

A breakthrough for tourism!

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With a title like this, you might expect this article to be about a sharp increase in tourism arrivals or, possibly, the completion of a much needed tourism project. Neither is the case.

This article is about a fairly straightforward activity organised for local tourist handling agents by the Malta Tourism Authority; a visit to Cottonera held last Thursday.

The visit included Vittoriosa, Cospicua, Senglea and Kalkara. At each of the localities, the respective mayor welcomed the group and expressed full support for the initiative. The visit also included Fort Rinella.

Historical re-enactments combined with the intrinsic historic value of the sites provided a very enjoyable experience for the over 100 persons who attended the tour. Incidentally, one of the sites visited, the Malta at War Museum, is now a reality due to the direct involvement of and the support extended by the MTA's Product and Development Directorate to *Fondazzjoni Wirt Artna* and the Vittoriosa local council.

Why is this a breakthrough? There has been a lot of talk about deficiencies in the product. Over the years, I become increasingly convinced that the real problem lies elsewhere. People operating in the industry are insufficiently aware of what Malta has to offer. For most people, product Malta is the same as that offered in the 1980s and 1990s – a sun and sea destination with the occasional visit to a heritage site. Unfortunately, up to some time ago, this was the predominant view within sections of the MTA itself.

To my mind, the Cottonera visit signifies a fundamental change in direction. In spite of many deficiencies, Malta has an exceptional product. It offers a wide range of unique experiences all within short travel distances of each other. The MTA's role now includes communicating this to tourism operators. Well-organised visits enable operators to experience that which they can subsequently offer to their clients.

The visit to Cottonera contrasts sharply with a visit organised for the MTA board members to the Roman Domus, in Rabat some two years ago. Board members were taken around the site to highlight its many deficiencies. That visit was symptomatic of the stance adopted by sections of the tourism industry, including of the MTA itself, where the idea that the Malta tourism product was lousy was hammered into people's minds. The negative stance may well have been adopted to

divert attention away from problems relating to the way Malta was being marketed. (The Roman Domus is currently refurbished by Heritage Malta with financial assistance from the MTA's Product Planning and Development Directorate).

When deciding on places to visit during a tour, handling agents have a responsibility which goes beyond narrow considerations relating to the profit to be made. The best and least expensive form of promotion is to provide current visitors with an exceptional experience. Not only are they more likely to return but they will naturally tell their friends about their wonderful experience. Operators should therefore seek out places which are most interesting and likely to give the visitor an unforgettable experience. Ultimately, they are the first to benefit if and when there is repeat business.

On more than one occasion, the MTA's chairman, Chris Grech, has spoken about the linkage between marketing and product. To market a tourism destination effectively you need to understand and appreciate the experience that it offers. Conversely, product development should focus on those areas which can most effectively be marketed overseas.

The visit is also a breakthrough for Cottonera. At the moment, fewer than 100,000 tourists a year visit the area. This is far too little for an area which has so much to offer. This new awareness among the tourism industry should result in increased tourism flows to the area and, hence, increased investment by the private sector in much needed tourism infrastructure.

The Cottonera visit signifies a new willingness to better realise the potential of Malta's tourism product offer.

Well done to Mr Grech for whole-heartedly supporting the initiative and to the MTA personnel who coordinated the visit.

The need to constantly improve our tourism product offer remains. Cleanliness should become a priority especially in key tourism areas, including Valletta and Cottonera. Efforts by Heritage Malta to improve maintenance and presentation of key heritage attractions deserve commendation and support.

With reference to Cottonera, the tourism sector eagerly awaits further improvements to Fort St Angelo and the initiation of the Dock No. 1 project. 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.

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