

Gozo & Comino



For the holidaymaker, Gozo has an air of exclusivity about it, no doubt helped by the surfeit of upmarket hotels, luxuriously converted farmhouses and high-quality restaurants, and the lack of package-holiday crowds such as those found on bigger, brasher Malta to the south.

Gozo, called Ghawdex (*aow-desh*) in Malti, provides soothing respite from the bustling, noisy resorts and manic drivers of Malta. Although it is more than one-third the size of its larger sister island, it has less than one-tenth of the population – only about 30,000 Gozitans live here (and they are Gozitans first, Maltese second). The land is more fertile, the scenery is greener, the pace of life is much slower and the locals seem friendlier.

The island offers all the attractions of Malta but in a more compact package: good walking, a superb coastal landscape and excellent scuba diving and snorkelling, plus history in the form of megalithic temples and medieval citadels. If you're looking for action-packed nightlife you'll be disappointed, but if you're interested in a chance to enjoy warm hospitality and see how the rest of Malta must have been before the advent of mass tourism, you're in luck. A day trip won't allow enough time to sample this tiny island's treasures, however. It's worth scheduling at least a few days here, or, indeed, making Gozo the primary focus of your trip.

And while you're in the neighbourhood, consider slipping across to Malta's third island, tiny Comino. You've seen the image of the stunning Blue Lagoon on enough postcards – it's time to check out the real thing. An afternoon here provides ample time for top-class swimming and snorkelling.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Exploring Victoria's historic charm in both **Il-Kastell** (p146) and the laneways of **Il-Borgo** (p148)
- Getting red sand in your shorts at lovely **Ramla Bay** (p163)
- Taking in the impressive 360-degree views from tiny **Comino** (p164), then going for a dip in crystal-clear waters
- Renting a **converted farmhouse** (p150) in a sleepy Gozitan village and spending a blissful week unwinding
- Learning to **dive** (p44) with the experts in Xlendi or Marsalforn
- Enjoying a fine meal at one of Gozo's top restaurants, including **Restaurant Ta'Frenč** (p160) outside Marsalforn; **It-Tmun Victoria** (p150) in the capital; or **Tatita's** (p157) in San Lawrenz



GOZO

VICTORIA (RABAT)

pop 6640

Victoria, the chief town of Gozo, sits in the centre of the island, 6km from the ferry terminal at Mgarr and 3.5km from the resort town of Marsalforn. Victoria's main attraction is the compact and photogenic citadel Il-Kastell.

Victoria is Gozo's main hub of shops and services. It was named for the Diamond Jubilee of Queen Victoria in 1897. Originally known as Rabat, it is still called that by many of the islanders (and by several road signs).

Orientation

Victoria is on a hill crowned by the ramparts of Il-Kastell ('the Citadel', or its Italian names of Gran Castello/the Cittadella). Telgha Tal-Belt (Castle Hill) runs downhill from Il-Kastell to Pjazza Indipendenza (aka It-Tokk). Triq ir-Repubblika, Victoria's main street, runs east downhill from Pjazza Indipendenza. The bus station and main car park are on Triq Putirjal, running south off Triq ir-Repubblika.

Victoria's narrow streets are a labyrinthine one-way system – it may take several circuits of the town and unintentional trips to Kerčem before you find your way around.

Information

BOOKSHOPS

Bookworm (Map p146; ☎ 2155 6215; 105 Triq ir-Repubblika) Well-stocked shop with a good range of books, plus local and British newspapers.

EMERGENCY

Police station (Map p146; ☎ 2156 2040; Triq ir-Repubblika)

INTERNET ACCESS

Arkadia Shopping Centre (Map p146; Triq Fortunato Mizzi; per hr Lm1.20; ☎ Mon-Sat) There is a row of computers inside the complex, in front of the Body Shop. Machines can be used when the complex is open, but vouchers to use them can only be purchased from the lotto booth here, which is open 9am to 1pm and 4pm to 7pm Monday to Saturday.
Aurora Opera House (Map p146; ☎ 2156 2974; Triq ir-Repubblika; per 75min Lm1; ☎ 7am-1am) There are a few computers in the foyer of the opera house; to use them, buy your coupon from the bar here.

PRACTICALITIES

In this chapter, Gozo's main town, Victoria, is described first, followed by Mgarr, the main harbour. The rest of the island is covered in a roughly clockwise direction from Mgarr.

There are some very good websites to help with planning a visit to Gozo – try www.gozo.com, www.islandofgozo.org, www.discalcoveringgozo.com or www.gozo.gov.mt. See p17 for ideas on how to amuse yourself for a week on the island.

MEDICAL SERVICES

General Hospital (Map p146; ☎ 2156 1600; Triq I-Arcisqof Pietru Pace) Also known as Craig Hospital.

MONEY

Bank of Valletta (Map p146; 102 Triq ir-Repubblika) Has ATM.

Travellex (Map p147; cnr Triq ir-Repubblika & Telgħa Tal-Belt; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri, 9am-3.30pm Sat) Cashes travellers cheques and changes money.

POST

Post Office (Map p147; Triq ir-Repubblika; ☎ 8.15am-4.30pm Mon-Fri, 8.15am-12.30pm Sat)

TOURIST INFORMATION

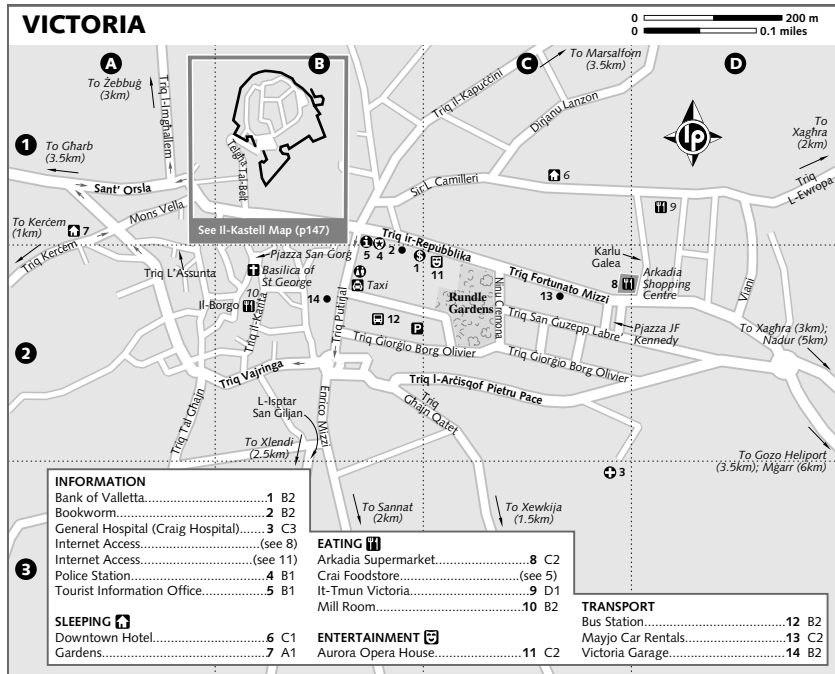
Tourist Information Office (Map p146; ☎ 2156 1419; Tigrinja Palazz, cnr Triq ir-Repubblika & Triq Putrijaj; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Sat, 9am-12.30pm Sun & public holidays) On the ground floor of a shopping arcade, not far from the bus station. Often closed between 12.30pm and 1pm for lunch.

