

Management and funding

Architect and urban planner JOHN EBEJER concludes his series of articles on creating a synergy between heritage and tourism

OVER THE YEARS there have been various reports, studies and plans which have highlighted the need to improve the presentation of our heritage resources. Progress has been achieved with the upgrading of the Museum of Archaeology and the Hypogeum.

There are, however, many sites which remain poorly presented and which, in terms of tourism experience, are increasingly becoming a liability rather than an asset.

Many facilities/sites have good potential to attract tourists but either because of lack of marketing or lack of investment, they do not contribute effectively to the overall tourist product.

Any deficiency in the management of these resources is detrimental to the tourism product and hence to the tourist industry as a whole.

In 1995, the Management Systems Unit compiled a report on the Operational Review of the Museums Department. The Operational Review states that: "More generic and business-oriented competences such as communications, team skills, project management and marketing have to be implemented to recognise that heritage resources are prerequisites to cultural tourism and hence to the socio-economic well-being in Malta"

Among other objectives, the Operational Review includes "promote cultural tourism through a careful exploitation of the heritage resources" as one of the new organisation's mission.

It has been reported in the press that the Cultural Heritage Act 2000 is to be discussed in Parliament after the summer. From a tourism point of view, this will be a welcome development as it will allow for the allocation of more resources to our heritage.

In my view, however, the Act does not put sufficient emphasis on the relevance of the heritage resources to the tourism industry. There needs to be more emphasis on the proper presentation of exhibits to provide a unique experience to the visitor. There also needs to be a more commercial approach to the management of resources to generate additional funds for conservation and for further improved presentations.

Clearly new legislation on its own is not enough. The various agencies involved, including the MTA, will need to collaborate better with each other to maximise benefits for the money and time spent.

In spite of the deficiencies, much has been achieved over the years, even if public opinion appears reluctant to recognise it. There have been improvements to several heritage resources as well as better protection measures thanks to a number of agencies.

The work of the Works Division, the Museums Department, the former NTOM (now Malta Tourism Authority), various local councils, the Planning Authority and the Rehabilitation Committees (Valletta, Cottonera, and Mdina) should be duly acknowledged. The work of NGOs such as *Din l-Art Helwa*, *Fondazzjoni Wirt Artna* and *Fondazzjoni Patrimonju Malti*, deserves special mention because of its voluntary nature.

Sources of funding

Like all things in life, without suitable funding little can be achieved. Experience in Europe has shown that there are two forces at work in this area. On the one hand, there is a tendency for governments to vote less public money for heritage sites because of budgetary constraints. On the other hand, governments and local authorities are keen to promote tourism as part of an overall restructuring of local economies. They therefore invest in the creation of

new attractions including tourism heritage facilities.

When considering funding issues, one needs to recognise that there are different types of heritage resources. The conservation, management and presentation requirements for archaeological sites, fortifications, historic monuments and historic gardens differ and hence diverse approaches to funding will need to be adopted.

Heritage and its conservation is not a vote catcher and very rarely is it the subject of political controversy. Hence, convincing politicians to allocate adequate funds is an uphill struggle, especially in a context of increasingly limited financial resources.

The main argument, which must be put to decision-makers, is that our tourism product is an important economic resource – in fact apart from human resources it is our *only* resource.

Our heritage is a vital part of that resource, especially within the context of reducing seasonality. The uniqueness of these assets, namely fortifications and archaeological sites, greatly enhances their economic potential. Money spent in their protection, improvement and, above all, presentation, is a good investment which will benefit everyone.

In the long term, a well-presented heritage resource increases tourism flows and hence generates increased revenue to Government from taxes. It also creates jobs and reduces Government expenditure on unemployment benefits.

Government allocations to heritage resources, through its various relevant agencies, should be seen as part of an overall economic strategy rather than an unwelcome burden.

Many local councils have shown an interest in promoting tourism heritage sites in their localities.

This is clearly an important source of funds. These initiatives should be duly supported primarily by providing technical assistance where necessary.

Visitor facilities should be managed, as far as it is practical, as a business concern. The management should retain conservation as the over-riding concern but should also seek to be innovative as to how to induce more spending by the tourist at the site. Providing a shop for the sale of souvenirs relating to the site and of a cafe are the most obvious examples.

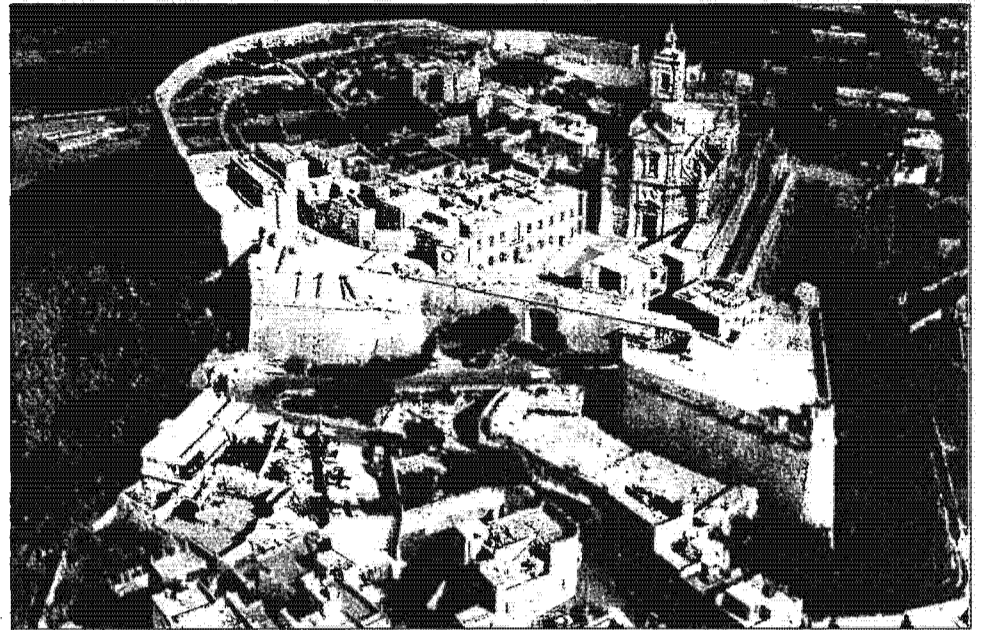
The increased revenue should be made use of within the site itself for better conservation and presentation (rather than being pumped back into Government's central coffers).

There may be scope for a more direct involvement of the private sector. It may be possible to devise schemes whereby the private sector agency would be given responsibility for the provision and subsequent management of visitor facilities at a heritage site.

Responsibility for the conservation will remain with the relevant Government agency. The agreement should specify strict provisions against the management company tampering with the heritage resource. Such a scheme should generate funding for the ancillary facilities with the added benefit of securing improved management.

Increased tourism flows during the off-peak season benefits the Maltese economy. It also benefits private sector companies, especially the larger ones, through increased business activity. Hence, these have an interest in investing in the conservation and preservation of our cultural heritage. It is good to note that this trend has already been established with a number of projects being financed by private sector companies.

There is no room for complacency. The heritage resources we possess



A VIEW of the Citadel, Victoria, Gozo

(Photo: Malta Tourism Authority)

are extensive. We have the responsibility to protect and conserve them for future generations to enjoy.

We are also responsible for the economic welfare of our country. Tourism was, and still is, taken too much for granted. The attention given to our heritage as a tourism resource has been limited. With more

and more cities investing in their product, the tourist has more destinations and a greater diversity of products to choose from. There are jobs and livelihoods at stake. There is no room for complacency.

Mr Ebejer, an architect and urban planner, 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.