Cycling Malta

A practical guidebook with detailed Maps, Bike Hire Outlets, Recommended Routes, Descriptions of Key Features, Weather, Practical Advice and more.

Cycling Malta

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Authors and Copyright

Cirkewwa
Mellieha
St. Paul's Bay
Golden Bay
St Julian's
Mgarr
Valletta
Mosta
Three Cities
Gozo
Rabat
Marsaskala
Comino
Dingli
Zurrieq
Malta
Marsaxlokk Bay
N
W
E
S
0
2
km

1. Introduction

Malta provides wonderful opportunities for cycling. Its attractions include stunning landscapes, a beautiful natural environment and a range of rich archaeological and cultural treasures. There are few other places in the world that offer, within easy reach, such an array of impressive and attractive features.

This book provides maps of cycling routes on Malta, together with a description of the noteworthy features that lie along each route. It also describes the background (historical, cultural and environmental) of the key points of interest to increase your understanding and pleasure. Allowing time for admiring the sights, each cycle route represents a day's adventure.

In Chapter 4 we suggest routes that allow you to cycle through (mostly) tranquil rural or coastal roads to reach locations of interest to visitors. The suggested routes also encourage you to stop at points from where short walks can bring you to key features that cannot be directly reached by bike.

The routes are mostly along level roads though there are a number of inclines that some might find a little challenging. As the highest point in Malta (at Dingli cliffs on the south coast) is only some 250 m above sea level, you can appreciate that the uphill sections are relatively modest by international standards. Some of the routes bring you near, but not very near, to cliffs. You may be tempted to cycle along some of the cliff-top paths that are used by walkers, but for reasons of safety, you should resist this temptation.

Cycling in Malta may not be very pleasant during the hot months of mid-June to mid-September and excursions during these months are best done in the early morning or in the evening. If you are planning an evening cycle during the hot season, it is best to allow enough time to be back before dark. Remember to bring water, a hat and sunscreen while a lightweight jacket should be carried in winter and in spring. Though Malta has a Mediterranean climate, the weather in Winter and Spring can sometimes be windy, cold and wet. On such days it is better to visit Valletta, the Three Cities or Mdina. Have a look at the weather forecast before you set out; many hotels will have one at the reception desk.

1.1 Visiting Key Attractions

The island of Malta has many attractions – our favorites are set out below:

Key Attractions of Malta

Valletta
World heritage city

The Ħaġar Qim Temple Complex
Amazing stone age temples

The Blue Grotto
Impressive and quirky geological feature

Mdina
Ancient capital of Malta

The Three Cities
Wonderfully preserved medieval towns

Paradise Beach
A beautiful beach

Victoria Lines
1890 Defence line spanning Malta

Majjistral National Park
Stunning coastline, wonderful plant diversity

Golden Sands Bay
Beautiful sandy beach, clear turquoise water

Dingli Cliffs
Dramatic landscapes, rural tranquility

The cycling routes that we describe in this guide will bring you close to each of these features, and many others. It is you who must make the difficult choice on which to visit - but do not miss out on Mdina or the HagerQim. The locations of key sites in relation to the suggested cycling routes are shown on maps later in this guide.

The Ħaġar Qim temples, the National Museum of Archaeology, the Hypogeum and other visitor attractions are normally open Monday to Sunday, 9.00 am to 5.00 pm. The entrance charges are reasonable and you can purchase single or combination tickets, with reductions for seniors and students. You can purchase tickets online at www.heritagemalta.org.

1.2 Topography

It is interesting to observe how the relatively simple geology of Malta has resulted in a fascinating variety of landscapes and habitats. The topography of the island is of interest to cyclists as it influences the location of roads and the number and steepness of inclines and hills.

