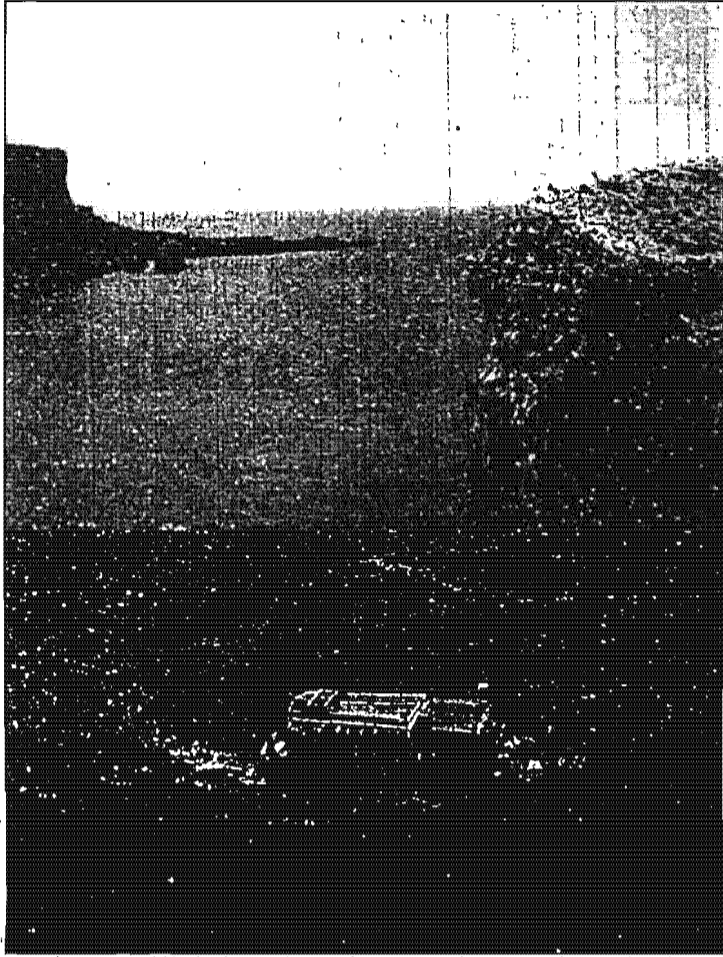


Gozo's ability to attract tourists depends on its unique landscape

# Local plan for Gozo and Comino

by John Ebejer



THE protection of Comino and Gozo's landscape takes on an economic significance

**G**OZO – the island of dreams. Well, yes if you are on holiday, providing you with the ideal break. But if you are working on a local plan for Gozo and Comino, it is a different story.

That was the job I, with Planning Authority consultant Graham Rogers, was entrusted to do. Clearly the starting point of the exercise was to better understand the island and its people. It serves little purpose to come up with bright ideas only to find that the aspirations of the community face a different direction.

Some 60 consultation meetings were held. Minutes are held for each meeting for future reference. A seminar for local councils was organised. Members of Parliament, local councils, political parties, officials from various government departments, architects in private practice, industrialists, tourism operators and developers aired their views and suggestions. Here are some of the more important issues identified.

Being a small island, much depends on the ability to generate revenue from Malta and overseas. The Local Plan for Gozo and Comino will need to address job creation within the context of Government economic policy for Gozo. Tourism clearly has a key role to play. Gozo's ability to attract tourists depends on its unique landscape and therefore its protection takes on an economic significance.

In Gozo and Comino there are 17 tourism accommodation establishments (hotels/tourist complexes/guest houses) with 1,310 beds. Over 60 per cent of the beds are four or five-star hotels. A further two

hotels (Chambrai and San Lawrenz) are under construction. There are also some 108 catering establishments. Hotels and catering establishments provide around 750 full-time jobs. Gozo is a seasonal destination with most hotels closing down during the winter season. There is a heavy reliance on part-time employment.

There are also a large number of holiday apartments rented out to foreigners or Maltese. Some of these apartments are unregistered. In recent years, more Maltese have taken to staying overnight in Gozo, mostly in apartments. This generates good income to Gozitan catering and entertainment establishments.

Day trippers on coach tours constitute a high proportion of visitors to Gozo. The economic benefits to Gozo for each day tripper is very limited. Moreover, these tours are not dedicating sufficient time to the display of Gozo's historical and architectural heritage and the beauty of its landscape. Day tours could be an excellent marketing tool to encourage return overnight stays but this potential is not being fully utilised.

Diving in Gozo has become increasingly popular in recent years. The designation of marine conservation areas and sinking of vessels in appropriate locations are possible initiatives to promote this sector.

Clearly Gozo has much to offer to the visitor. Sites such as the Citadel, Ggantija Temples and Dwejra are in their own right unique. Perhaps Gozo's charm can be better captured by 'discovery'. The streets and village squares, farmhouses and historic buildings, the picturesque landscape, the fertile valleys and the rugged coast all provide ample scope for the adventurous visitor to explore and discover and enjoy an enriching experience. Several Gozitans contend that Gozo can be considered as a destination in its own right and therefore a separate marketing strategy to that for Malta would be more effective. There may also be a case for a marketing strategy with Maltese for winter breaks.

Another form of tourism is retirement tourism whereby foreigners (and returned migrants) retire in Gozo. This generates demands for services and hence income and employment. Gozo has a better potential than Malta in this area, given that most of the island is as yet unspoiled by over-development. The current 17 per cent tax on acquisition of properties by foreigners is however a major constraint.

Gozo's ability to attract visitors is highly dependent on transport between the two islands. There have been substantial improvements in recent years. More are in the pipeline with the commissioning of new ferries and improved facilities at the Cirkewwa and Mgarr harbours.