Sights

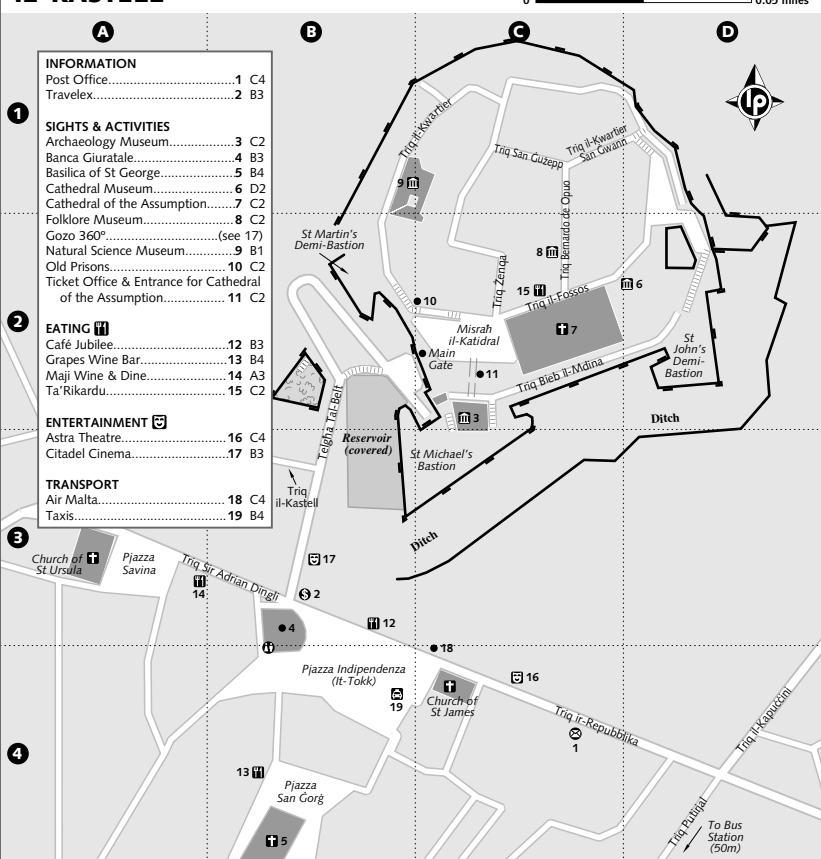
IL-KASTELL

All items mentioned here feature on the map on p147.

The **Cathedral of the Assumption** (Misrah il-Katidral; adult/child Lm1.25/free; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Sat) was built between 1697 and 1711 to replace a church that had been destroyed by earthquake in 1693. The earthquake had struck in southern Italy yet caused damage as far away as Malta. The cathedral was designed by Lorenzo Gafa, who was also responsible for St Paul's Cathedral at Mdina (p124). The elegant façade is adorned with the escutcheons of Grand



IL-KASTELL



Master Ramon de Perellos and Bishop Palmieri. Due to lack of money the dome was never completed, but the impression of one was maintained inside by way of a clever trompe l'oeil painting. The admission price includes a self-guided audio tour (but note that you need to pay a Lm10 refundable deposit, or leave ID such as a licence, to be given the audio piece). The ticket office is in the passageway connecting Misrah il-Katidral with Triq Bieb il-Mdina.

The **Cathedral Museum** (☎ 2155 6087; Triq il-Fossos; admission included in cathedral ticket price; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Sat) is just northeast of the cathedral. The downstairs vault contains church gold and silver, while the upstairs gallery is devoted to religious art and includes quite a disturbing

19th-century painting depicting the martyrdom of St Agatha (see boxed text, p126, for more on her grisly end). The ground floor houses various items including a 19th-century bishop's carriage and an altar with a wax model of the Last Supper.

There are four other small museums within the Citadel. They display reasonable collections, but if you're pushed for time, don't feel as though you've missed out – the museums in Valletta are better. If you do plan to visit more than one of the four, it's worth buying a Citadel Day Ticket (Lm2), which gives entry to all four sites and is available at each of them.

The **Archaeology Museum** (☎ 2155 6144; Triq Bieb il-Mdina; adult/child Lm1/0.25; ☎ 9am-5pm) contains finds from the island's prehistoric temples

GOZITAN FARMHOUSES

One of the best accommodation options for a stay on Gozo, especially if you're looking for a little local colour and rustic charm, is to rent a farmhouse. Dozens of these old, square-set farm buildings have been converted into accommodation, and many retain the beautiful stone arches, wooden beams and flagstone floors of their original construction (some are up to 400 years old). Most rental properties now have all the facilities you'll need for an easy holiday, including full kitchen, swimming pool, outdoor terrace and barbecue, laundry and cable TV. They can sleep anywhere from two to 16 people, so are perfect for families or groups of friends, and the costs are very reasonable – from around Lm350 per week for two people in the high season (most high-season rentals are weekly), or from Lm30 per night for two people in the low season. The farmhouses are usually inland in pretty, slow-paced villages like Xaghra and Għarb. Almost anyone with a guesthouse or hotel on the island can arrange a farmhouse for visitors; check the following websites for details of properties for rent (note that many agencies offer cheaper apartments and villas on Gozo, as well as vintage farmhouses):

www.farmhousegozo.com
 www.gozo.com/gozodirectory/farmhouses.php
 www.gozofarmhouses.com
 www.gozorentals.com
 www.gozogreatescapes.com

and wine. Take a seat and order a cheap, delicious platter, which includes cheese, bread, locally grown fresh tomatoes, sundried tomatoes, capers and olives. Veggie soup or home-made ravioli is also available; wash it all down with a glass or two of Gozitan wine.

TOWN

Café Jubilee (Map p147; ☎ 2155 8921; Pjazza Indipendenza; snacks & meals Lm0.40-2.25; ☎ 8am-1am) This lovely old-fashioned bar (the sister establishment of Café Jubilee in Valletta, p69) has a classy interior featuring a marble counter, brass rails, lots of dark wood and waiters in black waistcoats. It serves an affordable all-day menu of snacks and light meals, which you can also enjoy at the outdoor tables on the main square. Of an evening it becomes a popular wine bar and serves good local drops.

Mill Room (Map p146; ☎ 2155 5323; 94 Triq Il-Karita; snacks & meals Lm0.50-3.20; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Sat) Take the narrow street to the left of the Basilica of St George (facing the church) to find this intriguing café, with a fab snacky menu of sandwiches and salads served in all sorts of wonderful indoor-outdoor, upstairs-downstairs rooms and terraces. In the past it's also been a wine bar – it's worth heading here to see if it has extended its hours again (note that the sign above the gate reads Tickety-boo).

Grapes Wine Bar (Map p147; ☎ 7947 3503; Pjazza San Ġorġ; snacks & meals Lm1-3; ☎ lunch & dinner) One of a new breed of wine bars springing up all over

Malta. For a memorable Gozitan experience, sit at the old sewing machine tables with views of the basilica, choose a good local (or foreign) wine, and graze on a platter of regional cheese/sausage/seafood.

It-Tmun Victoria (Map p146; ☎ 2156 6667; Triq L-Ewropa; mains Lm3.50-6.50; ☎ dinner Fri-Wed, lunch Sun) Take a turn at the Arkadia shopping complex to reach It-Tmun, polished and professional from the linen-covered tables to the extensive wine list and menu of fusion dishes. Asian influences, New Zealand beef, fresh local fish and creative pasta options come together wonderfully in an elegant blue and white dining room. There's a lounge and bar available for nightcaps and chilling out, too. This place has won a number of local awards; it's worth booking ahead.

Maji Wine & Dine (Map p147; ☎ 2155 0878; 6 Triq Sir Adrian Dingli; mains Lm4-7; ☎ lunch & dinner Thu-Tue) Foodies on Gozo are rejoicing at the opening of another top-quality restaurant in Victoria. Maji smoothly combines bar, lounge and restaurant with stylish contemporary décor and an impressively modern menu (wild mushroom risotto, coconut-crusted halibut, macadamia nut meringue). There's great local art on display (and for sale). Bookings advised.

SELF-CATERING

There are fruit and vegetable vendors around It-Tokk and at the car park beside the bus station. The well-stocked **Arkadia supermarket**

(Map p146; Triq Fortunato Mizzi; ☎ 8am-7pm Mon-Sat) is on the basement level of the Arkadia shopping centre; closer to the bus station there's **Crai Foodstore** (Map p146; Tigrja Palazz, cnr Triq ir-Repubblika & Triq Putirjal; ☎ 7am-1pm & 4.30-7pm Mon-Sat).

Entertainment

Despite its diminutive size, Victoria has two theatres to Valletta's one. The **Aurora Opera House** (Map p146; ☎ 2156 2974) is the home of the Leone Philharmonic Society, and the **Astra Theatre** (Map p147; ☎ 2155 6256) is home to La Stella Philharmonic Society. Both are on Triq ir-Repubblika and stage opera, ballet, comedy, drama, cabaret, pantomime and celebrity concerts. Check the local press for details of performances.

Victoria also has the two-screen **Citadel Cinema** (Map p147; ☎ 2155 9955; www.citadelcinema.com; Telgha Tal-Belt; ticket per adult/child Lm1.85/1.35), which shows mainstream films. Check the website or local newspapers to see what's showing.

Getting There & Away

A regular helicopter service operates between Malta International Airport and Gozo. For details see p185. The main ferry service between Malta and Gozo has frequent crossings during the day and also operates throughout the night during summer (see p189 for more information).

