

Southeast Malta



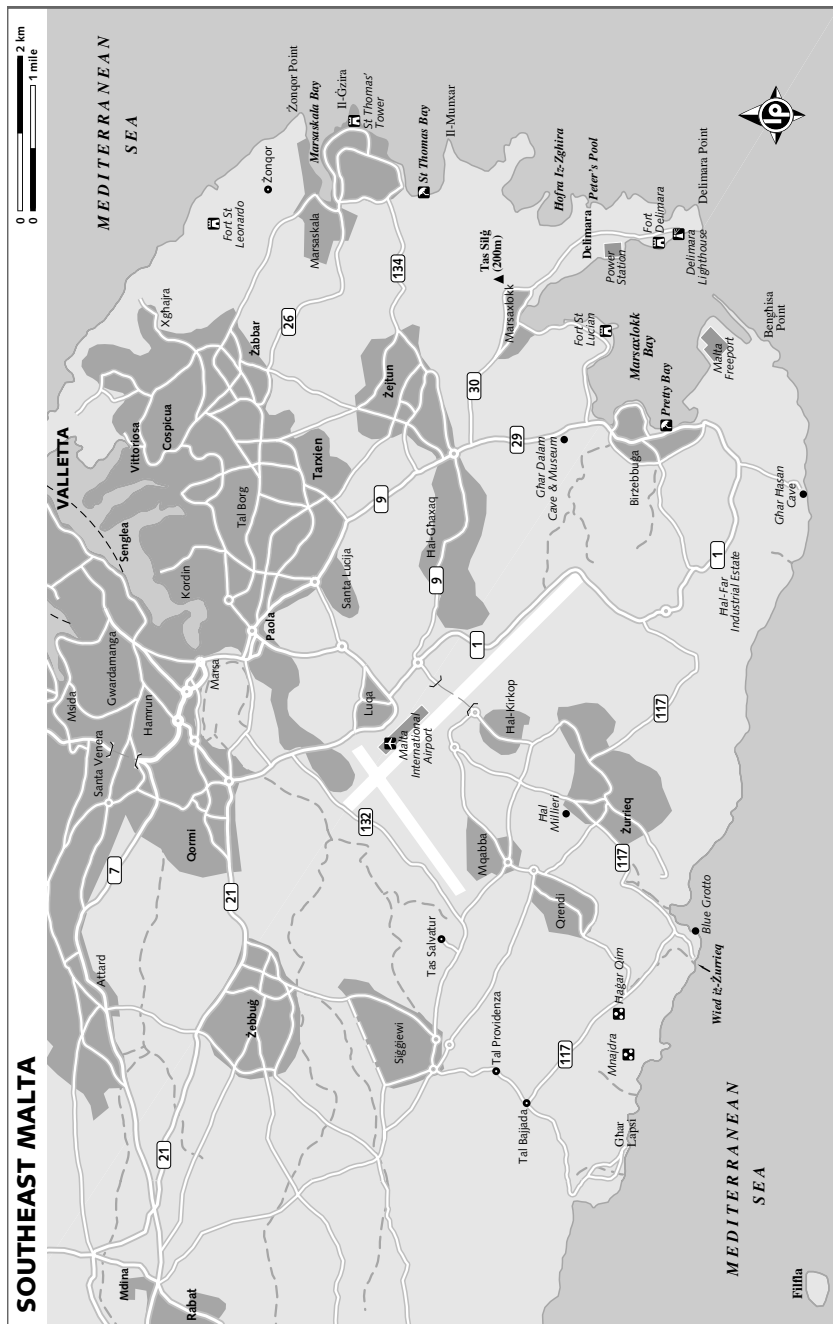
For all the industrial grit and general shabbiness that characterise parts of southeast Malta, visitors should think carefully before dismissing the region entirely and concentrating their sightseeing efforts elsewhere. Several of Malta's most significant historical sites are in the southeast, including two impressive temples (Haġar Qim and Mnajdra) dating back over 5000 years, and the Għar Dalam cave, full of fossilised remains of prehistoric animals. There is some excellent coastal scenery with boat trips available to visit grottoes, plus enticing swimming spots well off the tourist trail. A genuine highlight is the old fishing village of Marsaxlokk, with a photogenic harbour full of colourful boats and a waterfront lined with restaurants specialising in fresh fish, patronised by discerning locals and camera-toting day-trippers. These small honey pots of tourist activity are easily accessed by bus from Valletta.

