

# Enhancing the attraction of the Malta destination

by John Ebejer

**W**HAT MAKES for an attractive destination? What are those factors which will provide for an unforgettable experience? Tourism is a complex activity. The tourist experience is largely determined by the choices made by the tourist as to which attractions to visit and which activities to engage in. Time is limited so choices must be made.

Tourist choices are made on the basis of information that is available – the experience that is on offer, opening times, costs, how best to get there and so on. The greater the choice, the more the tourist is likely to pursue that experience which is enjoyable, in line with his/her interests and expectations.

Transport is another factor which must be considered when making the choice. Attractions and activities involving reasonably priced transport with minimal hassle are more likely to be chosen. The choice process is different depending on whether the tourist is on a package tour or has made his/her own travel and accommodation arrangements.

For persons on a package tour, the tour representative has a central role in the information that is made available. Normally, the information given is limited to those excursions that the tour operator can readily provide.

The choice available to the tourist is therefore very restricted. More than that, the tourist cannot decide how much time to spend at a particular attraction. We have often heard stories of tourist groups being rushed through visitor attractions so they can spend more time at some retail outlet. With some operators, the decision on the places to visit is not taken on the basis of the quality of the experience but more on the basis of the commission that is on offer.

Restricted information and choice means that the experience offered to the tourist is not the best that is available. It also means that the tourist will gain a wrong perception of the destination. He/she will go away with the impression that the destination does not have much to offer simply because the tour rep did not provide more comprehensive information. There is insufficient effort to offer the very best of what Malta has to offer.

When selecting which places to visit, operators have a responsibility that goes beyond narrow considerations relating to profit. The best and least expensive form of promotion is to provide existing visitors with an exceptional experience.

Not only are they more likely to return, but they will tell their friends about their experience. Operators should therefore seek out places that are the most interesting and the most likely to give the visitor an unforgettable experience. Ultimately, they are the first to benefit if and when there is repeat business.

There is also a sizeable number of

persons who make their own travel and accommodation arrangements. The opportunity to explore and discover the destination makes for a more exciting and enjoyable experience. Inevitably, independent tourists will seek information on places that can be visited – the most likely sources of information are Websites, guide books, tourism information offices and the hotel reception. The better the information, the more likely the tourist will choose that which is compatible with his/her interests.

The tourist can decide on how much time to spend at a site. The downside of making's one's own arrangements is that travelling to the chosen attractions can be more problematic and/or time consuming.

In my view, the Malta Tourism Authority has the responsibility to ensure that the tourist is offered the widest possible choice of attractions to visit and activities to engage in. The MTA can achieve this by ensuring that, as far as is practicable, both package tourists and independent travellers have access to the most comprehensive information.

In this respect, a familiarisation visit organised by the MTA last September was an important initiative. Tour operators and others involved in tourism were taken to Cottonera.

The intrinsic heritage value of the area combined with carefully planned re-enactments at key locations provided for an enjoyable experience and an awareness of just how much Cottonera has to offer. The MTA should organise more of such visits to the many heritage sites and scenic locations Malta and Gozo offer.

**A**nother MTA initiative relating to information was the opening of Valletta churches. The MTA issued a brochure giving opening times as well as some information on eight Valletta churches. This enables individual tourists to include one or more churches in their Valletta itinerary.

Churches have the potential to form part of the tourism product but this can only happen if they open for visitors and the information is duly made available; hence the importance of such an initiative.

The Visitmalta tourist bus service is another initiative which increases information and choice. The MTA, in conjunction with the Malta Transport Authority, introduced a hop-on hop-off tourist transport service. The service connects areas with hotels such as Sliema, St Julians and Qawra with several heritage attractions.

Two routes were designed to include attractions which are not easily accessible by means of public transport such as Haġar Qim and Cottonera. A colourful brochure giving the timetable as well as information on the various heritage sites en route. The new service significantly improves the choices available for the individual tourist and makes a much wider spectrum of Malta's heritage accessible.

In recent years, a number of tourist publications produced by the private sector have also emerged. These provide useful information on the Malta destination. They are funded through advertising and are provided in hotels free of charge. These publications are another source of information for the tourist and as such should be supported. Several local councils have issued brochures, CDs or have put up information signs. These are positive initiatives that should be encouraged, albeit with proper monitoring.

In one instance, for example, a local council information brochure includes buildings which no longer exist (windmills, historic houses, etc). Evidently, this is a mistake and should be avoided.

The MTA could take a more proactive role to encourage local council initiatives related to tourist information while vetting the quality of what is produced. Moreover, the Local Council office could be a point of reference from where tourists collect a brochure of the locality and other information.

In terms of information for the tourist, there is much more that needs

to be done. Other than guide books, good quality up-to-date information on visitor attractions is lacking. Attractive information brochures should be produced for the more important heritage sites, particularly Valletta, Cottonera, Mdina, the Citadel and several archaeological sites. These should be made available to tourists from information offices, if necessary at a nominal charge.

**T**he production of brochures should form part of an overall interpretative strategy of our historic cities. The interpretation of historic cities would involve the development of an appropriate storyline, interpretation panels, detailed training for guides and better visitor management. The MTA operates a number of tourism information offices. TIOs provide information to the tourist, improving choice and the quality of the tourist experience. The network of TIOs needs to be extended to the main tourism areas particularly Qawra/Bugibba and Sliema.

A recent Deloitte report on the MTA proposes several changes, including the outsourcing of tourism

information offices. The report argues that this be a non-core function for the MTA and as such should be left to private initiative.

This would be a risky move. In the hands of the private sector, TIOs could become merely sales outlets for the tours and services that the particular operator wishes to sell. Unless there are adequate safeguards, the outsourcing of TIOs to the private sector will restrict, rather than increase, the choice available to the tourist.

In spite of several deficiencies, Malta has an exceptional product. It offers innumerable heritage sites and a wide range of unique experiences, all within short travel distances of each other. The MTA should strive to communicate this to operators, marketing personnel and others involved in the industry.

The tourist experience is largely determined by the information that is made available to the tourist and the resultant choices he/she makes.

*Mr Ebejer is an architect and urban planner. Until recently, he was consultant on product development with the Malta Tourism Authority.*