Air Malta (Map p147; ☎ 2299 9624; 13 Pjazza Indipendenza; ☎ 8.30am-5pm Mon-Fri) has a central office in Victoria.

Getting Around

TO/FROM THE HELIPORT

Gozo's heliport is just south of St Cecilia's Tower, about 3.5km southeast of Victoria and signposted off the main road to Mgarr. Most hotels will offer to pick you up from the heliport, and rental agencies can organise transfers; otherwise, you could phone and arrange for a taxi to meet your flight. Alternatively, you can walk 200m up to the main road and catch bus 25 into Victoria (Lm0.20).

BUS

Victoria's **bus station** (Map p146; Triq Putirjal) is just south of Triq ir-Repubblika, about 200m from Il-Kastell. All the bus routes are circular, starting and finishing at Victoria. Except for bus 25, which shuttles regularly between Victoria and Mgarr and connects with the ferries to Malta, the buses are slow and run

according to the needs of the local schools and shoppers – so the schedule is not often convenient for sightseeing. There's a flat fare of Lm0.20, except for summer tourist routes to Dwejra and Ramla Bay (Lm0.35). Schedule inquiries can be made on ☎ 2156 2040.

CAR & BICYCLE

If you want to see as much of the island as possible, then it makes sense to rent a car. It's also quite cheap – even cheaper than on Malta. You'll also find that the quieter roads and shorter distances make cycling a more attractive option on Gozo than on Malta.

Victoria Garage (Map p146; ☎ 2155 6414, 2155 3741; Triq Putirjal), opposite the bus station, rents out bicycles (Lm2 per day, or Lm1.50 per day for longer rentals) and cars (daily rate of around Lm10, or Lm8 for longer periods).

Mayjo Car Rentals (Map p146; ☎ 2155 6678; www.mayjo.com.mt; Triq Fortunato Mizzi) has a large range of vehicles and good rates (from Lm6/8 per day in the low/high season for the smallest vehicle – for rentals of a week or longer). Prices vary with length of rental, size of car and time of year.

TAXI

Taxis hang around at the bus station and at Pjazza Indipendenza (Map p147). Approximate taxi fares from Victoria: to Marsalforn Lm4; to Mgarr Lm5.50; to Xaghra Lm3.50; and to Xlendi Lm3. To book a taxi, try phoning **Belmont Garage** (☎ 2155 6962) or **Mario's Taxis** (☎ 2155 7242).

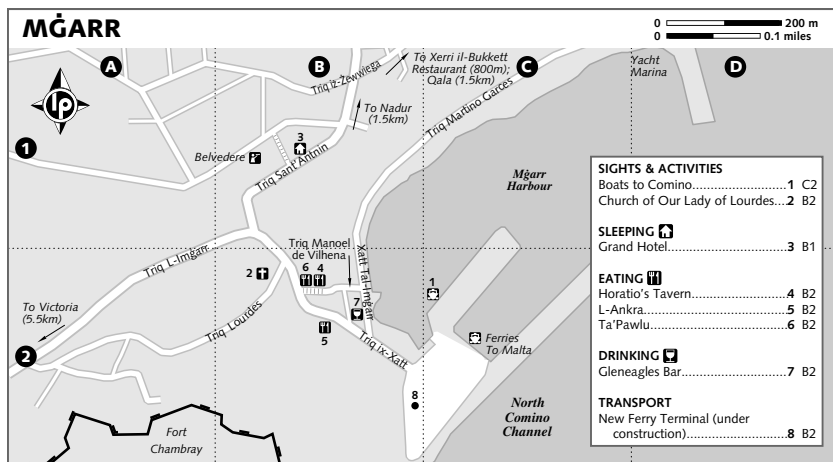
WALKING

Gozo is so small that you could walk from Mgarr to Marsalforn in two hours. Away from the relatively busy road between Mgarr and Victoria the roads are pretty quiet and there are lots of attractive hikes around the coast.

MĠARR

Mgarr is Gozo's main harbour and the point of arrival for ferries from Malta. When we visited, the waterfront was a mess – a new ferry terminal was under construction. The tourist information office and bank that once welcomed visitors had closed; hopefully they will return in a new home when the new terminal opens.

The 20th-century neogothic **Church of Our Lady of Lourdes** (Triq Lourdes) appears almost to hang over the village. Begun in 1924, lack of funds meant that its construction was



not finally completed until the 1970s. The hilltop above it is capped by the ramparts of **Fort Chambray**, built by the Knights of St John in the early 18th century. It was originally intended to supplant Victoria's Citadel as Gozo's main fortified town, and the area within the walls was laid out with a grid of streets similar to that of Valletta. But with the decline of the order in the late 18th century the plan came to naught. Instead, the fort served as a garrison and later as a mental hospital; it's rumoured that the on-again off-again developments to turn the fort into a hotel and residential complex are back on, but it's hard to keep up...

Activities

A right turn at the top of the harbour hill leads to a **belvedere** with a grand view over the harbour to Comino and northern Malta. Triq iż-Żewwiega leads to an even better **viewpoint** just south of Qala (it's worth the effort to get here – it's 1.8km uphill from the harbour to the viewpoint, and once here you can enjoy the magnificent panorama from Xerri Il-Bukkett restaurant (opposite)).

Xlendi Pleasure Cruises (☎ 2155 9967; www.xlendi.cruises.com) offers half- and full-day boat trips around Gozo and/or Comino from April to October. A full-day trip taking in Gozo and Comino costs Lm13.50/7.50 per adult/child and includes swimming stops and free use of snorkelling equipment. A half-day trip around Gozo is Lm10/5 per adult/child; around Comino and the Blue Lagoon is

Lm8.50/4.75. And you're not too far away to take in some of the highlights of the big sister down south – a full day visiting Valletta and Grand Harbour costs Lm16.50/8. On all trips an optional buffet lunch costs an extra Lm3.20/2. Trips depart from MĠarr harbour, but there's free transport for participants from Xlendi and Marsalforn to the departure point (and transfers can be arranged from other points of the island). You can book trips through most travel agents in the resort towns on Gozo.

Ticket-sellers selling tickets to Comino sit by the kerb of the main road through town – the going rate is Lm3 return, and boats generally leave MĠarr hourly from around 10am to 4pm. **Anselma** (☎ 9945 9389) is one such ferry service; it's worth telephoning ahead to check if and when the boats are operating.

Sleeping

Grand Hotel (☎ 2156 3840; www.grandhotelmalta.com; Triq Sant'Antnin; B&B per person Lm8.50-17.50 low season, Lm12-23 high season; 🚻 📺 📺) With the recent closure of L-Imgarr Hotel, there's only one accommodation option left in MĠarr. The four-star Grand Hotel has a fine position overlooking the harbour, with bright, airy rooms and extensive facilities including a sauna, gym, games room, restaurant and cocktail bar. Its least expensive rooms have no view; from these it's a small step up to a 'country view' room; sea-view rooms are naturally at the top of the scale, and are a very worthy investment.

Eating & Drinking

Xerri il-Bukkett (☎ 2155 3500; Triq iż-Żewwiega; snacks & meals Lm1-5.50) Who cares about the menu when the view is this good? Xerri il-Bukkett is just south of Qala, about 1.8km uphill from MĠarr harbour, and has a terrace with a stupendous view across the channel to Comino and northern Malta. There's a pub area for a casual drink and snack, and a restaurant serving traditional dishes such as fried rabbit, swordfish, *bragioli* (thin, rolled slices of beef stuffed and then braised in a red-wine sauce) and so on. And it's great to see that this place appeals as much to locals as to view-impressed tourists – at the front of the restaurant is an area where local men gather to play bocce.

L-Ankra (☎ 2155 5656; Triq ix-Xatt; mains Lm1.50-6; 🍷 lunch & dinner) Up the hill from the ferry terminal and opposite Gleneagles Bar, L-Ankra has a brightly coloured dining room and a menu full of the usual suspects (pasta, fresh fish, fried rabbit, king prawns) – which it executes very well. Of an evening there are also pizza selections, including the Gozitan, a great introduction to the local produce – it's groaning under the weight of anchovies, capers, black olives, potatoes, onion, basil, tuna and fresh tomato.