Malta is essentially a limestone rock that emerged from the sea around 8 million years. It has since been molded by tectonic activity, sea, wind, rain and humans to create a diversity of landscapes and natural features, some dramatic, others beautiful and quirky. The island is tilted, with high cliffs to the south (e.g. Dingli cliffs) and gently sloping land along the northern coast (e.g. Sliema). A number of valleys, flooded by a rise in sea level, have formed spectacular bays, for example, the Grand Harbour at Valletta. Underground tectonic activity has created two large faults across the island from north to south. By raising the land abruptly by about 150 m, the Great Fault has created a natural barrier against invaders (the Victoria lines) and short but steep inclines for cyclists. The highest point on the island, at just over 250 m, is near Dingli on the south coast.

Limestone, a natural material, varies greatly in nature and strength from place to place, sometimes over quite short distances. Hard limestone on the surface will prevent the erosion of lower layers, giving rise to hills and promontories as surrounding land is washed away by rain, wind or sea. Erosion by rainwater and streams has created many valleys, sea inlets and deep gorges which make difficult the construction of roads and tracks close to much of the southern coast.

As a result of these geological processes it is not possible to cycle or even walk around certain sections of the island by a route that is always very close to the coast. It also means that on many cycle routes you will encounter inclines/hills where you must cycle from near sea level up to perhaps 100 – 150 m. While a little challenging at times, this adds considerably to the diversity of landscapes and habitats that you will encounter and enjoy.

2.2 Hire of Bikes

There is as yet no public scheme for the rental of bicycles on Malta. You can rent a bicycle on Malta and on Gozo from the outlets shown below. Each outlet has a website and a contact point. It is important to ring in advance to discuss availability and price and any special requirements you may have. We do not endorse or recommend any particular operator; we merely provide information on their services and contact details. There are also a number of smaller operators who rent bikes from tourist shops. When renting, making sure your bike fits and is adjusted to suit you. If your bike is too big or too small it will be uncomfortable to ride and can cause unnecessary discomfort. The staff in the shop should ensure that your bike is a good fit. However, don't rely entirely on the bike shop staff and be prepared to ask for any adjustments you feel you need.

Do enquire beforehand about the emergency arrangements offered by the bike hire company in the event of puncture, bike fault or accident. Be sure to take the phone number of the renter with you. Always make sure your bike is in good working order before you set out.

Hire Prices

The hire price varies slightly with the outlet, the season and the number of days the bike (and any accessories such as helmets) are to be hired. Typically the charge is in the region of €10 - €15 per day, with electric bikes available for between €20 and €25 per day.

Bike Rental Outlets on Malta

1. Ecobikes Malta

This company offers a range of high-quality bikes for short or long hire. The range includes mountain and trekking bikes as well as electric bikes. The website is comprehensive.

Website: www.bikerentalmalta.com

email: ecobikesmalta@gmail.com

Phone: 00 356 2750 0022, **Mob.** 00 356 9947 1627

Address: TriqL-Imsell, Bugibba, Malta

2. The Cyclist

2.5 Weather and Climate

The Maltese islands are situated about ninety km south of Sicily and two hundred and ninety km north of Africa. The islands enjoy a Mediterranean climate with mild winters and warm to hot summers. Rain falls mainly in winter, with summer being generally dry (see table below). Malta enjoys around 3,000 hours of sunshine per year (one of the highest in Europe), from an average of over 5 hours of sunshine per day in December to an average of over 12 hours of sunshine per day in July.

	Rain mm/day	Sun Hrs/day	Daily Mean Temp. Deg. C	Mean High Temp. Deg. C
Jan	98	5.5	13	16
Feb	65	6	13	16
Mar	38	8.5	15	18
Apr	29	9	17	20
May	12	10	20	24
June	3	11	24	29
July	0.3	12	27	32
Aug	7	11	28	32
Sept	56	9	25	28
Oct	71	7	22	25
Nov	122	6.5	18	21
Dec	109	5	15	18

3. About Malta

The state of Malta consists of three inhabited island – Malta, Gozo and Comino and a few uninhabited islets. Malta, the largest island, is about 30 km long by 14 wide, while Gozo is 14 km by 7 wide. With a population of about 400,000 Malta is among the most densely populated countries in the world. The island of Malta contains the capital, Valletta and the major centres of tourist and commercial activity. Gozo, with a population of 31,000, is a more tranquil island with an agricultural base and a more traditional approach to life.

