ring the flat tops of Gozo's hills. The golden-coloured Globigerina Limestone is softer and underlies much of central and eastern Malta. The sticky Blue Clay is rich in nutrients and is responsible for the more fertile soils of Gozo – you can see it in the cliffs west of Ramla Bay.

Local quarrymen refer to the easily worked Globigerina Limestone as *franka*; the harder-wearing coralline limestones are called *zonqor*. Both were widely used in the building of the islands' massive fortifications.

Malta, Gozo & Comino – Off the Beaten Track is an excellent resource by Nature Trust Malta that gives an overview of the Maltese environment (including its geology, flora and fauna). It also contains details and maps for walking tours.

Malta's built-up surface area stands at 22% (compared to the European average of 7%), and in an unpopular move the government announced in 2006 it will extend Malta's development boundaries by a further 2.4%.

WILDLIFE Animals

The sparse vegetation supports little in the way of land-based wildlife – just a handful of rats, mice, hedgehogs, weasels and shrews. Rabbits have been hunted almost to extinction (the rabbit you'll see on menus has been bred). Geckoes and other lizards are fairly common – the dark green and red lizard *Lacerta filfolensis* is found only on the islet of Filfla – and there are three species of snake, none of them poisonous.

There are barely a dozen resident bird species, including sparrows, rock doves, linnets, corn buntings, herring gulls and the blue rock thrush – Malta's national bird, which appears on the 25c coin – but more than 150 species have been recorded as migrants and winter visitors (these are favourite targets for Maltese hunters, sadly).

The seas around Malta and Gozo are clean and clear, and support a rich and diverse marine fauna that attracts scuba divers from all over Europe. For more information, see p44.

Plants

Malta has little in the way of natural vegetation. Much of the island is cultivated and where it is not the land is often bare and rocky. The only extensive area of woodland is at Buskett Gardens (see p131), which is dominated by Aleppo pines.

The rough limestone slopes of the hilltops and sea cliffs support a typical Mediterranean flora of stunted olive, oleander and tamarisk trees, with growths of thyme, euphorbia, rosemary and brambles. Samphire, sea campion, spurge and saltwort can be found on the rocks beside the sea, and the rare parasitic plant *Cynomorium coccineus* is found at Dwejra on Gozo (see p157).

NATIONAL PARKS

Malta has no national parks – hardly surprising, given its diminutive size. In Central Malta you might see signs pointing to 'National Park' – these are in fact pointing to the national sports stadium at Ta'Qali!

There are two nature reserves that protect resident and migrating birdlife in Northwest Malta, managed by volunteers from Birdlife Malta – these are Is-Simar Nature Reserve (p114) at Xemxija, and Ghadira Nature Reserve (p118) at Mellicha Bay. Both are open to the public.

THE MALTESE FALCON

Falconry was the great passion of the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II (1194–1250). He wrote a famous treatise on the subject, *De arte venandi cum avibus*, and chose as his emblem a peregrine falcon, the king of birds. He grew up in Sicily, and learned from his own experience that the finest peregrines came from Malta (the Maltese falcon is a subspecies of peregrine).

When Malta was given to the Knights of St John in 1530, the only condition attached was an annual rent of two Maltese falcons – one for the Spanish emperor and one for the viceroy of Sicily. Unfortunately, by the 1970s trapping and shooting had reduced these magnificent raptors to just one or two breeding pairs. There are occasional reports of peregrines – known as *bies* in Malti – being seen on the remote southwestern cliffs of Malta and Gozo, but there have been no confirmed sightings since the mid-1980s.

All this, of course, has nothing to do with Dashiell Hammett's famous detective story, *The Maltese Falcon*. If you've read the book you'll know that the eponymous black bird is actually a red herring.

Wildlife of the Maltese Islands edited by Joe Sultana & Victor Falzon is a large, comprehensive book that covers about 1000 species of plants and animals, all illustrated in colour.

For botany buffs, www.maltawildplants.com is an incredibly comprehensive site describing in detail the wild flowering plants growing in Malta.

ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

The combined pressures of population, land use and development, as well as pollution and the lack of protection of natural areas, have had a significant environmental impact on the islands. There is also a severe shortage of fresh water – the only natural supply comes from ground water, which is increasingly contaminated with nitrate run off from farmland. This has been eased slightly by the construction of several large desalination plants.

Air and noise pollution is caused by dust from uncontrolled building activity, the high concentration of cars, lorries and buses (many of them old) in the congested roads around Grand Harbour, and by discharges from coal-fired power stations and factories; this is contributing to many health problems, including the highest rate of asthma among children in Mediterranean countries. With such a small land area, disposal of rubbish in landfill sites is also increasingly problematic, although the authorities are increasing the number of sites where people can take recyclables.

Newspaper reports indicate that the state of the roads, increasing urbanisation, traffic congestion and low levels of cleanliness in urban areas are the environmental issues generating high levels of dissatisfaction in visitors to Malta (and these concerns are shared by most locals, too). There is recognition that these negatives are playing a part in Malta's declining tourist numbers (letters to the editor are full of the message to 'clean up our act'), but there doesn't seem the push to do much about these issues and the government is showing hardly any initiative. In 2006 the government decided to instead extend Malta's development boundaries, a very unpopular move. During the past few years Malta has witnessed a massive increase in speculative property development, to such an extent that one in every four houses is vacant. This in a country that has a high population density and few green areas. Developers are also busy proposing huge new tourism, residential and/or marina developments in what little countryside that remains (eg Ta'Ċenċ and Hondoq ir-Rummin on Gozo). In a continued move to lure cashed-up residents and travellers, there are also proposals for golf courses (at Ta'Ċenċ and close to Golden Bay) – crazy in a country that already has a high-standard golf course, but has so little countryside and fresh water. Meanwhile, the country's true assets – its heritage and cultural sites – continue to be neglected.