Horatio's Tavern (☎ 2156 6669; 9 Triq Manoel de Vilhena; platters for 2 Lm3-4; 🍷 noon-late) Triq Manoel de Vilhena is lined with restaurants. Horatio's, at the top of the hill, is a cosy, casual midrange option. It's a nautically themed tavern with outdoor seating and a menu of sandwiches, salads and platters. Try a platter of local treats (including Gozitan cheeses and sausage), fish (marinated swordfish and salted tuna), Italian hams and salamis, or imported cheeses.

Ta'Pawlu (☎ 2155 8355; 4 Triq Manoel de Vilhena; mains Lm5-7; 🍷 dinner Wed-Mon) Next door to Horatio's, this restaurant raises the bar with a more elegant dining room and more-upmarket selections. Mains might include sautéed calamari or king prawns; duck breast with honey and orange sauce; or veal with cognac sauce. Leave room for the crème caramel, homemade ice cream or 'surprise' crepes for dessert.

Gleneagles Bar (Triq ix-Xatt) This is the place to head for a cold beer at the end of the day. It commands a view over the harbour, and is the social hub of the village, filling up in the early evening with a lively mix of locals, fishermen, yachties and tourists looking for some Maltese colour.

Getting There & Around

Gozo Channel (☎ 2155 6016; www.gozochannel.com) operates the car ferry that shuttles between Malta's Ċirkewwa and Gozo's MĠarr every 45 to 60 minutes from 6am to around 8pm (and roughly every two hours throughout the night). Return tickets are purchased in Ċirkewwa, so there's no need to buy a ticket in MĠarr.

Bus 25 meets ferry arrivals and runs from the harbour to Victoria (Lm0.20). Taxi drivers tout for business among the crowds disembarking from the ferry; a taxi to Victoria will cost around Lm5.50, to Xaghra it's Lm5, to Xlendi it's Lm7 and to Marsalforn expect Lm7.50.

ĠHAJNSIELEM

pop 2480

MĠarr merges uphill into the town of Ġhajnsielem (ayn-see-lem, meaning 'spring of peace'). The huge, modern **Church of Our Lady of Loreto**, built in neogothic style, looms over the village square.

On the western edge of the village, on the main road from MĠarr to Victoria, is **Gozo Heritage** (☎ 2156 1280; Triq l-Imġ; 🍷 9am-4.30pm Mon-Sat), which advertises itself as a 'walk through 7000 years of living history'. It's a pretty lame series of historical tableaux – the legend of Calypso, Ġgantija temples, the Romans, the Great Siege, WWII – accompanied by special light and sound effects (*why* are there so many of these attractions in Malta?).

Another 100m along the road to Victoria is **St Cecilia's Tower**. The level area around the tower served as a temporary airfield in 1943 during the invasion of Sicily. A left turn at the tower leads to Gozo heliport (see p185 for details on the Malta-Gozo helicopter service).

MĠARR IX-XINI

The narrow, cliff-bound inlet of MĠarr ix-Xini (Port of the Galleys) was once used by the Knights of St John as their main harbour on Gozo – one of their watchtowers still guards the entrance. It was also used by Turkish admiral Dragut Reis, who raided Gozo in 1551 and took most of the island's population into slavery.

There's a tiny shingle beach at the head of the inlet, and a paved area where tourists and locals stake out their sunbathing territories. The swimming and snorkelling along the rocks is very good, and the little cove near the

Entertainment

La Grotta (☎ 2155 1583; www.lagrottalesure.com; Triq ix-Xlendi; 🕒 10pm-dawn Fri & Sat May-Oct) On the road to Victoria about 600m east of Xlendi, is the best nightclub in the Maltese Islands, in a unique, lovely setting. It's housed in a limestone cave in the cliffs above the valley, with two large dance areas (indoors and out). The admission price varies, depending upon the attraction that night (DJs, live music etc).

Club Paradiso (☎ 2156 0810; Triq ix-Xlendi; 🕒 year-round) Found above La Grotta and run by the same people, is this smaller scale, more-traditional (indoor) club pumping out commercial tracks and R&B.

Getting There & Away

Bus 87 runs between Xlendi and Victoria. By car, follow signs from the roundabout at the southern end of Triq Putirjal in Victoria. Or, it's a 3km walk from Victoria bus station.

GHARB

pop 1050

The village of Gharb (pronounced aarb, meaning 'west') in the northwest of Gozo has one of the most beautiful churches in the Maltese Islands. The baroque **Church of the Visitation** was built between 1699 and 1729, with an elegant curved façade and twin bell-towers. Three female figures adorn the front: Faith, above the door; Hope, with her anchor, to the right; and Charity. Inside, there is an altarpiece, *The Visitation of Our Lady to St Elizabeth*, which was gifted to the church by Grand Master de Vilhena.

The attractive **village square** was the location for the classic postcard, on sale throughout Malta and Gozo, showing a traditional British red telephone box beside a red letter box and a blue police station lamp (unfortunately the red letter box has since been removed).

Next door to the police station is **Gharb Folklore Museum** (☎ 2156 1929; Triq il-Knisja; adult/child Lm1.50/free; 🕒 9.30am-4pm Mon-Sat, 9.30am-noon Sun). This early-18th-century house has 28 rooms crammed with a fascinating private collection of folk artefacts. The exhibits, assembled by the owner over the past 20 years, include an early-18th-century printing press, a child's hearse, farming implements, fishing gear, jam-making equipment and much more.

A drive or pleasant walk of about 30 minutes (just over 2km) from Gharb leads to the tiny **Chapel of San Dimitri** (signposted on the

road to the left of the church). This small, square church with its baroque cupola dates originally from the 15th century, though it was rebuilt in the 1730s. It stands in splendid isolation amid terraced fields. You can continue the walk down to the coast, and return via the hilltop of **Gordan Lighthouse**, or the Basilica of Ta'Pinu.

The **Basilica of Ta'Pinu** (Triq ta'Pinu; 🕒 7am-12.30pm & 1.30-7pm) is Malta's national shrine to the Virgin Mary and is an important centre of pilgrimage. It was built in the 1920s on the site of a chapel where a local woman, Carmela Grima, heard the Virgin speak to her in 1883. Thereafter, numerous miracles were attributed to the intercession of Our Lady of Pinu, and it was decided to replace the old church with a grand new one. Built in a Romanesque style, with an Italianate campanile, the interior of pale golden stone is calming and peaceful. Part of the original chapel, with Carmela Grima's tomb, is incorporated behind the altar. The basilica's name comes from the man, Filippino Gauci, who used to tend the old church – Pinu is the Maltese diminutive for Filippino. The track leading to the top of the hill of Ta'Ghammar opposite the church is punctuated by marble statues marking the Stations of the Cross. Visitors to the basilica should note that no shorts, miniskirts or sleeveless dresses are allowed.

Where the road to Gharb from Victoria forks (400m after the turning to Ta'Pinu) you'll find **Jeffrey's Restaurant** (☎ 2156 1006; 10 Triq il-Gharb; mains Lm4-6.50; 🕒 dinner Mon-Sat Apr-Oct). Set in a converted farmhouse with a pretty courtyard, Jeffrey's offers home-style cooking that makes good use of local produce, and you can sample Maltese specialities such as *bragioli* (p52), stuffed marrow and the highly rated rabbit in wine and garlic.

Buses 1, 2 and 91 go to Gharb; bus 91 will take you to Ta'Pinu (Lm0.20).

SAN LAWRENZ

pop 570

A left turn at Jeffrey's restaurant in Gharb (see above) leads to the village of San Lawrenz, where novelist Nicholas Monsarrat (1910–79) lived and worked for four years in the early 1970s. His love for the Maltese Islands is reflected in his novel *The Kappilan of Malta*, which grew out of his experiences here.

En route from Gharb to San Lawrenz you'll pass the **Ta'Dbiegi Crafts Village** – a miniature

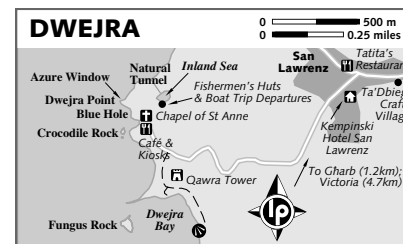
clone of Malta's Ta'Qali (p129) – selling handicrafts, lace, glass and pottery. The stalls have variable hours, generally from around 10am to 4pm, but it's best to go in the morning. A left turn just after the crafts village leads to the **Kempinski Hotel San Lawrenz** (☎ 2211 0000; www.kempinski-gozo.com; Triq ir-Rokon; r Lm75-95; 🕒 📺 📶), a swish hideaway set in landscaped grounds. You get the feeling nothing is too much trouble for the obliging staff here, and the crowd is an interesting mix of honeymooners, families and well-heeled older Europeans. Facilities to help pass the time include a large health spa (with a huge list of de-stress treatments), tennis and squash courts, a gym, indoor and outdoor pools and pool bars. There's also a coffee lounge, trattoria and fine-dining restaurant. The spa and eateries are open to the public.

