

Northwest Malta



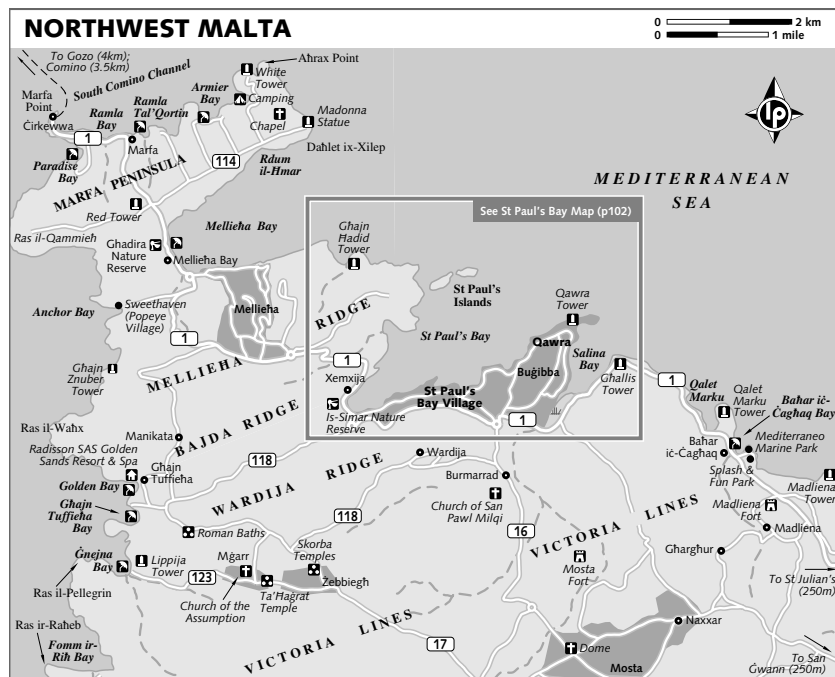
If you've been distracted by Malta's ancient sites and historic cities, you may have started to wonder where the beaches are hiding. It's in the northwest of Malta that visitors will discover how the country received its reputation for bucket-and-spade holidays. Beach bums should make a beeline for Mellieħa Bay for facilities and water sports laid on thick, or either Ġhajn Tuffieħa Bay or Ġnejna Bay for something more low-key and a chance to hang out with the locals. Scenic Golden Bay offers a choice midway between those two extremes, and is now home to one of Malta's loveliest five-star hotels. Just be aware that there's little chance of finding solitude on any patch of sand or rock during the high season – locals and visitors will all be looking to escape the heat. In the low season, however, you may well get to experience those picture-perfect images the tourist brochures are so fond of. Or you could always go looking for peace, solitude and natural beauty *under* the water – the rocky shores of the north boast some of the country's best diving outside Gozo.

Many of the country's large resorts – Buġibba, Qawra, St Paul's Bay (three neighbouring towns that have more or less blurred into one conglomeration of hotels) and Mellieħa Bay – are in the northwest, but the list of drawcards extends beyond facilities-laid-on holiday hot spots. The northwest offers noteworthy activities, including diving and water sports, of course, but also bird-watching and horse riding, good coastal walking in the region's remote corners, and Malta's best family-fun attractions.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Squeezing yourself into a wetsuit to explore the local marine life, scuba diving off the **Marfa Peninsula** (p120)
- Fulfilling every kid's dream and swimming with dolphins at **Mediterraneo Marine Park** (p98)
- Enjoying **Golden Bay** (p114) at your doorstep from a five-star suite at the new hotel here
- Feasting your eyes on the magnificent coastal views from the wild headland of **Ras il-Qammieħ** (p120)
- Making the long climb down to the near-empty **Ġhajn Tuffieħa Bay** (p115) on a quiet spring day
- Letting the locals know that you prefer your bird life alive, not hunted down, by supporting the beautiful birds of **Ġhadira Nature Reserve** (p118)





BAħAR IĊ-ĊAĠHAQ

Baħar iċ-Ċaġhaq (*ba-har eetch cha-ag*; also known, less tongue-twistingly, as White Rocks) lies halfway between Sliema and Buġibba. It has a scruffy rock beach and a couple of hugely popular family-friendly attractions.

The waterlogged **Splash & Fun Park** (☎ 2137 4283; www.splashandfun.com.mt; adult/child Lm7/4; 🕒 9am-5pm April-Oct, to 9pm Jul-mid-Sep) has undergone an expansion and rejuvenation to justify the price hike – it's now home to the largest wave pool in Europe, constantly pumping 1.5m artificial waves. There's also a safe kids' area with plenty of tunnels and spray jets, fibreglass waterslides, and a 240m-long 'lazy river' you can coast down on a rubber tube. There are plenty of sun lounges, a restaurant and the requisite number of ice-cream parlours. It's a fun day out, but potentially pricey, as food can't be brought into the park; from July to mid-September you pay less if you visit after 3pm (adult/child Lm4/2.50), outside these months there's a decent-value family pass costing Lm16. Note that a combined ticket for this park and Mediterraneo Marine Park is Lm12/7.50 per adult/child.

Next door, the well-organised **Mediterraneo Marine Park** (☎ 2137 2218; www.mediterraneo.com.mt; adult/child Lm6.50/4.50; 🕒 10am-5pm) is home to a group of performing Black Sea dolphins, rescued from an old Soviet marine park that went bust. The dolphins go through their routine at 12.30pm and 4.30pm daily, preceded by a sea-lion show (11.30am and 4.30pm), and a performing parrot show (10.30am and 2.30pm). The cost of admission includes viewing of all shows. Other kid-friendly attractions include a seal enclosure, a reptile house and a playground and kiddies' amusement rides. Also on offer through the marine park is the chance to swim with dolphins, under the guidance of their carers. This costs Lm45 per person (including admission to the park) and is very popular, so advance bookings are necessary (note that the minimum age for the dolphin swim is eight).

On Qrejten Point, west of Baħar iċ-Ċaġhaq Bay, is **Qalet Marku Tower**, one of several 17th-century watchtowers along this coastline.

To get to Baħar iċ-Ċaġhaq, take bus 68 from Valletta (Lm0.20), bus 70 south from Buġibba (Lm0.50) or bus 70 or 645 north from Sliema (Lm0.50).

BUĠIBBA, QAWRA & ST PAUL'S BAY

pop 8375

St Paul's Bay is named after the saint who was shipwrecked here in AD 60 (see the boxed text, p101). The unattractive sprawl of Buġibba and Qawra, on the eastern side of the bay, is the biggest tourist development in Malta.

This is the heartland of the island's cheap-and-cheerful package-holiday trade, and it's absolutely mobbed in summer. It's full of hotels, bars and so-so restaurants – fine if you want a week or so of beer-fuelled, sun-filled hedonism, but rather lacking in local charm (and almost devoid of attractions). Still, there are some points in its favour, number one being that it is affordable, especially in the low season when there are some real accommodation bargains and the swimming areas are not so crowded. Just don't expect the same level of after-dark action during this quieter period.

Orientation

The tourist towns of Buġibba and Qawra (*aow-ra*) occupy the peninsula on the eastern side of St Paul's Bay. Buġibba merges westward into the fishing village of St Paul's Bay (San Pawl il-Baħar in Malti). The smaller resort of Xemxija lies at the head of the bay on the west shore, about 3.5km from Buġibba. St Paul's Islands guard the northwestern point of the bay.

The main coast road from Valletta and Sliema to Melleiha and the Gozo ferry bypasses Buġibba, Qawra and St Paul's Bay village.

THE VICTORIA LINES

Built by the British in the late 19th century, the Victoria Lines were supposedly built to protect the main part of the island from potential invaders landing on the northern beaches, but they didn't see any military action and some historians think they were commissioned simply to give the British garrisons something to do. The fortifications were named after Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee in 1897.