Recent world events have also highlighted Malta's lack of natural resources. Tensions in the Middle East have led to higher oil prices, and Malta – as elsewhere – has felt the pinch. Oil is needed here to generate power and water (via desalination plants) and utility bills have risen alarmingly. Moreover the population seems inexplicably attached to its cars (quite baffling in such a tiny country). The government has begun investigating energy options for the future, and is evaluating the possibilities of installing a cable between Malta and a neighbouring country to be able to purchase electricity through the European grid, as well as the installation of a pipeline or gas storage plant in order to introduce gas as another source for the generation of electricity. There is also early talk of wind farms having some potential.

Bird Hunting

One of the favourite Maltese sports is shooting or trapping anything that flies. Bird shooting is still a popular pastime in Malta, and one of the more unpleasant aspects of the islands for many foreign visitors. The shooters will take a potshot at almost anything that flies – from a sparrow to a swift – though the main prey are turtledoves and quail. Shooters' hides can be seen in the quieter corners of the countryside and the crack of shotguns is a common accompaniment to an evening walk in these areas.

With 53 cars per 100 inhabitants, Malta has one of the highest number of cars in the EU on a per-capita basis (and the lowest number of road fatalities), plus the least amount of land on which to drive them.

The Blue Flag (www.blueflag.org) program grants recognition to beaches and marinas worldwide that demonstrate high environmental standards and good sanitary and safety facilities. Malta plans to implement the Blue Flag criteria to its beaches by mid-2008.

Flimkien għal Ambjent Ahjar is a brand-new pressure group, concerned about the threats to Malta's heritage and environment. The name means 'Together for a Better Environment', and the website, www.ambjentahjar.org, details the group's mission and the issues worth fighting for.

Bird netting is also very popular – the rickety little towers of stones and metal poles you see in the Maltese countryside are for supporting the drop-nets and for holding cages containing decoy birds. Greenfinches are a popular prey and you can often see them being bought and sold at the markets in Valletta. Conservative estimates are that around half a million birds are shot or trapped in Malta each year – but we also came across reports that put this number at six million. The truth probably lies in the middle of these extremes, at around three million – a phenomenal amount for such a small country. Most birds are shot or trapped while migrating between Africa and Europe in the spring and autumn.

Laws were introduced in 1980 designating a closed season for shooting and trapping, protecting many bird species (especially migrants), and making shooting and trapping illegal in certain protected areas. They include Ghadira Nature Reserve at Melliha Bay, Is-Simar Nature Reserve in Xemxija, Filfla island, Buskett Gardens, the Ta'Qali area and Gozo's Ta'Ċenċ cliffs. However, these laws are regularly flouted and poorly policed (in September 2006, for example, hunters attempted to break into Ghadira, but the intervention of a watchman on duty prevented this).

The closed season for shooting is 22 May to 31 August (the shortest in Europe) – but these dates are routinely ignored by hunters. BirdLife Malta (www.birdlifemalta.org), a large organisation of bird-lovers, is seeking a ban on spring hunting and trapping as well as a stop to hunting at sea, but it faces an uphill battle – the hunters are a large and powerful lobby group (estimated at around 20,000) that has actively opposed government measures to curb their activities by resorting to violence and extreme vandalism. In a country where electoral victories usually involve very small margins, political parties want to keep hunters on side, even going in to bat for them against EU authorities.

EU laws prohibit bird hunting and bird trapping in spring; Malta is the only EU member state that still allows hunting during the spring season, invoking a derogation (exemption of sorts) allowed under the EU's Birds Directive. The derogation permits hunting for just two bird species (turtledove and quail) on condition that rigid rules are adhered to. But in order to operate the derogation, Malta has to justify its position every year by sending a report to the commission. The bureaucratic toing and froing between authorities gives some hope to bird-lovers, as the EU is making it increasingly hard for Malta to justify its claims that hunting should continue. There is hope that eventually Malta will step into line with the rest of Europe and bring in bans, but rest assured that hunters will not give in without a fight (and even if bans are introduced, their adherence to them is unlikely). Things could get ugly (well, uglier).

www.birdlifemalta.org is an excellent website belonging to an active organisation of bird-lovers (not shooters) whose main aim is the protection of birds and their habitat.

Fatal Flight: Maltese Obsession with Killing Birds A thought-provoking account by Natalino Fenech of the massacre of millions of migrating birds that takes place each year in Malta.

Diving & Snorkelling

The Maltese Islands – and Gozo in particular – offer some of the best scuba diving in Europe and have many advantages for divers (especially beginners), including a pleasant climate, warm, clear water, a wide range of interesting dive sites (caves, reefs, wartime wrecks) – many of them accessible from the shore – and a large number of dive schools with qualified, professional, multilingual instructors. There are also sites perfect for experienced open-water and cave divers.

Most schools in Malta offer courses that lead to qualifications issued by one or more of the internationally recognised diving bodies – the most common being Professional Association of Diving Instructors (PADI) courses. The websites of these organisations offer general information about diving and dive qualifications, plus details of accredited diving schools in Malta:

British Sub-Aqua Club (BSAC; www.bsac.co.uk)

Confédération Mondiale des Activités Subaquatiques (CMAS; www.cmas.org)

Professional Association of Diving Instructors (PADI; www.padi.com)

DIVING Requirements

If you want to learn to dive in Malta, there are a few things required of you, not the least of which is the ability to swim. Restrictions on minimum age are at the instructor or operator's discretion, but operators generally advise that 10 years of age is the youngest they will teach; note that those under 18 must have written parental consent. Some dive schools operate 'Bubblemaker' programmes designed to introduce kids aged eight and nine to breathing underwater.

Medical bureaucracy has been relaxed a little in recent times. All persons registering at a dive centre are now required to fill out a self-assessment medical questionnaire to show that they are medically fit to dive. If this questionnaire highlights any medical condition that may restrict your diving practices, you will be requested to have a medical examination, and a physician will determine your fitness. The medical can be organised by the dive school, usually at a cost of around Lm6 to Lm8. You should also heed medical warnings and not fly within 24 hours of your last dive. Your last day in Malta should be spent reacclimatising to sea-level pressures.

