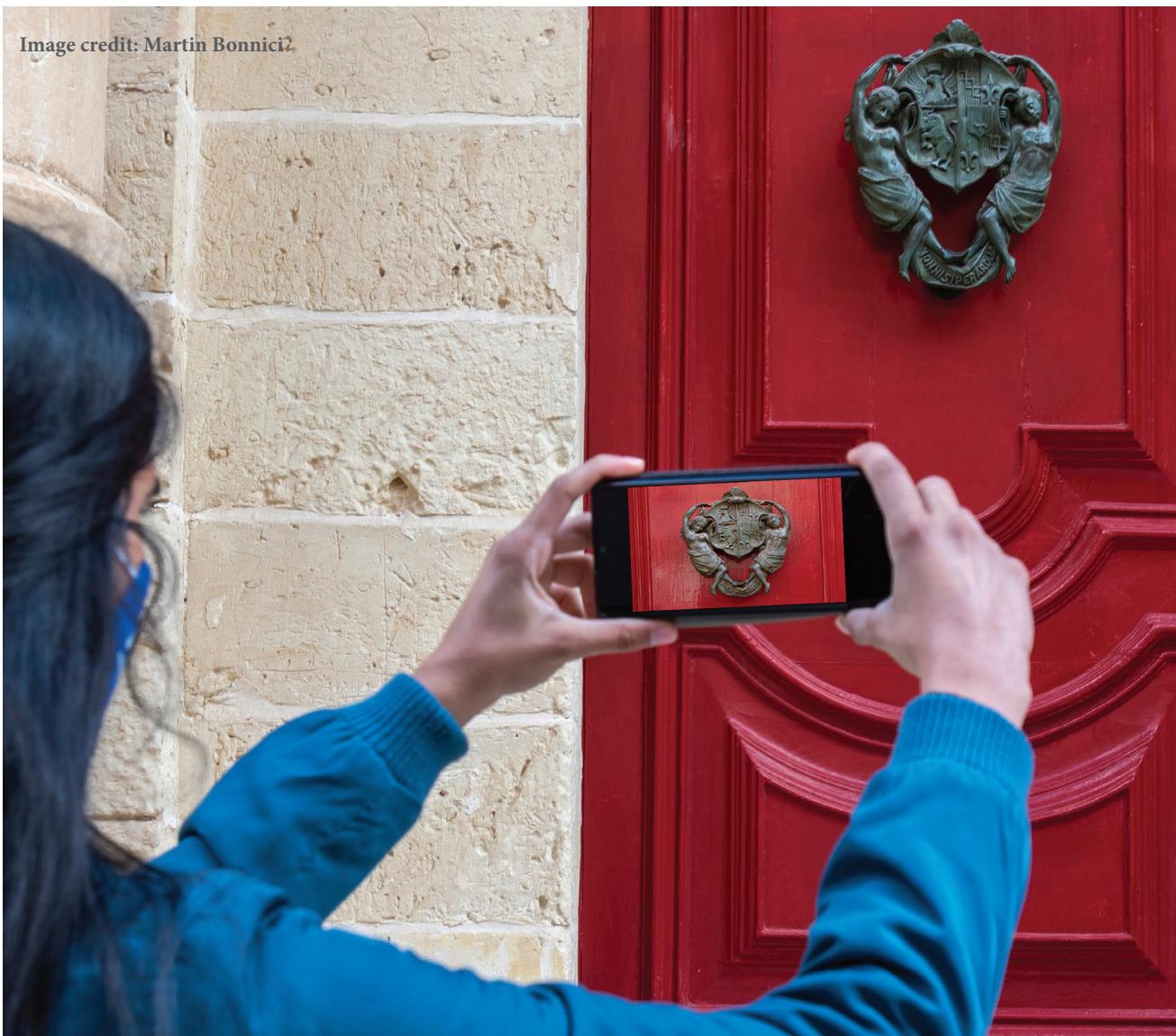


# A Sense of Place: Photography Tour in Malta



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**A**lthough a "Sense of Place" has different meanings to different people, it can easily be explored in a photography tour. The researcher was looking to bridge the gap between intangible feelings by turning them into the tangible expression of photography.