3.1 A very short history of Malta

Malta is fascinating because of its history, cultural heritage and natural environment. It has been inhabited from the earliest times and possesses many stone-age monuments (among the best in the world). The Phoenicians, Romans, Byzantines, Saracens, Normans and Spanish ruled the islands until 1530 when ownership was passed to the Knights of St. John. Malta has a strategic importance from its location, a great natural harbour and easily worked stone. The Knights exploited these advantages to make Malta into a fortress on the front line between the Christian and Muslim worlds. In 1565 Turkish troops of the Ottoman Empire (the superpower at the time) attacked Malta with a seemingly irresistible force. The outnumbered Knights (supported by the Maltese) defended the island heroically and successfully. After that stressful start, the rule of the Knights (now proudly renamed the Knights of Malta) proved a golden age as evidenced by the many treasures still to be seen - palaces, churches, gardens, paintings, sculptures and Valletta, a U.N. world heritage city. In addition, by building a university, schools and libraries, the Knights initiated a tradition of learning and culture which is still evident in the high educational level of the modern Maltese.

In their early days the Knights were true Christian warriors and hospitallers and enjoyed wide support among the Maltese people. However, by the end of the 18th century their moral practices (such as keeping mistresses) had declined. In addition, the Knights became viewed as a privileged class, particularly by not admitting Maltese to the Order. The Knights were expelled by French forces when Napoleon captured the island in 1798. After the English victory over the French in the Napoleonic Wars the Maltese did not wish to have the island again under the rule of the Knights and in 1800, at the request of the Maltese, Malta became a Crown Colony under a benevolent British administration. Malta played an important military and commercial role within the British Empire, particularly after the opening of the Suez Canal, as a supply and repair base for both commercial and military purposes. During the Second World War it was an unsinkable aircraft carrier and withstood a ferocious siege of almost two years by German and Italian forces. The importance of the island to the war effort and the courage of its defenders were recognised officially when the island as a whole was awarded the St. George's Medal by the King of England.

Malta opted for independence in 1974 but remains a member of the Commonwealth with many links to the U.K. Its long series of rulers have contributed to a varied and rich cultural legacy that is unsurpassed in any other small country. The island endured two dramatic sieges (1565 against the Turks, 1941/43 against the German/Italian forces) which were of great importance, not just to Malta but to all of Europe.

3.2 Archaeology

Malta has been inhabited since 5,000 BC. and hosts a rich range of archaeological sites and features, including Stone Age temples, cart ruts, Punic tombs, cave dwellings, Roman villas, Palaces of the Knights and British military fortifications. It possesses several important Neolithic temple sites, including the temple complex of HagerQim (on the south coast) and the Hypogeum (near Valletta) an impressive underground temple.

Modern archaeology has shown that on Malta, people without a written language or knowledge of metal had constructed large, highly sophisticated structures several hundred years before the Egyptians began work on the pyramids. The temple building period started around 3600 BC, and lasted for over 1000 years. Artefacts (such as the beautiful Venus of Malta statue) found during excavations at the sites are to be seen in the National Archaeological Museum in Valletta, a lovely museum, well worth a visit. Some of the cycle routes pass by important archaeological sites. Information on these sites is given within the route description in section 4 of this guide. You should make it a priority to allow time (about 1 hour) for a visit to the UNESCO recognised Hager QimTemple comlex.

3.3 Geology

The Maltese islands are situated about 90 km south of Sicily and 290 km north of Africa. The combination of a warm Mediterranean climate, physical isolation from other land masses and its limestone base, have led to the formation in Malta and Gozo of rare eco-systems with endemic species of plants and animals.