The lines run about 12km along a steep limestone escarpment that stretches from Fomm ir-Riħ in the west to Baħar iċ-Ċaġhaq in the east and are excellent for country walking. There is still some talk of a heritage trail being developed along the lines, but little sign of the talk being put into action. If you're interesting in doing some independent exploration, try to get hold of *The Victoria Lines*, edited by Ray Cachia Zammit. A guide to the site, it includes a foldout map and is available in the better bookshops in Valletta.

Three forts – Madliena Fort, Mosta Fort and Binġemma Fort – are linked by a series of walls, entrenchments and gun batteries. The best-preserved section – the Dwejra Lines – is north of Mdina.

Information

BOOKSHOPS

Agenda (Map p100; ☎ 2157 4866; 91 Dawret il-Gzejjer, Buġibba) Sells foreign newspapers and magazines and a good range of English-language books.

EMERGENCY

Police Station (Map p100; ☎ 2157 6737; Triq it-Turisti, Buġibba)

INTERNET ACCESS

9-Ball Café (Map p100; ☎ 2158 6091; Triq it-Turisti, Buġibba; per hr Lm1; 🕒 8am-midnight) Large cybercafé in a café-cum-snooker hall, close to the bus station.

Browsers (Map p100; ☎ 2158 5082; Triq Kavetta, Buġibba; per hr Lm1; 🕒 10am-1.30am) Scanning and printing facilities, cheap international telephone calls, and a bar upstairs.

Mirabelle's (Map p100; ☎ 2157 0917; Triq Bajja, Buġibba; per hr Lm1; 🕒 10am-late) There's an internet café next door to Mirabelle's Restaurant (the entrance is on Misraħ il-Bajja).

MONEY

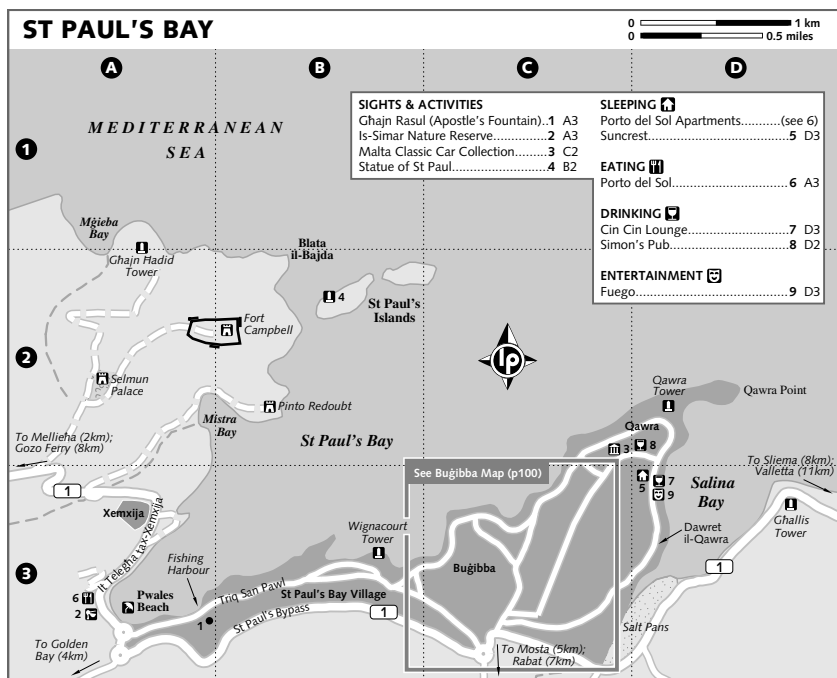
HSBC (Map p100; Misraħ il-Bajja, Buġibba) Full bank services plus a 24-hour foreign exchange machine and an ATM.

Travellex (Map p100; Triq Bajja, Buġibba; 🕒 9am-1.30pm & 2-5.30pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm Sat) Currency-exchange bureau not far from Misraħ il-Bajja (Bay Sq).

Travellex (Map p100; Dawret il-Gzejjer, Buġibba; 🕒 9am-1.30pm & 2-5.30pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm Sat) Another branch, near the entrance to the Dolmen Resort Hotel.

POST

Just Jase (Map p100; Dawret il-Gzejjer, Buġibba) Sub-post office in a souvenir shop.



Yellow Fun Watersports (Map p100; ☎ 2355 2570; www.yellowfunwatersports.com; Dawret il-Gzejjer, Bugibba) operates from the Amazonia Beach Club in front of the Oracle Casino and offers powerboat trips to the Blue Lagoon on Comino. Trips leave daily at 10.30am and 11am, returning at 3pm; the cost is Lm5 per person. Yellow Fun can also arrange boat charter, sea-taxi service, fishing trips and showers of watersports fun, such as water-skiing, jet skiing, canoeing, windsurfing and paragliding.

DIVING

There are several dive operators in Bugibba that can help you explore the excellent nearby dive sites (p46) or sites around the Maltese Islands. These include the following:

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

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

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

Sleeping

Most accommodation around St Paul's Bay is taken up by package-holiday companies from April to October, so book in advance if you want to stay in summer. In the low season (November to March) you can get some good deals, especially for stays of a week or more (although many smaller establishments may close during this period). There is very little by way of small and intimate hotels, except in the budget category. Most hotels are large and have good facilities (pool, restaurant etc), but are impersonal and often have dated, super-bland décor – you get what you pay for here. They usually offer a choice of hotel rooms or self-catering studios and apartments; the latter are usually good value as you'll get a larger room (to accommodate a kitchen/kitchenette and dining area) and you can cut costs by preparing your own meals. Half- and full-board arrangements are available at most guesthouses and hotels, but the food is rarely anything to write home about. There are supplements for solo travellers, sea views and for stays of less than three days at many hotels.

BUDGET

The following budget and midrange hotels are located on the Bugibba map (Map p100).

Buccaneers Guesthouse (☎ 2157 1671; www.buccaneers.com.mt; Triq Gulju, Bugibba; B&B per person Lm6; ☎ Apr-Oct; ☎) This friendly, well-run guesthouse has surprisingly decent rooms at a bargain price (if you're on a shoestring budget, the princely sum of Lm7.50 gets you dinner, bed and breakfast). Rooms are large, clean and well-equipped – all with phone, air-con and private shower and washbasin (toilets are shared). There's a sun terrace on the roof with a newly-installed small pool, and a lively bar and restaurant downstairs.

Sea View Hotel (☎ 2157 3105; seawiew@waldonet.net.mt; cnr Dawret il-Gzejjer & Triq il-Imsej, Bugibba; B&B per person Lm5.50/8.75 low/high season; ☎) Small-fry in comparison to the big boys in town, this budget hotel is on the promenade northeast of Misraħ il-Bajja and is open year-round. It's home to tiny, rather basic rooms, but all have balconies and bathroom, and there's a small pool too, with terrace and bar. You'll pay for extras such as a TV and/or a fridge in your room, a sea view, or for one-night stays.

MIDRANGE

Sunseeker Holiday Complex (☎ 2157 5619; www.sunseekerholidaycomplex.com; Trejjet il-Kulpara, Bugibba; 1-bedroom apt Lm65/100 low/high season; ☎) Tucked one block back from the waterfront in what feels like a quietish location, this central complex has indoor and outdoor pools, a gym, sauna, Jacuzzi and handy minimarket. On offer are one- to three-bedroom self-catering apartments for weekly lets (although shorter stays are welcome); all have ceiling fans (no air-con), kitchenette and lounge area. Apartments with families in mind sleep up to seven. Low-season prices (November to April) are good value, but you'll pay extra to have a TV or phone in your apartment.

Howard Johnson Mediterranean Hotel & Suites (☎ 2157 8759; www.hojomed.com.mt; Triq Bugibba, St Paul's Bay; hotel B&B per person Lm8/20 low/high season, 1-bedroom apt Lm19/40 low/high season; ☎ ☎ ☎) HJ offers more of the same in terms of hotel rooms and spacious self-catering studios and apartments (one-/two-bedroom sleeping up to four/six), but the rustic décor is a cut above the other places listed in this category, with plenty of polished timber, arched windows, full kitchens and attention to detail. There is a rooftop pool and gym, a restaurant and a

good location high above the bay close to St Paul's Bay village.