Still, few holiday-makers choose to stay in these parts, and it's getting harder for them to do so. While luxurious new five-star hotels are popping up all over Malta's more prosperous northern region, it was announced in 2006 that the largest and flashiest hotel in the southeast would soon be demolished. This no doubt leaves the south as the working-class poor relation to the north; after copping an eyeful of the unavoidable heavy industry dotted around this region, visitors may well get the impression that, aside from a few notable exceptions, tourism is a dirty word down here.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Questioning who, when, how and why at the mysterious **Haġar Qim** and **Mnajdra temples** (p142)
- Devouring local seafood specialities with a view of the photogenic harbour in **Marsaxlokk** (p137)
- Taking a midmorning boat trip to the **Blue Grotto** (p141) out of Wied iż-Żurrieq
- Sunning yourself, snorkelling and enjoying some sustenance at **Għar Lapsi** (p143)





MARSAXLOKK

pop 3000

Despite the encroachment of modern industry, the ancient fishing village of Marsaxlokk (marsa-shlokk; from *marsa sirocco*, meaning 'southeasterly harbour') at the head of Marsaxlokk Bay remains resolutely a slice of real Maltese life.

Old low-rise houses ring the waterfront, and a photogenic fleet of brightly coloured *luzzu* (fishing boats; see below) dance in the harbour. Men with weathered faces sit by the waterside mending nets and grumbling about the tax on diesel, while others scrape, paint and saw as they ready their boats for the sea. The town is home to around 70% of the Maltese fishing fleet, and is – not surprisingly – renowned for its top-notch seafood restaurants, making a magnet for long-lunching locals and busloads of day-trippers.

It makes a relaxed place to base yourself. If you're after nightlife into the wee small hours you'll be disappointed, but if you're looking to chill out (and regularly chow down on all manner of fishy morsels), you'll be happy. Once the lunchtime tourist buses depart, it'll just be you and the locals.

History

Marsaxlokk Bay is Malta's second natural harbour. It was here that the Turkish fleet was moored during the Great Siege of 1565 (p21), and Napoleon's army landed here during the French invasion of 1798 (p26). In the 1930s the calm waters of the bay were used as a staging post by the huge, four-engined Short C-Class flying boats of Britain's Imperial Airways as they pioneered long-distance

air travel to the far-flung corners of the Empire. During WWII Marsaxlokk Bay was the base for the Fleet Air Arm, and in 1989 the famous summit meeting between Soviet and US presidents Mikhail Gorbachev and George Bush (senior) was held on board a warship anchored in Marsaxlokk Bay. Today the harbour is framed by the fuel tanks and chimney of a power station and the huge cranes of the Kalafrana Container Terminal – eyesores that will probably prevent any serious tourist development.

Sights & Activities

The daily **market** on the waterfront sells mainly tourist tat aimed at the tour groups, who regularly sally forth from their buses for a lunchtime shopping break. Far more interesting is the **Sunday Fish Market**, where you can admire the riches of the Med before they're whisked off to Malta's top hotels and restaurants (but rest assured, you'll still find the tourist tat here too). The market starts early in the morning and the best stuff is long gone by afternoon.

Delimara Point, southeast of Marsaxlokk, is blighted by a huge power station whose chimney can be seen for miles around, but there are a few good swimming places on the eastern side of the peninsula. **Peter's Pool** is the best, a natural lido in the rocks with large areas of flat slab for sunbathing between swims. Follow the narrow, potholed road out towards Delimara Lighthouse until you are just past the power station chimney (about 1.5km from the main road), and you'll see a low building on the left with 'Peter's Pool' signposted on it. A sump-crunchingly rough track leads down

MALTESE BOATS

The brightly coloured fishing boats that crowd the harbours around the coast have become one of Malta's national symbols. Painted boldly in blue, red and yellow, with the watchful 'Eyes of Osiris' on the bows to ward off evil spirits, they are unmistakably Maltese. The harbour at Marsaxlokk is famous for its colourful vista of moored fishing boats.