Qualified divers wishing to lead their own groups must do so through a licensed dive centre. The instructor will first have to register with a dive centre, presenting an instructor qualification and a current copy of an annual medical examination by a doctor specialising in diving medicine.

SHINING THE SPOTLIGHT ON GOZO

Recent EU funding has been channelled toward promoting diving as a niche tourism market for Gozo. The island will be promoted in the international media as a top diving destination. As well as a few practical issues will be addressed, including the setting up of a decompression chamber at Gozo General Hospital (in the past divers had to be airlifted to Malta's main hospital for treatment). To add to the catalogue of dive sites off Gozo's shores, in August 2006 two vessels were scuttled off Xatt l'Ahmar (west of Mgarr) to create an artificial dive-site, landing in a perfect position on the seabed 35m underwater. The location was chosen in part because it is sheltered from the strong prevailing winds that can make popular sites such as Dwejra and Marsalforn inaccessible.

The average sea temperature in Malta is above 20°C from June to October. The average temperature in June is 21°C, in August it is 25.5°C, and in October it's 22°C.

Courses & Qualifications

Most schools offer a 'taster course' or 'beginner's dive', which begins with one or two hours of shore-based instruction on the workings of scuba equipment and safety procedures. You will then be introduced to breathing underwater in a pool or shallow bay and will end up doing a 30-minute dive in the sea. A beginner's course should cost around Lm15 to Lm20.

A so-called 'resort course' gives you shore-based instruction plus four to six open-water dives accompanied by an instructor and costs Lm50 to Lm70. These courses do *not* result in an official qualification.

A course that will give you an entry-level diving qualification (CMAS One-Star Diver, PADI Open Water Diver, BSAC Ocean Diver) should take three to five days and it should cost between Lm130 and Lm150.

For certified divers, guided dives usually cost Lm10 to Lm15 for one dive (including all equipment), but multi-dive packages are a better option, costing around Lm65 to Lm80 for six dives (gear included). Transport to dive sites may be included in these packages, but if you're staying in Malta, boat trips to Gozo or Comino will often be an additional cost (this varies depending on your location).

Unaccompanied diving is possible for those in possession of a minimum qualification of a CMAS two-star or PADI advanced certificate; a six-day dive pack that includes use of cylinder, weight belt and unlimited air fills costs around Lm35.

DIVE SCHOOLS

There are more than 40 dive school operators in Malta. The majority are members of the **Professional Diving Schools Association** (PDSA; www.pdsa.org.mt), an organisation dedicated to promoting high standards of safety and professionalism.

The following dive schools all offer a similarly comprehensive menu of PADI-, BSAC- or CMAS-approved training and education courses, guided diving and the rental of scuba equipment to experienced divers. Some are based at large resorts; many can organise packages covering diving, accommodation and possibly airport transfers and car rental, should you require them.

Note that Nautic Team Diving Centre in Marsalforn, Gozo, specialises in diving for people with disabilities.

Sliema & St Julian's Area

Aquarrigo Scuba Diving Centre (Map p86; ☎ 2133 0882; www.planetsea.net; Preluna Beach Club, Triq it-Torri, Sliema)

Diveshack (Map p86; ☎ 2133 8558; www.divemalta.com; ix-Xatt Ta'Qui-Si-sana, Qui-Si-sana, Sliema)

Divewise (Map p88; ☎ 2135 6441; www.divewise.com.mt; Westin Dragonara Complex, St Julian's)

Northwest Malta

Buddies Dive Cove (Map p100; ☎ 2157 6266; www.buddiesmalta.com; 24/2 Triq il-Kor Tal-Pijunieri, Bugibba)

Dive Deep Blue (Map p100; ☎ 2158 3946; www.divedeepblue.com; 100 Triq Ananija, Bugibba)

Meldives Dive School (☎ 2152 2595; www.meldives.info; Tunny Net Complex, Mellieħa Bay)

Paradise Diving (☎ 2157 4116; www.paradisediving.com; Paradise Bay Hotel, Ċirkewwa)

Subway Scuba Diving School (Map p100; ☎ 2157 0354; www.subwayscuba.com; Triq il-Kor Tal-Pijunieri, Bugibba)

Guide to Shore Diving the Maltese Islands, by Peter G Lemon, is a well-researched guide to 36 dive sites, with aerial photographs, good underwater plans and detailed text (but no details of boat dives).

Gozo

Atlantis Diving Centre (Map p158; ☎ 2156 1826; www.atlantisgozo.com; Atlantis Hotel, Triq il-Qolla, Marsalforn)

Calypto Diving Centre (Map p158; ☎ 2156 1757; www.calyptosdivers.com; Triq il-Port, Marsalforn)

Frankie's Gozo Diving Centre (☎ 2155 1315; www.gozodiving.com; Triq Mgarr, Xewkija)

Moby Dives (☎ 2155 1616; www.mobydivesgozo.com; Triq il-Gostra, Xlendi Bay)

Nautic Team Diving Centre (Map p158; ☎ 2155 8507; www.nauticteam.com; cnr Triq il-Mungbell & Triq ir-Rabat, Marsalforn)

St Andrews Divers Cove (☎ 2155 1301; www.gozodive.com; Triq San Ximun, Xlendi)

Comino

Comino Dive Centre (Map p164; ☎ 2157 0354; www.cominodivecentre.com; Comino Hotels, Comino)

Safety

Speedboat and ferry traffic can be quite heavy, especially in peak summer months and in the Gozo Channel area. For their own protection, divers are required to fly the code-A flag or use a surface-marker buoy.

Divers should ensure that their travel insurance policy covers them for diving. Some policies specifically exclude 'dangerous activities', which can include scuba diving.