The island's rocks are of sedimentary limestone which started to form on the seabed some 200 million years ago through the compaction of shells, coral, sediment and other material that fell to the sea bed. Five distinct layers can be distinguished within the deep limestone beds, with each layer representing a different phase of development of the Mediterranean Sea and its inhabitants. These layers can be seen at a number of cliffs. From top to bottom (and from young to old) the five layers are as follows: Upper Coralline limestone (a strong coral material used for concrete), Greensands (no particular use), Blue Clay, (which has a significance for creation of springs), Globigerina limestone (a yellow stone easy to carve, yet strong enough for construction) and Lower Coralline Limestone (the strongest rock of all, used in construction). It is the availability of the readily quarried yellow Globigerina limestone that has given Malta such an abundant

4. Cycle Routes and Maps

In selecting cycling routes on Malta two main factors have been taken into account. The first is the topography of the island as it dictates the position of roads and the steepness of inclines. The second is the location of features and landscapes of most interest. This guide is aimed at readers who enjoy cycling, not just for its own sake, but because it can take them through landscapes of beauty and past features of historic, natural or environmental interest. In this guide we describe the following routes:

Route 1: Three Cities to Marsaxlokk

Route 2: Marsaxlokk to Zurrieq

Route 3: Qrendi, Blue Grotto and Temples

Route 4: Rabat, Buskett and Dingli Cliffs

Route 5: Mdina to Ghajn Tuffieha

Route 6: Mellieħa and Marfa Peninsula

Route 7: Mosta and the Victoria Lines

Route 8: Round Malta Coastal Route

In those cases where a choice of routes can bring you to the same destination we have selected those roads that are less busy, and which bring you through more interesting areas. The routes are shown on detailed maps and the associated descriptions provide information on the key features to be encountered. On each route we also describe a number of options (**Brown** on the map) which will allow the cyclist to visits points of interest not immediately close to the route. The suggested routes also encourage you to stop at specific locations from where short walks (**Green** on the map) can bring you to features that cannot be directly reached by bike.

Gozo has a number of wonderful cycling routes. These are described in detail in the book “Cycling Gozo” available at www.greatwalksmalta.com. Comino is the tranquil island between Malta and Gozo. There are wonderful walking tracks on the island but they are not suitable for bikes.