There are different kinds of traditional Maltese vessels. The *luzzu* (*loots-zoo*) is a large double-ended fishing boat (for nonsailors, that means it's pointed at both ends). The *kajjik* (*ka-yik*) is similar in appearance, but has a square transom (it's pointed at the front end only). The *dghajsa* (*dye-sa*) is a smaller and racier-looking boat, with very high stem and stern-posts – a bit like a Maltese gondola. These are not solid, seaworthy fishing boats, but sleek water-taxis. A small flotilla of *dghajsa* is now carrying tourists back and forth between Valletta and the Three Cities. They were powered by oars, but today's *dghajsas* generally carry an outboard engine. Local enthusiasts maintain – and race – a small fleet of oar-driven vessels. The waterfront at Vittoriosa and Senglea is the best place to admire these classic boats.

ANY WAY THE WIND BLOWS

In Malti, the points of the compass are mostly named for the winds that blow from that direction. These are versions of the old Latin names used by Roman sailors.

north	<i>tramuntana</i>
northeast	<i>grigal</i>
east	<i>lvant</i>
southeast	<i>xlokk</i>
south	<i>nofs in-nhar</i>
southwest	<i>lbic</i>
west	<i>punent</i>
northwest	<i>majjistral</i>

Xlokk is the Maltese equivalent of the Italian *sirocco*, both of which derive from the Arabic word *sharg*, meaning 'east.' The *xlokk* is a hot, humid and oppressive wind that blows from the south-east, usually in spring, bringing misty conditions to the island. It derives its heat from the Sahara and picks up its humidity passing over the sea. The *tramuntana*, from the Italian for 'across the mountains', is the cold northerly wind from the direction of the Alps. The northeasterly *grigal* is the typical winter wind that batters the rocky coast of Malta, and makes for an uncomfortable ferry crossing to Gozo, while the northwesterly *majjistral* is the stiff sailing breeze of summer afternoons, the equivalent of the Turkish *meltem*.

to a parking area. Don't leave anything in your car – this is a favourite spot for thieves.

The road to Delimara passes **Tas Silġ**, where archaeologists have uncovered a Punic-Roman temple. This may be the famous Temple of Juno that was plundered by Verres, the Roman Governor of Sicily and Malta in 70 BC, as recorded in the writings of Cicero. Due to on-going excavations, the site is not open to the public.

South of Marsaxlokk, on the road to Birżebbuġa, is **Fort St Lucian**, built in 1610 to protect the bay. Today it houses a naval college and the offices of a government fish farm.

Sleeping

There's only one accommodation option in Marsaxlokk, and thankfully it's a ripper.

Our pick **Duncan Guesthouse** (☎ 2165 7212; <http://duncanmalta.com>; 33 Xatt is-Sajjieda; d from Lm14; 🏠) Friendly, family-run Duncan's is hands-down the sweetest accommodation deal in southern Malta. It's above Duncan Bar & Restaurant on the waterfront, and the spacious guest rooms come in family-friendly configurations. They're well kitted out for lengthy stays, each with sitting area, TV, small balcony, spic-and-span modern bathroom and kitchenette. Air-con is an optional extra. There's a washing machine for guest use (a rare beast in Malta), plus plans for turning the empty roof area into

a sun terrace – the perfect vantage point for sundowner drinks and harbour-watching.

Eating

It's all about the seafood in Marsaxlokk. Restaurants line the harbour, most offering alfresco dining. There are some casual places geared to tourists, plus more upmarket selections. Marsaxlokk is a favourite location for the Maltese to enjoy a long Sunday lunch among family and friends – if you wish to join them in this weekly ritual, bookings for the following restaurants are advised.

Pisces (☎ 2165 4956; 86 Xatt is-Sajjieda; mains Lm3-6.50; 🍴 lunch & dinner Thu-Tue) Don't be too disheartened if you can't get in to Ir-Rizzu. Down the road, Pisces has an equally fine-looking menu with house specialities including warm octopus salad or mussels stewed in spicy tomato sauce. And there are meat and pasta dishes that cater to non-fish-lovers too.