Also recommended if you are travelling in summer and struggling hard to find accommodation:

Primera Hotel (☎ 2157 3880; www.primerahotel.com; cnr Triq il-Korp Tal-Pijunieri & Triq Bajja, Bugibba; B&B per person from Lm6/12 low/high season; ☎ ☎) Bang in the heart of Bugibba. Don't expect luxury, but it's not too bad an option for the low price.

Cape Inch Hotel (☎ 2157 2025; www.capeinchhotel.com; cnr Triq it-Turisti & Triq il-Merluzz, Bugibba; B&B per person Lm8/18 low/high season; ☎) Something of an oddity in Bugibba – a small (25 rooms), family-run, old-style hotel opposite the bus station, and without a pool.

Gillieru Harbour Hotel (☎ 2157 2720; gillieru@vol.net.mt; Triq il-Knisja, Bugibba; B&B per person Lm9/20 low/high season; ☎ ☎) Adjacent to Gillieru seafood restaurant; has decent rooms (despite the threadbare bedspreads) and a good pool and terrace above the restaurant.

TOP END

Suncrest (Map p102; ☎ 2157 7101; www.suncresthotel.com; Dawret il-Qawra, Qawra; s/d/st from Lm25/35/45 low season, Lm35/50/65 high season; ☎ ☎) This vast hotel takes up a good stretch of the Qawra waterfront facing Salina Bay and is the biggest hotel in Malta, with 453 rooms. The lobby is a pastiche of classic '80s décor, with marble, mirrors and gold, but the facilities are excellent and the clientele is diverse (the brochure is printed in six European languages). There are plenty of restaurants, bars and a nightclub, and guests have free use of swimming pools, beachside lidos and a summer water-sports centre. Rates quoted here are for the cheapest (inland) rooms – you'll pay extra for a sea view. Suites are a good option, with a spacious lounge/dining area (no kitchen, however).

Dolmen Resort Hotel (Map p100; ☎ 2355 2355; Triq il-Merluzz, Bugibba; www.dolmen.com.mt; s/d from Lm29/38 low season, Lm43/56 high season; ☎ ☎ ☎) Another huge hotel, this one with the selling points of a casino and its very own prehistoric temple incorporated into the grounds. It's on the waterfront about 200m northeast of Misraħ il-Bajja (with its entrance at the end of Triq il-Merluzz), and boasts all the creature comforts you would expect of a four-star hotel, and then some – four outdoor swimming pools (one solely for kids), sports facilities, a health spa, an excellent beach club and a bevy of bars and restaurants. It draws a mixed international clientele, from Euro-package families to older, gambling-focused travellers.

Grand Hotel Mercure San Antonio (Map p100; ☎ 2158 3434; www.acorhotels.com; Triq it-Turisti, Bugibba; s/d Lm33/44 low season, Lm45/60 high season; 🍴 📺 📺) The Med-themed whitewashed exterior and colourful, light-filled lobby effortlessly create the best first impression of any hotel in the neighbourhood. The high standards carry through to the restaurants, pool and garden areas and well-kitted-out rooms, simply furnished with terracotta tiles and cheery green fabrics. For our money, the best option in town.

Eating

Bugibba is awash with cheap eating places, many offering 'full English breakfast' and 'typical English fish and chips', as well as pizzas, burgers and kebabs. But there's a reasonable selection of other cuisines and a few good Maltese places too. All of the places listed here are in Bugibba and located on the Bugibba map (Map p100).

Ta'Pawla (☎ 2157 6039; Triq it-Turisti; mains Lm2-6; 🍴 lunch Mon-Sat, dinner nightly) Bugibba may make you feel you're visiting an English seaside resort (but with better weather), but you can get a taste of good, authentic Maltese cuisine in the cute farmhouse interior of this busy little place opposite the San Antonio hotel. A set three-course Maltese menu is only Lm4.75. On the menu are local classics like rabbit in garlic and octopus stew, but there's also a good assortment of stock-standard pizza, pasta, steak and seafood (or roast beef with gravy, if you must).

Cherry Tree (☎ 9982 6667; Triq il-Korp Tal-Pijunieri; mains Lm2-6.50; 🍴 lunch & dinner) New for summer 2006, Cherry Tree pleases all-comers in its various incarnations (bar, restaurant, lounge). There are sought-after alfresco tables, comfy lounges and a more upmarket restaurant section (all dramatic black with red-leather booths). Snacks are available all day, plus there's a decent menu of well-priced salads, risotto, pasta and pizza.

Bombay Palace (☎ 2157 4457; Triq il-Halel; dishes Lm3-6; 🍴 lunch & dinner) Escape pizzas and pasta to explore favourites of the subcontinent. Vegetarians and curry lovers will be happy with the 'classic hits' menu – beef or lamb vindaloo, chicken korma, tandoori lamb chops and various biryanis. Octopus balti adds a bit of Maltese colour to the menu.

Wagon Steakhouse (☎ 2158 0666; Empire Cinema Complex, Triq il-Korp Tal-Pijunieri; mains Lm3.50-9; 🍴 dinner) There's some heavy-duty cowboy in the rich, warm décor here and a menu to please

the most discerning carnivore. The Montana mixed platter features chicken breast, beef fillet, pork fillet and kangaroo meat – for when too much meat is never enough; there's some greenery by way of a salad buffet. Needless to say, there's little joy for vegetarians here.

Gillieru (☎ 2157 3480; 66 Triq il-Knisja; mains Lm4-8; 🍴 lunch & dinner) Gillieru enjoys a five-star location on a terrace overlooking the harbour. The building is designed to resemble the front of a ship – sit at a window and you'll feel you're on a cruise liner. The restaurant has been around for decades (the décor shows this) and is a local institution famed for its unadventurous but fresh seafood dishes (prawns, lobster, grilled swordfish, calamari). There are good choices for nonseafood-eaters too.

Mongolian Barbeque (☎ 2157 4072; Dawret il-Gzejjer; lunch/dinner Lm4/5.25; 🍴 dinner Tue-Sun, lunch Sun) A funky modern dining room with sea views and a novel, budget-friendly menu. For your money you get to choose raw produce from a buffet (meat, fish, vegies and a sauce to accompany), and then have it cooked to order in front of you (rice, noodles or couscous included). You can revisit the buffet as often as you like, making this place perfect for those 'so hungry you could eat a horse' occasions.

Venus (☎ 2157 1604; cr Triq Bajja & Gandoffi; mains Lm6-8.50; 🍴 dinner) Venus is an oasis of class in a neighbourhood swimming in fast-food places and tourist restaurants. There's a bright and sophisticated interior and the modern menu adds an imaginative twist to traditional ingredients – try the salmon and coriander or Thai beef salad, followed by roast rabbit with garlic and star anise or marinated Moroccan chicken.

The Bugibba promenade is lined with jewellery and souvenir stores and some very touristy eateries, but there is a decent array of ice-cream kiosks, and a good (unsigned) creperie, **La Krepre** (☎ 2157 1517; 165 Dawret il-Gzejjer; crepes Lm0.80-1.90; 🍴 noon-midnight), perfect for an inexpensive late-night snack (sweet or savoury).

SELF-CATERING

There are minimarkets everywhere, including inside some large accommodation providers, and fruit-and-veg vans set up Monday to Saturday on the corner of Triq it-Turisti and Triq il-Merluzz, close to the bus station. Probably the best-stocked supermarket is **Trolees** (Triq il-Merluzz, Bugibba; 🍴 7.30am-9pm Mon-Sat, to 7pm Sun).

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Drinking

Take your pick from the dozens of bars along Triq it-Turisti and the streets around Misrah il-Bajja (particularly Triq Sant'Antnin). There are two species of bar in Bugibba. There's the 'typical British pub', with names like the Victoria or the Red Lion, drawing tourists looking for the comforts of home. Here you can down pints of bitter, play darts and sing along with the karaoke machine. Then there are bars for the younger party crowd where the mission for the evening is to get sloshed and maybe get lucky. The bars catering to the boozy crowd come alive in the high season and vary from year to year – but it shouldn't take too long to find them. Don't expect the same level of hedonism in the low season.