Divers should ensure that their travel insurance policy covers them for diving. Some policies specifically exclude 'dangerous activities', which can include scuba diving. Malta's public general hospital is **St Luke's Hospital** (Map p84; www.slh.gov.mt; Triq San Luqa, Gwardamanga), near Pietà (southwest of Valletta), and there is a decompression chamber here. Staff at the hospital can be contacted for any diving incidents requiring medical attention on ☎ 2123 4765 or ☎ 2123 4766. Divers on Gozo have previously been transferred by helicopter to Malta in the case of an emergency, but a decompression chamber should be in operation at Gozo's **General Hospital** (Map p146; ☎ 2156 1600; Triq l-Arcisqof Pietru Pace, Victoria) by the time you read this.

Top Diving & Snorkelling Spots**NORTHWEST MALTA**

Ahrax Point (average depth 7m, maximum depth 18m) Caverns and a tunnel opening up to a small inland grotto with good coral growth. Suitable for all levels of diving experience. Shore dive. Can also be viewed by snorkelling.

Anchor Bay (average depth 6m, maximum depth 12m) Not much to see in the bay itself, but around the corner are good caves. Suitable for all levels of diving experience. Shore dive.

Cirkewwa Arch (average depth 15m, maximum depth 36m) Underwater walls and a magnificent arch, where divers can encounter a variety of fish and sometimes seahorses. Suitable for all levels of diving experience.

Marfa Point (average depth 12m, maximum depth 18m) Large dive site with caves, reefs, promontories and tunnels. Can be accessed from the shore. Decent snorkelling opportunities.

St Paul's Islands (multiple sites, average depths 6m to 12m, maximum depth 25m) Popular dive sites with a wreck between the shore and inner island, a reef on the eastern side of the northernmost island, and a valley between the two islands. Suitable for all levels of diving experience. The wreck can be accessed from the shore.

Tugboat Rozi (average depth 30m, maximum depth 36m) A boat deliberately sunk in 1991 as an underwater diving attraction and now colonised by thousands of fish.

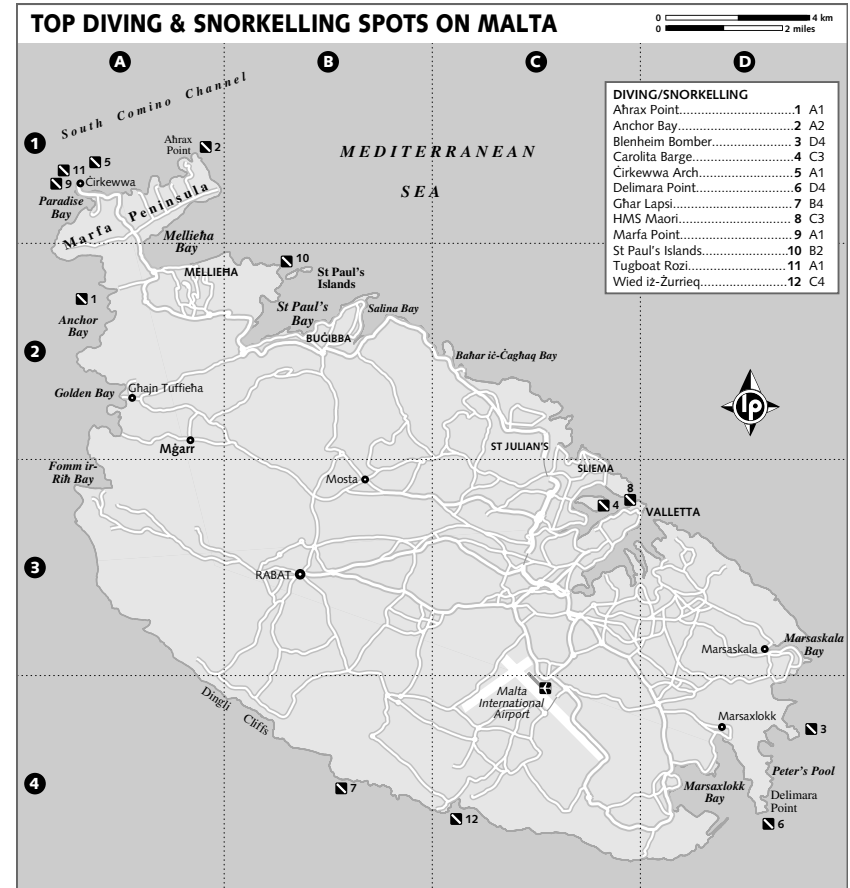
VALLETTA AREA

Carolita Barge (average depth 12m, maximum depth 22m) Possibly mistaken for a submarine, this barge was hit by a torpedo in 1942 and sank immediately. Well preserved and home to grouper and octopus. Popular training site for divers and therefore busy. Suitable for all levels of diving experience. Shore dive.

www.visitmalta.com/en/diving has loads of stuff, including safety regulations, marine life, dive operators and an interactive map with the country's best dive sites.

Click on 'Diving sites of the Maltese Islands' at www.locationmalta.com/theme/diving and browse through extensive notes on 34 dive locations on Malta, Comino and Gozo.

Diving Around Gozo is available in English and in German. Author Klaus-Thorsten Tegge details 15 of the best shore dives from Gozo, coupled with good travel information for Gozo-bound travellers. Tegge also has useful information at www.dive-gozo.com.



HMS Maori (average depth 13m, maximum depth 18m) Below Fort St Elmo is the wreck of the HMS Maori, sunk in 1942. Silted up, but home to fish and octopuses. Suitable for all levels of diving experience. Shore dive.

SOUTHEAST MALTA

Blenheim Bomber (average depth 42m, maximum depth 42m) Exciting dive to explore the well-preserved wreck of a WWII bomber, with engine and wings intact. For experienced divers only.

Delimara Point (average depth 12m, maximum depth 25m) Usually excellent visibility for divers, with vertical cliffs and many caverns. Varied and colourful flora and fauna. Suitable for all levels of experience. Shore dive.

Ghar Lapsi (average depth 6m, maximum depth 15m) Popular training site for divers. Safe, shallow cave that winds through the headland. Shore dive, reasonable snorkelling and suitable for all levels of experience.