Back in San Lawrenz, right by the church on the charming town square is **Tatita's** (☎ 2156 6482; Pjazza San Lawrenz; mains Lm3-6.50; 🕒 lunch & dinner Apr-Oct), which comes highly recommended by our readers. Smart modern renovations have turned this town house into a stylish restaurant, or you can dine alfresco on the postcard-perfect square. The kitchen prepares local treats such as homemade ravioli filled with Gozo cheese; grilled stuffed quail; and fresh local calamari and king prawns.

Buses 1, 2 or 91 connect San Lawrenz with Victoria (Lm0.20).

DWEJRA

Geology and the sea have conspired to produce some of Gozo's most spectacular coastal scenery at Dwejra on the west coast. Two



vast, underground caverns in the limestone have collapsed to create two circular depressions now occupied by Dwejra Bay and the Inland Sea.

The **Inland Sea** is a cliff-bound lagoon connected to the open sea by a tunnel that runs for 100m through the headland of Dwejra Point. The tunnel is big enough for small boats to sail through in calm weather, and the Inland Sea has been used as a fishermen's haven for centuries. Today the fishermen supplement their income by taking tourists on **boat trips** (per person Lm1.50) through the cave.

A few minutes' walk from the Inland Sea is a huge natural arch in the sea cliffs, known as the **Azure Window**. In the rocks in front of it is another geological freak called the **Blue Hole** – a natural vertical chimney in the limestone, about 10m in diameter and 25m deep, that connects with the open sea through an underwater arch about 8m down. Understandably, it's a very popular dive site. The snorkelling here is excellent, too. Between the Inland Sea and the Azure Window is the little **Chapel of St Anne**, built in 1963 on the site of a much older church.

FUNGUS ROCK

Known in Malti as Il-Ġebra tal-Ġeneral (The General's Rock), Fungus Rock takes both of its names from the fact that the Knights of St John used to collect a rare plant from the rock's summit. The plant (*Cynomorium coccineus*) is dark brown and club-shaped, and grows to about 18cm in height. It is parasitic and has no green leaves, which is why it was called a fungus or, in Malti, *gheraq tal-Ġeneral* (the General's rock). It's native to North Africa, and Fungus Rock is the only place in Europe where it's found.

Extracts from the plant had powerful pharmaceutical qualities, and were said to stem bleeding and prevent infection when used to dress wounds. The plant cured dysentery and ulcers, and was used to treat apoplexy and venereal diseases. It was long known to the Arabs as 'the treasure among drugs', and when a general of the Knights of St John discovered it growing on a rock on Gozo, he knew he had struck gold. A rope was strung between the mainland and the rock, and harvesters were shuttled back and forth in a tiny, one-man cable car. Qawra Tower was built to guard the precious resource. The plant extract was much in demand in the Knights' hospitals; it was sold at a high price to the various courts of Europe.

The broad horizontal shelf of rock to the south of Dwejra Point has been eroded along the geological boundary between the Globigerina Limestone and the Lower Coralline Limestone – the boundary is marked by a layer of many thousands of fossilised scallop shells and sand dollars (a kind of flattened, disc-shaped sea urchin). See p40 for more on these limestone layers. Just offshore is **Crocodile Rock** (seen from near Qawra Tower it looks like a crocodile's head) between Dwejra Point and Fungus Rock (see below).

Qawra Tower overlooks **Dwejra Bay**. This collapsed cavern has been completely invaded by the sea, and is guarded by the brooding bulk of **Fungus Rock** (see boxed text, p157). A path below the tower leads to a flight of stairs, cut into the rock, which leads down to a little slipway on the edge of the bay. There is good swimming and sunbathing here, away from the crowd of day-trippers who throng the rocks around the Azure Window. For even more peace you can hike right around to the cliff top on the far side of the bay, where the view back over Fungus Rock to Dwejra Point is spectacular.

You can get snacks from a **café** by the car park at Dwejra, and there are a couple of **kiosks** here selling drinks and ice creams to the day-trippers.

Bus 91 runs infrequently between Victoria and Dwejra (Lm0.35) from March to October. Alternatively, catch bus 1, 2 or 91 to San Lawrenz (Lm0.20) and walk the 1.5km down to the bay.

MARSALFORN

Marsalforn is Gozo's main holiday resort, but tourist development has ensured that it is not an especially lovely town. The bay of this former fishing village (the name is possibly derived from the Arabic for 'bay of ships') is now lined with an ugly sprawl of hotels and apartment buildings, gradually spreading northwest along the coast towards Qbaijar. Still, it's a low-key resort compared with the fleshpots of Sliema and Bugibba on Malta, and offers some good out-of-season deals on accommodation.

Most of the restaurants, hotels and guesthouses are clustered around the waterfront. You can change money at the Bank of Valletta on the promenade, which has an ATM and a 24-hour moneychanging machine. **Extreme Sports Internet Café** (☎ 2155 0983; Triq il-Mungbell; per 70min Lm1; ☎ noon-midnight), adjacent to the Extreme Sports bar (p160), offers internet.

Sights & Activities

There's not much worth seeing in the town itself. One reader wrote 'please mention the Christ statue just outside Marsalforn. It is the only thing there worth seeing'. She is referring to the large statue of Jesus you'll see on the small hill (Rio de Janeiro-style) to the left as you enter town from Victoria. It was erected in the 1970s, replacing earlier statues and a wooden cross from around the 1900s. The 96m-high hill is known as Tas-Salvatur, or 'the Redeemer'.

At the head of the bay is a tiny scrap of sand, but better swimming and sunbathing

can be found on the rocks out to the west. You could also hike eastward over the hill a couple of kilometres to Calypso's Cave and Ramla Bay.

If you walk west from town along the nicely updated promenade (with a handful of restaurants en route) you'll reach the tiny sand beaches at **Qbaijar Bay** and **Xwieni Bay**, separated by a headland with a small fort. Beyond Xwieni the rocky shore has been carved into an impressive patchwork of **salt pans**, which are still worked in summer.

Another 20-minute hike beyond the salt pans will bring you to the narrow, cliff-bound inlet of **Wied il-Ghasri**. Here a narrow staircase cut into the rock leads down to a tiny shingle beach at the head of the inlet. It's a gorgeously picturesque place and there is good swimming and snorkelling when the sea is calm, but it's best avoided in rough weather when the waves come crashing up the narrow defile. You can also drive or walk to Wied il-Ghasri from the village of Ghasri, about 2km south, but it's a bit tricky to find – you'll need a decent map if you're coming from this direction. If you're coming from Marsalforn, there is an unsigned turn-off on the right about 300m after the coastal road heads inland.

Check out p152 for information about Xlendi Pleasure Cruises out of Mgarr that offer free transfers to/from Marsalforn. There are a number of dive operators in town that can help you explore Gozo's great dive sites (p48), including:

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

Calypso Diving Centre (☎ 2156 1757; www.calypso-divers.com; Triq il-Port) Near the Calypso Hotel.

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

Sleeping

Our pick **Maria-Giovanna Hostel** (☎ 2155 3630; www.gozohostels.com; cnr Triq il-Mungbell & Triq ir-Rabat; B&B per person Lm6-8) No-one else in Malta caters to independent, budget-minded travellers like this wonderful hostel. And hostel is perhaps a misleading term – this is more like a guesthouse, with rooms rented out individually (no dorm beds, no room-sharing necessary). From the pretty town-house exterior to the fish tank, plants and piano in the communal lounge, this place is clearly well looked after. There are only five guest rooms (two with en suite), each decorated in rustic style, with

funky cast-iron beds and colourful linen and rugs. Guests have use of the hostel's kitchen, dining area and TV lounge, and breakfast is included. The friendly owners live across the road and can arrange all sorts of extras (for a small fee): laundry, home-cooked local meals, taxi service, a water taxi to Comino. Nothing seems too much trouble. The owners can also help with self-catering apartments and farmhouses – check the website for more information.