Route 1

Three Cities to Marsaxlokk

Three Cities - Kalkara - Xgħajra - Marsaskala - Marsaxlokk

Key Features

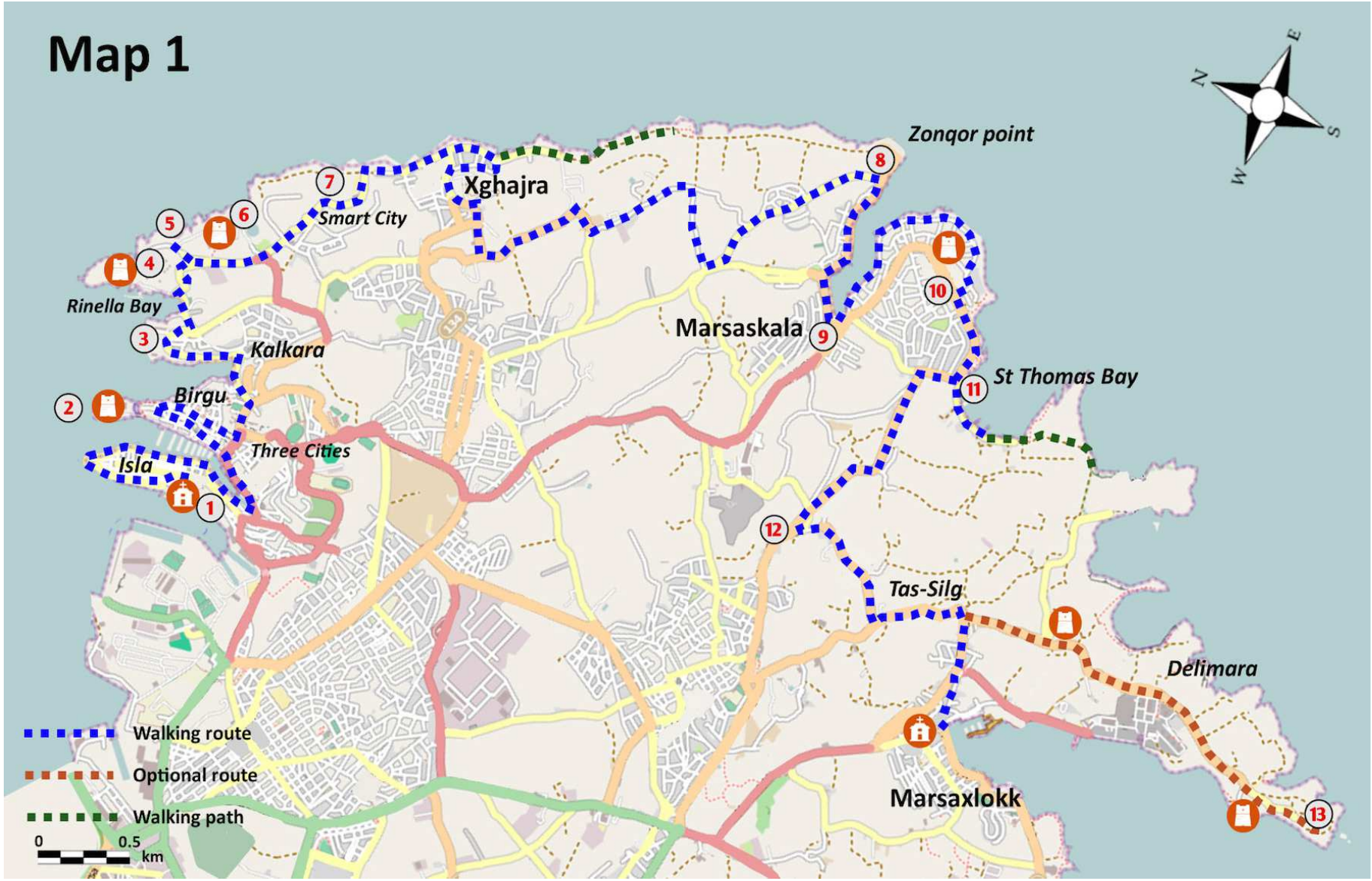
The Three Cities

St. Thomas Bay

Panoramic views

Marsaxlokk Fıshıng Vıllage

This 25 km route (Map 1), graded easy to moderate, takes you around the eastern tıp of Malta, a quite developed region not much frequented by tourists. The route begins at The Three Cities whıch was the base of the Knights before the construction of Valletta in 1570. It contains so many beautiful medieval buildings, museums and forts that you must visit this area - but some other day.


Map 1
N
E
S
W
Zonqor point
8
Xghajra
7
Smart City
6
5
4
Rinella Bay
3
Kalkara
Birgu
2
Three Cities
Isla
1
Marsaskala
9
10
St Thomas Bay
11
12
Tas-Silg
Delimara
Marsaxlokk
13
Walking route
Optional route
Walking path
0
0.5
km

Route Description

You begin the cycle at Isla (also known as Senglea) by passing through its impressive entrance **(1)** and then through a square with a church to proceed along the central road of the peninsula. Just before a second square you take a narrow road to the left and then turn right. Coming to a junction you take the lower coastal road and follow it around the peninsula at sea level. You quickly pass along the curving uphill road that brings you into Birgu (also known as Vittoriosa). Passing by the parish Church of St. Lawrence you follow the rising narrow road that brings you near to the tip of the peninsula and the impressive Fort St Angelo **(2)**. The route then curves around to bring you through the central square and then out of the peninsula, again passing the parish church. Taking the main road to the left you head towards Kalkara with its pretty sandy beach.

Follow the coastal promenade as it goes uphill past Villa Bighi **(3)** and then curves towards Rinella Bay. Notice the prominent fort at the right hand side of the bay, this is Fort Ricasoli **(4)**. Cycle up along the steep uphill road, perhaps taking a look at the War Cemetery **(5)** and then maybe a visit to Fort Rinella **(6)**. The latter fort is open to the public and houses the Armstrong 100 ton gun, the largest in the world. The Grand Harbour had a great strategic value and so it was heavily defended with forts constructed by the Knights (e.g. Fort St. Angelo) and the British (e.g. Fort Rinella).