Wied iz-Zurrieq (average depth 9m, maximum depth 30m) Close to the Blue Grotto. Underwater valley and labyrinth of caves. Shore dive, reasonable snorkelling and suitable for all levels of experience.

Malta is popular with underwater photographers due to the clarity of its waters. Natural colours can be captured on film without the use of a flash, even at a depth of 10m to 12m.

GOZO

Billinghurst Cave (average depth 20m, maximum depth 35m) Long tunnel leading to a cave deep inside the rock, with a multitude of coloured sea sponges. There's very little natural light (torch required). For experienced divers only.

Blue Hole & Chimney (average depth 20m, maximum depth 45m) The Blue Hole is a natural rock formation and includes a large cave plus a fissure in the near-vertical wall. Popular, busy site. Shore dive, excellent snorkelling and suitable for all levels of experience.

Coral Cave (average depth 25m, maximum depth 30m) Huge semicircular opening with a sandy bottom, where divers can view varied and colourful flora and fauna. Shore dive.

Crocodile Rock (average depth 35m, maximum depth 45m) Rocky reef between the shore and crocodile-shaped rock off the west coast. Natural amphitheatre and deep fissures. Shore dive, decent snorkelling and suitable for all levels of experience.

Double Arch Reef (average depth 30m, maximum depth 45m) Site characterised by a strange formation, with an arch dividing two large openings in the rock. Prolific marine life. For experienced divers.

Fessej Rock (average depth 30m, maximum depth 50m) A prominent column of rock. Vertical wall dive descending to 50m amid large schools of fish. A very popular deep-water dive.

Fungus Rock (average depth 30m, maximum depth beyond 60m) Dramatic underwater scenery with vertical walls, fissures, caverns and gullies. Good site for underwater photography and suitable for all levels of diving experience.

Reqqa Point (average depth 25m, maximum depth beyond 70m) Near-vertical wall cut by fissures, caves and crevices. Large numbers of small fish, plus groups of amberfish and groper if conditions are favourable. Shore dive and good snorkelling.

San Dimitri Point (average depth 25m, maximum depth beyond 60m) Lots of marine life and exceptional visibility (sometimes exceeding 50m). Good snorkelling and suitable for all levels of experience.

Ta'Cenc (average depth 25m, maximum depth 35m) Sheltered bay – access is by 103 steps from car park of nearby hotel. Canyon with large boulders, plus cave. Good marine life, but visibility can occasionally be poor. Good spot for night dives. Shore dive and suitable for all levels of experience.

Wied il-Ghasri (average depth in cave 12m, maximum depth 30m) A deep winding cut in the headland makes for a long, gentle dive. May view seahorses in the shallows. Cave with a huge domed vault and walls covered in corals. Can be done as a shore dive. Very good snorkelling and suitable for all levels of experience.

Xatt L'Ahmar (average depth 9m, maximum depth 30m) Small bay, excellent for observing a large variety of fish including mullet, groper, sea bream, octopus and cuttlefish. Shore dive, OK



RESPONSIBLE DIVING

The popularity of diving is placing immense pressure on many sites – over 40,000 divers a year visit the Maltese Islands. Please consider the following tips when diving and help preserve the ecology and beauty of Malta's underwater world:

- Avoid touching living marine organisms with your body or dragging equipment across the rocks.
- Be conscious of your fins. Even without contact the surge from heavy fin strokes can damage delicate organisms.
- Practise and maintain proper buoyancy control. Make sure you are correctly weighted and that your weight belt is positioned so that you stay horizontal. If you have not dived for a while, have a practice dive in a pool before taking to the sea. Be aware that buoyancy can change over the period of an extended trip: initially you may breathe harder and need more weight; a few days later you may breathe more easily and need less weight.
- Take great care in underwater caves. Spend as little time within them as possible as your air bubbles may be caught within the roof, leaving previously submerged organisms high and dry. Taking turns to inspect the interior of a small cave will lessen the chances of damaging contact.
- Resist the temptation to collect or buy shells or other remains of marine organisms. Aside from the ecological damage, taking home marine souvenirs depletes the beauty of a site and spoils the enjoyment of others. The same goes for marine archaeological sites (mainly shipwrecks). Respect their integrity; some sites are protected from looting by law.
- Ensure that you take home all your rubbish and any litter you may find as well. Plastics in particular are a serious threat to marine life.
- Resist the temptation to feed fish. You may disturb their normal eating habits, encourage aggressive behaviour or feed them food that is detrimental to their health.
- Minimise your disturbance of marine animals. Never ride on the backs of turtles.

snorkelling and suitable for all levels of experience. Two vessels were scuttled here in August 2006 to create an artificial dive-site.

Xlendi Cave & Reef (average depth 6m, maximum depth 25m) Easy cave dive in shallow water and popular with beginners. Brightly coloured cave walls. Rocky headland dips steeply to the sea. An abundance of flora and fauna. Shore dive, OK snorkelling.

COMINO

Blue Lagoon (average depth 6m, maximum depth 12m) Easy site to the north of the sheltered lagoon, very popular with divers and snorkellers, plenty of boat traffic. Shore dive. Suitable for all levels of experience.

Lantern Point (average depth 30m, maximum depth 45m) Very popular dive site. Dramatic dive down a vertical wall. Rich fauna and an abundance of colour. OK snorkelling.

Santa Marija Cave (average depth 7m, maximum depth 10m) Large cave and cavern system, and one of the most popular sites for cave dives. An abundance of fish in the area. Very good snorkelling and suitable for all levels of experience.

SNORKELLING

If you don't fancy scuba diving, you can still sample the delights of the underwater world by donning mask, snorkel and fins and exploring the rocks and bays around Malta's coastline. The only qualification necessary is the ability to swim. You can usually rent or buy the necessary equipment from hotels, lidos (recreational facilities with a swimming pool) and watersport centres in all the tourist areas.

