

OPINION

Why Valletta?

John Ebejer

'... Valletta's main attraction is in its totality.'

Eighteen months ago, the Valletta Alive Foundation was set up. Why was a voluntary foundation set up to specifically cater for Valletta? Why is it that a large number of people have a keen interest in the city? What is so special about Valletta for it to attract so much attention? Why Valletta?

Valletta has an identity and character which is second to none. It is located on a peninsula separating two harbours. One can enjoy exceptional views of the harbours from gardens and vantage points along its periphery. The refurbishment of Hastings Gardens and, prior to that, the Upper and Lower Barracca Gardens are important investments in Valletta's infrastructure and environment.

The fortifications surrounding the city are impressive both for their extent as well as for their height. Valletta has been declared a World Heritage Site by Unesco. Valletta is a centre for performing and visual arts having Malta's most important cultural venues and museums.

In spite of its rich history and immense cultural heritage, it is a dynamic city with innumerable offices, shops, cafés and restaurants. Republic Street and adjoining streets are a hub of activity during the day. The pedestrianisation of Merchants Street, as planned by the government, will certainly increase the activity within the commercial hub.

Like most towns, it is home to several parishes, each of which is the centre of the community's spiritual and social life. For decades, the population of Valletta declined. More recently, there were several people, Mal-

tese and foreigners, who chose to take up residence in Valletta. The downward trend may well have been halted, maybe even reversed.

Valletta is our nation's capital and, inevitably, the more important national and political events take place within its walls. Its distinctive identity is intricately linked with our identity as a nation.

Valletta provides an exceptional visitor experience. For more than a million tourists who visit it each year, it is remarkable for its architecture, characterised by the yellow globigerina, elaborate stonework and the coloured balconies. It is not just a series of visitor attractions which happen to be within walking distance from each other – Valletta's main attraction is in its totality.

Since its inception, the foundation has generated significant interest. It is evident that there are many people who have an interest in what happens to our capital city.

One of the objectives of the Valletta Alive Foundation is to revitalise Valletta in the evenings. With this in mind, the foundation will be holding BOV Streets Alive on four Friday evenings, namely today, August 4, August 11 and August 18.

The main streets of Valletta will come to life with activities ranging from live musicians,

Valletta walk tours, late opening of museums, children's entertainment, a classic car show, artists and sport exhibitions.

Participating shops will also remain open for late shopping until 8.30 p.m. and will offer discounts or incentives on the four Fridays after 6.30 p.m.

There will also be participating bars, cafés and restaurants which will offer discounts and which will also remain open till late.

BOV Streets Alive and other similar activities act as a catalyst and accelerate the process of Valletta's evening revitalisation.

In a letter to *The Sunday Times* (August 4, 1996), Paulo Varela Gomes, an art and architectural historian from Portugal, wrote thus: "The place I keep in a very special shrine in my heart is Valletta. I know Paris, Barcelona, Venice and Rome. I know Rio de Janeiro, for me the most beautiful city in the world. But I rate Valletta second only to Rio in my personal chart of top 10 cities".

Why Valletta? Prof. Varela Gomes offers an answer in the conclusion to his letter: "Humankind has not been gentle to this planet. But it has managed to add some magnificent things to its surface. Valletta is one of them".

Mr Ebejer, an architect and urban planner, is honorary secretary of the Valletta Alive Foundation.