

VALLETTA 450 SEMINAR – 25th October 2008
Event organized by the Valletta Alive Foundation

PAPER

Tourism Product Considerations for Valletta by Ms Elizabeth Aquilina

Some years ago during a conference on Valletta, organized by the Malta Tourism Authority, various speakers lamented about the lack of appreciation by the Maltese people of their capital city. Dr. Paul Borg Olivier, the previous Mayor of Valletta, had highlighted the difficulty in selling property in our capital, citing that one estate agent had over 17 million liri worth of property on his books.

We can all feel confident that this situation has now changed completely and that estate agents are today in a situation where their demand for properties in Valletta is likely in excess of supply. The strong appeal that the city is now enjoying for its architecture and residential status is a mark of its successful revival in just a few short years.

We now have new targets for another milestone in our history, and whilst preserving Valletta as a living monument, we need to maintain its continuity through urban living and enterprise.

Valletta's already widespread exposure to tourism has multiplied with the booming of the cruise liner industry. We need to act now to harness this momentum by identifying and addressing any tourism product shortfalls.

Addressing means taking action, and not just thinking about it, and there is no better time than the present.

Valletta, as yet, does not offer within its walls, accommodation in the 4 and 5 star categories. One has to add that the two 5 star hotels, the oldest and the newest, namely the Phoenicia and the Excelsior, are located just outside its walls, and are well within walking distance to the centre of the city.

This should not however preclude us from exploiting the potential available for the more unique experience, that of the boutique hotels. Valletta is indeed an ideal place for sophisticated hotel accommodation. Restoring and converting a small number of the currently vacant palazzos to their former glory, to host the

more discerning traveller preferring to stay away from the mainstream hotels, will expand and upgrade Malta's offer to the tourist.

Extending the hotel sector within the city has considerable commercial and economic benefits; tourists as opposed to day or half-day visitors spend more money as they use lodging facilities, thus staying in the area for longer periods.

The catering industry also plays a considerable role in giving the city more value as a tourist destination. With over 200 food and beverage outlets across 0.8 square kilometres, and the number is on the rise, it is evident that Valletta enjoys a wide choice of catering facilities to suite all tastes, ranging from little snack bars, cafeterias, fast food outlets, stylish wine bars, to the elegant restaurants offering specialized international cuisine.

The current situation is one where the greater majority of these establishments open for business only during day time, catering for the demand of day visitors, whether they are local or tourists.

The challenge for the future of this sector has to be one that instils the correct stimuli for evening entertainment without degrading the quality of life of the residents. Expansion in the tourism lodging sector would certainly influence favourably this demand and bring back life to the city in the evenings.

In the longer term, we will also need to look into HR planning and resource maximisation in order to fulfil the demand of a trained work force willing to work evening hours and shifts.

The VISET Cruise Liner Terminal has opened a new chapter in the tourism market. In the year 2000, cruise liner passenger arrivals stood at 171,000. Today, eight years on, the number is expected to exceed half a million visitors by the end of this year.

The proposed extension of the cruise liner terminal is likely to result in greater number of tourist arrivals in the coming years.

Although exact data is not available on the number of tourists that visit Valletta daily, it is established that 95% of tourists that visit Malta also visit Valletta. This would mean that as much as 1.5 million visitors roam our streets every year.

It is sufficient to walk down the main streets in Valletta to observe the throngs, the bustle and the increased commercial activity during the high seasons and more so, during the days of heavy cruise passenger arrivals, making the city as vital, colourful and cosmopolitan as it was always intended to be.

Problems can arise with insufficient studies on carrying capacities. Tourist points of interest are generally clustered in limited areas, often creating

pedestrian 'traffic jams'. Distribution of tourist within the city will improve the overall visitors' experience, as well as spreads the economic benefit.

The future outlook which aims at increasing tourism arrivals should also address the issue of visitors' management, and should include:

- Expand the product to improve spatial planning: Without a doubt, we all look forward to regeneration projects such as the restoration of St. Elmo and the proposed heritage trail, which will be a massive attraction on its own; the rebuilding of the Opera House; City Gate project and the embellishment and paving of the peninsula's promenades.
- Reconsider the way we are packaging and marketing lesser visited attractions, such as Valletta walking tours and garden tours that could extend into Floriana and military heritage trails for which there is a demand but we are not yet fully catering for.
- Extending visitors' opening hours of our most notable attractions where demand is not being satisfied. Another option is to de-market the over-demanded attraction by replacing it with high quality alternatives.

Our most recent research concludes that as much as 94% of tourists consider Valletta to have a very high variety of historical and cultural attractions.