Top snorkelling spots are off Comino and Gozo and include the **Blue Lagoon** and the crags and caves east of **Santa Marija Bay** on Comino; the cave-riddled coastline at **Dwejra**; the long, narrow inlet at **Wied il-Ghasri** off Gozo; and along the salt pan rocks west of **Xwieni Bay** near Marsalforn on Gozo.

MALTA'S MARINE LIFE

Malta's location in the narrows between Sicily and North Africa, far away from the pollution of major cities and silt-bearing rivers, means that its marine life is richer than in many other parts of the Mediterranean.

Invertebrates such as brightly coloured bryozoans, cup corals, sea anemones, sponges, starfish and sea urchins encrust the underwater cliffs and caves around the shores of Malta and Gozo. The countless nooks and crannies in the limestone provide shelter for crabs, lobsters, common octopuses and white-spotted octopuses. By night, cuttlefish graze the algal beds below the cliffs.

Most divers who visit Malta hope to catch sight of a seahorse. The maned seahorse is fairly common around the Maltese coast, preferring shallow, brackish water. They grow up to 15cm in length and feed on plankton and tiny shrimps. They mate for life and display an unusual inversion of common male and female reproductive roles. Using her tube-like ovipositor, the female deposits her eggs in a brood pouch in the male's abdomen where they are fertilised. Here the eggs develop and finally hatch before the male 'gives birth' by releasing the live brood into open water.

Migratory shoals of sardine, sprat, bluefin tuna, bonito, mackerel and dolphin fish – known in Malti as *lampuka*, and a local delicacy – pass through the offshore waters in late summer and autumn. Swordfish are fairly common all year round. Sea bream, sea bass, groper, red mullet, wrasse, dogfish and stingray frequent the shallower waters closer to shore, where moray and conger eels hide among the rocks and venture out at night to feed on octopus and fish.

The seas around Malta are known among shark-watchers as one of the 'sharkest' spots in the Med. In April 1987 a great white shark caught by local fisherman Alfredo Cutajar off Filfla was claimed to be a world record at 7.13m in overall length. However, later investigations brought the accuracy of the original measurements into doubt (still, be it 7m or 7.13m, it's still *big!*). Photographs of the shark – including some of Alfredo with his head in the (dead!) shark's mouth – can be bought in souvenir shops at Wied iż-Żurriq (p141).

Other shark species known to haunt Maltese waters include the blue, thresher and mako. However, bathers and divers should not be unduly alarmed. Shark sightings in inshore waters are extremely rare. Indeed, the great white is considered to be an endangered species, and the decrease in its numbers is thought to have resulted from dwindling stocks of tuna, its main food source.

The loggerhead turtle is another endangered species that is occasionally sighted in Maltese waters, but the lack of secluded, sandy beaches means that they do not nest on the Maltese Islands. The common dolphin – known as *denfil* in Malti – and the bottlenose dolphin are fairly common in Maltese waters and are occasionally seen from cruise boats and dive boats.

Dive Sites of Malta, Gozo & Comino by Lawson and Leslie Wood is a comprehensive guide with details on marine life, plus a very helpful star-rating system grading the diving and snorkelling at each of the 80-odd sites reviewed.

Food & Drink

Like Malti, Maltese cuisine is influenced by the many foreign cultures that have ruled the country in its long history. The food is rustic and meals are generally based on seasonal produce and the fisherman's catch.

Malta is not known as a destination for gourmets, but the food is generally good and cheap. The most obvious influence is Sicilian, and most cheaper restaurants serve pasta and pizza; there are also upscale places serving more creative Italian specialities. English standards (eg grilled chops, roast with three veg) are also commonly available, particularly in tourist areas. If you tire of the meat-fish-pasta-pizza menus, you'll also find Chinese restaurants, a few Indian eateries and an increasing number of Japanese and Thai places.

STAPLES & SPECIALITIES

Snacks

Ġbejniet You'll either love or hate this small, hard, white cheese traditionally made from unpasteurised sheep's or goat's milk. They are dried in baskets and often steeped in olive oil flavoured with salt and crushed black peppercorns.

Hobż Freshly baked Maltese bread is delicious. It is made in a similar manner to sourdough bread, using a scrap of yesterday's dough to leaven today's loaves.

Hobż biż-zejt This is another traditional snack – slices of bread rubbed with ripe tomatoes and olive oil until they are pink and delicious, then topped with a mix of tuna, onion, capers, olives, garlic, black pepper and salt.

Ftira Bread baked in a flat disc and traditionally stuffed with a mixture of tomatoes, olives, capers and anchovies.

Pastizza (plural *pastizzi*) The traditional Maltese snack is the *pastizza*, a small parcel of flaky pastry filled with either ricotta cheese or mushy peas. A couple of *pastizzi* make for a tasty – if somewhat high-fat – breakfast or afternoon filler. You'll probably pay around Lm0.10 for one, so they're also great for budget travellers. They're available in most bars or from special takeaway *pastizzerija* (usually hole-in-the-wall places in villages – follow your nose).

Food-lovers, don't eat out without the *Definitive(y) Good Guide to Restaurants in Malta & Gozo*. It's updated annually and includes reviews of 150 of Malta's best restaurants. Available from most major bookshops (Lm4); information is also online at www.restaurantsmalta.com.

FINE FOOD VENUES IN MALTA

We've enjoyed some fabulous meals in Malta (and quite a few uninspiring ones). Here are our restaurant picks for top nosh.

Ambrosia (Valletta, p69) Offers a warm welcome and top use of fresh local produce.

Bed (St Julian's, p92) Playful Portomaso option, with nightclub-esque décor and (surprisingly) a Korean menu.

Fusion Four (Valletta, p69) A hidden gem in the capital, big on innovative fusion flavours.

Ir-Rizzu (Marsaxlokk, p138) Fabulously fresh seafood, straight off the local fishing boats.

It-Tmun Victoria (Gozo, p150) Stylish Gozitan option wooing locals and visitors with creative choices.

Kitchen (Sliema, p92) Award-winning chef presides over a modern menu.