Transport on Gozo itself also has an

economic significance. The provision of a broader range of transport services to visitors will provide for a more comprehensive tourist product. It also has a social dimension since it allows people to meet, interact and participate in social, cultural and sporting events. Inadequate public transport, therefore, has social implications particularly for the elderly and the young.

The road network in Gozo is centred on Victoria, resulting in substantial through traffic within the town centre. There clearly is the need for relief roads and/or improved traffic circulation to reduce congestion and pollution. The parking situation in Victoria is difficult and worsens in summer. A multi-level car park below ground was suggested on the site of the current car park.

Agriculture is an integral part of the Gozitan landscape. Apart from generating revenue, promotion of agriculture will help conserve the landscape. The agricultural sector in Gozo relies heavily on part-time activity. In spite of a reduction in full-time farmers in recent years, agricultural produce has increased. Rubble walls are not being maintained, resulting in soil loss after heavy rainfall. In some instances, poor access to fields for mechanised equipment constrains utilisation of fields.

Parcelling of fields into smaller units because of inheritance is yet another constraint. Measures will be required to maximise the availability of water from surface water runoff and the sewage treatment plant to be built in coming years.

The location of animal farms in urban areas is causing inconvenience to residents. The Local Plan will identify suitable locations for animal farms which are outside urban areas but which will cause least visual impact on the countryside. For the fishing sector, berthing and boat storage facilities are inadequate.

Three land uses which could have substantial visual impact are batching/tarmac plants, quarrying and waste disposal. Most softstone quarries are to the west of the island and a large hardstone quarry is at Qala. A waste transfer station is planned for Xagħra. A permit for use of a disused quarry at Tal-Qattara was issued recently.

The industrial sector in Gozo is concentrated in the Xewkija Estate with over 40 per cent being employed in textiles. Given Gozo's agricultural sector, food processing and production has good potential for further development. Small retail outlets and hand-made crafts are also important contributors to the manufacturing sector.

A number of garage industries are located in urban areas causing inconvenience to neighbours. The PA recently issued a permit for some 23 units in Xewkija Industrial Estate. Pri-

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BEACH replenishment and improved access to beaches in Gozo and Comino were suggested during one of the meetings

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vate land suitable for garage industries is available at Xewkija but as yet has not been developed.

Retail and office development in Gozo are concentrated in Victoria. In recent years there has been a substantial increase in shops in Victoria. The quality of recent developments is conducive to increased leisure shopping by visitors to Gozo and hence for job creation. Most office developments are small scale and conversions of residential development. Only recently were there some purpose-built offices developed.

Given the improved telecommunications, better inter-island transport and the increase in Gozitan graduates, the potential for financial services in Gozo should be investigated.

The Lyceum complex in Victoria houses four schools. Thanks to the ingenuity of the heads of school and other officials involved, the best possible use of the limited space available has been made. There is a need for additional space.

The Gozo population is around 29,000. Close to half live in Victoria and adjoining towns and villages (Xewkija, Sannat, Kercem, Fontana and Munxar). Between 1985 and 1995, the Gozo population increased by 13 per cent (the corresponding figure for Malta being eight).

In four years (1993 to 1996), 2,000 new dwelling units were to be produced if all permits issued were used. Forty per cent of these are for flats. Between 1988 and 1994, some 31 hectares of land within development zone were developed. A further 105 hectares were available for development in 1994.

Some 10,600 existing houses are occupied all year round and a further 3,600 are made use of for part of the year. A further 2,100 (equivalent to 12.8 per cent of the total) were unoccupied throughout the year.

There are many attractive roads and piazzas in Gozitan towns and villages. Vacant buildings around the piazzas reduce the viability and the attractiveness of these spaces. Excessive use of tarmac gives dominance to the car

(moving or stationary) with pedestrians being pushed to the edge of the space.

Several Gozitan settlements are characterised by ribbon development along roads. For smaller settlements such as Ghasri, San Lawrenz and Santa Lucija, the result is dispersed development over a somewhat large area. The larger villages/towns such as Kercem, Xaghra, Gharb, Nadur and Qala have a central area more compactly developed with 'fingers' spreading outwards. With ribbon development, most houses have open fields and countryside at the back. The perception is that anywhere you live in Gozo (except for the larger towns) you are always close to nature.

Several towns and villages such as Zebbug, Nadur, Qala are on ridges and plateaux. Development at the fringes is very visible from the valley below and from a distance. The mass and treatment of the back elevation are sometimes unrelated to the prominent position, thus disrupting the skyline of the towns and villages. The PA is in the process of designating Urban Conservation Areas for most towns and villages in Gozo.

Marsalforn and Xlendi are very popular seaside resorts in the summer but very quiet in the winter. They have been in varying degrees subject to overdevelopment. Requests have been made to increase the height limitation in Marsalforn to four floors.

The quality of life of Gozitans and visitors to the island is dependent on

a wide range of factors. Job opportunities and transport issues clearly are pivotal in this respect. Facilities for recreation, culture and sports are as important. There is potential for more gardens or picnic areas. Various local councils are considering this or have made specific proposals.

One form of recreation for which Gozo is well-suited is walks in the countryside. This may require facilities such as parking at strategic locations and open areas for picnics. More coastal footpaths would allow for better appreciation of the scenic shoreline.

Marsalforn, Xlendi and Ramla Bay are the most popular beaches. In one of the meetings, suggestions for beach replenishment at Xlendi and improving access to other beaches were made. In spite of being a small island, most water sports are not practised widely.

The PA invites the public and interested organisations to send in their comments and suggestions to be considered for inclusion in the Gozo and Comino Local Plan. This is the first-stage of a public consultation process this local plan. All comments received will be considered while the local plan is being drafted. A second public consultation will be held once the draft local plan is prepared.

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