In the "Sense of Place Photography Tour", the group will learn how to identify a location in such a way that they connect with it in an individually meaningful way. The researcher set out to explain a number of techniques taking approximately 20 to 30 minutes and subsequently, showing the group a standard way of shooting to simplify this process. Over the next four hours, the researcher would spend individual time with each member of the group slowly revealing technical pointers and reaffirming techniques via repetitive methods and positive reinforcement.

"A Sense of Place Photography Tour" has to be like a tide that ebbs and flows in a fluid motion. The idea is to help a group reach their innermost feelings and interpret them into visual communication. The student will be able to capture parts of a niche, destination, cultural and creative tourism expressing them via photography.

#### WHAT IS A SENSE OF PLACE?

The idea of a "place" is a broad term which can be described as the meanings held about a particular place and "how people evaluate it based on those meanings" (Amsden, Stedman & Kruger, 2010, p.33). However, according to the literature, "a sense of place" is a much deeper concept which involves a range of experiences and emotions.

Derrett (2003, p. 51) discusses the strong emotional connection to a place

and the sensory impact this can have on the experience of it. He explores the way place can provide a "physical manifestation and better understanding of the relationships between residents, their environment, their neighbours, and visitors." A sense of place draws together the social, cultural, historical, sensory, and natural elements of a place (Larson, De Freitas & Hicks, 2013). Even though they are experienced on a personal level, when these elements are encountered together, they create a shared experience and emotional connection.

Campo et al. (2014, p. 155) discuss the concept of "spirit of a locality" which involves attachment, bonding and ancestral connections in exploring the sense of place. A sense of place has a strong temporal aspect and many studies have explored the impact of time and history when discussing this concept (Campelo et al., 2014; Derrett, 2003). This is particularly relevant to Malta as visitors feel that they can experience places from the past as well as enjoying the warmth of a modern coastal Mediterranean destination.

Oren, Shani & Poria (2021) discuss the significance of cultural tourism and note that there have been an increasing number of visits to heritage sites since the 1980's. Malta offers a number of sites rich in cultural tourism. When tourists visit a place like Vittoriosa (Birgu), they could feel that they have trodden in the same footsteps as the Hospitaller Knights. It draws them into the history of that area. These sites offer a depth of emotional attachment to the location whether it is a natural, built-up (urban), historical or museum setting. Thus, it can facilitate a mutual experience that lends itself to a better understanding of place.

#### EXPLORING "A SENSE OF PLACE"

In terms of historical and cultural qualities, it is useful to examine the

concept of a sense of place. When talking about a sense of place, there is a more cathartic feeling of spirituality expressed by individuals - that special feeling of becoming one with the location and/or the surroundings. In comparable experiences within historical settings, it can be argued that this place gives a feeling of a point in time when life was more uncomplicated (Jepson & Sharpley, 2014).

Physical activity such as walking, will foster a greater sense of intimacy in a given location. In the cultural tourism context based on arts aesthetics, learning on-site is a more valuable experience and it is more engaging for most groups travelling within any environment (Jepson & Sharpley, 2014). Exploring through the visual art of photography whilst visiting locations will enable a group to connect with a sense of place, and help in learning how to communicate what they see and feel through their cameras and present this to others.

In the specific photographic context of a tour, the group will create their visual story and the sense of place becomes their own. For example, does the community in Mdina look similar in comparison to a place of work at the Wignacourt Museum, or even on the outskirts of Rabat?

Each location has a dramatically different feel and function. The tours will occur in a relatively small area and yet the group will be walking through different spaces which demonstrate how much each community changes. Some communities seem to have more resources, while some work as custodians of a cultural artistic history and yet others will be rural. These differences directly contribute to a vibrant tapestry of that sense of place, each strand and thread tell their own story. Amsden, Stedman & Kruger (2010) discuss the connection of community through the interaction with others and

Rabat Street  
Image credit: Martin Bonnici



walking tours with an experienced guide helps foster this. A sense of place can be forged through the many activities and experiences in any given location.