Fat Harry's (Map p100; ☎ 2158 1298; Triq Bajja, Bugibba) Fat Harry's belongs firmly to the first category. It's a central English-style pub doing all-day traditional pub grub like fish and chips, and offering plenty of draught beer, outdoor tables for people-watching and, inside, live sports on the big screen or live entertainment.

Rookies Sports Bar & Grill (Map p100; ☎ 2157 4550; www.rookiesmalta.com; Triq Sponoz, Bugibba) Fourteen TVs and three giant screens televise sports from around the world at this large and popular American-style sports bar. There are also regular live bands and a wide range of international beers (and meals) to get you going.

Grapevine Pub & Restaurant (Map p100; ☎ 2157 2973; Triq il-Korp Tal-Pijunieri, Bugibba) The Grapevine is of Irish persuasion, as evidenced by the Guinness on tap, among other things. There are good pizzas and snacks, plus the ubiquitous TV screens broadcasting sports, and regular live bands.

Simon's Pub (Map p102; ☎ 2157 7566; www.simonspub.com; Triq it-Turisti, Qawra) Simon's got a two-room shrine to Elvis going on. He's clearly a huge fan of the King – so are we, so we love this place. There's live entertainment every night – stop in on Friday for the highlight, the Elvis tribute. Cheesy fun, thank you very much.

Cin Cin Lounge (Map p102; ☎ 9949 6577; Dawret il-Qawra, Qawra) Along the seafont, opposite the Suncrest hotel and among touristy cafés and pizzerias, you'll find the new Cin Cin Lounge, part of the wine bar craze that's sweeping through Malta. It's a grown-up option for those looking for something more than just a pub, with tables, sofas and a seafont terrace, plus a menu of platters, snacks and salads.

Victoria Pub (Map p100; ☎ 2157 1355; Misrah il-Bajja, Bugibba) On Bugibba's main square, this pub has a sign out the front boldly claiming to be 'Malta's No 1 karaoke venue' – consider yourself warned. There's karaoke every night for up-for-anything holidaymakers who wouldn't dare sing along back home.

Corner Pocket Bar (Map p100; ☎ 2158 5082; Triq Kavetta, Bugibba) A great after-dark spot, this bar has something for everyone – karaoke, DJs, big screens for sports coverage, pool tables and video games. It's above Browsers, a large internet café.

Cherry Tree (Map p100; ☎ 9982 6667; Triq il-Korp Tal-Pijunieri, Bugibba) This stylish new place has fast become a hot spot for beers, wines or cocktails, with live entertainment on Friday and Saturday nights and a big screen for sports events.

Entertainment

NIGHTCLUBS

Fuego (Map p102; ☎ 2138 6746; Dawret il-Qawra, Qawra) Due to the enormous popularity of the first Fuego in Paceville, a sister salsa bar opened in Qawra. With its unique music policy (DJs playing pure and commercial Latin music), free entry, free salsa dancing classes (8.30pm to 10.30pm Thursday and Friday), tequila specials and open terraces (covered and heated in winter), this place is sizzling!

Miracles (Map p100; ☎ 2157 1034; Misrah il-Bajja) Near the Victoria Pub, Miracles (formerly Caesar's) is a mainstream nightclub playing summer anthems for the holidaymakers – it's open nightly in high season, spilling out into Bugibba's main square.

Zoo Bar (Map p100; ☎ 2157 1714; www.zoobarmalta.com; Triq il-Hgjej) The slogan painted on the bright purple exterior of this drinking den – 'party all night or go home' – seems pretty redundant. If you choose the former option, there are free snacks to keep you drinking and in the party mood.

Amazonia (Map p100; ☎ 2355 2461; www.amazoniamalta.com; Dawret il-Gzejjer) This pumping summer club is at the lido opposite the Dolmen Resort Hotel and is popular with tourists and locals happy to kick on all night to cool tunes in a lush waterfront setting.

CASINOS

Oracle Casino (☎ 2157 0057; www.oraclecasino.com; admission free; 🍴 10am-4am) Bugibba's casino is smaller and less formal than the other two

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casinos on the island (at St Julian's, p95, and Vittoriosa, p79). It's part of the Dolmen Resort Hotel (enter via Dawret il-Gżejjer) and open daily until the wee small hours. The minimum age is 18 for visitors (25 for Maltese citizens). The dress code is 'smart casual' and you'll need your passport or ID card.

CINEMAS

Empire Cinema Complex (☎ 2158 1787; www.empirecinema.com.mt; Triq il-Korp Tal-Pijunieri) These cinemas show first-run movies. Tickets cost Lm2.50/1.50 adult/child (Lm2 for adults before 5pm weekdays).

Getting There & Away

There is a central taxi rank on Misrah il-Bajja in Bugibba.

Bugibba bus station is on Triq it-Turisti near the Dolmen Resort Hotel. Buses 49 and 58 run frequently between Valletta and Bugibba (one way Lm0.23).

Direct bus services to/from Bugibba (avoiding Valletta) include the following (all fares one way Lm0.50):

No 45/49 – late-night bus linking Bugibba with Paceville (nightly from mid-Jun to mid-September; last bus from Paceville is at 3am; the rest of the year the service operates Friday & Saturday only, with the last bus around 1.30am)
No 48 – to Mellieħa town, Mellieħa Bay and Ċirkewwa (for the Gozo ferry)

No 70 – to St Julian's and Sliema

No 86 – to Mosta, Ta'Qali Crafts Village and Rabat

No 427 – to Mosta, Attard, Paola (for the Hypogeum and Tarxien temples) and Marsaxlokk

No 627 – to St Julian's, Sliema, the Three Cities and Marsaxlokk

No 652 – north to Ghajn Tuffieħa and Golden Bay, or south to Sliema and St Julian's

XEMXIJA

The small, south-facing village of Xemxija (shem-*shee*-ya), on the north side of St Paul's Bay, takes its name from *xemx*, meaning sun in Malti. There are a couple of private lidos along the waterfront, but Pwales Beach at the head of St Paul's Bay is just a narrow strip of gravelly sand. The town itself is desperately in need of some TLC – along the main road is a collection of derelict buildings creating a serious eyesore.

Back from the water is **Is-Simar Nature Reserve** (Map p102; ☎ 2134 7646; www.birdlifemalta.org; admission free, donations welcome; ☎ 12.30-4.30pm Sun Nov-May), opened in 1995 on a marshy patch

of neglected land and managed by BirdLife Malta volunteers on behalf of the government. As with the Ghadira Nature Reserve at Mellieħa Bay (p118), it's wonderful to see this commitment to Malta's natural assets and an area where local and migratory bird life is protected from hunters. Over 180 bird species have been recorded at the site.

At the foot of the hill on the main road is **Porto del Sol** (Map p102; ☎ 2157 3970; portosol@malta.net; It Telegħa tax-Xemxija; mains Lm4-6.50; ☎ lunch & dinner Mon-Sat, lunch Sun Oct-May), a family-run restaurant with views of the bay from its large picture windows. The service is top-notch and it's popular with locals for its fresh seafood and local dishes. Above the restaurant are 18 self-catering apartments, ranging from two-person studios (Lm8/15 low/high season) to two-bedroom apartments that sleep up to four (Lm14/20 low/high season). The spotless, no-frills apartments are spacious and bargain priced; all have private bathroom and fan (no air-con or TV), and most have a kitchenette and balcony with bay views.

About 300m west of the roundabout at the top of the hill in Xemxija a minor road leads to **Mistra Bay** (Map p102), which has another tiny, gravelly beach and a tourist restaurant. It's not very pretty and the bay itself is filled with fish-farm pens, but there's good swimming and snorkelling off the rocks. There's also good hiking along the coast beyond the **Pinto Redoubt** (Map p102), a 17th-century gun battery at the far end of the bay.