Lantern Guesthouse (☎ 2156 2365; www.gozo.com/lantern; Triq il-Mungbell; B&B per person Lm6.50-8) Not a bad fall-back budget option, the Lantern has clean, homely rooms, all with en suite, cable TV and fridge. The owners can also hook you up with reasonably priced apartments around town.

Atlantis Hotel (☎ 2156 1826; www.atlantisgozo.com; Triq il-Qolla; B&B per person from Lm10/15 low/high season; ☎ ☎) Above the west side of the bay is this large hotel complex, which extends to both sides of the street and has loads of facilities. The dated exterior and lobby don't inspire a lot of confidence but the well-equipped rooms are decent for the price. It's particularly popular with the diving crowd.

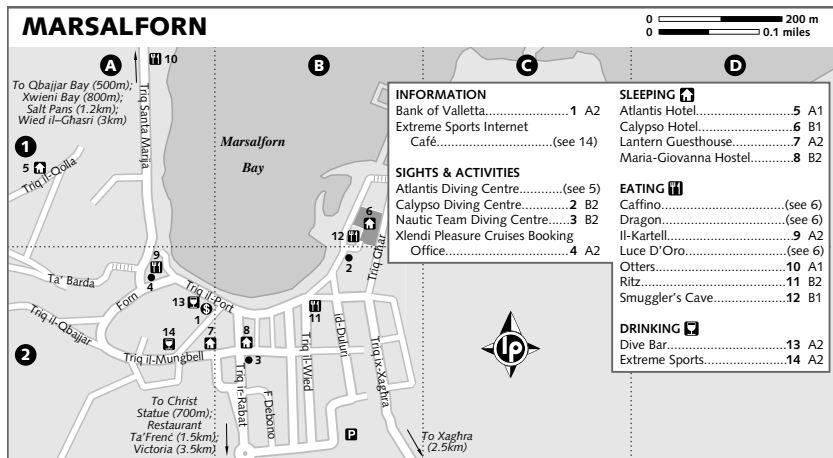
Calypso Hotel (☎ 2156 2000; www.hotelcalypsogozo.com; Triq il-Port; B&B per person from Lm11.50/18 low/high season; ☎ ☎) After recent renovations the Calypso boasts fresh, stylish décor and excellent facilities. The large modern guest rooms are clean and contemporary, in warm blue tones. An international and Maltese crowd makes good use of the handful of on-site restaurants and café, plus the lovely pool, bar and sun terrace on the roof. Sea-view rooms cost an additional Lm4 per person.

Eating & Drinking

The majority of restaurants in Marsalforn have reduced hours in winter – it pays to call ahead to check somewhere is open before setting off.

Il-Kartell (☎ 2155 6918; Triq il-Port; mains Lm2.50-5.50; ☎ lunch & dinner) Sit right by the water or inside the rustic dining rooms at this bustling place, housed in a couple of old boathouses in the southwestern corner of the bay. The menu includes pasta dishes around the Lm2 mark, along with fresh fish, traditional dishes and daily specials chalked up on the blackboard.

Otters (☎ 2156 2473; Triq Santa Marija; mains Lm3.50-6; ☎ lunch & dinner) Waterfront Otters, on the western edge of the bay, has stylishly reinvented



itself and now boasts a tasteful charcoal interior with white and yellow accents, and a fusion menu to match the new surrounds. Choose from mains along the lines of seared yellow-fin tuna; braised lamb and date *tajine*; or pork chops topped with pineapple and lime salsa.

Restaurant Ta'Frenc (☎ 2155 3888; Triq ir-Rabat; mains Lm5-13; ☺ lunch & dinner Wed-Mon) For a special occasion and to see what the fuss is about, head to this *très élégant* restaurant, about 1.5km south of Marsalforn on the road to Victoria. It's in a beautiful setting (a 200-year-old converted farmhouse surrounded by garden) and is polled as the best and the most popular eatery in the country. There's an impressive menu of French, Italian and Maltese dishes, with rabbit-filled ravioli or traditional *aljotta* (fish soup) to start, followed by slow-cooked lamb shank, fresh fish or steak Diane. Crêpes suzette, flambéed at the table, are quite a show-stopper. Vegetarians are catered to, as are children, surprisingly. There's also an extensive, award-winning winelist – take a taxi home. Bookings advised.

The Calypso Hotel is home to a very good Chinese restaurant, the **Dragon**, plus **Luce D'Oro**, an elegant rooftop restaurant. Fashionable **Caffino**, at ground level, is the best choice for a snack or drink, with loads of savoury pastries, toasted sandwiches and mouthwatering cakes.

The **Ritz** (☎ 2155 8392; Triq il-Wied; snacks Lm0.30-1) is far from ritzy – it's a cheap-and-cheerful café-bar selling snacks and sandwiches (a steak sandwich is Lm0.65). **Smuggler's Cave** (☎ 2155 1005; Triq il-Port mains Lm2.50-5.50), by the Calypso Hotel, has cheap pizzas and burgers (plus the usual pasta, meat and fish), but feels more like a British seaside restaurant than a Maltese one, and you can get a traditional roast pork or beef.

Dive Bar (☎ 2155 9931; Triq il-Port) is a great nighttime watering hole – stop by for pizza in its bright, nautically themed interior, which is reminiscent of a ship's galley. **Extreme Sports** (☎ 2155 0983; Triq il-Mungbell), a block back from the waterfront, is another popular drinking den, with a restaurant upstairs, and big screens televising sporting events in an extremely big way.

Getting There & Away

Bus 21 runs regularly between Marsalforn and Victoria (Lm0.20).

XAGHRA

pop 3850

The pretty village of Xaghra (shaa-ra) spreads across the flat summit of the hill east of Victoria, seemingly lost in a dream of times past. The early-19th-century Church of Our Lady of Victory looks down benignly on the tree-lined village square, Pjazza Vittorja, where old men sit and chat in the shade of the oleanders.

Orientation & Information

The main road from Mgarr and Victoria zig-zags up the hill from the south and passes the site of the temples of Ġgantija before joining the village square in front of the church. A left turn here leads back towards Victoria on a rough, steep, minor road (affording fabulous views of Victoria and Il-Kastell). A right turn leads past the school and post office to the Marsalforn road. The Bank of Valletta (no ATM) is at the western end of the square.

Sights

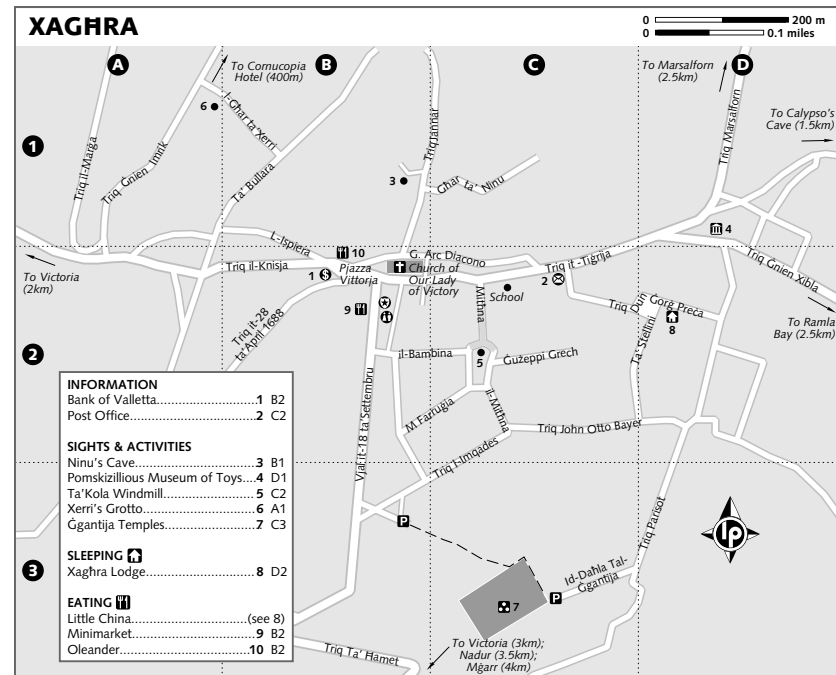
A narrow lane beside the school leads to the restored **Ta'Kola Windmill** (☎ 2156 1071; Triq il-Bambina; adult/child Lm1/0.25; ☺ 9am-5pm). Built in 1725, the windmill is now something of an attraction, housing a museum of country life with exhibits of woodworking tools, farm equipment and period bedroom and living quarters. Best of all is the climb up the narrow stairs to see the original milling gear, complete with millstones.

