

The Gozo Discovery Bus: A Successful Experiment

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Introduction

The introduction of a tourist discovery bus in Gozo came about as a result of an EU Project which is part of the Interreg III B Archimed programmes in which the Islands and Small States Institute of the University of Malta participated. Other countries participating in this programme besides Malta, represented by the Islands and Small States Institute, are Italy, Cyprus and Greece.

The discovery bus service was aimed at encouraging more tourists to come to Gozo and enabling them to visit strategic places of interest, some of which are not usually reached by public transport. The idea of having a discovery bus in Gozo has long been debated by the Gozo Tourism Association and came to fruition only after several consultation meetings between local authorities and enterprises whose interests lie mainly in tourism. The intention of this service is to have

more tourists come and stay in hotels in Gozo rather than coming over for day trips. Having tourists stay overnight in Gozo, generates more employment and income for local businesses in which case the tourism industry in Gozo will be rendered more sustainable.

Bus Trip Around Gozo

During the three week trial which was held between 16 July and 6 August 2008, there were five round trips a day, where the Gozo Discovery Bus left Sabina Square in Victoria every two hours between 0930hrs and 1730hrs. The route then took passengers on a round trip through Mgarr, Nadur, Ramla Bay, Ġgantija temples in Xagħra, Marsalforn, Ta' Pinu, Dwejra, Xlendi and back to Sabina Square via Ta' Dbiegi Crafts Village.



The brochure distributed throughout Malta and Gozo indicating the places of interest visited by the Gozo Discovery Bus.



Tourists boarding the Gozo Discovery Bus which is displaying the poster advertising the route in the front windscreen.

destination. Thus passengers could choose whether they wanted to stay on the same bus and continue on with the round trip or else stay at a destination of their choice and catch one of the other buses which passed through each destination every two hours to continue their tour of the other destinations on the route at their own pace. The bus was not just used by foreign tourists but also by locals and Maltese tourists who made use of the bus which was in the form of a hop-on hop-off service. During the trial the service was offered without a fee however it is being proposed that the service will operate in the future at a modest fee.

Feedback from the Users of the Service

A survey was carried out during the trial to elicit the opinions of those individuals who used the Gozo Discovery Bus service. During the three weeks of the trial a total of 1126 individuals used the service. Of these 915 were foreign tourists, 176 were Maltese tourists and the remaining 35 were Gozitans. The passengers of the bus were chosen at random and questioned by means of a questionnaire.

Foreign tourists who used the bus came from a diverse range of seventeen different countries of whom half were staying in accommodations

in Malta while the other half were staying in accommodations in Gozo. 78% of the foreign interviewees claimed that they spent an average of €7.87 per person during the trip on food and beverages, souvenirs and entrance fees into the Ġgantija temples. All the interviewees claimed that they thought the service was extremely useful as they were able to visit most of the places of interest in Gozo on one trip. They claimed that without this service they would not have been able to visit all the major attractions in one day. The passengers were asked what in their opinion the most important benefit of such a service was. 86% answered that sightseeing of the major attractions was by far the greatest benefit of having a service such as the Gozo Discovery Bus in operation. They also claimed that education and culture was also another incentive for using this service and also purely for entertainment.

The Maltese tourists and the locals who used the service said that it saved them the problem and also precious time in finding a parking space which is a major problem especially in Victoria. The Maltese tourists who were interviewed claimed that although they drove and owned private vehicles, they chose to leave their cars in Ċirkewwa as they planned on using the Gozo Discovery Bus while

on their day trip to Gozo. They said that they found the service extremely useful as a hop-on hop-off service and most enjoyable at the same time.

When asked whether they thought that the service should be in place in the future, 96% of the interviewees replied that they thought it was important that it was established permanently. They said that the service was a very good idea and much needed in Gozo. Half of the interviewees claimed that the five round trips were quite adequate while the other half said that there was a need for more trips at hourly intervals so that as a hop-on hop-off service, it would be more efficient. Most of the foreign tourists staying at accommodations in Gozo, who used the service considered themselves lucky to have come on holiday during the trial period. They found the service most convenient and some used it more than once during their stay.

Feedback from the Non-Users of the Service

Further on during the same survey, a questionnaire was presented to a number of individuals who had not used the Gozo Discovery Bus during the three week trial in order to see what their opinions were regarding the service. In this case many of the foreign tourists questioned thought it was a shame that the service was not in operation during their stay as they claimed that they would have found it very useful. Some of the Maltese visitors said that had the service been in place they would have been able to leave their cars in Malta and therefore avoid the problem of parking. 100% of all the individuals questioned said that they thought the Gozo Discovery Bus service was a good idea both for taking a round trip and also to use as a hop-on hop-off service.

Approximately 47% of Gozitans said that they would not use the service if it was operating. The reason offered by the interviewees for this being that the Gozitan culture would have to take time to readjust to using buses again as for so long now due to an insufficient public transport service, Gozitans have become accustomed to using their own private transport. 80% of the Maltese interviewees claimed that if the service was in operation, they would use it, while approximately 90% of the foreign visitors said that they would definitely make use of the service. The 10% of

the foreign visitors who said that they would not use the service were return visitors who did not come back to see the sights but to relax in the laid back atmosphere offered by Gozo, although they did say that the hop-on hop-off service might prove useful on occasions. As to the adequacy of the service, the majority of Gozitan and Maltese visitors claimed that five round trips as during the trial were adequate but claimed that as a hop-on hop-off service, the trips need to be more frequent. On the other hand the majority of foreign visitors claimed that more than the five trips were needed daily and at hourly intervals in order to be able to visit the whole island at leisure.

The Service Providers of the Service

The bus drivers who provided the service were also questioned during the survey. 83% of them claimed that the service was worth their while and at the same time offered a new service to locals and visitors alike. They said however that the buses needed to be at full capacity and that they should have some help from the government to compensate low takings during the off-peak tourist season. The majority thought that the service should only be offered between May and October or during the summer months. Overall, 94% of the drivers interviewed thought that the service would serve as an added attraction for tourists visiting the island.

Conclusion

All in all, and based on the opinions of the individuals who took part in the survey, the project was perceived as very successful. Many of the interviewees were curious as to whether the service was to continue in the immediate future. They claimed that just as other tourist destinations have such services offering city tours they thought it as important for island destinations to have island tours. Gozo could well benefit from such a service which would add to the attraction for those visitors wishing to have an island tour in which it is possible to view the major attraction sights during one round trip.

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