Ir-Rizzu (☎ 2165 1569; 52 Xatt is-Sajjieda; mains Lm3-7; 🍴 lunch & dinner) Ir-Rizzu has a large and bustling dining room devoid of airs and graces. The fish do the talking here – check out the mind-boggling list of local piscatorial specimens, everything from *lampuki* (dolphin fish) and octopus to king prawns or a hearty bowl of *aljotta* (Maltese fish soup). Lots of locals trust Ir-Rizzu for its quality; the downside is no outdoor seating.

Ron's Restaurant (☎ 2165 0382; 54 Xatt is-Sajjieda; mains Lm2-6; 🍴 lunch & dinner) Ron is a welcoming host offering outdoor tables for a casual drink or light snack, or a more formal upstairs dining area with funky blue walls, stylish décor, a great view over the boat-filled harbour and a no-surprises menu of reliable seafood favourites.

Getting There & Away

Bus 27 runs every half-hour from Valletta to Marsaxlokk from around 6.30am to 9pm (services are more frequent on Sunday morning for the fish market). Tickets cost Lm0.20 one way. Bus 627 runs hourly until 3pm from Bugibba via Sliema and St Julian's to Marsaxlokk (one way Lm0.50).

BIRŻEBBUĠA

pop 7650

Birżebbuġa (beer-zeb-*boo*-ja, meaning 'well of the olives') lies on the western shore of Marsaxlokk Bay. It began life as a fishing village, but today it's a dormitory town for workers from the nearby Malta Freeport. The misleadingly named **Pretty Bay** lies at the southern end of town. Although it has a very pleasant sandy beach, it also has a not-terribly-pretty view of the Kalafrana Container Terminal, only 500m away across the water.

There's little to see in town, but 500m north on the main road from Valletta is the **Għar Dalam Cave & Museum** (☎ 2165 7419; adult/child Lm1.50/0.50; 🕒 9am-5pm). Għar Dalam (aar-da-lam; the name means 'cave of darkness') is a 145m-long cave in the Lower Coralline Limestone (for more on this formation see p40). It has yielded a magnificent harvest of fossil bones and teeth belonging to dwarf elephants, hippopotamuses and deer – an estimated total of over 7000 animals – which lived between 180,000 and 18,000 years ago. The animals are all of European type, suggesting that Malta was once joined to Italy, but not to northern Africa.

The revamped museum at the entrance contains an exhibition hall with displays on how the cave was formed, and how the remains of such animals came to be found here, plus how these animals adapted to new conditions. In the older part of the museum are display cases mounted with thousands and thousands of bones and teeth. It's not hugely interesting unless you're a palaeontologist, but impressive in terms of sheer numbers. Beyond the museum a path leads down through gardens to the mouth of the cave, where a

walkway leads 50m into the cavern. A pillar of sediment has been left in the middle of the excavated floor to show the stratigraphic sequence. For geology and prehistoric history buffs only.

On the cliff-bound coastline south of Birżebbuġa lies another cave, **Għar Hasan Cave** (admission free; 🕒 24hrs). Follow the road towards Żurrieq, then turn left on a minor road that ends at an industrial estate (there are plenty of signposts). The cave entrance is down some steps in the cliff-face to the left; there is usually an enterprising local in the car parking area out the front with torches for hire for around Lm0.30 to help you find your way inside the cave. The 'Cave of Hasan' is supposed to have been used as a hide-out by a 12th-century Saracen rebel. With a torch you can follow a passage off to the right to a 'window' in the cliff-face. Note that at the time of research access to the cave wasn't possible thanks to roadworks, but it should be accessible again by the time you read this.

To get to Għar Dalam and Birżebbuġa, take bus 11 from Valletta. The cave museum is on the right-hand side of the road at a small, semi-circular parking area 500m short of Birżebbuġa – look out for it as it's not well signposted. There is no public transport to Għar Hasan – it's a 2.5km walk south of Birżebbuġa.

MARSASKALA

pop 5420

Marsaskala, gathered around the head of its long, narrow bay, was originally a Sicilian fishing community (the name means 'Sicilian Harbour'; note that you will also see it spelt Marsascala). Today it is an increasingly popular residential area and seaside resort among the Maltese; save for a couple of reasonable restaurants, the town has little appeal for travellers. It rarely rates a mention in guidebooks to Malta and is well off the tourist trail compared with northern resorts (especially now that the town's major hotel has announced its impending closure). Marsaxlokk makes a considerably more interesting and picturesque southern base.

