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.

There are very many features of interest on Malta that you will encounter on your cycling expeditions. This guide provides information on key features by means of links (in Blue) within the text. The links are of two kinds. One is a link to an external website (e.g. www.greatwalksmalta.com) that needs a connection to the Internet. The second type, also in Blue, is to a source of information within this eBook (e.g. Ħaġar Qim Temple). This latter link has the advantage that it does not need an Internet connection which could prove expensive for foreign visitors. You can recognise the difference between the two by the presence of a www: this means that an Internet connection is required.

1.1 Visiting Key Attractions

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

Key Attractions of Malta

1. **Valletta**
   - World heritage city
2. **The Ħaġar Qim Temple Complex**
   - Amazing stone age temples
3. **The Blue Grotto**
   - Impressive and quirky geological feature
4. **Mdina**
   - Ancient capital of Malta
5. **The Three Cities**

   Wonderfully preserved medieval towns
6. **Paradise Beach**
   - A beautiful beach
7. **Victoria Lines**
   - 1890 Defence line spanning Malta
8. **Majjistral National Park**
   - Stunning coastline, wonderful plant diversity
9. **Golden Sands Bay**
   - Beautiful sandy beach, clear turquoise water
10. **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 Ħaġar Qim Temple Complex. 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. Practical Information

2.1 General stuff

Language

Malta has its own language, with an Arabic base but containing many Italian and English words. Maltese is written in the Latin script, with a number of minor variations. For example:

Ċ is pronounced as ch so Ċisk (a good local beer) is Chisk

X is pronounced as sh so Xlendi on Gozo is Shlendi

M before a consonant is pronounced as im. Thus Mdina is Imdina

Għ is silent, so the village of Għarb is pronounced Aarb

Almost everyone speaks English as a second language. Learning a few words in Maltese won't hurt and can prove a good conversation starter.

English	Maltese	Pronounced
Yes	Iva	Ijva
No	Le	Le
How are you?	Kif inti?	Kiyf intee?
Do you speak English?	Titkellem bl-Ingliz?	titkellem blinglis?
My name is	Jisimni	yisimnee
So long	Caw	chaw
Good morning	Bongu	bonju
Good evening	Bonswa	bonswa
Good night	Il-lejl it-tajjeb	illeyl itayeb
Goodbye	Sahha	sahha
Please	Jekk joghgbok	yek yojbok
Thank you	Grazzi	gratsee
Very good/well	Tajjeb hafna	tayeb hafna
Welcome	M'hemmx mn'hiex	memsh mnish
Sorry / Excuse me	Skuzani	Skuzanee
How much is it?	Kemm tiswa?	Kemm tiswa?
I need a doctor	Ghandi bzonn tabib	undee bson tabib
Bicycle	Rota	Rota
Street	Triq	Trick
Valley	Wied	Vied
Cave	Għar	Arr
OK, yeah, all right	Mela	Mella

Cycling on the left

As with other islands that were within the British Empire (Ireland, Sri Lanka) the Maltese drive and cycle on the left side of the road.

Electricity

Normal European voltage (220v) but the electricity socket requires the standard British 3-pin plug.

Banks and money

Malta is an EU member state and uses the Euro. Banks offer all the usual services and ATMs are commonplace.

Phones

There is full mobile phone coverage on Malta and Gozo. The international dialling code for Malta is 356. In the event of an emergency ring 112.

Crime

Malta is among the safest countries in the world for tourists, a feature which must be very attractive to those who have visited certain countries in South America or Eastern Europe.

Hospitals

The hospital and medical care system in Malta is as good as anywhere in Europe. For EU citizens the European Health Insurance Card (EHIC) can be used in respect of necessary medical treatment due to either an accident or illness. You should get the EHIC card from the authorities in your own country before you travel.

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

This company offers a wide variety of bikes for hire and sale.

