

Heritage and tourism - creating a synergy

Increasing visitor satisfaction

Architect and urban planner JOHN EBEJER expands his argument on bringing heritage and tourism together and here focuses on customer satisfaction

FROM a tourism point of view, there are two overriding objectives for our heritage sites. Firstly, we need to protect and preserve the cultural site in accordance with sustainability principles. Secondly, we should strive to increase visitor satisfaction.

There is an increased sense of frustration among people in the tourist industry about the poor level of presentation of our more important heritage sites. One cannot but feel embarrassed about the presentation of sites such as Ggantija and Hagar Qim.

To remedy the situation, some have suggested that heritage sites should be managed by the tourism sector. I disagree with this view, especially in relation to archaeological sites. Such an opinion reflects a lack of understanding of what heritage conservation entails and the expertise and human resources that are required.

The value of our heritage resources lies in their intrinsic worth as artefacts which reflect our culture and identity. Attitudes which consider our heritage sites merely as money spinners need to be avoided.

Having said that, one cannot ignore the potential of our unique heritage resources to attract tourists to our islands and hence their economic significance. Whereas conservation issues remain a priority, we simply cannot afford to overlook the economic potential of these sites.

MTA's role with respect to heritage sites should be that of a catalyst. It should give technical and financial support, wherever necessary, to achieve improvements in the presentation, including the provision of visitor facilities. It may be possible for the Museums Department and the Malta Tourism Authority to collaborate on a joint project.

The involvement of the two agencies will ensure that both conservation and presentation issues are adequately catered for. Such collaboration is achievable, even if subsequent management of the site remains with the Museums Department.

Competitive environment

In promoting urban tourism Malta is not alone. Thousands of towns and cities across Europe, ranging from small rural settlements to mega-cities, invest in projects specifically aimed at attracting visitors. Each promotes tourism in accordance with the assets it can afford to provide and/or present. They all talk of cultural tourism, conference facilities, historic cores and promotion of events.

If Malta is to compete effectively, it needs to develop its product in accordance with its assets. Malta needs to exploit, effectively and yet in a sustainable manner, all those resources which distinguish it from

other destinations.

In this respect, Malta has two important advantages: the uniqueness of our archaeological sites and the extensive network of fortifications, these resources are located within a relatively small area and hence very little time is lost in travel. Possibly with the exception of one or two cities, Malta has the highest concentration of heritage resources in Europe.

A strategy for tourism heritage sites

Today, we need to put more emphasis on better management, better presentation and better ancillary facilities. This is dictated by overall tourism strategy considerations and the need to reposition Malta's tourism industry.

Improved management, presentation and ancillary facilities will be conducive to better conservation. Visitor flows can be managed in such a way as to reduce impact on the heritage resource. Increased revenue could be used for better conservation of the site.

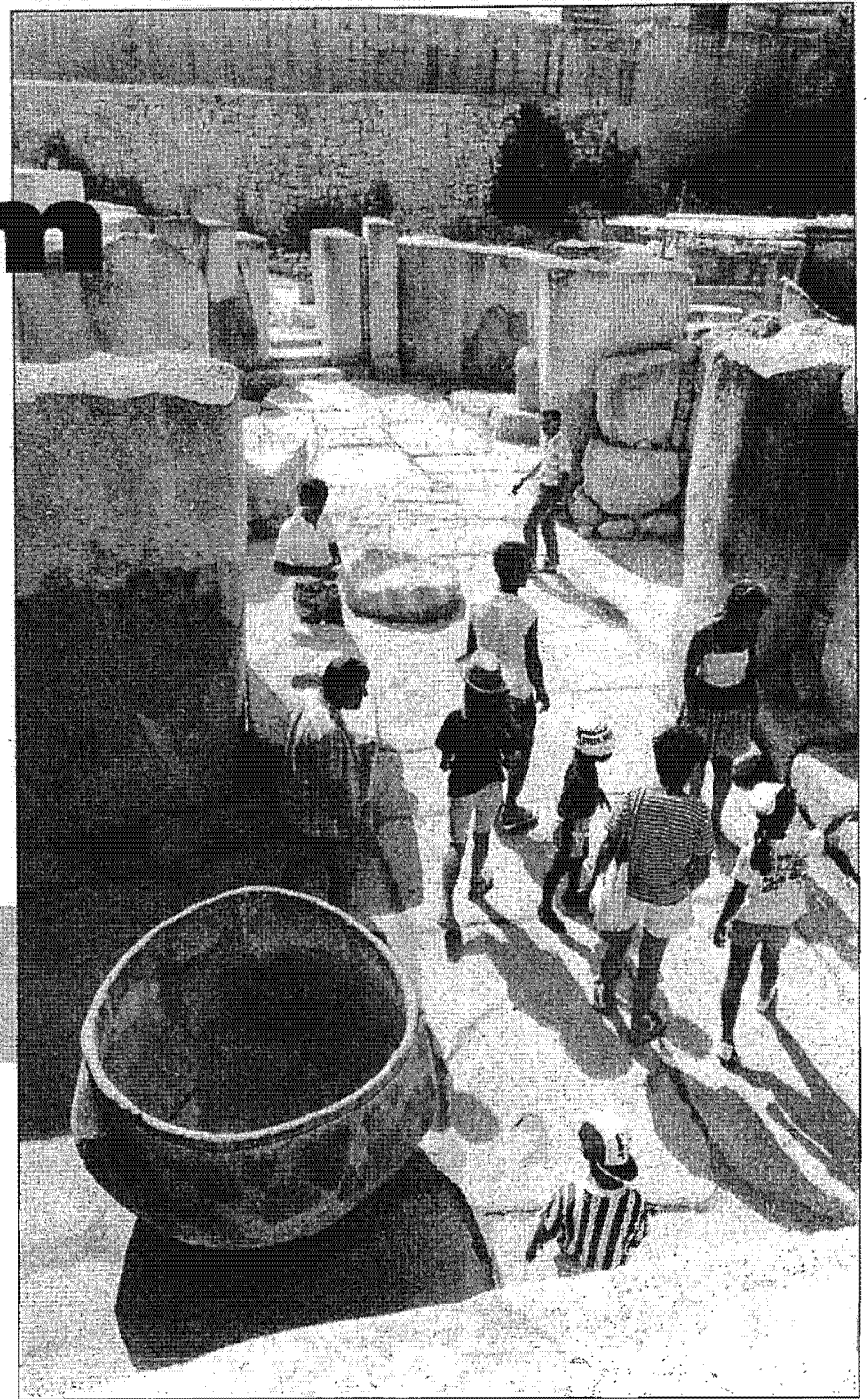
We need to offer more opportunities for spending on culture.⁵ Surveys have shown that there is scope to increase tourism spending and hence generate increased revenue and create additional jobs. Buying souvenirs, books and postcards is part of the overall tourist experience of the heritage site and should therefore be provided and carefully planned for.