Sights & Activities

No-one could accuse Marsaskala of being over-endowed with sights or tourist attractions. The main activities are hanging out in cafés and bars along the waterfront, strolling along the promontory and fishing in the harbour.

The Triq ix-Xatt promenade is the focus of the town and where most of the restaurants and cafés can be found. On the north side of the bay, Triq iż-Żonqor goes past the Church of St Anne, with its distinctive Italianate campanile, to Żonqor Point, where a swimming pool and water polo stadium are located. Triq is-Salini, on the south side of the bay, leads to the headland of il-Gżira and St Thomas' Tower.

St Thomas' Tower, on the southern point of the bay, is a small fort that was built by the Knights of St John after a Turkish raiding party landed in Marsaskala Bay in 1614 and plundered the nearby village of Żejtun.

St Thomas Bay is a deeply indented – and deeply unattractive – bay to the south of Marsaskala, lined with concrete and breeze-block huts and a potholed road. There's a sandy beach of sorts, and the place is popular with local people and windsurfers. It's about a 10-minute walk from Marsaskala along Triq Tal-Gardiell (past the Sun City Cinema complex). From St Thomas Bay you can continue walking along the coast to Marsaxlokk (about 4km).

Sleeping

Accommodation options in Marsaskala are shrinking following the announcement in late 2006 that the huge, four-star Corinthia Jerma Palace Hotel (the largest hotel in Malta's southeast) will be demolished to make way for upmarket apartments. This leaves only a couple of uninspiring, if affordable, options if you're looking for a bed.

Summer Nights Guesthouse (☎ 2163 7956; m.cut.ajar@ondnet.net; Triq ix-Xatt; d Lm10/12 low/high season) Basic, good-value rooms are on offer at this central guesthouse in the heart of the town's action (there's a restaurant and pub downstairs). Rooms have private bathroom, fan, TV and fridge (some have kitchenette), and all have a balcony with sea view.

Charian Hotel (☎ 2163 6392; www.charianhotel.com; Triq is-Salini; d incl breakfast Lm14/16 low/high season) A small, unremarkable, family-run hotel about 600m from the centre. Rooms here are small and a tad dingy but well equipped, with ceiling fan, TV and balcony (most with sea view), and there's a rooftop terrace with Jacuzzi.

Eating & Drinking

Marsaskala's redeeming feature is its restaurants. There are some good options here, popular with locals who are happy to travel across Malta to enjoy a well-prepared meal.

Jakarta (☎ 2163 3993; Triq Tal-Gardiell; dishes Lm3-6; ☎ dinner Wed-Mon) Despite its name, Jakarta offers mostly Malaysian and Chinese cuisine from an extensive menu of meat, poultry and seafood dishes (and decent selections for vegetarians). Rabbit in five-spice sauce (or served with pancakes, Peking-duck style) lend a local flavour – and we've never seen Thai wine on any European menus before! There are good-value set menus from Lm7 per person. Takeaway available.

Tal-Familja (☎ 2163 2161; Triq Tal-Gardiell; mains Lm3-7; ☎ lunch & dinner Tue-Sun) A particular local favourite is the friendly and relaxed Tal-Familja, away from the town centre (about 300m past the cinema). You'll need some time to choose from the huge menu and daily specials, at the heart of which are fresh fish, seafood and classic Maltese cuisine (kids are well looked after too). The excellent service and massive portions will have you heading home well sated.

Grabiell (☎ 2163 4194; Pjazza Mifsud Bonnici; mains Lm5.50-7.50; ☎ lunch & dinner Mon-Sat) Elegant Grabiell is popular with the expense-account brigade, no doubt because of the hefty prices it charges for its renowned fish and seafood dishes. Less cashed-up patrons can dine alfresco at the attached (downmarket) kiosk-style café, with less interesting food and more reasonable prices (eg omelettes, pasta or roast chicken priced from Lm0.50 to Lm4).

For fast food, try **Country Style** at the southern end of the promenade. The food is certainly nothing to write home about – it has a simple selection of soups, sandwiches, doughnuts and cakes, and pizza of an evening – but internet access is available, and there's a playground outside where you can keep an eye on the kids.