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

Key Dates

5000 BC First settlers arrive in Malta
3600-2500 BC Construction of Megalithic Temples
800-480 BC Roman rule
60 AD St. Paul shipwrecked on Malta
395 Byzantine rule
970-1090 Arab rule
1090-1194 Norman rule
1194-1530 Swabian, Angevin and Spanish rule
1530 Malta ceded to Knights of St. John
1565 The Great Siege, Ottoman army repulsed
1566 Foundation of Valletta
1798 French forces capture Malta and expel Knights
1800 French expelled, British rule commences
1941/43 German/Italian forces lay siege to Malta
1964 Malta gains independence
2004 Malta joins EU

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

Birds

The island of Malta consists mainly of a dry limestone habitat with just a few forested areas and no permanent rivers or lakes. As a consequence, it has as few as 21 regularly breeding bird species; these include species such as the Short-toed Lark and the Blue Rock Thrush (the Maltese national bird). A contributory factor to these small numbers has undoubtedly been that, historically, trapping and shooting of birds, particularly migrants, was a major pastime. Since joining the EU, these activities have been significantly curtailed in compliance with the EU Birds Directive and recently there has been a recorded increase in both the numbers and species of breeding birds.

As Malta occupies a strategic point on the migration flyway between Africa and Europe it plays host to an impressive list of spring (March to May) and autumn (September to November) passage migrants. In all, some 384 species have been recorded to date, of which at least 170 are regularly recorded. Qawra (near St. Paul's Bay) is regarded as one of the best locations for watching sea birds while Buskett, a small woodland area near Dingli, is noted for birds of prey such as the Honey Buzzard and Eleanora's Falcon. Only limited wetland and salt marsh areas remain in Malta and these provide important stop-over points for migrants such as herons, rails and grebes while also supporting some breeding birds.

The Ghadira Nature Reserve is situated on low-lying land behind Mellieha beach. About 20 years ago BirdLife Malta converted the area into a nature reserve with lagoons, islands, observation hides and a visitor centre. This is a very rare habitat in Malta and provides a valuable sanctuary for breeding species such as Warblers, Corn Buntings, Coot and Plover, as well as visiting species. The reserve also hosts some local flora and fauna, such as rabbits, hedgehogs, chameleon, geckos, lizards, snakes, shrimps and the salt-tolerant killifish. The centre welcomes visitors, typically on Saturdays and Sundays, from November until May from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Further information is available at www.birdlifemalta.org.

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 Neolithic 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