#### **ARCHITECTURAL SENSE OF PLACE**

In Malta, historical buildings, street plans and the unique patterns they create add to the strong sense of place while modern buildings lack the same charm and uniformity. In Mdina, local globigerina stone has been used to construct many buildings. This type of stone creates a particular feel, especially in the morning and or the afternoon, as the honey-coloured light falls on the buildings. Although there are a number of architectural differences, the stone with its sandy tones help to set a mood. The Mdina palaces, some framed in baroque architecture decorated with the coats of arms of various families, help to exude a unique atmosphere.

As tourist groups walk through the main gate in Mdina they feel a sense of history. Walking across the stone bridge to the baroque city gate is one thing, but seeing the place where the old medieval gate used to be demands an explanation. Then walking through the richly decorated carved homage to Grand Master de Vilhena, is both regal and gives a sense of importance to that specific location. As the group pass through the city gate there are carved reliefs of legendary historical scenes, saints, and Latin inscriptions (Ebejer, 2013).

In a paper on cultural and creative tourism in Portugal, Carvalho, Ferreira and Figueira (2016) discuss the ways in which creative tourism is also a form of cultural tourism. The researcher strongly believes that this will relate directly to the Sense of Place Photography Tour.

#### **DILEMMAS**

It is clear that the tourism sector brings a number of benefits to Malta. In discussing a sense of place and the popularity of

tourism in various destinations, some issues of concern have been highlighted. For example, Foxell and de Trafford (2010, p. 156) note that Malta, a country of 400,000 people can receive up to a million tourists per year, placing a strain on infrastructure and fragile heritage sites. These figures have increased substantially since then. In considering this, questions must be asked about overcrowding and the negative impact on a sense of place this may have. In other Mediterranean destinations, tourism has taken over so much that local residents are increasingly pushed out of the city which changes the character of that area (Minoia, 2017).

The advantages and disadvantages of guided tours have also been explored. Zillinger, Jonasson and Adolfsson (2012) have discussed the herd-like and stereotyped image of guided tours. However, they acknowledge the benefits that guided tours provide, such as an introduction to an area as well as access to the best or most interesting locations of a city within a short space of time.

Cultural and niche tourism can assist in countering some of these problems. An experienced guide can assist in controlling numbers and corral tourists to help them in obtaining the maximum benefit from their visit while protecting vulnerable or fragile historic sites. Guides can also introduce visitors to new locations and suggest places to explore or visit outside the tour.

#### **QUESTIONNAIRES**

The researcher made use of an online questionnaire consisting of 14 targeted questions to find out who would be interested in taking such a tour. Information about the age and demographic characteristics and the profession of the interested participants were also recorded. The outcome of the questionnaire assisted the researcher to ascertain the target demographic and location of the audience most

likely to partake in the "Sense of Place Photography Tour" in Malta.

#### **AGE GROUPS**

Regarding age, the researcher wanted to get an idea what age groups would be interested in the "Sense of Place Photography Tour" of Malta.

The survey respondents revealed that the age group from 35 to 44 (35.17 %) were the most interested in doing the "Sense of place photography" tour. The age groups of 45 to 54 (22.07%) and 55 to 64 (17.93%) placed second and third probably due to a number of reasons including financial and family stability. The survey was also shared on Facebook.

#### **SOCIAL MEDIA**

When asking about social media, the researcher tried to determine which platforms are most commonly used by the respondents. Facebook was the most commonly used followed by Instagram.

This indicates that participants engaging on social media, would share images from the "Sense of Place Photography Tour" with some or all of the people within their group on social media. They may be proud of their images and promote the connection they feel to the area where the tour was held.

The questions about Social Media Platforms produced some interesting results. It revealed that an older audience was more likely to use Facebook and Instagram. It is likely that a number of images from the tour would be shared on these platforms. Facebook is generally more personal and could include stories of travels and experiences.