The route passes through Smart City, an ultra modern development designed to attract I.T. companies to Malta. The buildings are attractive as is the seawater lagoon **(7)** where you may care to stop for a coffee. Continue on towards the promenade of the small town of Xghajra **(9)**. There is a coastal walking track from Xghajra to Marsaskala but it is a bit too rough for most bikes and it is better to take the route inland along the rural roads shown on the map.

You soon reach the mouth of the narrow bay of Marsaskala. The modern buildings facing the sea are attractive if over-intensive and the general impression is of a peaceful seaside town. Cycling along beside the promenade, you pass by the parish church with an impressive bell tower. Crossing over a bridge at the inner part of the Bay **(9)** you continue uphill around its curving edge. Here you can see saltpans used in past centuries to obtain salt from seawater. Passing around the tip of the peninsula, you come to the impressive St. Thomas Tower **(10)** constructed by the Knights shortly after the 1614 landing of 6,000 Turkish soldiers in nearby Marsaskala Bay. Continue along the road, past a number of modern villas, and turn left at a wide road. You soon come to the pretty beach of St. Thomas Bay. Parking your bike near the well-located café **(11)**, we suggest you ramble along the beach to its far end where you can notice the unusually soft nature of the rocks. Though all the rock of Malta is limestone which formed at the bottom of ancient seas, there is considerable variations in strength and colour. The coast to the east of the beach is very beautiful but the track is too rough for bikes and so you must you must turn inland a little to reach the fishing village of Marsaxlokk.

From the café **(11)** take a right inland and then the left towards Marsaxlokk (signposted). The road meanders through this tranquil area, reaching a roundabout adjacent to a chapel **(12)**. You pass the Tas-Silg area where archaeological investigations have shown that a number of cultures have used this site as a sanctuary since around 3,000 BC. Findings include the remains of Punic, Greek and Roman temples. After about 500 m you come to to a T-junction where you have the option of going left to see the lighthouse at Delimara point or turning right to Marsaxlokk.

Option to Delimara Point

Taking the road to the left at the T-junction you cycle to the tip of the peninsula, about 1.5km away. Here you can admire the historic Delimara lighthouse **(13)**, the beautiful coastline and the cliffs of Delimara that overlook an extensive area of salt pans.

The road downhill runs past fertile agricultural land towards the fishing village of Marsaxlokk. This is a prosperous and bustling village, with many restaurants offering fresh fish from local fishermen. The traditional fishing boats in the bay add a colourful touch to the view while the eye painted on the prow is reputed to bring good luck. The extensive open market is popular among locals and tourists, particularly at weekends. This route ends at the parish church.

Route 2

Marsaxlokk to Żurrieq

Marsaxlokk - Birżebbuġa – Hal Far - Żurrieq

Key Features

Marsaxlokk Fishing Village

Għar Dalam cave

Cave of Għar Ħasan

Ancient town of Żurrieq

This 15 km route (Map 2), graded easy, takes you around the eastern end of Malta, a developed region not much frequented by tourists. A visit to the cave and its associated Victorian museum at Għar Dalam is strongly recommended. Your route takes you around the edge of Marsaxlokk Bay, Malta's second largest harbour and the island's main fishing base. The bay nowadays is dominated by the commercial activities of the large and busy Freeport on its southern end.

Map 2
N
W
E
S
Marsaxlokk
Ghar Dalam
Zurrieq
Birzebbugia
Marsaxlokk Bay
Pretty Bay
Freeport
Hal Far
Fort Benghisa
Ghar Hasan
1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10
11
12
13
14
Main route
Optional route
Walking path
0
0.5
km

Route Description

You start at the fishing village of Marsaxlokk **(1)**, a good place to see the colourful traditional fishing boats, the Luzzu, which have an eye painted on the prow to bring good luck. A little further on, at the weekends, you pass to a busy market with stalls selling fish and cheap Asian goods. The range of fish includes octopus, morays, grouper, tuna, swordfish, sea bass and lampuki, a fish used in a number of traditional dishes. The village has a number of pleasant cafés and restaurants, several specializing in fish dishes.