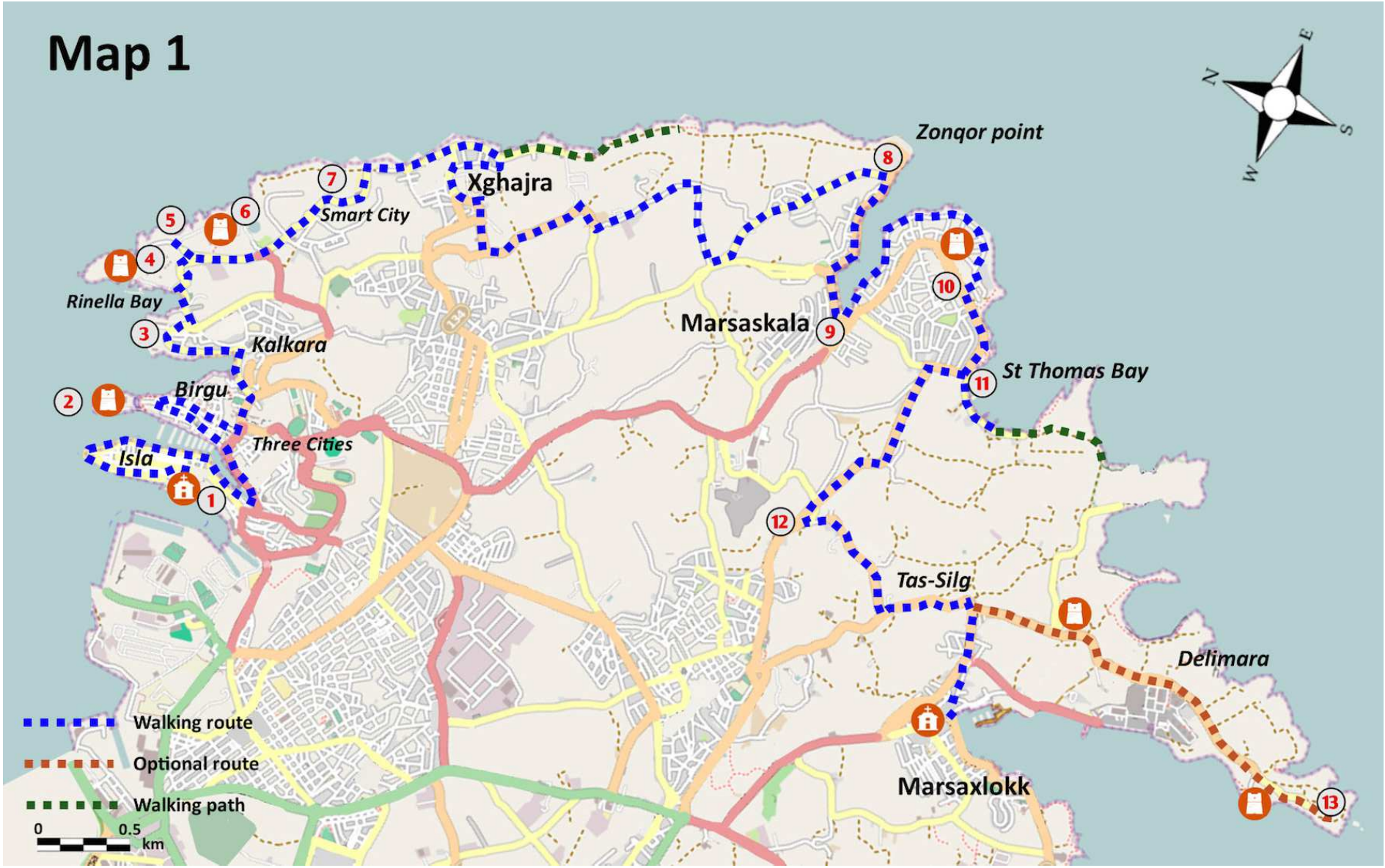
The Three Cities

St. Thomas Bay

Panoramic views

Marsaxlokk Fishing Village

This 25 km route (Map 1), graded easy to moderate, takes you around the eastern tip of Malta, a quite developed region not much frequented by tourists. The route begins at The Three Cities area which 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
7
Xghajra
Smart City
6
5
4
Rinella Bay
3
Kalkara
Birgu
2
Three Cities
Isla
1
10
Marsaskala
9
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.

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.

Box 4 Ghar Ħasan Cave

This cave, situated some 75m above sea level on a dramatic cliffs provides breathtaking views of the Mediterranean Sea. Its extraordinary shape is a result of the erosion action of underground water that has dissolved limestone held between two layers of harder coralline limestone. This is evident in the smooth surface of the rock and the many fractures in the wall and roof. A 16th century legend relates that during Count Roger's rule of Malta (1092), an Arab named Ħasan kidnapped a Maltese girl. He carried her into the cave, keeping her imprisoned there. Seeking to escape with her from Malta, Ħasan established contact with some Berber pirates. Just as he was lowering the girl down the cliffs to a pirate ship waiting below, Ħasan was surprised by a group of Maltese who had come to rescue the girl. In the ensuing commotion, he let go of the rope and both Ħasan and the girl plunged to their death in the merciless sea below. One of a number of alternative versions recounts how Ħasan was killed by his captive who managed to return safely to her village. Explore this amazing cave with care, perhaps going on the right side towards another opening. The innermost part of the cave hosts a rare community of Mediterranean mouse-eared bats.

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.