Visitors can also purchase a **Xaghra Day Ticket** (Lm2), which includes entry to the Ġgantija temples and Ta'Kola Windmill on the same day. This ticket is available at both the temples and windmill.

In the back streets to the north of the village square lie **Xerri's Grotto** (☎ 2155 6863; l'Għar ta'Xerri; adult/child Lm0.75/0.30) and **Ninu's Cave** (Triq Jannar; admission Lm0.50). These underground caverns,

EDWARD LEAR ON GOZO

Edward Lear (1812–88), an English landscape painter and nonsense poet (Lear popularised the limerick as a form of comic verse), spent much of his life travelling around the Mediterranean. He visited Gozo in 1866, and described the scenery as 'pomskizillious and gromphiberous, being as no words can describe its magnificence'.



complete with stalactites and stalagmites, are unusual in that they are both entered through private houses. Having discovered the caves beneath their homes, the owners decided to cash in on the tourist potential. Xerri's Grotto was discovered in 1923 when Antonio Xerri was digging a well. It's the bigger, deeper and more interesting of the two. Opening times are at the discretion of the owners, but are generally from 9.30am to 5pm in summer (with shorter hours outside the peak tourist months).

At the eastern end of town the road forks – left for Marsalforn, right for Ramla Bay. A few metres along the Ramla road on the left is the **Pomskizillious Museum of Toys** (☎ 2156 2489; Triq Ġnien Xibla; adult/child Lm1/0.50; ☺ 10am-noon & 3-6pm Mon-Sat May-Oct, 10am-1pm Thu-Sat Apr, 10am-1pm Sat & public holidays Nov-Mar), popular with kids (and kids at heart) for its impressive array of dolls houses, toy soldiers, dolls and various other old toys.

Signposts near the Pomskizillious Museum of Toys point the way through the maze of minor roads east of Xaghra down to **Calypso's Cave**, overlooking the sandy beach of Ramla Bay – it's a 30-minute walk from the village square. The cave itself is hardly worth the

hike – it's just a hollow under an overhang at the top of the cliff – but the view over Ramla Bay is lovely. On a calm day visitors can usually see the remains of an artificial reef extending into the sea off the eastern headland of the bay. This was part of the defences built by the Knights of St John to prevent attackers landing on the beach. In theory, the enemy ships would run aground on the reef, where they would be attacked using primitive mortar like weapons.

ĠGANTIJA

Located on the crest of the hill to the south of Xaghra, the megalithic **Ġgantija temples** (☎ 2155 3194; access from Triq l-Mqades; adult/child Lm1.50/0.50; ☺ 9am-5pm) command a splendid view over most of southern Gozo and beyond to Comino and Malta. As the name implies (ġgantija – dje-gant-ee-ya – means 'giantess'), these are the largest of the megalithic temples found in the Maltese Islands – the walls stand over 6m high, and the two temples together span over 40m.

Along with Ta'Haġrat (p116) and Skorba (p116) on Malta, the Ġgantija temples are thought to be Malta's oldest, dating from

CALYPSO'S ISLE

Gozo is one of the half-dozen or so contenders for the title of Calypso's Isle – the mythical island of Ogygia described in Homer's *Odyssey* where the nymph Calypso seduced the hero Odysseus and kept him captive for seven years. But she could not overcome his longing for his home in Ithaca, and Zeus eventually sent Hermes to command her to release him.

If the cave above Ramla Bay on Gozo was really Calypso's hideaway, then it is no wonder that Odysseus was keen to get home. Despite the nice view and pretty island, it's a long, hot and scratchy climb up from the beach, and the cramped living quarters leave a lot to be desired.

the period 3600 to 3000 BC. Both temples face towards the southeast, and both have five semicircular niches within. The south temple (on the left) is the older, and is entered across a huge threshold slab with four holes at each side, thought to be for libations. The first niche on the right contains an altar with some spiral decoration – there was once a pillar here with a snake carved on it, but the pillar now lives in Victoria's Archaeology Museum (p147). The left-hand niche in the inner chamber has a well-preserved trilithon altar; on the right is a circular hearth stone and a bench altar.

There is little of interest in the north temple, but the outer wall of the temple complex is impressive in scale. The largest of the megaliths measures 6m by 4m and weighs around 57 tonnes, and the wall may originally have stood up to 16m tall.

Heritage Malta has set up a small 'info pod' giving a short audio narration on the temples in a half-dozen different languages. But, as with other temple sites in Malta, it has a ways to go to ensure that visitors leave the site with an understanding of what makes these piles of stones so special.

Sleeping & Eating

Cornucopia Hotel (☎ 2155 6486; www.vjborg.com/cornucopia; Triq Ġnien Imriq; s/d Lm11.25/22.50 low season, Lm26/39 high season, bungalows, villas & apt Lm15-60; 🍷 🍷 🍷) Cornucopia and its accommodation options are set in and around a converted farmhouse about 1km north of the village square. Four-star

accommodation is available in hotel rooms arranged around a courtyard, pool and pretty garden, or in self-catering villas, bungalows, apartments and farmhouses (with an average price of Lm25/50 per unit low/high season); request a valley view.

Xaghra Lodge (☎ 2156 2362; www.gozo.com/xaghra lodge; Triq Dun Ġorġ Preċa; s/d Lm16/21 low season, Lm19/25 high season; 🍷 🍷) This homely guesthouse in a quiet neighbourhood is run by a friendly English couple. There are excellent facilities for the price, including en suite, balcony, cable TV and tea and coffee facilities in all rooms; flowering garden with pool and bird aviary; and an adjacent bar and Chinese restaurant. It's a five-minute walk east of the town square.

Oleander (☎ 2155 7230; Pjazza Vittorja; mains Lm3.50-6; 🍷 lunch & dinner Tue-Sun) On the pretty village square, the popular Oleander has a menu you've probably seen before (pastas, *braġioli*, rabbit, fresh fish, local lamb), but it's all well prepared and regulars rave over the rabbit dishes – 'Oleander fried rabbit' is glazed with a red-wine sauce and fried with garlic and mixed spices. It's a pleasant place to while away an evening, and there are a couple of other decent options on the square.

Little China (☎ 2156 2362; Triq Dun Ġorġ Preċa; dishes Lm2-6, set menu from Lm6; 🍷 dinner Mon-Sat) If you're tired of perusing menus full of pizza, pasta and rabbit, head to Little China, adjacent to the Xaghra Lodge. On offer is a huge range of meat, vegetable, noodle and seafood dishes – favourites like sweet and sour pork, beef with black bean sauce, lemon chicken and crispy duck. There are lots of soups and starters, and vegetarian options.

For those who prefer to picnic or self-cater, there's a handy **minimarket** (Vjal it-18 Ta' Settembru; 🍷 6.30am-7pm Mon-Sat) just south of the square.

Getting There & Away

Buses 64 and 65 run between Victoria and Xaghra (Lm0.20).

NADUR

pop 4230

Nadur is Gozo's 'second city', spreading along a high ridge to the east of Victoria. In Malti, Nadur means 'lookout', and a 17th-century watchtower overlooks the Comino sea lanes from the western end of the ridge.

Nadur's ornate **Church of Sts Peter & Paul** (Pjazza San Pietru u San Pawl) was built in the late 18th

century – the entrance is framed by white statues of the two saints, giving the church its local nickname of *iz-Zewġ* (the pair). The interior is richly decorated with marble sculptures, and the vault is covered with 150 paintings. See the boxed text, p38, for more about the church.

A block south of the church (well signposted from the square) is the **Kelnu Grima Maritime Museum** (☎ 2156 5226; Triq il-Kappillan; adult/child Lm1/0.50; 🍷 9am-4.45pm Mon-Sat), a private collection of ship models, relics and maritime memorabilia.

On the square directly behind the church is **Anthony's Bar & Restaurant** (☎ 2156 5369; 20 Triq Madre Ġ Camilleri; pizzas Lm1.25-2.35, mains Lm2-5.50; 🍷 dinner Tue-Sun), a small, friendly place with well-priced meals.

To get to Nadur, take bus 42 or 43 from Victoria (Lm0.20).

AROUND NADUR

Narrow country roads radiate northward from Nadur to three beaches, all signposted.