Instagram tends to be more location and experience based with little or no story attached. The advantage of Instagram is the high volume of uses for the platform. In a lot of instances, connections on Instagram tend to be outside of one's

social circle.

Of the platforms in the survey LinkedIn tends to be the most conservative, it is usually used for business purposes and images shared on this platform seem to be more business oriented.

#### **DO YOU LIKE PHOTOGRAPHY?**

As 93% of participants surveyed indicate that they like photography it could mean that the right kind of tour would be very popular. There will always be a lot of variants such as overly hot days or wet weather. Most people on social media tend to share their photos. A good number of people find locations by seeing new locations on other people's pages.

The survey has also uncovered a number of people that indicate that they do not like photography. This was not a surprise.

#### **WOULD YOU CONSIDER A PHOTO TOUR IN MALTA?**

Question nine indicated that 81% of participants surveyed would consider doing a photo tour in Malta. This opens possibilities to explore the various types of photo tours that could be offered locally.

#### **SHOOT LIKE A PHOTOJOURNALIST?**

This question indicates the openness of survey participants in learning photography that the researcher specialises in, both as a photojournalist and also as someone who has been conducting these type of photo tours for over a decade outside of Malta.

Photojournalism is about storytelling, this works well for people in general. Learning this craft is best done on site in various locations which is precisely what this "Sense of Place Photography Tour" intends to do.

Taking photos like a photojournalist is more than simply pointing and shooting. Learners need to be open to take in all

aspects of life around them in any location and must think about what they want to convey and how the final images will look. This style of tour and photography workshop is hands on and practical, and needs to be done on location.

#### **WORKSHOP AND WALKING TOUR**

80.5% of the participants indicated that they would attend a workshop/walking tour. In the experience of the researcher there needs to be a very delicate balance between distance covered and the ease of the walking. If the tour is too long or strenuous, participants focus on being tired rather than learning.

There are several options that could be explored. Tours could be graded for beginners, intermediate and advanced learners. For example, Mdina and Rabat are gentle on the feet and both are rich locations for photographers and tourists in general.

Valletta could have an A and a B tour. The B tour could circle the city exploring the streets. The Valletta streets can be taxing in hot weather, people who are physically able would be more likely to attend such a tour and photography workshop.

#### **BUSINESS OR PERSONAL?**

Most survey participants (89.3%) indicated that they would do the "Sense of Place Photography Tour" for personal reasons. In general, leisure is the most common reason for travel. However, business travel is also a huge market.

In Melbourne, Australia, the researcher was conducting photography tours and workshops. At the end of each workshop the researcher would hand out a short questionnaire. Approximately 30% of participants were in Melbourne for business reasons. They had a short period of time to do some sight-seeing, so they came to the researcher to view and photograph sites of interest. Of these

business tourists, several also looked for the researcher knowing he is in Malta, revealing that they would also do his workshop in Malta.

#### **PHONE OR CAMERA?**

Most survey participants (81%) indicated that they take more photos with their phone. Although this is not surprising, the researcher feels that there could be a very good opening for tours aimed at phone photography. This is less about taking photos for high-end purposes and more about capturing a location quickly and effectively.

This type of photography can lead tourists into trouble very quickly. In certain areas one is not allowed to take photos. For example, in an art exhibition, photographing work can breach copyright. Also, Photography can be banned for security reasons. In phone photography, one needs to take into consideration the ethics and the rules about taking photos in public and private spaces.

It is the experience of the researcher that a very large number of people attend photography tours to access good locations and learn how to photograph them quickly.

#### **TOUR DESCRIPTION**

The Sense of Place photography Tour is a four-hour long photography tour. During this time, the group will explore a combination of intangible, emotional and visual connections to a place, learning photographic skills enabling them to express the elicited emotions in the form of digital visual images.