The cycle route continues past some attractive houses and a hardstand area for boat maintenance **(2)** overlooked by the Knights' Vendome redoubt. The road goes right towards the Tower of San Luċjan **(3)**, from the time of Knights. The Fort is now restored and serves as a base for the Malta Aquaculture Research Centre. Follow the main road past an oil depot and then along by the coast to Birżebbuġia. At this point, you could consider a visit to the Għar Dalam cave **(4)** and museum about 500 m uphill and inland from this inner part of the bay. It was here that the earliest evidence of human settlement on Malta (from 5,400 BC) was discovered. (information at www.heritagemalta.org).

You cycle by the promenade that fringes the lovely bay of Saint George **(5)**. Just where the promenade widens, you may notice a pair of cart ruts leading into the sea. These cart ruts became partially submerged when sea level rose after the last ice age. To your right, you can note the parapet wall of Saint George's redoubt, and behind it an old country chapel dating from 1683. Continue along the promenade with a small public garden, passing another oil depot. You go past a memorial dedicated to the end of the cold war. It was at a historic meeting near this spot in Malta that U.S. President George H. W. Bush and U.S.S.R. leader Mikhail Gorbachev agreed a new peaceful relationship, just a few weeks after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1990. Continue along the promenade, past the Gżira Battery, now converted into the Redoubt bar and on towards Pretty Bay **(6)**.

You continue to cycle at sea level close to the coast around curving Marsaxlokk Bay, noting the busy Freeport. After leaving the built-up area you turn to the right at a roundabout and head inland towards Hal far. There is a turn to the left just beyond Point **(7)** on which you can cycle on rural roads past the neglected Fort Benghisa. The British built this large polygonal fort in 1909 to protect commercially important Marsaxlokk Bay. Since its abandonment by the British forces in the 1970s it has fallen into disrepair and is not open to the public. The road, though interesting, is very rough and you may prefer to stay on the main route.

The main route brings you to the southern coast with its many high cliffs. Despite the industrial character of this area, it hosts a number of rare species. Of particular importance are the shearwaters that have established safe nesting sites along the inaccessible cliffs. You come to a small parking area **(9)** where you should visit the impressively located Cave of Għar Ħasan. You notice a fence that keeps the public away from the cliff edge. If you wish to visit the cave you should pass through the gap in the

Route 6

Mellieħa and Marfa Peninsula

Mellieħa - Majjistral Park – Paradise Bay – Marfa - Mellieħa

Key Features

Mellieħa Beach

Popeye Village

The Red Tower

Paradise Bay

Wonderful panoramic views

This 18 km circular route (Map 6), graded as moderate, takes you from the seaside town of Mellieħa to the beautiful and well-named Paradise Bay. You pass near the ferryport of Ċirkewwa and explore the beaches of the Marfa Peninsula before returning near the Red Fort and terminating at the glorious beach at Mellieħa.

Map 6
N
W
E
S
White Tower
Cirkewwa
Ahrax
Marfa Ridge
8
7
Paradise Bay
6
Red Tower
Mellieha Bay
Ghadira
Beach
5
9
Popeye Village
4
1
2
Mellieha
3
Majjistral Park
Main route
Optional route
Walking path
0
0.5
km

Route 8

The Round Malta Cycle Route

Map 8 shows a route that takes you around the island of Malta by a network of roads and tracks that is as near to the coast as is practical and safe and which avoids impassable coastal promontories, quarries or land in private ownership. On the map you can see other tracks nearer to the coast that are used by walkers and farmers but these, in the main, are not suitable for cycling because of rough terrain or their proximity to cliffs. The route is circular so you can begin at any point you like. For convenience we have chosen to begin at Valletta.