There are a number of options on the promenade for sitting with a beer and just watching the world go by. There are kebab and pasta places for a quick bite, and cafés-bars that live up of an evening. **Summer Nights** (☎ 2163 7956; Triq ix-Xatt) has a bustling restaurant and English-style pub, plus a big screen for televising sports matches.

Getting There & Away

Buses 17, 19 and 20 run regularly from Valletta to Marsaskala (one way Lm0.20). The bus terminus is on Triq Sant'Antnin at the southern end of the waterfront promenade.

ŻURRIEQ

pop 9000

The village of Żurrieq sprawls across a hillside on the south coast, in a sort of no-man's-land to the south of the airport. This part of Malta feels cut off from the rest of the island, and although it's only 10km from Valletta as the crow flies, it seems much further. Signage from Żurrieq to neighbouring towns is poor, but this region is small and it shouldn't take long to find the direction you need (ask locals for guidance if you get stuck).

The **parish church of St Catherine** was built in the 1630s and houses a fine altarpiece of St Catherine – painted by Mattia Preti in 1675, when the artist took refuge here during a plague epidemic – and there are several 17th- and 18th-century windmills dotted about the village. On a minor road between Żurrieq and Mqabba is the **Chapel of the Annunciation** (☎ 2122 5952) in the deserted medieval settlement of Ħal Millieri. This tiny church, set in a pretty garden, dates from the mid-15th century and contains important 15th-century frescoes – the only surviving examples of medieval religious art in Malta. Both church and garden are normally locked, but are open to the public from 9.30am to noon on the first Sunday of each month. Telephone to confirm these times or to possibly arrange an alternative time for viewing; read more about the chapel on the website of **Din l-Art Helwa** (National Trust of Malta; www.dinlarthelwa.org).

About 2km west of Żurrieq lies the tiny harbour of **Wied iż-Żurrieq**, set in a narrow inlet in

the cliffs and guarded by a watchtower. Here boats depart for enjoyable 30-minute cruises to the **Blue Grotto**, a huge natural arch in the sea cliffs 400m to the east.

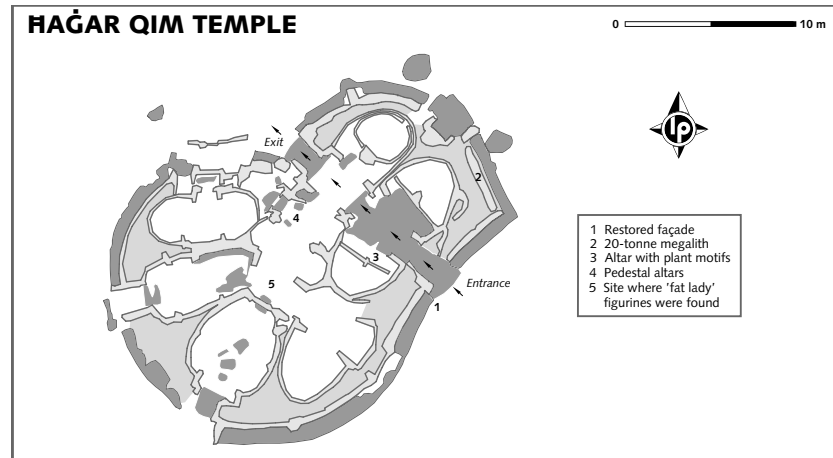
The boat trips take in about seven caves, including the Honeymoon Cave, Reflection Cave and Cat's Cave. The best time is before midmorning, when the sun is shining into the grotto. **Boat trips** (☎ 2164 0058, 9945 5347; adult/child Lm3/1.50) on small boats (up to eight passengers) depart from 9am to around 5pm daily, weather permitting (trips are less likely to run from December to February). If there is any doubt about the weather or sea conditions, call to check.

You can see the Blue Grotto without a boat from a viewing platform beside the main road, just east of the turn-off to Wied iż-Żurrieq.

It's a souvenir-shop ghetto above the harbour in Wied iż-Żurrieq, alongside much-of-a-muchness restaurants serving up snacks, fish, rabbit, pasta etc.

Browse and see if anything takes your fancy. **Congreve Channel Restaurant** (☎ 2164 7928; snacks & mains Lm1.50-6; ☎ closed Wed) is a down-to-earth option with king prawns, shellfish and swordfish at the higher end of the price range, and simple pasta and burger meals at the lower end.

