The island city - Malta's potential for urban tourism

The second part of an article by JOHN EBEJER

The proliferation of mass tourism and seaside tourism is that in the former case the tourist is likely to make use of those facilities which the residents of the island do not use. In the latter case, some commercial and leisure facilities as well as roads and transport.

There are areas where significant investments are required, particularly in relation to the presentation of our visitor sites and the improvement of our urban environment.

Urban tourism takes a greater significance within the context of economic restructuring and Malta's application to join the European Union. One should consider seeking EU financial assistance, at the appropriate stage, for the provision of infrastructural projects aimed at improving Malta's product offer for urban tourism.

Commercial centres

The Government's Vision 2000 council has led to many improvements in our towns and villages with embellishments, bottlenecks, and the provision of facilities. In major commercial areas, however, the environment provided for the pedestrian is poor and fails along the way to be considered as an acceptable quality. In places like Siġġiewi, Hamrun, Birkirkara, and Victoria, others, pedestrians are forced to walk on crowded pavements and are subject to noise and exhaust from car and buses.

The pedestrianisation of areas in central commercial areas is already on the long way in improving the environment within which people shop, shop, and relax. An improved town centre environment would encourage people to visit and to visit with, and to visit within the central urban tourism will provide for an improved holiday experience in Malta.

Pedestrianisation/recreation, and planning. To ensure that a commercial centre remains accessible and functional, hence viable, the flow of vehicular traffic must be accompanied by measures to improve access including external parking space. For some commercial centres, only a radical transformation (and hence significant investment) can bring about a quality urban environment.

Possible first urgent of these works is the extension to Valletta (for which plans have been drawn up) but there are other areas which warrant significant interventions.

Compared to many European cities, we have a very long way to go before our main commercial centres can be considered as efficient as the latter case, urban tourism could draw on these examples to provide alternative routes.

Another consideration is the opening times of shops. Retailing is increasingly becoming a leisure activity. Extending shopping hours in the island as an added vitality to the main commercial centres. Tourists will have the option of spending some of their evening leisure time shopping.

Green parks

Many European cities enjoy extensive greenery, including gardens, parks, woods and even forests. Tourist cities are often faced with the fear of losing green space, and hence, they must have a network of parks in the area. Our gardens and parks could, however, form part of our tourist product to provide alternative sites not previously experienced.

In particular, highlighting the specific context and characteristics present in our environment. For example, basket, sea, and mountains are all sites which are important to us and are set in the context of a pulex or the bastions. They can also be promoted as a display of typically Mediterranean trees, shrubbery and landscape design. 'To Qa'll and Kennedy Grove can be appreciated for their settings (the latter, for the historic salt pans nearby).

An urban park, adjoining the touristic map, these gardens require improved management so that ongoing maintenance and improvements are carried out.

There are other landscaped areas which could be promoted for tourists and Maltese. Around Msida, for example, there are extensive areas with mature trees, from which selective views of Mellieha and Wied il-Qitna can be enjoyed. A scenic walk connecting these landscaped areas was designed as part of the Msida New Town. With proper investment, this scenic walk could actually become a magnet for recreation and nature.

Historic buildings

The appropriate reuse of historic buildings is a principle most people would agree with. It generates revenue for the maintenance of the building and, depending on the use adopted, could be an added asset to promote urban tourism.

There are however many difficulties, both technical and financial. To what extent can physical changes be made without compromising the buildings' historic value? How are the relatively expensive renovation works to be funded? Clearly we need to develop further expertise and knowledge as to how historic buildings can be brought back into life as a tourist attraction and without losing their architectural delays.

One example which comes to mind is the Magisterial Palace in Malta, part of which is used as local council offices and part as a natural history museum. The building is strategically placed immediately adjoining the main traffic of Mdina and enjoys good views at sea. Yet, the last part of the original palace has been allowed to fall into decay and the museum is very poorly presented. Failure to utilise the full potential of this building is a loss to tourism and our economy.

Modern development

Our urban environment has over the years been spoilt by poor architectural buildings. Buildings which may be described as eyesores are common. In more recent years, there have been improvements with developers and architects making increased efforts to produce good quality buildings.

(Apart from eventually increasing profits, good design is part of the construction industry's responsibility towards our community and to our tourist industry.)

Some cities have a flagship building - the image of the building is linked to that of the city. The most obvious examples are the London Eye, and the Statue of Liberty. More recent examples are the Sydney Opera House and the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao.

Such buildings give a brand to a city which no amount of advertising can achieve. Certainly, most flagship buildings caused controversy when they were first conceived or constructed. Could it be that Pjànu's Theatre (St. Paul's) will eventually become Malta's own flagship building?

Transport

To date, the choice available to the tourist in terms of transport is limited. For a tourist wishing to explore a 'third card' is a must. Those using public transport will find that the choice of sites to visit is severely limited, unless they are willing to spend a high proportion of the time travelling.

The quality of our roads is also relevant to urban tourism. Apart from the improvements in road design and surface (a problem which Civil Engineer has committed itself to resolve) we also need to think about linking Birkirkara along our main arteries.

A tourist will get a general perception of the city as he travels around and the increased greenery would give a good impression. More important, landscaping strategically placed along a road would be effective in concealing some eyesores in the landscape.

Transport choice is also of relevance to overseas residents. I know of one overseas resident who left Gozo because it was impractical for her to chauffeur her daughter every time she wanted to go out.

Overseas residents

One form of tourism is foreign persons taking up residence in Malta for several months during the year or even throughout the year. The profile of overseas residents would normally be retired 65-plus persons or semi-retired persons who make use of modern communications to continue their part-time economic activity.

One should not overlook overseas residents with foreigners who buy property in Malta. The investment purposes and who would only occasionally come to Malta, if at all. In the former case, the economic benefits are greater because of the acquisition of goods and services by the foreign resident during his time in Malta. Moreover, overseas residents encourage overseas friends and relatives to visit. In a single year one overseas resident could generate as much revenue as some 20 to 30 tourists. Hence, the potential economic benefits are significant and should therefore be actively promoted and encouraged.

In my view, Gozo is particularly well-suited to attract overseas residents. It is quieter than Malta and largely unspoilt. Most services are readily available in a single commercial centre namely Victoria. Moreover, Victoria has a distinctive charm and character with its narrow streets in the historic core, and the Citadel.

COUGO Renzo Piano's gate to Valletta becomes Malta's own flagship building?

Above all, Gozo is safe from crime - a consideration which would top the list of criteria of any elderly persons considering taking up residence.

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The author attended an internation­ al conference on Tourism and the City Sustainability and Development organized by the International Urban Development Association. This article considers some of the issues raised with reference to the Maltese context. It is hoped that the ideas expressed may be of use for the improvement of our urban tourism product.

(Two more articles to follow)