GOLDEN BAY & GHAJN TUFFIEHA

The fertile Pwales Valley stretches 4km from the head of St Paul's Bay to Ghajn Tuffieħa (ayn too-*fee*-ha, meaning 'Spring of the Apples') on Malta's west coast. Here, two of Malta's best sandy beaches draw crowds of sun-worshippers. **Golden Bay** – the sand is more grey-brown than golden – is the busier and more developed of the two beaches, with cafés, water sports and boat trips, and a huge new hotel rising above the shoreline. There is talk of a golf course being built behind the Radisson hotel – a proposal firmly opposed by environmental groups.

Borg Watersports (☎ 2157 3272) is on the shoreline in front of the hotel, offering rental of snorkelling gear, sailboards, jet skis, speedboats, pedalos and canoes, as well as the chance to go parasailing (Lm14) or water-skiing (Lm8).

From Golden Bay, you can take a worthwhile cruise with **Charlie's Discovery Speedboat Trips** (☎ 9948 6949; mattnick@onvol.net). Charlie is a knowledgeable guide who will take you south from Golden Bay, to view rugged cliffs and visit the bays and grottoes that indent the northwest coast, including Ghajn Tuffieħa, Ġnejna (p116) and Fomm ir-Riħ (tricky to get to on land – see p130). The one-hour trips leave at noon and 2.30pm daily and cost Lm4/2.50 per adult/child. Look out for Charlie and his boat on the northern part of the beach, or ask at Munchies Bar-Pizzeria on the sand. Charlie also operates a trip every day at 4pm from April to October to Comino's Blue Lagoon – a great chance to visit this beautiful spot and take a swim after most of the crowds have left. This trip costs Lm6/3.50 per adult/child.

Landlubbers don't miss out though. Behind the beach (well signposted) is **Golden Bay Horse Riding** (☎ 2157 3360; ☎ 8am-8pm), offering enjoyable one- and two-hour rides on fields overlooking the northwest beaches (but marred by the sight of so many bird hunters in the area). A one-/two-hour ride costs Lm6/9. All levels of experience are welcome, and free transport to the stables can be arranged for riders staying in the island's north. Advance booking is preferred.

Around the headland and to the south, guarded by a 17th-century watchtower, is **Ghajn Tuffieħa Bay**. It's reached via a long flight of 186 steps from a car park beside the derelict Old Riviera Hotel, which is slowly sliding downhill towards the sea. The 250m strip of red-brown sand, backed by slopes covered in acacia and tamarisk trees, is more attractive than its neighbour; sun lounges can be hired here.

There are good coastal walks south to Ġnejna Bay and north to Anchor Bay.

Sleeping & Eating

Our pick Radisson SAS Golden Sands Resort & Spa (☎ 2356 1000; www.goldsands.malta.radissonsas.com; Golden Bay; r from Lm50/80 low/high season; ☎ ☎ ☎) Did Malta really need another five-star mega-hotel? The answer, quite clearly, is 'yes'. We were impressed at every turn by this shiny new three-tower, 10-storey hotel, chock-full of facilities and standing guard over one of Malta's loveliest beaches. The hotel opened in late 2005 and everything is in pristine condition (and in generous proportions). The standard

rooms are spacious and welcoming; fluffy robes, fancy toiletries and buffet breakfast are provided. The next notch up in accommodation comprises roomy one-bedroom suites with a separate lounge, and then there's the 'Heavenly Collection', and it's here that we fell in love – these are slick, contemporary apartments with a private deck and outdoor spa, plus a gadget-filled kitchen and indoor Jacuzzi. The most stressful thing about the Radisson experience is determining whether to spend your days at the private section of beach, by one of the pools, in the day spa, or at one of the numerous restaurants or bars. Hey, life's tough.

Apple's Eye Restaurant (☎ 2158 1042; meals Lm2-4), on a terrace overlooking Golden Bay, this place peddles an uninspiring menu of tourist fare (burgers, pizzas etc). It's better to come here just for a drink, as many of the locals do. On the beach are a number of cafés and kiosks selling snacks and drinks to parched and hungry sunbathers.

Your best bet for a meal is to brush the sand off your feet and head to one of the Radisson's shiny new options – the fab outdoor terrace of **Mokka Lobby Bar & Terrace** (snacks & meals Lm1-5; ☎ 8am-11pm) for coffee, cake and light meals, or the cheery, aqua-coloured **Agliolio** (mains Lm3-7; ☎ lunch & dinner), with an appealing Med-flavoured menu heavy on pizza, pasta and salads. Options increase of an evening, with **Essence** (☎ 2356 1000 ext 1920; mains Lm6.75-9.50; ☎ dinner), the number one pick for a fancy-pants dinner – the six-course set menu (Lm16, or Lm24 with wine) could be the way to go; bookings are recommended. The hotel is home to a decent number of bars too, poolside and indoors.

At Ghajn Tuffieħa Bay there's a kiosk selling drinks and ice creams at the top of the steps leading down to the beach, and you're usually able to buy drinks on the beach without having to complete the marathon climb.

Getting There & Away

By car from Bugibba (or anywhere on Malta's east coast), turn south at the roundabout at the western end of St Paul's-Bugibba Bypass (towards Manikata). Otherwise, catch bus 652 from Bugibba or Sliema (Lm0.50 from either destination), or bus 47 from Valletta (Lm0.23).

Note that the car-park attendant at Ghajn Tuffieħa Bay will expect a small payment upon your departure – Lm0.25 is sufficient.

MĠARR & AROUND

The village of Mgarr (mm-jarr), 2km to the southeast of Ghajn Tuffieħa (and not to be confused with Mgarr on Gozo), would be unremarkable were it not for the conspicuous dome of the famous **Egg Church**. The Church of the Assumption was built in the 1930s with money raised by local parishioners, largely from the sale of locally produced eggs. Across the village square from the church is the **Mgarr Shelter** (☎ 2157 3235; Triq il-Kbira; adult/child Lm1/0.50; ☎ 9am-2pm Tue-Sat, 10-11.30am Sun), used by locals during the WWII bombings of Malta (enter through Il Barri restaurant). You can only imagine the long uncomfortable hours spent down here in the humidity, 12m underground, but to show that life went on under such tough conditions, there are rooms on display that served as classrooms and hospitals.

The site of the **Ta'Haġrat Temple** (☎ 2123 9545; Triq San Pietru; adult/child Lm2/0.50; ☎ 9.30-11am Tue), dating from around 3600 to 3300 BC and the earliest temple building in Malta, is concealed down a side street near the police station (on the road towards Żebbiegħ), but it's hardly worth seeking out. The site is fenced off and there is little to see except a few tumbled stones. The **Skorba Temples** (☎ 2123 9545; Triq Sant'Anna; adult/child Lm2/0.50; ☎ 11.30am-1pm Tue), in the neighbouring village of Żebbiegħ, are slightly more interesting, but probably only to archaeology enthusiasts. The excavation of the site was important in providing evidence of village habitation on Malta in the period between 4500 and 4100 BC (earlier than the temple-building period), now known as the Skorba Phase. Fragments of pottery and figurines found on the site are displayed in the National Museum of Archaeology in Valletta (p62).

A minor road leads west from Mgarr past the ornate early-19th-century **Zammitello Palace** – originally a manor house, and now a wedding and function hall – to **Gnejna Bay**. The red-sand beach is backed by terraced hillsides and enjoys a distant view of the Ta'Čenč cliffs on Gozo. There is good swimming off the rocks on either side of the bay, and kiosks and water sports on the beach itself. The **Lippija Tower** on the northern skyline makes a good target for a short walk.

On the road between Mgarr and Ghajn Tuffieħa are the fenced remains of the **Roman Baths**. There are only scant remnants of floor mosaics, the fire-bricks beneath the caldarium

(hot room), and the stone toilet seats from the latrine, but the site is closed to the public.

Il-Barri (☎ 2157 3235; Triq il-Kbira; mains Lm2.50-6.50) is on the village square in Mgarr, close to the Egg Church. It's a favourite local venue for a *fenkata* – whole fresh rabbit served in a casserole, either fried in garlic or in a wine gravy, or stewed with pork belly and potatoes to really harden the arteries (Lm11.85 for a whole rabbit, which serves three, or Lm3.95 for a single portion). There are also grilled steaks, lamb chops and king prawns, plus Maltese-as-they-come local favourites such as *aljotta* (fish broth), quail, horsemeat and *bragioli* (a thin slice of beef wrapped around a stuffing of breadcrumbs, chopped bacon, hard-boiled egg and parsley, then braised in a red-wine sauce).

