

Selling with conviction

A realistic approach to Malta's tourism product

by John Ebejer

NINETY-NINE per cent of tourists visiting Malta have rated their experience as good or very good. This is what the newspaper headlines should have read when reporting the results of the recent MHRA environmental survey.

Instead, the impression given on the front page of *The Sunday Times* of October 26 was that the survey was nothing but bad news. "160,000 tourists criticise the environment...16,000 tourists leave the islands with a bad taste...84 per cent of tourists believe that our roads are bad or very bad...350,000 tourists believe our level of cleanliness leaves much to be desired..." and so on and so forth.

In many cases, absolute numbers are given (rather than percentages) so that the figures appear more substantial than they actually are. Out of some 30 paragraphs of the newspaper report, only two or three refer to positive results and, in any case, only towards the end.

The report as published by MHRA has a synopsis or summary on the front page. Of the six points made in the synopsis only one is a positive comment.

The synopsis fails to mention, for example, that according to the MHRA survey 95 per cent of visitors would recommend Malta to friends and relatives and that 88 per cent would consider revisiting.

The synopsis does not refer to the fact that 38 per cent of tourists are repeat visitors and that four out of ten tourists rate their experience in Malta as very good.

Any intelligent reader can see through the negative spin that has been put on the survey results. Overplaying the weaknesses of the tourism product serves no purpose other than to undermine credibility.

The analysis of the survey results and the newspaper reports are part of a pattern of constant criticism of the Malta product that has been going on

for years.

We have the tendency to paint everything black and forget that shades of grey do exist. A doomsday scenario is often depicted, accompanied by a stern warning that unless there is substantial investment in the product our tourism industry will be dealt a severe blow.

The truth is that in spite of several product weaknesses, the vast majority of tourists visiting Malta have a positive experience.

Price of negativity

The constant criticism of the Malta tourism product, including in the English language newspapers, should be cause for concern to the tourism industry itself.

Whether it is tourists in Malta reading the papers or potential tourists overseas who view them over the Internet, the bad impression that foreigners get does not do us any good.

Moreover, it weakens the hotelier's position when it comes to negotiating rates with operators. Better rates are achievable if we convince ourselves and others that our product is more interesting and intriguing than that of our competitors.

To sell a product you need to be convinced of its strengths. Some months ago, I attended a conference in Oporto where delegates were taken to visit a small town in northern Portugal.

We met the mayor and tourism officials of the town who explained what the town has to offer. They spoke with conviction. Their enthusiasm was contagious and very convincing. Most people in the group left the meeting with the impression that the town was well worth a visit.

It is this type of conviction and enthusiasm that people marketing

Malta cannot possibly have because of the negativity that is constantly thrown around.

The perception of marketing people is that the Malta product is poor. Ultimately, this means we are getting less value for the money spent on marketing.

How does one explain a 99 per cent satisfaction rate among tourists in spite of several obvious weaknesses of the Malta product? First of all there are the intrinsic strengths of our product.

A diversity of attractions are on offer – prehistoric temples, fortified towns, fortifications, palaces, churches, gardens, historic waterfronts, seaside promenades, typical villages, coastal cliffs and beaches.

Many attractions are unique to these islands. All are within short travel distances and all can be enjoyed most year round in pleasant weather. When I take foreigners around to visit, I am normally confronted with a comment and a question.

They are surprised to discover that Malta has so much to offer, in spite of its size and they ask me why it is that Malta's promotion overseas does not say that there is so much to see?

My answer is that most tourism people do not take the time and the trouble to discover the many attrac-

tions that Malta has to offer to our visitors.

Where there is some product deficiency, the tourist is likely to note it and possibly even be annoyed by it. The annoyance, however, is unlikely to be of such magnitude that it will spoil the whole tourist experience. The tourist will remember the experience taken in its totality, with positive aspects taking precedence over any perceived shortcomings.

This is best illustrated with an example. Some months ago, during a Mediterranean cruise, I went for a day trip to Monaco. Getting from the ship to Monaco was a laborious and time consuming affair, waiting in queues, crowding, coach journeys, exhaust-filled car parks, etc.

I wondered whether all the hassle would be worth it. Once we got there, however, I thoroughly enjoyed the visitor attractions and the shopping.

After the trip, the memory of the Monaco visit was a pleasant one; the inconvenience of the journey to get there was nothing but a mere footnote.

Getting better results

There is, however, no reason to be complacent. Tourism in Malta is undergoing a process of change. We are becoming more dependent on culture-oriented tourism and hence our tourism product should be devel-

oped accordingly.

We should constantly aim for higher and better results. Tourism flows in the shoulder and off-peak months have to be improved to make better use of our tourism infrastructure.

There is a constant need to improve our product. Cleanliness should become a priority especially in key tourism areas. Our heritage needs to be better maintained and presented.

Visitors should be provided with a wider choice of activities to engage in and transport modes to move around. The image of destination Malta should be projected overseas in a more consistent manner and in line with Malta's product on offer.

In conclusion, there needs to be more investment in the tourism product, not because the shortcomings create any significant threat to the industry, but because there is significant potential that is waiting to be realised. Effective utilisation of our tourism assets will provide for increased employment and increased revenue to the Maltese economy.

Mr Ebejer is an architect and urban planner. He is consultant on product development with the Malta Tourism Authority. The views expressed are strictly his own.