

Re-inventing the Malta image

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Tourism flows to Malta peak in July and August. A vast majority of summer visitors come to enjoy our sunshine and seas. Even if we talk about restructuring, sun-sea tourism will remain an important component of our tourism industry.

On the other hand, Malta's potential for cultural tourism is significant. Malta has a rich and colourful history which is amply displayed by innumerable buildings, fortifications, museums and archaeological sites. Diverse cultural assets are within short distances, not only of each other, but also from tourism support infrastructure, such as accommodation and leisure facilities. Elements of Malta's tourism product are unique and provide a visitor experience which no other destination could match.

Is Malta a cultural destination? It is interesting to compare Malta with Bruges, which is widely considered to be a cultural destination. In Bruges, the money spent by tourists in 2000 on culture amounted to an equivalent of Lm3.4 million whereas each tourist spent on average the equivalent of Lm2.46 per night. The corresponding figures for Malta (in 1998 figures) were Lm8.9 million and Lm1.14. Even if Bruges is a short stay destination,

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the fact remains that the participation of visitors to Malta in cultural activities is comparable to other cultural destinations.

Effective promotion requires the development of a consistent image – for example, when Egypt is referred to, most people think of the pyramids; for many, Greece brings to mind the acropolis and Greek architecture. (Incidentally, it is interesting to note how the Greeks used the signing of the EU accession treaty to further reinforce the "Greek temple" image of their country).

What image does the name Malta bring to mind? The way our tourism industry operates creates a difficulty in this respect. In effect, Malta competes in two distinct markets. On the one hand, we need to maintain our sun-

sea tourism during the peak summer months; on the other hand, we need to encourage more visits motivated by culture and heritage during the off-peak months.

To my knowledge, this dilemma on what image to develop – sun-sea or culture – has never been fully discussed and resolved.

How much of our resources (marketing, product development, etc.) should target visitors who come for our beaches and sunshine and how much should target cultural tourists?

Even if we were to talk of an image based on culture and heritage, this could be developed in different ways, primarily because of Malta's diverse product offer. There are a number of themes upon which a cultural image could be based including the Knights of St John, fortifications and fortified towns, religious tourism, historic towns and architecture, archaeology, an island celebration, maritime Malta and the British connection. Any one, possibly two or three, of these could be the theme/s with which the Malta name can become synonymous with.

As a tourism destination, we need to decide, in precise terms, the image with which we want the name "Malta" to be associated with. Once this is decided, we need to adopt a single-minded approach whereby promotional and product development initiatives are in line with the Malta image that has been adopted.