Bus 47 runs from Valletta to Golden Bay via Mgarr (Lm0.23).

MELLIEĦA

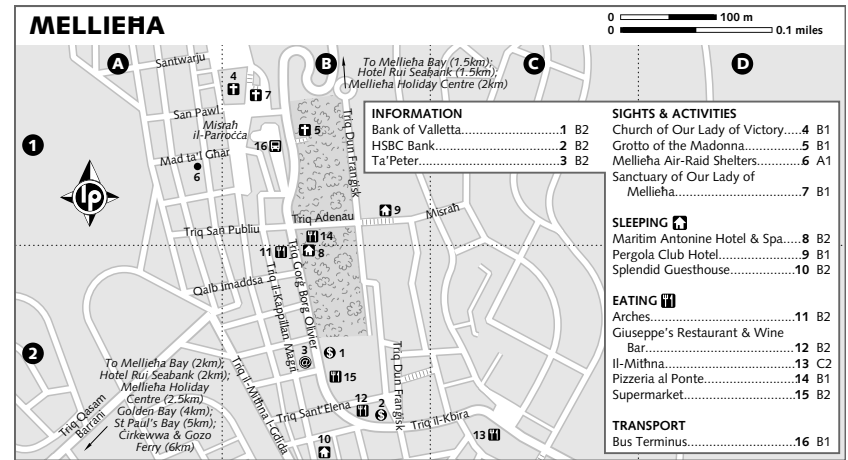
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The sprawling, rapidly developing town of Mellieħa (mell-ee-ha) perches picturesquely atop the ridge between St Paul's Bay and Mellieħa Bay. Because of its distance from the beach, Mellieħa escaped the tidal wave of development that blighted Sliema and Bugibba in the early days of Malta's package-holiday boom. Although there are now several large hotels in town, Mellieħa today exudes a certain atmosphere of exclusivity, and is home to some high-class restaurants. A 15-minute walk leads down the steep hill to **Mellieħa Bay** (also known as Ghadira Bay), the biggest and best sandy beach in the Maltese Islands. It's also, predictably, one of the most popular.

Orientation & Information

Triq Ġorġ Borg Olivier – Mellieħa's slender main drag – runs north-south along a narrow gorge in the limestone plateau of the Mellieħa Ridge, and descends via a series of hairpin bends towards Mellieħa Bay. The older part of the town lies to the west of this street, with the Church of Our Lady of Victory at the northern end. Newer houses, luxury villas and apartments spread along the ridge to the east. Buses in both directions stop on the main street, below the church. The main road to Ċirkewwa and the Gozo ferry bypasses Mellieħa to the south and west.

The **Bank of Valletta** (Triq Ġorġ Borg Olivier) and **HSBC Bank** (Triq il-Kbira) both have central



branches with ATMs. **Ta'Peter** (☎ 2152 3537; 45 Triq Ġorġ Borg Olivier; per hr Lm1; ☎ 10am-2pm & 6pm-late Tue-Sun) is a bar and café with 1970s décor and a few computers for internet access.

Sights & Activities

MELLIEĦA

The **Church of Our Lady of Victory** sits prominently on a rocky spur overlooking Mellieħa Bay. Stairs lead down on the eastern side of the church to a little pedestrian plaza beside the **Sanctuary of Our Lady of Mellieħa** (☎ 8am-noon & 5-7pm), which has been a place of pilgrimage since medieval times. Its walls are covered with votive offerings; the fresco of the Madonna above the altar is said to have been painted by St Luke.

Across the main street from the shrine, a gate in the wall and a flight of steps lead down to the **Grotto of the Madonna** (☎ 8am-6pm), another shrine dedicated to the Virgin. It is set deep in a cave lit by flickering candles, beside a spring with waters that are reputed to heal sick children. Baby clothes hung on the walls are votive offerings given in thanks for successful cures.

As you approach the sanctuary from the main street, steps to the left lead up to the entrance to the **Mellieħa air-raid shelters** (☎ 2152 1970; Triq il-Madonna tal-Għar; adult/child Lm1/0.25; ☎ 9am-3.30pm Mon-Sat), dug by hand to shelter the town's population from WWII bombs. It's one of the largest underground shelters in Malta, with a depth of 12m and a length of around 500m. Visitors tour a marked route

through the narrow corridors; mannequins have been placed in some rooms in order to re-create the scene.

MELLIEĦA BAY

Mellieħa Bay really is family-holiday turf, but not exclusively so. The warm, shallow waters of Mellieħa Bay are great for swimming and safe for kids, so the sea gets almost as crowded as the sand. Add the water-skiers, rental canoes, banana rides, parasailing boats and the fact that the reliable northeasterly breeze blowing into the bay in summer makes it ideal for windsurfing, and you begin to realise that Mellieħa Bay is not the place to get away from it all. Still, there are good summertime facilities, including sun beds (per day Lm1.50) and umbrellas (Lm2.50) for rent, windsurfing and kite-surfing gear for hire, and numerous kiosks serving drinks and snacks.

Boat and sailboard rental is available from the striking **Adira Sailing Centre & Lido** (☎ 2152 3190; www.adirasailingcentre.com.mt) at the beach's northern end. Sailboards can be hired from Lm5/18 for one/four hours; rental of an easy-to-sail Laser Pico dinghy costs Lm14/25 for one/four hours.

At the southern edge of the bay is the **Tunny Net Complex**, with restaurants and a few shops, a lido, a water-sports operator open from April to October (parasailing, ringo rides on rubber tubes, jet skis for hire, canoes and paddle boats etc), and a diving operator: **Meldives Dive School** (☎ 2152 2595; www.meldives.info). If you're not after sea-based activities,

there's a small **ten-pin bowling alley** (adult/child per game incl shoe hire Lm1.95/1.55) inside the Hotel Riu Seabank, as well as an amusement arcade full of games.

Ironically, on the other side of the road from Malta's busiest beach is **Għadira Nature Reserve** (☎ 2134 7646; www.birdlifemalta.org; admission free, donations welcome; ☎ 10.30am-4.30pm Sat & Sun Nov & Feb-May, 9.30am-3.30pm Sat & Sun Dec-Jan, closed Jun-Oct). This area of shallow, reedy ponds surrounded by scrub is an important resting area for migrating birds (over 200 species have been recorded at the site). The name, pronounced aa-dee-ra, means 'marsh', and this was Malta's first national nature reserve, managed by passionate volunteers of BirdLife Malta on behalf of the government. Visitors are accompanied for a walk along a nature trail that eventually leads to a bird-watching hide, and it's wonderful to visit an area in Malta where bird life is respected and admired in its natural habitat, rather than hunted and trapped.

Sleeping

MELLIEħA

Splendid Guesthouse (☎ 2152 3602; www.splendidmalta.com; Triq il-Kappillan Magri; s/d with shared bathroom Lm10.50/17, with bathroom Lm12.50/19; ☎ Apr-Oct; ☎) This pleasant, affordable guesthouse is at the southern end of town in a residential area, a few minutes' walk from the main street. The spick-and-span guest rooms have plain, no-frills furnishings, and all rooms have a private shower and washbasin (some have full en suite). Rates include breakfast in the cheerful breakfast room-bar area, and there's a sun-bathing terrace on the rooftop. The friendly owners also have self-catering apartments available, and a large villa sleeping up to 11.

Pergola Club Hotel (☎ 2152 3912; www.pergolahotel.com.mt; Triq Adenau; hotel B&B per person Lm6/17 low/high season, 2-person studio Lm12/30 low/high season, 4-person apt Lm18/45 low/high season; ☎) Across the bridge from the main road is the Pergola, offering comfortable if unremarkable hotel rooms and self-catering apartments (entry is at the top of the steps). The views from the sun terraces towards the church are lovely. There is also a health spa, an indoor pool and a children's play area, plus the obligatory choice of bars and restaurants. Studios and apartments are very good value, especially for families (note that studio/apartment prices given here are per room, not per person); low-season rates are a bargain.