Buses 38 and 138 run from Valletta to Żurrieq and Wied iż-Żurrieq (on a circular route that also includes Ħaġar Qim and Mnajdra temples) every 30 minutes or so from 9.20am to 4.15pm. Tickets are Lm0.50 one way.



MEGA-ATTRACTIONS

The megalithic temples of Malta, which date mainly from the period 3600 to 3000 BC, are the oldest freestanding stone structures in the world. They predate the pyramids of Egypt by more than 500 years.

The oldest surviving temples are thought to be those of Ta'Ħġrat (p116) and Skorba near the village of Mgarr on Malta. Ggantija (p161) on Gozo, and Ħaġar Qim and Mnajdra (see below) on Malta are among the best preserved. Tarxien (p81) is the most developed, its last phase dating from 3000 to 2500 BC. The subterranean tombs of the Hypogeum (p80) date from the same period as the temples and mimic many of their architectural features below ground.

The purpose of these mysterious structures is the subject of much debate. They all share certain features in common – a site on a southeasterly slope, near to caves, a spring and fertile farmland; a trefoil or cloverleaf plan with three or five rounded chambers (apses) opening off the central axis, which usually faces between south and east; megalithic construction, using blocks of stone weighing up to 20 tonnes; and holes and sockets drilled into the stones, perhaps to hold wooden doors or curtains made from animal hide. Most temple sites have also revealed spherical stones, about the size of cannonballs – it has been suggested that these were used like ball bearings to move the heavy megaliths more easily over the ground.

No burials have been found in any of the temples, but most have yielded statues and figurines of so-called 'fat ladies' – possibly fertility goddesses. Most have some form of decoration on the stone, ranging from simple pitting to the elaborate spirals and carved animals seen at Tarxien. There are also 'oracle holes' – small apertures in the chamber walls which may have been used by priests or priestesses to issue divinations. The temples' southeasterly orientation has suggested a relationship to the winter solstice sunrise, and one amateur investigator has put forward a convincing theory of solar alignment (see www.geocities.com/maltatemples/).

ĦAĠAR QIM & MNAJDRA

The megalithic temples of Ħaġar Qim (*adġar qem*; 'standing stones') and Mnajdra (*mm-nigh-dra*) are perhaps the best preserved and most evocative of Malta's prehistoric sites, especially at dawn or sunset when the ancient stones are tinged pink and gold. The temples are fenced off and the gates are locked at these times but it's worth the effort, especially around the winter solstice (21 December) at some of the supposed solar alignments.

It costs a steep Lm2 to visit just one temple, Lm3 to visit both. Once inside it's disappointing that there is limited information explaining the story of these temples and what makes them so remarkable. At the time of research, Heritage Malta was conducting free guided tours of the site daily at 11am and 3.30pm – recommended if you want to come away with some sort of understanding. A guided tour of the displays of the National Museum of Archaeology in Valletta (p62) is also highly recommended.

Happily, things are set to change in the near future. EU funding is being channelled into a project with two goals – the conservation of the temples, and a better interpretation of the site. The temples will each receive a temporary tentlike shelter to protect them from the

elements (while searching for a permanent solution), and a new visitors centre will be built here, offering a small café and bookshop, and all-important information panels detailing the cultural and natural significance of the area. If all goes according to plan, the coverings should be in place by late 2007 and the visitors centre completed sometime in 2008.

Ħaġar Qim (☎ 2142 4231; adult/child Lm2/0.50; 🕒 9am-5pm) is right next to the parking area. The **façade**, with its trilithon entrance, has been restored, rather too obviously, but gives an idea of what it may once have looked like. The temples were originally roofed over, but the wooden structures have long since rotted away.

Before going in, look round the corner to the right – the **megalith** here is the largest in the temple, weighing over 20 tonnes. The temple consists of a series of interconnected, oval chambers with no uniform arrangement, and differs from other Maltese temples in lacking a regular trefoil plan. In the first chamber on the left is a little altar post decorated with **plant motifs**, and in the second there are a couple of **pedestal altars**. The **'fat lady'** statuettes and the so-called *Venus de Malta* figurine that were found here are on display in the National Museum of Archaeology in Valletta (p62).