During the tour, the researcher will instruct the group on what to look for in their surroundings to assist them develop a visual narrative. The locations will be the Mdina Streets, the Wignacourt Museum and the walk from the Wignacourt Museum to the Buskett.

Due to the terrain, the group will need to be physically mobile enough to cope when walking on uneven ground. The researcher will conduct this tour in the morning to get the best quality of light. Even in overcast weather the light still has a special quality about it and may elicit different feelings within the photographers.

The French baroque architecture of the Vilhena Palace really sets a visual tone. Mdina, like many places in Malta has various piazzas and each one is different exuding a special character. As the group walks though the city of Mdina, the changes in locations will allow the participants to find different aspects of the medieval city. These changes are enough to keep them engaged for hours.

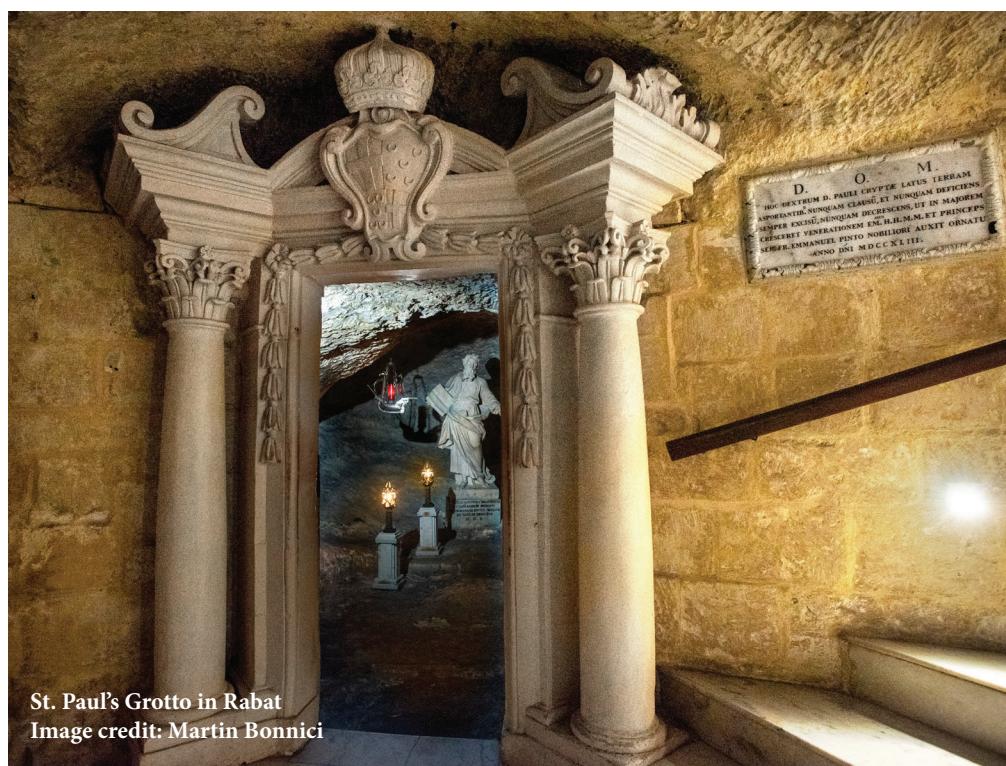
When looking at the architecture between Mdina, the Wignacourt Museum and Saint Paul's Grotto, there are numerous differences. Each of these will have a profound effect on the development of the sense of place for the group. The Wignacourt Museum was built at the end of the 1600s and early 1700's and constructed to house the chaplains of the Order of Saint John to take care of the Saint Paul's Grotto. The group will be using this space to shoot various interiors. The curios and art pieces housed within the facility will tell a story of their own. In this space, the researcher will show the group the function of art and its relationship to the sense of place photography tour.

