

Tangible improvements to destination Malta

A recent Deloitte report proposes radical changes to the way the Malta Tourism Authority operates. This is the final article in a series of two commenting on aspects relating to the tourism product.

The Deloitte report comments on the work of various sections and directorates of the Malta Tourism Authority.

When referring to the product planning and development directorate, the report speaks almost as if the only projects carried out were the St George's Bay beach development project and the subsequent management of the replenished beach in summer 2004. Although these are significant projects in their own right, PP&D was involved in a much longer list of projects and initiatives.

Two new visitor attractions have been established in collaboration with *Fondazzjoni Wirt Artna*, namely the Malta at War Museum in Vittoriosa and the Noon-Day Gun at Upper Barrakka, Valletta. The former is a wartime shelter together with a small permanent exhibition of wartime items. The latter involved the provision of a gun with carriage and the re-enactment of the shooting of the noon-day gun every Saturday at midday.

A number of restoration projects have been carried out in collaboration with the Restoration Unit (Works Division) including the Eagle fountain in San Anton, the Ball Monument in Lower Barrakka, Villa de Argote in Argotti Gardens, the façade of the Inquisitor's Palace in Vittoriosa, the main portal of the Grandmaster's Palace in Valletta and Greeks Gate in Mdina.

Following financial assistance offered by MTA, Heritage Malta embarked on a comprehensive refurbishment of the Roman *Domus* in Rabat, as opposed to minor touching up as was originally intended.

A series of six countryside walks were published and a further two are under preparation. User friendly and colourful booklets were produced enabling the visitor to walk the route without assistance. The routes were selected on the basis of scenic views and unspoilt countryside. Over 10,000 booklets were sold from shops. Agreements have been reached with the Works Division and the Gozo Ministry for the cleaning and upkeep of the routes.

As part of the Roots Programme, the directorate planted over 200 trees in Ta' Qali national park. The trees were sponsored by Maltese families living overseas.

In conjunction with the Malta Transport Authority (ADT), MTA launched the Vis-

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italma tourist transport service. This hop-on hop-off bus service connects resort areas to visitor attractions. Following initial support from both the MTA and the ADT, the Association of Bus Owners is now operating the service without any further support.

Eight churches in Valletta are open daily to visitors. The directorate issued a brochure giving information on each of the eight participating churches. The brochure also gives opening times, thereby enabling tourists to plan their itinerary to include one or more of these churches.

Over 40 projects have been implemented by local councils and NGOs thanks to the direct assistance of the PP&D. The projects were very diverse in nature and included gardens, belvederes, landscaping, rural improvements, urban improvements, public conveniences, provision of heavy duty dustbins, information brochures and direction signs. In most cases, the project would not have taken place without this assistance.

In section 6.10, the report argues that PP&D did not have "a major impact" on product Malta. The role of PP&D as perceived by the report writers is to "be a catalyst for product improvement" which the report claims is "one of the areas where the private sector had the highest expectations".

It is nonsensical and totally unrealistic for anyone to expect PP&D to have a "major impact on product Malta" simply by being a "catalyst for product improvement".

The approach adopted by the directorate recognises the constraints within which it operates. The projects embarked upon might not have had the "major impact" the report writers refer to but they certainly were tangible improvements to Malta's tourism product offer.

In page 51 the report states: "The MTA has increasingly started involving itself in areas relating to product Malta that many feel should

be outsourced or left to other agencies as opposed to facilitating and coordinating overall product issues". Had MTA not involved itself directly in project implementation the impact it would have had on the product would have been significantly less.

The level of involvement of PP&D varied according to the nature of the project and the partner with whom it was working. Wherever possible, the directorate collaborated with other agencies and this worked well in many cases. In other areas, however, it was evident that such an approach was not producing results.

A case in point is St George's Bay beach replenishment project. At one time, Works Division were involved in the project but it was never high in its list of priorities. Rightly or wrongly, the division got itself entangled in endless arguments with Mepa on the promenade design and the extent of the sand. Issues relating to storm water design were treated in a superficial manner. Had MTA and the ministry not intervened directly and took over responsibility for the project, the sand replenishment of St George's Bay would not have happened – not now and not in the foreseeable future.

Given the choice, I prefer having the benefits that the project generated (to the area and to tourism) rather than strictly adhering to the principle that MTA should not get involved in projects.

On the basis of experience, I would argue that the role of MTA should be to facilitate and coordinate overall product issues. This would be subject to the proviso that MTA may have to take direct responsibility for projects which other agencies clearly have no inclination or interest to implement.

The writer is an architect and urban planner. Until recently, he was consultant on product development with the Malta Tourism Authority. The views expressed are strictly his own.