

Editorial:

Gozo at the cross-roads

Googling the word 'Gozo' reveals several million references. Looking a bit more in depth at the first 80 entries one can see that the vast majority of these refer to holidays on the island, including renting farm houses and other holiday accommodation. Thus, through the eyes of the internet at least, Gozo is predominantly seen as a place where one can go for a holiday, and hopefully enjoy oneself luxuriating in sun and sea.

What does this make of the native population? Are they merely providers for holiday-makers? Is there any life beyond being the providers of hedonistic pursuits of the holiday-makers?

A persistent problem with a life that depends on a seasonal tourist industry, geared primarily for the summer months, is that a void inevitably develops for the rest of the year. It is abundantly clear that activities of most kinds seem to peter out for most of the year, only to mushroom again with the approach of the warm season.

It is perhaps a foreign concept to most Gozitans that there is life beyond the tourist industry. It is pleasing to see several activities that have been organised by enterprising individuals and organisations to sex-up life in Gozo. Among these one could mention musical activities such as the opera season, which, albeit based on pique between rival band societies has nevertheless benefited the musical scene in Gozo. There is also the outstanding series of concerts organised by St George Basilica, a unique annual experience. The greater the pity that these activities have become the reserve of the gliterati and the largely non-Gozo based population. The majority of Gozitans seem to ignore the temptation to enlarge their cultural vista and embrace these musical innovations.

Another gaping void in the cultural life of Gozo is the near-total absence of other intellectual activity that attracts even a minimal support from the Gozitan population. One could mention the occasional lecture, or the odd seminar as evidence that there is some element of intellectual activity. Other experimental approaches have included the reasonably popular 'poetry on Gozo' which seems to attract a group of interested individuals.

But what about other activities? Where are the book-shops where one can browse and hopefully purchase the latest offerings? Where are the meeting places where one can talk about topics other than the channel crossings, golf courses or helicopter services (or lack of them)? Is

anyone responsible for stimulating the grey matter of the average Gozitan?

The University of Malta Gozo Centre should ideally be hub of intellectual life in the island. It is true that in the relatively short time that it has existed, it has provided opportunities for further studies for a number of students who would otherwise have missed out completely on a tertiary education. It has also organised seminars and lectures on various topics. There is also the beginning of a research activity. This activity has already resulted in the first post-graduate student achieving a Ph.D from the university. However, it is certainly possible to go beyond this and encourage further development. There is no reason why Gozo could not become a centre for international meetings. More lecturers could be invited to give lectures to the general public. While this requires an injection of funds which are hard to come by, it is none the less crucial in the development of one aspect of life which is sadly not quite up to scratch.

More important is the effort to convince the actual population that there is more to life than material gains, bigger houses, flats to rent and plasma televisions. Gozitans have to be shown that while hard work is to be recommended, it is not to be all and end all of human existence. Working for a better life is desirable, living merely for work is not the ideal. Many Gozitans seem to have never learned about the finer aspects of life. Their routine consists of work and television. While it is true that more are now enjoying a weekend outing, a meal by the sea-side, very few can be induced to read a book or attend the odd lecture. Such habits do not just spring unbid within a nation: they have to be fostered and helped to develop. In this respect, the university of the third age has made considerable progress, although more can be done to encourage the trend.

In the final analysis, the question remains: what sort of a nation do we hope to develop into? Rich, happy and wise is the ideal. While Gozitans as a rule do not need any help to appreciate the need for the first of these desiderata, and while no recipe seems to work to achieve the second, a little help with the last of these attributes might go a long way to ensuring that Gozo will not become a backwater, a sleepy island for lay-back holiday makers, but will ensure that it will keep at the forefront and participate in the European way of life.