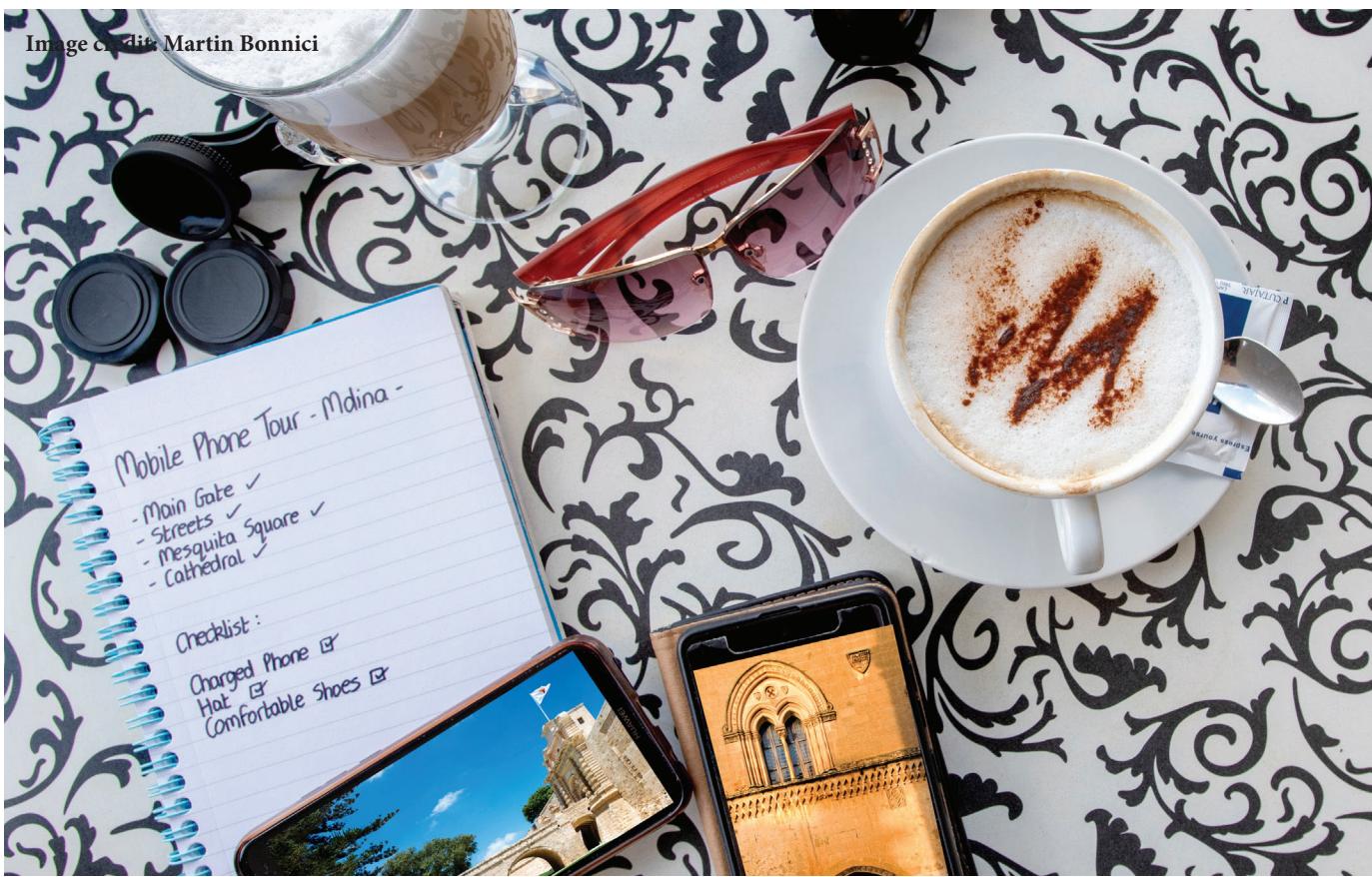
Each painting and curio will speak to various members of the group in different ways. This is where the most interesting part of the sense of place plays out. In such a small area, items visually explored by the group will help express parts of the visual narrative. There will also be "Coats of Arms" and other historical identity marks, but they will differ from what the group has seen in Mdina. Each component has its own ambiance, and this will help group members connect to the space

around them. Such differences will show up in the images that the group will take with their cameras.

