



# Central Malta

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## Why Go?

Central Malta combines beautiful historic centres with some of the island's most spectacular scenery. Here, you can explore Mdina, Malta's atmospheric ancient walled capital perched on a hilltop with stupendous views over the hills and out to sea, visit remarkable medieval frescoes in ancient catacombs, marvel at one of Europe's largest church domes, and spend the night worshipping the dance gods at some of Malta's best nightclubs. Natural attractions include stark cliffs (the perfect place to watch a sunset), and a scenic bay ideal for swimming (if only you can find it). There are sleeping and eating options ranging from luxurious five-star hotels to rustic village restaurants where locals come for their weekend feasts of rabbit.

If you're after traditional Maltese traditional culture and a tranquil holiday that's a little off the well-worn path, this is the perfect base.

## When to Go

- ➔ Spring (April to June) and autumn (September and October) are the best times to visit this region.
- ➔ If you're coming in early spring, you can see the pageantry of Holy Week and catch the Mdina Medieval Festival in mid-April.

## Mdina & Rabat

Mdina is the hilltop walled medieval city, packed with the historic mansions of Maltese nobility. Outside the city walls, Rabat is a separate, yet adjoining town, with some superb sights of its own.

Just inside Mdina's main gate is a helpful **Tourist Information Centre** (☎2145 4480; Torre dello Stendardo; ☀9am-5.30pm Mon-Sat, 9am-1pm Sun Apr-Sep, 10am-4pm Oct-Mar).

You'll find banks and ATMs in Rabat opposite the bus stop, and an ATM on Pjazza tas-Sur. There are public toilets outside the main gate. Point de Vue (p95) has wi-fi.

A ride in a *karrozzin* (traditional horse-drawn carriage), departing from Mdina's main gate, costs €35 for a circuit around Mdina and Rabat; you'll soak up more atmosphere on foot.

### Getting There & Away

The local bus terminus is in Rabat on Is-Saqqajja, 200m south of Mdina's main gate.

From Valletta, take bus 50, 51, 52 or 53 (30 minutes, every 10 minutes). Bus 52 goes on to Dingli. Buses 202 and 203 travel to/from Sliema (50 minutes, half-hourly) and St Julian's (one hour), going on to Dingli. The X3 express bus travels between here and Bugibba (25 minutes, half-hourly) as well as the airport (55 minutes).

## Mdina

POP 290

The mysterious golden-stone Arabic walled city of Mdina crowns the hilltop, and is a world apart from modern Malta. Its hidden lanes offer exquisite architectural detail and respite from the day-tripping crowds, who largely stick to the main street.

The citadel of Mdina was fortified from as long ago as 1000 BC when the Phoenicians built a protective wall and called their settlement Malet, meaning 'place of shelter'. The Romans built a large town here and called it Melita. It was given its present name when the Arabs arrived in the 9th century – *medina* is Arabic for 'walled city'. They built strong walls and dug a deep moat between Mdina and its surrounding suburbs (*rabat* in Arabic). The moat has recently been landscaped to become a garden with surreally neat lawns; it's a pleasant place for a stroll and a venue for regular festivals.

In medieval times Mdina was called Città Notabile – the Noble City. It was the favoured residence of the Maltese aristocracy and the

## MDINA CATHEDRAL CONTEMPORARY ART BIENNALE

The first **Mdina Cathedral Contemporary Art Biennale** ([mdinabiennale.org](http://mdinabiennale.org)) is scheduled to run from 13 November 2015 to 7 January 2016, and between 2017 and 2018, the latter edition to coincide with Valletta as European Capital of Culture for 2018. It will see many historic locations, such as Palazzo de Piro, St Paul's Cathedral and the cathedral's subterranean vaults, turned into exhibition spaces for artists from all over the world.

seat of the *università* (governing council). The Knights of St John, who were largely a sea-based force, made Grand Harbour and Valletta their centre of activity, and Mdina sank into the background as a holiday destination for the nobility. Today, with its massive walls and peaceful, shady streets, it is often referred to as the Silent City, a nickname that becomes appropriate after dark.

### Sights & Activities

#### St Paul's Cathedral

CHURCH

(Piazza San Pawl; adult/child €5/free incl Cathedral Museum; ☀9.30am-4.45pm Mon-Sat, 3-4.45pm Sun) The cathedral is said to be built on the site of the villa belonging to Publius, the Roman governor of Malta who welcomed St Paul in AD 60.

The original Norman church was destroyed by an earthquake, and the restrained baroque edifice you see today was built between 1697 and 1702 by Lorenzo Gafa, who was influenced by the Italian master Borromini. Note the fire and serpent motifs atop the twin bell towers, symbolising the saint's first miracle in Malta.

Echoing St John's Co-Cathedral in Valletta, the floor of St Paul's is covered in the polychrome marble tombstones of Maltese nobles and important clergymen, while the vault is painted with scenes from the life of St Paul. The altar painting, *The Conversion of St Paul* by Mattia Preti, survived the earthquake; so too did the beautifully carved oak doors to the sacristy on the north side, and the apse above the altar, featuring the fresco *St Paul's Shipwreck*.