Without a doubt, Valletta abounds with cultural treasures, and some of these can be found in its splendid churches. Yet, no more than a handful, out of the 25 places of worship, are open to visitors during daytime. It would appear that we are losing a significant opportunity to display our more notable heritage, and at the same time reduce the pressure from some other highly visited attractions.

The burden of opening churches as visitor attractions, with the exception of St. John's Co-cathedral, presently falls on the ecclesiastical community. In future, this option may be threatened further. We should start working with the various stakeholders, including the local government, in order to establish local voluntary organisations that can offer their services of custodianship for these places. With a growing aging population, the first choice would probably fall on retired persons who still want to remain active and could be trained to carry out this service. Instilling the civic pride of 'hosts' has been proved in studies of other destinations to increase the level of hospitality by offering tourists the opportunity to meet and mix with the locals. Tourism after all has a high factor of social element which should be wisely exploited.

Another issue to improving the tourism product concerns accessibility to Valletta's centre.

Methods of transportation for the vast number of tourists still rely heavily on motor vehicles. The majority of these do not enter the city centre but stop outside city gate.

The other two gateways available are the cruise liner terminal on the Grand Harbour and the Marsamxetto harbour.

The sheer number of visitors' arrivals at the cruise liner terminal has prompted the present efficient arrangement through various modes of transportation of tourists into the city and other destinations both by VISET as well as other stakeholders. These comprise of coaches, a dedicated route bus, white taxis, as well as horse drawn cabs.

The walking distance from the harbour to Valletta is reasonable short; however, it is neither push-chair nor wheelchair friendly.

Re-installation of the Upper Barrakka lift would appear to be by far the best solution, especially for the encumbered visitors, the aged and those with reduced mobility. Furthermore the ride in a panoramic lift can be marketed as an experience in itself, that offers value for money with the scope of making this investment self-sustainable.

Ferry crossing to and from other towns and cities is as yet an underrated method of transportation. The service provided from Sliema Ferries to Valletta would seem to enjoy substantial patronage by tourists (although no official statistics could be sourced), and should be incorporated in future transport planning by extending this service as well as integrating it with land transportation. Smaller and less cumbersome buses could be used for ring road transportation which could service passengers from both harbours.

Given that our market will continue to rely predominantly on visitors to Valletta as opposed to tourists, our aims should focus on maximising the hours spent by day trippers, as well as entice repeated visits to the city.

The abundance of cultural and heritage sites in Valletta remains our greatest strength. On the other hand, some of our weaknesses are quite glaring. Clearly we are still a long way from fulfilling some of our visitors' basic requirements and expectations, and one of these concerns the quality of our public conveniences.

Research points at this shortfall quite strongly however, in reality, do we really need to look into statistics to confirm this? Half of these services are situated below ground level denying access to wheelchair bound users. A number of these public conveniences are not maintained and in some cases fall short of being considered as 'primitive'. Benchmarks should be set and a plan to gradually upgrade all these restrooms to compliment this exceptional city should be put in motion.

Here, we come to another area in which the process of bestowing pride back in our city has already started. The grid-like streets of *Citta Umilissima* were designed by their architect to be anything but humble. The most recent paving projects for Merchants Street and St John Square have served as a catalyst for regeneration. Facades, both public and private were embellished as a consequence, whilst new and upmarket businesses have now moved into this prestigious address.

The case points towards good strategy, and show that particular projects undertaken by the government will steer the helm towards private restoration and investment.

The commercial centre remains the life blood of the city and one would invite collaboration between shop owners and the government that could instil a return to the evening stroll 'passeggiata' of bygone days in an environment of beautifully lit and decorated shop windows.

There is so much that we can do in this direction. We should start by replacing shutters that obliterate shop windows with see through glass ones; window display lights need to be left on after closing time and until late evening to invite attention; displayed merchandise should serve as an opportunity to invoke desire and excite the viewer. Improving display decoration to standards that captivate, similar in standards to other fashionable cities of culture around Europe, can be aspired to by setting up incentives in this direction.

More tourists staying around Malta would very willingly spend their evenings in Valletta if we can provide them with a transport service, that includes both bus and taxi service, which is efficient without being exorbitantly expensive.

In the light of the above, let us also keep in mind that in all our enthusiasm to rekindle the spirit and beauty of Valletta, we do not overlook its residential character. In a city where visitors vastly outnumber residents, negative attitudes to tourism can develop unless there is a concerted effort to safeguard civic rights for residents.

We have now been discussing and considering for many years, it is now time, high time to start implementing changes to improve our city, so that it once again shall play the role of a 'City built by Gentlemen for Gentlemen.'

~~~