Restaurant Ta'Frenċ (outside Marsalforn, Gozo, p160) Voted Malta's best restaurant, deserving the high praise.

Tal-Familja (Marsaskala, p140) Generous portions, friendly service and a huge menu of traditional Maltese dishes.

Zest (St Julian's, p93) Funky décor and an inspiring menu of treats from East and West.

If you're keeping it casual, you can't go past:

Avenue (Paceville, p93) A cheap-and-cheerful crowd-pleaser.

Café Jubilee (Valletta, Gzira, p69; Victoria, p94; Gozo, p150) Old-world décor, cosy nooks and a budget-friendly menu of easy edibles.

Il Gattopardo (Mdina, p127) A gorgeous Mdina setting and interesting Greek-inspired fare.

Mill Room (Victoria, Gozo, p150) A quirky laneway find for lunch in Victoria.

Ta'Rikardu (Victoria, Gozo, p149) Perfect platters of farm-fresh local produce in the picturesque Il-Kastell.

Trabuxu (Valletta, p69) Perfect spot in the capital for vino and colourfully presented platters.

Soups

Aljotta A delicious fish broth made with tomato, rice and lots of garlic.

Kusksu Soup made from broad beans and small pasta shapes, often served with a soft fresh *ġbejniet* floating in the middle.

Minestra A thick soup of tomatoes, beans, pasta and vegetables, similar to Italian minestrone.

Soppa tal-armla The so-called 'widow's soup' (possibly named because of its inexpensive ingredients) is traditionally made only with components that are either green or white. Basically a vegetable soup, it contains cauliflower, spinach, endive and peas, poured over a poached egg, a *ġbejniet* and a lump of ricotta cheese.

Main Dishes

Braġioli These are prepared by wrapping a thin slice of beef around a stuffing of breadcrumbs, chopped bacon, hard-boiled egg and parsley, then braising these 'beef olives' in a red wine sauce.

Fenek *Fenek* (rabbit) is the favourite Maltese dish, whether fried in olive oil, roasted, stewed, served with spaghetti or baked in a pie (*fenek bit-tewm u l-inbid* is rabbit cooked in garlic and wine, *fenek moqli* is fried rabbit, *stuffat tal-fenek* is stewed rabbit). See Celebrations, opposite

Kapunata A Maltese version of ratatouille made from tomatoes, capers, eggplant and green peppers – it goes well with grilled fish.

Qarabali Baby marrows – particularly good baked, stuffed with minced beef and parsley, or made into a creamy soup.

Ravjul/ravjuletti Maltese variety of ravioli (pasta pouches filled with ricotta, parmesan and parsley).

Timpana A rich pie filled with macaroni, cheese, egg, minced beef, tomato, garlic and onion, *timpana* is a Sicilian dish not dissimilar to Greek *pastitsio*.

Torta tal-lampuki The local fish speciality is *torta tal-lampuki*, or *lampuki* pie. *Lampuka* (*Coryphaena hippurus*) – plural *lampuki* – is known in English as dolphin fish, dorado or *mahi-mahi*. It is delicious simply fried in olive oil, but the traditional way to prepare it is to bake it in a pie with tomatoes, onions, black olives, spinach, sultanas and walnuts. *Lampuki biz-zalza pikkant* is *lampuki* in a piquant sauce.

Sweets

Kannoli Believed to have originated in Sicily, *kannoli* is a tube of crispy, fried pastry filled with ricotta and sometimes sweetened with chocolate chips or candied fruit.

Mqaret Diamond-shaped pastries stuffed with chopped, spiced dates and deep-fried.

Qubbajt Maltese nougat, flavoured with almonds or hazelnuts and traditionally sold on festa (feast) days.

Qagħh tal-ghasel Honey or treacle rings made from a light pastry, served in small pieces as an after-dinner accompaniment to coffee.

DRINKS

Nonalcoholic Drinks

Good Italian coffee – espresso and cappuccino – is widely available in cafés and bars, and in the main tourist areas you'll find a cup of strong British tea, heavy on the milk and sugar.

Cold soft drinks are available everywhere. Kinnie – its advertising signs are all over the place in Malta – is the brand name of a local soft drink flavoured with bitter oranges and aromatic herbs. It slips down nicely when mixed with rum or vodka.

Alcoholic Drinks

Maltese bars serve up every kind of drink you could ask for, from pints of British beer to shots of Galliano liqueur. The good locally made beers, Cisk Lager and Hopleaf Ale, are cheaper than imported brews.

The main players on the local wine scene are **Camilleri Wines** (www.camilleriwines.com), **Emmanuel Delicata** (www.delicata.com), **Marsovin** (www.marsovin.com) and **Meridiana**

www.aboutmalta.com /FOOD_and_DRINK (case-sensitive address) gives links to topics in the Food and Drink category, from a site purely about Kinnie soft drink to recipes for octopus.

UK-based bespoke tour company Tabona & Walford (www.tabonaandwalford.com) offers a week-long tour of Malta that combines cooking with walking and sightseeing.

25 Years in a Maltese Kitchen is a glossy hardcover book that will whet your appetite for Maltese specialities. It's by Pippa Mattei and contains easy-to-follow recipes from *aljotta* (traditional fish soup) to stuffed zucchini.

THE TASTE FOR THE GRAPE

When Malta joined the EU in 2004, it said goodbye to government levies charged on sales of foreign wine. Wine became cheaper, sales grew (by an estimated 25%), and wine bars started popping up all over the country. Some of these wine bars are simply cafés that have added 'wine bar' to their name and a few bottles to their menus, while other places have embraced the culture surrounding wine-drinking and gone the whole hog, with lengthy lists of imported and locally produced drops, available by the glass or bottle. Some newly opened restaurants have made a feature of an attached bar. And it seems no wine bar is complete without a menu of platters – local nibble-worthy produce such as sausage, olives, cheese and sundried tomatoes feature prominently. You'll no doubt find a favourite of your own, but recommended options include Trabuxu (p69) in Valletta, Del Borgo and Il-Forn (p79) in Vittoriosa, The Bar at Balluta Bay in Sliema (p94), Gigi's Concept Café (p93) on Spinola Bay in St Julian's, Portovino (p92) in the Portomaso Complex and Grapes Wine Bar (p150) in Gozo's Victoria. These all make a good alternative to English- or Irish-styled pubs or noisy Paceville nightclubs, and are frequented by a mature crowd as well as young local hipsters.