As participants move through different environments, the attachments to a sense of place will fall into different categories. Some will have strong feelings of connection to history, others will have a physical attachment to the art and for others it will be the influence of the countryside. Because of the need to be

observant and engaged, each member of the group will tap into their own subjective relationship to and complex study of the area. This will need to be digested and processed relatively quickly so any member of the group can act fast to take the photos they want. At times, a group will take a photo because it feels right with no other explanation needed and at other times, the group will connect to something specific within a scene. Each of these feelings are an equal and a valid connection





to a sense of place. Photos may produce a different feeling after each individual group member has the time to look at and edit their images.

In the Sense of Place Photography Tour of Malta, the group will produce a series of photos that can either stand alone or be compiled to recount a specific story. That story will live with them as a memory of Malta, but also as a visual journey into their own version of a sense of place.

Some of the survey results were not regarded as surprising to the researcher. In question 1 the most common age group was 35 to 44. This age group usually has the resources to travel and is young enough to tackle all types of terrain.

In question 14, 81% of questionnaire participants indicated that they use their phones to take photos. This opens the possibility to explore tours specifically aimed at smart-phone photography.

## PHOTOGRAPHY TOURS IN MALTA

Exploring the literature regarding a sense of place has had an impact on the researcher. This will assist in guiding tours around various locations and helping participants take an opaque emotion and turn it into a tangible visual expression. This introduces the possibility for many different locations and variables within photography tours.

It should be noted that most of the survey questions focused on aspects of tourism which are not connected to sense of place, and this is very important. If certain aspects are not addressed in the planning phase, such the level of interest shown by the participants, what type of equipment they have and how much walking they can do, participants may find that the tour is too difficult and/or dislike the location for the wrong reasons. This will distract them from connecting to the locations they are touring. An evaluation after the course led the researcher to add a question about connection to place and obtain more specific information about the feeling of a sense of place from tour participants directly. This may assist with planning tours in future.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Sense of Place photo Tour has many levels of potential. Such a tour will promote Malta in a unique way. After conducting similar workshops in Melbourne Australia since 2006, the city experienced exposure from thousands of people that came through the researcher's business. This is invaluable to any city because such a tour can gain exposure through the eyes and real experiences of photo tour participants rather than through advertising. In addition, participants that joined the researcher's tours in Melbourne, went to other tours and knew how to photograph each location properly.

When the researcher moved to Malta, he offered photo walks to up to five participants. The emphasis was specifically on how to take photos like a photojournalist. It was not a tour but a way to develop a technical skill in lovely surroundings.

The evolution of the photo tours in Melbourne and the technical photo walks in Malta will be combined into the Sense of Place photo tour. There is a constant balance

of technical, historical and emotional information going on that allow the participant to explore their own feelings and how they will express these through their cameras.

One interesting outcome of the survey that the researcher had not considered was the possibility of using smartphone photography. This would be much less technical and limited, but participants would still be able to explore their surroundings as they go through various locations.

The researcher intends to offer tours of varying duration. For example, Valletta is a great tour location, but only for those with a better level of fitness. This presents the opportunity for an A, B and a C tour. The A tour being more physical with longer distances covered whilst the C tour could be managed by anyone.

## The Future Of Photographic Tours

The researcher envisions great potential in various forms of photo walks and tours in Malta. Some will cater for professional and serious amateurs, and others will cater for tourists who want to visit some good locations and take trophy images for their social media pages.

There is a wide scope for this type of photography tour, and it can be adapted to suit any needs and situations. It is possible to coordinate with other tour operators, as well as collaborating with businesses that want different experiences for their staff such as team building.

Two issues could potentially damage the photographic tour industry. Unregulated tourism from rogue operators and those offering tours without professional photography experience. Maintaining professionalism is a key component. One thing is certain. Malta offers many unique locations and opportunities for various versions of a Sense of Place Photography Tour to flourish.

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