Ramla Bay (also called Ir-Ramla) is the biggest

and best sandy beach on Gozo, and one of the prettiest in the islands – the strand of reddish-gold contrasts picturesquely with the blue of the sea and white statue of the Virgin Mary. As such, it is usually heaving with people in summer, when cafés, souvenir stalls and water-sports facilities abound. It is much quieter and more pleasant in spring and autumn, and in winter you can have the place almost to your (goose-pimpled) self. The minimal remains of a **Roman villa** are hidden among the bamboo behind the beach, and Calypso's Cave (p161) looks down from the hilltop to the west. Ramla Bay is also easily accessed (on foot or by car) from Xaghra, and bus 42 runs between the bay and Victoria from July to September (Lm0.35).

The next beach to the east is **San Blas**, a tiny, rock-strewn bay with some patches of coarse rust-coloured sand backed by steep, terraced fields with prickly pear hedges. It's a lovely place to take a picnic lunch and a good book, and perhaps a mask and fins for snorkelling – the water is quite shallow and very clear. There are no facilities here, and there's parking space

GOZO AGRITOURISM

At the time of research an excellent new initiative had just been created. It caters to eco-minded travellers interested in experiencing first-hand the island's renowned hospitality and rural customs.

The nonprofit **Ager Foundation** (☎ 2156 4378; www.agerfoundation.com) has launched the Gozo Experience, a project with the noble aims of promoting responsible, sustainable tourism on Gozo and safeguarding the natural environment. It offers visitors (locals and tourists alike) the chance to get back to nature – milk a goat, go fishing, cook up a traditional feast – alongside Gozitans and according to Gozitan traditions. Options for one-day outings include:

- experiencing the life of a local shepherd, and being shown how ġbejniet (p51), the traditional cheese, is made
- preparing and tasting natural Gozitan food
- fishing onshore or from a boat with a local fisherman
- learning about local wine-making practices
- bird watching with local birders
- exploring Gozo's archaeology and heritage

The experiences are designed with families in mind (especially with parents who'd like their kids to have some understanding of where supermarket produce comes from) and are a hit with city slickers enamoured with the romance of rural life. Other back-to-basics outings may include herb-picking or wildflower identification, or a visit to a local festa. Groups are kept small (with a maximum of eight participants) and costs are very reasonable (eg a day spent meeting a local shepherd, with the chance to milk a sheep and make cheese, costs adult/child Lm8/4, including lunch). Tailored outings can be arranged. This is a unique project that deserves to do well; check the website and contact the Ager Foundation for more information.

for only a handful of cars on the very narrow track above the bay. You can walk here from Nadur in about 30 minutes (take Triq San Blas off Triq it-Tigrija, two blocks north of Nadur's church; it's just over 2.5km from town).

Attractive **Dahlet Qorrot**, the third bay, is popular with local weekenders. There's a tiny sandy stretch, but most of the swimming is off the rocks beside the rows of little boathouses (carved out of the rock, and with brightly painted doors). There's usually plenty of space to park; you can buy drinks and snacks in summer only. A turn-off en route to San Blas leads to Dahlet Qorrot.

QALA

The village of Qala (a-la) has little to see except for a couple of 18th-century **windmills**. The road east of the village square (Triq il-Kuncizzjoni) leads down to the coast at **Hondoq ir-Rummien**, a cove with a scrap of sand, bathing ladders on the rocks, and benches with a view across the water to Comino. There are toilets here, and a kiosk catering to sunbathers.

COMINO

pop 4

It's stretching the truth to say that you'll be getting away from it all here. Comino (Kem-muna in Malti) was once reportedly the hide-out of pirates and smugglers, but now regularly plays host to boatloads of sunseeking invaders. Home to the Blue Lagoon, one of Malta's most hyped natural attractions, the island itself is a small, barren chunk of limestone wedged smack-bang between Malta and Gozo. Almost the only inhabitants are the guests and staff of the island's single hotel, but hordes of day-trippers from Malta and Gozo put paid to any desert-island fantasies. In winter, when the hotel is closed, only a handful of people remain.

Classified as a nature reserve and bird sanctuary, and free of cars, Comino is only 2.5km by 1.5km in size, and away from the hotel and the Blue Lagoon the island is peaceful and unspoiled. A walk along the rough tracks affords some great views of northern Malta or of Gozo. It's impossible to get lost here, given the island's tiny size and the fact that St Mary's Tower, the only landmark of note, is visible from almost everywhere on the island.



The main part of the Comino Hotel is on San Niklaw Bay, and the Comino Hotel Bungalows are on Santa Marija Bay, 500m to the east. A rough track lined with oleander trees, rather grandly named Triq Congrevo, runs from Santa Marija Bay south to St Mary's Tower. Side tracks lead to the Blue Lagoon and San Niklaw Bay.

SIGHTS

The only manmade sights of note on Comino are the little **Chapel of Our Lady's Return from Egypt** at Santa Marija Bay and **St Mary's Tower**, built by the Knights in 1618. It was once part of the chain of signal towers between Gozo and Mdina but today is just an observation post used by the Maltese military. Climb the steps and enjoy the views.

The island's biggest attraction is the **Blue Lagoon**, a sheltered cove between the western end of the island and the uninhabited islet of Cominotto (Kemmunnett in Malti). This immensely photogenic cove has a white-sand sea bed and clear turquoise waters – it's an image repeated on countless souvenir post-cards from Malta.

In summer the bay gets inundated with people daily between around 10am and 4pm; if you're staying at the hotel, of course, you can enjoy the lagoon in relative peace in the early morning and late afternoon. The southern end of the lagoon is roped off to keep boats out; there is top-notch swimming and snorkelling here, plus you can swim over to Cominotto.

Take care in the unrelenting summer heat – there is no shade here, and most sunbathing is done on the exposed rocky ledges surrounding the cove. There are public toilets and a few kiosks selling cool drinks, ice creams and snacks (eg burgers, hot dogs and sandwiches). Deckchairs (per day Lm1.25) and umbrellas (Lm1) can be hired for extended luxurious lazing about.

SLEEPING & EATING

An international crowd of sunseekers, scuba divers and those who prefer to holiday without too many distractions make a regular pilgrimage to the well-equipped **Comino Hotels** (☎ 2152 9821; www.cominohotels.com; half board per person Lm17-28; 🏠 📺 📶), the only place to stay on the island. (Note that the hotel is open only from April to October.) The four-star hotel has 95 rooms at San Niklaw Bay and 46 bungalows at Santa Marija Bay, but no self-catering options. Bungalows are a larger option than the hotel rooms, with a sitting area; these are open from May to October.

Pack a good book – there are no museums or shops to distract you, and only the hotel's café, restaurant and bar (and your fellow guests) keep you fed, watered and entertained. A garden-view room costs Lm17 per person per night for half board in the low season (April, May and October), Lm23 in the mid-season (June and from mid- to late September) and Lm28 in the high season (July to mid-September). Full board costs an additional Lm6. The buffet meals are of a good standard.

By day there are hotel-organised activities (at additional cost) to occupy your time – the most popular is scuba diving, taking advantage of Comino's excellent dive sites (see p49). Instruction and courses for beginners, experienced divers and kids are available through the hotel's dive school, **Comino Dive Centre** (☎ 2157 0354; www.cominodivecentre.com).

Other diversions include a private beach (in San Niklaw Bay), swimming pools, tennis

courts and bikes, waters sports (including rental of windsurfing equipment, sailing and motor boats, and canoes) and boat excursions. Or you can simply recharge your batteries in your bright, bland but perfectly adequate room (featuring air-con, phone, cable TV, fridge and balcony).

Day-trippers can use the hotel's facilities for a stiff fee of Lm14 a day, but this must be booked in advance through the hotel. The price includes lunch, a return boat ticket and use of the pool and private beach. Casual visitors might like to escape the Blue Lagoon and dine at the café or buy a drink at the bar.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

The hotel runs its own boat service, with around seven crossings a day from Ċirkewwa in Malta's north (between 7.30am and 11.30pm) and Mgarr in Gozo's south (between 6.15am and 10pm). Arriving and departing hotel guests are given priority on the boats, and the return ticket price per adult/child is Lm3.50/1.75; the ferry can also be used by nonresidents of the hotel for the same price. The boats do not run from November to March, when the hotel is closed. To get to Ċirkewwa from Valletta, take bus 45.

Independent water taxis also operate regularly to the island from the two ports – from Mgarr it's usually Lm3 return, and from Ċirkewwa it's Lm4 return. Sightseeing trips operate to the Blue Lagoon from tourist areas like Sliema, Bugibba and Golden Bay in Malta, and Xlendi and Marsalforn in Gozo.

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