Moreover, the provision of suitable ancillary facilities will increase the capacity of a site. Capacity of a visitor site is understood to be the maximum number of tourist flows which will not result in the deterioration of the visitor facility and/or in visitor discomfort through crowding.

The capacity of a site could also be increased by extending opening hours. Extending opening hours is also more convenient to the tourist.

It allows for the viewing of more sites in a single outing. It is appreciated that there are practical difficulties in changing opening hours but a solution must be found sooner rather than later.

We also need to offer a wider choice of heritage sites for the tourist to visit. Malta and Gozo are fortunate enough to have substantial



THE capacity of a visitor site is understood to be the maximum number of tourist flows which will not result in the deterioration of the visitor facility and/or in visitor discomfort through crowding. (Photo: Malta Tourism Authority, 1995)

heritage resources but these need investments if they are to become part of the tourist itinerary. A wider choice of sites to visit together with suitable management of tourist groups could relieve some of the pressures on the more popular sites.

Exhibitions, re-enactments and festivals set in a heritage context should be encouraged, while duly protecting the heritage resources from any negative impact. These give new life to a place and generally assist the visitor in appreciating the many positive aspects of the heritage resource.

High profile exhibitions, such as "The Silver of Malta" held some years back, should become a focal point in our international calendar of events.

This past decade has seen the increased involvement of the private sector through the provision of visitor facilities with recreated heritage artefacts. These provided the tourist with increased choice of sites to visit and hence enhanced the overall tourist product.

They were, however, symptomatic of Government's own failure to provide for tourist heritage sites based on the authentic artefact. We need to reverse this trend and invest in tourism heritage sites which use the authentic heritage resource to provide for a pleasant experience to the tourist.

Some heritage sites do not provide even the most basic facilities to their clients such as toilets and, even where they do, these are not kept in a proper state.

Let us not forget that ultimately a visitor facility provides a service to its client - the tourist. Like any other service, failings in the provision of that service will have wider repercussions.

The immediate surroundings of a

heritage site are also relevant. In many instances, they will form part of the tourist experience of the site and, therefore, it is crucial to provide a safe and pleasant setting as free of traffic and parked cars as possible. Improvements to the setting of a heritage site could include (where applicable) partial pedestrianisation, increased seating and landscaping.

Improved access arrangements for the more popular sites is required. The preferred approach is to provide for better public transport services (increased frequencies and routes). Alternatively, access can be improved by providing coach parking and/or increasing vehicle parking (subject of course to site constraints).

Signage and interpretation is another area where our tourist product is generally lacking. A holistic approach is required. The establishment of ongoing systems will allow for the provision and maintenance of signs and information stands.

Tourism was, and still is, taken too much for granted. If presented and managed properly, our unique and extensive heritage will provide unforgettable experiences to the many thousands of tourists who visit them.

(To be concluded)

References

5. "Economic Impact of Tourism in Malta", Malta Tourism Authority 2000, Marie-Louise Mangion and Leslie Vella

Mr Ebejer is currently a consultant with the Product Planning and Development Directorate of the Malta Tourism Authority. The views expressed in this paper are his own. This paper was presented in a recent seminar on Integrated Conservation. The seminar was organised by the Museums Department and the Planning Authority.