Maritim Antonine Hotel & Spa (☎ 2152 0923; www.maritimmalta.com; Triq Gorg Borg Olivier; B&B per person from Lm15.50/31 low/high season; ☎) The glossy Antonin dominates the main street in the middle of Mellieħa. Here you'll find plenty of young and old Euro-travellers (especially Germans, as Maritim is a German company) enjoying the stylishly appointed rooms and suites, each with balcony, minibar, coffee and tea facilities, satellite TV and internet connection. Hotel facilities are first-rate and include restaurants, a health spa, rooftop pool and sun terrace, and lovely lush gardens with a large pool. A sophisticated choice.

MELLIEħA BAY

Hotel Riu Seabank (☎ 2152 1460; www.seabankhotel.com; Triq Marfa; B&B per person from Lm9/23 low/high season; ☎) It has to be said, the fairly basic rooms here come as a disappointment after the opulent Moorish-style entry and lobby (complete with bird aviary). Still, the rooms are clean, comfy and well equipped, and the hotel itself is a fine family choice with something for everyone – a health spa for mum, pub for dad, 10-pin bowling alley for kids and a playroom for the littles. Plus, with the huge onsite pool and the beach across the road, it comes as no surprise that plenty of package-tour holidaymakers call this place home. Winter rates are dirt cheap.

Purpick Mellieħa Holiday Centre (☎ 2289 3000; www.mellieħaholidaycentre.com; Triq Marfa; bungalows per person Lm11/18 low/high season, children under 12, 50% discount; ☎) As you enter this attractive, well-maintained 'village', the signs in Danish, not to mention the wholesome blonde families surrounding the pool, should leave you in little doubt you've entered Scandinavian holiday country. The large complex sits opposite the beach (to which it's connected by an underground walkway) and is set back off the main road in landscaped grounds. There are loads of family-friendly facilities, including a choice of restaurants, sports facilities, internet café, laundry, supermarket, and a large pool and sun terrace. Kids will be stoked with the games room, kids' pool and playground; parents will be pleased by the fully equipped two-bedroom bungalows. The fuss-free décor of these is simple and comfy, and each sleeps up to six and has a private, sheltered courtyard; a handful of smaller, cheaper studios is also available. The centre is sometimes booked out by Danish tour operators in the high season, but it's well worth inquiring after vacancies.

Eating & Drinking

MELLIEħA

Pizzeria al Ponte (☎ 2152 0923; cnr Triq Gorg Borg Olivier & Triq Adenau; snacks & meals Lm2-6; ☎) lunch & dinner) The food here won't set anyone's world on fire (especially given the culinary masterpieces on offer up the road – read on), but the menu is vast and crowd-pleasing and the décor is nicely done. You'll get a pretty predictable list of pizzas, pasta, sandwiches and burgers, plus a kids' menu and good desserts.

Il-Mithna (☎ 2152 0404; 45 Triq il-Kbira; mains Lm4-7; ☎) dinner nightly, lunch Sun) This atmospheric eatery is housed in a 400-year-old windmill, the only survivor of three that used to sit atop Mellieħa Ridge. There are outdoor tables in a pretty courtyard, and a menu of local dishes with a twist – a starter of Maltese sausage, tomato and Brie tartlet, or a main of casseroled rabbit in a bacon, sweet pepper, tomato and cream sauce. Servings are generous. There's a great-value set menu for early diners – Lm5.50 for three courses, from 6pm to 7.45pm.

Giuseppe's Restaurant & Wine Bar (☎ 2157 4882; cnr Triq Gorg Borg Olivier & Triq Sant'Elena; mains Lm4-8; ☎) dinner Tue-Sat) Run by Malta's favourite TV chef, Michael Diacono, this inviting place has a winning formula of stylishly rustic décor, a relaxed atmosphere and a great menu of creative treats that changes regularly according to seasonal produce. The fresh fish is reliably good, and regulars recommend the king prawns. Bookings are recommended.

Arches (☎ 2152 3460; 113 Triq Gorg Borg Olivier; mains Lm4-11.50; ☎) dinner Mon-Sat) This acclaimed restaurant is another main-street favourite. It's large and elegant, with a menu, prices and service befitting the chic décor and formality. The food is accomplished and delicious – try venison fillet on roasted asparagus or roasted spiced monkfish on a chive risotto. Frock up, and book ahead.

For the self-caterers, there are a couple of supermarkets on the main street, Triq Gorg Borg Olivier; note that they are all closed on Sunday.

MELLIEħA BAY

Adira Sailing Centre & Lido (☎ 2152 3190; dinner mains Lm3-6; ☎) lunch & dinner) Inside the sailing centre's Greek Islands-inspired exterior is an alluring café-bar. Enjoy your meal inside the sky-blue interior or preferably alfresco, with water views everywhere you look. The lunchtime menu is small, with a few baguette and burger

selections; dinner-time options are greater, with appealing fish and pasta dishes.

At the southern edge of the bay, near the roundabout where the bypass rejoins the coast, is the Tunny Net Complex, home to some good dining options with outdoor terraces and water views. The casual **Café Latino Punta Rena** (☎ 2152 3254; mains Lm2-7.50; ☎) lunch & dinner) has outdoor seating over the water and a Tex-Mex menu, with selections like nachos, fajitas and steaks any which way you please. For sweet-tooths there are also cakes and sundaes, a kids' menu and a wide choice of cocktails. Next door, the more formal **Trattoria de Buono** (☎ 2152 1332; mains Lm6-8.50; ☎) dinner nightly, lunch Sun) serves up high-quality Italian and local dishes, including rabbit casserole, flambéed king prawns or roasted chicken roulade stuffed with dried apricots, pistachios and spinach. The set menu (Lm8.50) is excellent value.

Self-caterers should head to the **supermarket** (Triq Marfa; ☎ 7.30am-7pm Sun-Fri, to 11pm Sat) inside the Mellieħa Holiday Centre (opposite), one of the few places selling groceries on a Sunday.

Getting There & Away

Buses 43, 44 and 45 from Valletta pass through Mellieħa. Bus 43 terminates here, while buses 44 and 45 continue to Mellieħa Bay (bus 45 goes on to Ċirkewwa); the fare from Valletta is Lm0.25.

To/from Sliema, catch bus 645; to/from Bugibba, you need bus 48. Both these routes run to Mellieħa town and Mellieħa Bay; the fare is Lm0.50.

There are a number of car-rental places lining the main street in town – shop around and you should find a good price, especially given the competition along here.

AROUND MELLIEħA

The crest of Mellieħa Ridge offers some good walking to the southeast and southwest of the town. To the east, the fortress-like **Selmun Palace** (Map p102) dominates the skyline above St Paul's Bay. It was built in the 18th century for a charitable order called the Monte di Redenzione degli Schiavi (Mountain of the Redemption of the Slaves), whose business was to ransom Christians who had been taken into slavery on the Barbary Coast. The palace, which now houses a hotel and restaurant, mimics the style of Verdala Palace south of Rabat (p131).

A right turn just before you get to Selmun Palace leads in just over 1km to the derelict **Fort Campbell** (Map p102), an abandoned coastal defence built by the British between WWI and WWII. The headland commands a fine view over St Paul's Islands, and you can hike down to the coastal salt pans of Blata il-Bajda and around to Misra Bay, or westwards along the clifftop to the ruined **tower of Ghajn Hadid** (Map p102) above the little beach at Mġieba Bay.

A left turn at the foot of the hill leading down to Mellieha Bay puts you on the road to Anchor Bay about 1.5km away on the west coast. This steep-sided, pretty little bay was named after the many Roman anchors that were found on the sea bed by divers, some of which can be seen in the Maritime Museum at Vittoriosa (p76).