(www.meridiana.com.mt). These companies make wine from local grapes and also produce more expensive 'special reserve' wines – merlot, cabernet sauvignon, chardonnay and sauvignon blanc – using imported grapes from Italy. The result can be surprisingly good and the quality is improving all the time.

Maltese liqueurs pack a punch and make good souvenirs. Look out for Zeppi's liqueurs concocted from local honey, aniseed or prickly pear. Gozo-produced *limunċell* (a variant on the lemon-flavoured Italian *limoncello*) is delicious and there are orange and mandarin variants too.

CELEBRATIONS

A *fenkata* is a big, communal meal of rabbit, usually eaten in the countryside. It supposedly originated as a gesture of rebellion against the occupying Knights, who hunted rabbits and denied them to the local population. The most important *fenkata* is associated with the L-Imnarja harvest festival at the end of June, when hundreds of people gather at Buskett Gardens to eat rabbit, drink wine, sing folk songs and dance all night (see p131). *Fenkata* is also eaten on special occasions, with family and friends taking over a country restaurant for an afternoon of celebration. A number of village bars and small restaurants specialise in preparing a *fenkata* for large parties of merrymakers – these places are mainly concentrated in the off-the-tourist-track areas in northern Malta (in the village of Bahrija for example). Your hotel or a friendly local could also recommend a favourite; see also the review for Bobbyland Restaurant (p130), Il-Barri (p116) and Valletta's Rubino (p69).

WHERE TO EAT & DRINK

Many travellers to Malta opt for packages that include breakfast and dinner at their hotel. This is a pity, as it means they don't get the chance to experience some of the great dining establishments in Malta, don't sample the local specialities or enjoy the views from scenically situated eateries, and never get the chance to chow down on rabbit with the locals. We recommend you opt only for a bed and breakfast arrangement and get out and travel your tastebuds in Malta. That said, many of Malta's finest restaurants are actually inside the four- and five-star hotels – and these are all open to the public.

Restaurants

Restaurants usually open for lunch between noon and 3pm, and for dinner between 7pm and 11pm. Many fine-dining restaurants open only in the

The Food & Cookery of Malta by Anne and Helen Caruana Galizia is the definitive guide to Maltese cuisine, packed with recipes and information on local ingredients.

OVERCHARGING

Beware the scourge of overcharging! A growing number of upmarket restaurants have introduced an odious 'cover charge' of between Lm0.50 and Lm1 per person – somewhat acceptable if it means that bread and the like are free with your meal, but a rather cheeky way of making money if not. And some places don't even advertise on the menu that they charge diners such a fee – it just appears on the bill.

Overcharging tourists appears to be a nasty habit in some restaurants that have no written menu. The idea of preparing meals based on whatever's fresh at the market is a good one when done well, and a few places in Valletta offer this. However, wherever you travel, it's always a good idea to beware of places that overcharge non-locals, who can't really argue because prices are not written anywhere. Our advice is to always ask prices upfront. The same advice applies when buying from kiosks that don't display their prices – and don't be afraid to walk away if the price seems high. And double-check your change from such establishments (learned from experience!).

evening; conversely, some of Valletta's best eateries open only for lunch. Many restaurants open only six days a week, but days of closure vary (Sunday and Monday are popular – call ahead to find out if a place is open).

Cafés

Cafés are usually open all day. Some such as Café Jubilee in Valletta (p69), Gżira (p94) and Victoria (p150) and Café Juliani (p94) and neighbouring Gigi's Concept Café (p94) in St Julian's, morph from daytime café to night-time café-bar, staying open till after midnight, serving alcohol and snacks.

Quick Eats

Look out for hole-in-the-wall *pastizzerijas* selling authentic *pastizzi* and other pastries – two central ones are on Triq San Pawl in Valletta (p70). Also try decent snacks from the many kiosks at Valetta's City Gate bus terminus.

VEGETARIANS & VEGANS

Vegetarians are reasonably well catered for, vegans less so. Some restaurants offer meat-free dishes as main courses, and most offer vegetarian pizza and pasta options (these usually include egg and/or dairy ingredients). Seafood eaters will have greater options. Alternatively, vegetarians and vegans can make a beeline for the local Chinese or Indian restaurant for a greater selection of dishes. It's best to steer clear of off-the-beaten-track village restaurants that specialise in rabbit – the menu will most likely also feature lamb, beef and quite possibly horse, and you'll go away hungry and disheartened.

EATING WITH KIDS

Like most Mediterranean cultures, the Maltese love children. (See p170 for more information on visiting Malta with children.) Generally speaking, babies and children are made welcome almost everywhere in the world of eating out, the exception to this may be upmarket establishments such as the Carriage (p69) in Valletta or Zest (p93) and Barracuda (p92) in St Julian's. But then you'll encounter somewhere like the elegant Ta'Frenċ outside Marsalforn on Gozo that welcomes babies and children and even offers a children's menu. Many restaurants offer highchairs and perhaps a kids' menu, or at least dishes that will appeal to kids (pasta, pizza etc). If in doubt, it pays to call ahead.

The most child-friendly restaurants include the Avenue (p93) in Paceville, Piccolo Padre and Papparazzi in St Julian's (p93) and Tal-Familja (p140) in Marsaskala.

Breathe easier – in 2004 Maltese authorities introduced a ban on smoking in all enclosed public places, including restaurants and bars.

Mona's just the kind of in-the-know local we'd want pointing us in the right gastronomical direction. Check out her spot-on restaurant reviews at www.planetmona.com before making dinner plans.

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