The 100 km route lies mainly along relatively peaceful country roads but must take you at times through urban areas, particularly near Valletta. The route is generally fairly level as Malta has no mountains or hills of consequence. The highest point on the island, at just over 250 m, is near Dingli on the south coast. There are a number of inclines where you rise quite quickly from sea level to a road on a plateau or higher level, and although the height difference may seem modest, it can prove quite challenging for some.

Map 8
Cirkewwa
Paradise Bay
Red Tower
St. Paul's Bay
Mellieha
Popeye Village
Salina
Golden Bay
Pembroke
St Julian's
Mgarr
Victoria Lines
Mosta
Valletta
Mdina
Three Cities
Rabat
Marsaskala
Dingli
Dingli Cliffs
Zurrieq
Ghar Dalam
Neolithic Temples
Marsaxlokk Bay
Blue Grotto
Ghar Hasan
N
W
E
S
0
2
km
The Round Malta Cycle Route
Main route

There are few cyclists who would wish complete the entire route in one day. Almost all others will prefer a combination of a shorter distance and some relaxation (e.g. at Paradise Beach) or a visit an interesting feature such as a Neolithic temple. For that reason the overall route is divided into the following four sections, though some may prefer to cycle the overall route in smaller sections.

A. Valletta to Żurrieq

B. Żurrieq to Mġarr

C. Mġarr to Mellieħa

D. Mellieha to Valletta

The map shows the location of the natural and man-made features that are close to the route and the accompanying text provides information and links to the features. Additional information is provided in the description of other routes in this guide that overlap with this one.

Section A: Valletta to Żurrieq

From the modern entrance to Valletta you cycle downhill through the old suburb of Floriana with its many attractive stone buildings. The roads are busy as you curve around the Grand Harbour towards the Three Cities. This wonderful area is worthy of a full day's visit. As you cycle you get a flavour of its many medieval buildings, layout and impressive fortifications. After Kalkara you pass into more open countryside and enjoy the mix of small fields, villages and churches that you pass on the way to the seaside town of Marsakala. You curve around its narrow bay and then head a little inland through pleasant countryside to reach the fishing village of Marsaxlokk. Cycling around the coast road you soon come to the adjoining town of Birżebbuġa where you have the opportunity to visit the Dhar Ghalam Cave and its pretty Victorian museum. It was here that the earliest evidence of human settlement on Malta (some 7,400 years ago) was discovered (for info. see www.heritagemalta.org). The site is up a road to the right, near where you enter the village. Your route continues around the edge of busy Marsaxlokk Bay.

After leaving the Freeport area, you cycle on rural roads to visit the impressively located Ghar Hasan cave you should pass through the gap in the fence next to a small rural room. Despite the industrial character of this general area, it hosts a number of rare species. Of particular importance are the shearwaters which have established safe nesting sites along the inaccessible cliffs. You cycle on through the Hal Far industrial estate before turning again to the coast. As you approach the town of Żurrieq you pass Il-Wardija tower built by the Knights in 1659 and one of a set of 13 towers guarding the coast. Żurrieq is one of the oldest towns in Malta. Archaeological investigations have shown that the area has been inhabited since the Bronze Age (about 2,000 BC).

Box 9 Għadira Nature Reserve

The six-hectare site of the reserve was originally used in the times of the Knights for the production of salt from seawater. About 25 years ago, the voluntary organisation BirdLife Malta converted the area into a nature reserve with lagoons, islands, observation hides and a visitor centre. This wetland is a very rare habitat in Malta and provides a valuable sanctuary for breeding species of birds such as Warblers, Corn Buntings, Coot and Plover. Visiting species include Grebes, Ducks, Herons, Kingfishers, Egrets, Waders and birds of prey. The reserve also hosts some local flora and fauna, such as rabbits, hedgehogs, chameleon, geckos, lizards, snakes, shrimps and killifish. A number of rare plants now grow only in this reserve. Ghadira offers a taste of what the Maltese islands would be like if illegal hunting and trapping were stopped. The centre welcomes visitors, typically on Saturdays and Sundays from November until May from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. For further information go to: www.birdlifemalta.com.