Mnajdra (☎ 2142 4231; adult/child Lm2/0.50; 🕒 9am-5pm), a 500m walk downhill from Ħaġar Qim, is more interesting. There are three temples side by side, each with a trefoil plan and a different orientation. The oldest temple is the small one on the right, aligned towards the southwest and Filfla island. The central temple, pointing towards the southeast, is the youngest. All date from between 3600 and 3000 BC.

It has been claimed that the southern temple is full of significant solar alignments. At sunrise during the winter solstice, a beam of sunlight illuminates the altar to the right of the inner doorway. At sunrise during the summer solstice, a sunbeam penetrates the window in the back of the left-hand apse to the pedestal altar in the left rear chamber. In the right-hand apse there is a separate chamber entered through a small doorway, with a so-called 'oracle hole' to its left. The function of this is unknown.

On the cliff top to the southeast of Mnajdra is a 17th-century watchtower and a memorial to Sir Walter Congreve (Governor of Malta 1924–27) who was buried at sea off this point. You can hike east along the cliffs towards Wied iż-Żurriq and the Blue Grotto (p141), or west to Ħar Lapsi (p143). The tiny uninhabited island **Filfla**, 8km offshore, is clearly visible. It suffered the ignominy of being used for target practice by the British armed forces until it was declared a nature reserve in 1970. It supports important breeding colonies of seabirds, including an estimated 10,000 pairs of storm-petrels, and a unique species of lizard. Landing on the island is forbidden.

Ħaġar Qim Restaurant (☎ 2142 4116; mains Lm2-5; 🕒 lunch daily year-round, dinner Tue-Sun summer, Fri-Sun winter), above the car park, serves the usual suspects (pizza, pasta, Maltese specialities). There's a large open-air terrace and an unspiring view of the scruffy garden and the car park – you're better off at Blue Grotto or Ħar Lapsi for more variety and better panoramas.

Buses 38 and 138 run from Valletta to Ħaġar Qim and Mnajdra (on a circular route that also includes Wied iż-Żurriq) every 30 minutes or so from 9.20am to 4.15pm. Tickets cost Lm0.50 one way.

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ĦAR LAPSI

On the road west of the temples is a turn-off (signposted) to Ħar Lapsi. The name means 'Cave of the Ascension', and there was once a fishermen's shrine here. The road winds steeply to the coast and ends at a car park beside a couple of restaurants and boathouses. The main attraction here is the swimming – a little cove in the low limestone cliffs has been converted into a natural lido, with stone steps and iron ladders giving access to the limpid blue water. It's a popular spot for bathing and picnicking among locals, and also well frequented by divers and fishermen.

If swimming has given you an appetite, there are two contrasting restaurants above the cove. The 1950s-style **Lapsi View** (☎ 2164 0608; snacks & meals Lm0.50-6; 🕒 lunch & dinner Tue-Sun) is housed in a crumbling blue building that looks a little worse for wear, but inside is a taste of retro-Malta, with much of the original furniture still in place. As you'd expect, old-fashioned home-cooking is the order of the day, and the menu caters to tourists and locals, with burgers, sandwiches and pizzas, plus rabbit, steak, *lampuki* (dolphin fish) and stewed octopus.

The primary-coloured interior of **Blue Creek** (☎ 2146 2786; snacks & meals Lm2-11.50; 🕒 lunch & dinner Wed-Mon) has more polish but less local character, and the tables on the sunny outdoor terrace (directly above the water) are hotly contested. The menu has something for all-comers, from snacks and sandwiches to pasta and seafood, and some surprising main dishes of meats far from home (eg ostrich medallions, grilled kangaroo loin). Come for lunch rather than dinner, in order to enjoy the setting.

Getting to Ħar Lapsi without a car is tricky. For hikers, there is a footpath along the 3km stretch of cliff top between Ħar Lapsi, Ħaġar Qim and the Blue Grotto. For public transport users, the town of Siġġiewi is about 4km north of Ħar Lapsi; and bus 94 shuttles infrequently between the two points on Thursday and Sunday from July to September only. The alternative is to hike each way from Siġġiewi. Bus 89 runs from Valletta to Siġġiewi (one way Lm0.20).