However, in 1979 Anchor Bay was transformed into the ramshackle fishing village of **Sweethaven** (Map p98; ☎ 2152 4782; www.popeye.malta.com; adult/child Lm3/2; 🕒 9.30am-4.30pm Oct-Apr, to 5.30pm May-Sep) and was used as the set for the 1980 Hollywood musical *Popeye*, starring Robin Williams. The set still stands and is a family-targeted tourist attraction, but the theme park is about as interesting as, well, an abandoned film set. Adults may not be too taken by the heavy cheese factor, but younger kids in particular should find some entertainment value from the animation shows, puppets, small fun park (where you pay extra for rides) and play pool. If you're not keen to hand over your cash, you can get a good view of the village for free from the southern side of the bay (drive on past the car park entrance).

Bus 441 runs hourly from Mellieha Bay to Anchor Bay between 10am and 5pm Monday to Saturday (one way Lm0.50).

MARFA PENINSULA

The Marfa Peninsula is Malta's final flourish before dipping beneath the waters of the Comino Channel. Some of Malta's best diving spots are found along its northern coast (see Map p47). For information on requirements, dive schools and the best locations, see the Diving & Snorkelling chapter, p44.

The peninsula is a barren ridge of limestone, steep on the south side and dipping more gently north and east from the high point of Ras il-Qammieh (129m). A minor road leads west from the top of the hill up from Mellieha

Bay, passing the **Red Tower** (☎ 2121 5222; adult/child Lm0.50/free; 🕒 10am-4pm Mon-Sat, to 1pm Sun), built in 1649 for Grand Master Lascaris as part of the chain of signal towers that linked Valletta and Gozo. The view from the tower's flat roof is stunning. The road continues west to the wild headland of **Ras il-Qammieh**, with more incredible views north to Gozo and south along the western sea cliffs of Malta.

Opposite the Red Tower road, another road leads east along the spine of the peninsula, with side roads giving access to various small coves and beaches. These places are very popular with locals and best avoided on weekends, when the crowds can be enormous.

First up is **Ramla Bay**, with its small, sandy beach monopolised by the resort of the same name. Immediately to its east is **Ramla Tal'Qortin**, which has no sand and is surrounded by an unsightly sprawl of Maltese holiday huts amid a forest of TV aerials and telephone cables.

The next two roads lead down to the scrappy sandy beaches at **Armier Bay**, the most developed beach on the peninsula, with sun lounges, kiosks and a handful of cafés. The fourth road leads to Malta's only camping ground, while the next reaches **White Tower Bay**, which has another seaweed-stained patch of sand and a rash of holiday huts combining to form a small, unattractive shanty town. A track continues past the tower to the low cliffs of Ahrax Point, from which a pleasant coastal walk leads 1km south to a statue of the Madonna on Dahlet ix-Xilep. You can also reach the Madonna statue and a small chapel by following the main road east across the Marfa Peninsula.

The main road running the length of the island of Malta ends at **Ċirkewwa**, which consists of little more than a desalination plant, a hotel and the Gozo ferry terminal. A left turn just before the Paradise Bay Hotel leads to **Paradise Bay**, a narrow patch of sand below cliffs with a private lido, restaurant and a grand view of the ferry slip. It's a popular swimming spot and stages the occasional open-air clubbing event in summer.

Sleeping & Eating

Given the remote location of the three resorts in this area (not within easy walking distance of any restaurants – except for those at other hotels), half- and full-board options are available to guests at each hotel, normally at an additional cost of around Lm6 for half board per

person per night. Some of Malta's best diving is found in this area, so all the resorts have diving schools, plus good water-sports facilities and regular boat trips to nearby Comino.

Adventure Campsite (☎ 2152 1105; www.malta.campsite.com; 2-/4-person site with own tent Lm3.90/5.90, furnished tent per adult/child Lm5/1.50; 📶) Kudos to these guys for opening Malta's first official camping ground – it's just a pity about the shadeless grounds and remote location. You'll need your own set of wheels: the turn-off to the camping ground is 2.5km from the main road to Ċirkewwa, and then it's a further 1km from the turn-off to the site. Once here, the facilities are reasonable and include erected, furnished tents for hire and large, clean bathrooms, along with loads of other items for rent (including bikes, barbecues and fridges). Still, you'll pay for everything, including shower tokens and picnic tables – once all that is factored in, a bed in a guesthouse may work out cheaper.

Paradise Bay Resort Hotel (☎ 2152 1166; www.paradise-bay.com; s/d from Lm16/24 low season, Lm24/42 high season; 📶 📺 📺) Squeezed onto the tip of Marfa Point, opposite the Gozo ferry terminal, is this large (234-room) hotel, showing its age in comparison to its competitors but with generously proportioned rooms, corridors and common areas. Unless you don't mind dingy, dated décor, opt for the superior rooms, which have better furnishings and a fresher feel. All rooms have a balcony with good water views – the sea view takes in the ferry terminal and Comino, while bay views overlook the pool area and Paradise Bay. It's popular with divers and an older clientele.

Ramla Bay Resort (☎ 2281 2281; www.ramlabay.resort.com; r/low/high season from Lm23/53; 📶 📺 📺) A recent face-lift has turned this once humdrum hotel into a great holiday option, typified by the swanky new lobby and lounge area. Check out the colourful *luzzu* (traditional fishing boat) permanently moored near the bar en route to the expansive seafront pool area. Family-friendly distractions on offer include a health spa, water sports, private beach, bike hire and what the industry refers to as 'animation' – activities to occupy different age groups, from a kids' club to salsa-dancing lessons. Needless to say, there are the requisite food and drink providers. The well-equipped rooms feature a cheery colour scheme, and all have a balcony; cheaper rooms have views to Armier Bay to the west (not as appealing as Ramla Bay itself, but a sea view nonetheless).

Superior rooms have more bells and whistles, including a plasma TV, a minibar and tea and coffee facilities (they're worth the extra outlay). Get off the bus at the Barceló Riviera Resort & Spa and walk along the waterfront to reach Ramla Bay.

Barceló Riviera Resort & Spa (☎ 2152 5900; www.riviera.com.mt; s/d from Lm35/45 low season, Lm45/70 high season; 📶 📺 📺) Just off the main road, about 1.5km east of the Ċirkewwa ferry terminal, is this bright attractive option, with cheerful staff, fresh colourful décor and the requisite facilities, including a health spa, restaurants (a bistro, pizzeria and more formal restaurant), two bars and three pools. It's particularly popular with French travellers and Spaniards in summer.

The Marfa Peninsula is a culinary wasteland, with few eating options outside the three hotels. **Ray's Lido** (☎ 2152 0469; mains Lm1.50-6; 🍳 breakfast, lunch & dinner) at Little Armier Bay (the eastern side of Armier Bay) serves OK meals at its restaurant-pizzeria, and also offers sun lounges, canoes for hire and extensive water-sports facilities (including fun jet-ski tours out to Comino). On Friday nights in summer a live band plays, and there's a popular barbecue buffet.

Getting There & Away

Buses 45 and 145 run regularly between Valletta and Ċirkewwa, and the journey takes about an hour (one way Lm0.25). By car, you can make the trip in about 40 to 45 minutes. Bus 48 runs between Ċirkewwa and Bugibba (Lm0.50), and bus 645 services the Ċirkewwa-Sliema route (Lm0.50). Bus 50 runs from Valletta to Armier Bay daily from July to early September only (Lm0.25). A taxi from Malta International Airport to Ċirkewwa costs Lm13.50.

For details of ferry services to Gozo and Comino, see p189. As well as the boat service operated by the Comino Hotels, there are a couple of operators in this area. **Midas Shuttle Service** (☎ 2155 2432, 9947 4142) operates year-round from beside the Gozo ferry terminal, charging Lm4/1 adult/child for a return trip. Services run hourly from 9am to around 6pm or 7pm (according to demand) from June to September, 10am to 4pm in the shoulder season (April, May and October). Call for winter schedules. **Royal Cruises** (☎ 2155 3092, 9940 6529) has a similar schedule and arrives and departs from the Marfa jetty opposite the Barceló Riviera Resort & Spa, charging Lm4/1.50 for a return journey per adult/child.

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