

Arts and entertainment: the tourism perspective

JOHN EBEJER, consultant on Product Development with the Malta Tourism Authority, discusses why he believes that the performing and visual arts are two strands of cultural tourism which are complementary to one another and which attract tourists to these islands

Tourism is one of the mainstays of the Maltese economy. Over the years it has generated substantial revenue and created thousands of jobs. We are now operating in an increasingly competitive market with several other destinations offering a better sun-sea product at a cheaper price.

Malta receives high numbers of visitors during the summer months and substantially lower numbers during the winter and shoulder months. The tourism infrastructure, particularly accommodation, is thus under-utilised. One of the main objectives of the Malta Tourism Authority (MTA) is to improve seasonality, thereby making the tourism industry more sustainable. One sector which could provide for increased tourism flows is the performing and visual arts.

There are two strands of cultural tourism which are complementary to one another. The first involves the "tangibles" or the physical product (including urban heritage, historic and archaeological sites and museums). The second strand involves the "intangibles" namely the performing and visual arts. Cultural tourism is normally associated with the "tangibles"; the relevance of performing and visual arts for cultural tourism is not given sufficient emphasis. This needs to be remedied if Malta is to develop a more holistic cultural image.

There are two attributes which distinguish art from "non-art". Art is creative and innovative; art is an expression of feeling. Certain activities which are entertaining may have a limited artistic content (for example, animation and games in hotels, re-enactments and concerts of popular tunes). Because they are of interest to the tourist, they are also relevant in this discussion.

The need for a positive cultural image

Selling is all about image. An image which Malta has the potential to develop is that of a cultural destination.

A positive cultural image benefits all kinds of tourism, including various niche markets (such as conferences, English language schools and diving). The benefits are not limited to tourism – it also makes Malta more attractive to do business with (whether it is for investment, overseas study and so on). The promotion of cultural tourism is an effective means of meeting government tourism policy and hence provide for an improvement of the standard of living and the quality of life.

Malta has the potential to develop a positive cultural image not least because of various assets related to performing and visual arts. Over the years, there has been a constant improvement in the quality of our cultural activities. A diversity of cultural and leisure experiences are offered within a relatively small area, thus greatly reducing the need for travel.

Malta possesses a number of cultural venues more notably the Manoel Theatre, the Mediterranean Conference Centre (MCC) and the Centre for Creativity. The historic and architectural interest of these sites give added value to the arts experience.

Providing an enjoyable experience

Tourism is all about experiences. For tourists to enjoy themselves they need to have things to do during the day and in the evenings. The more varied and fuller a tourist programme of activities is, the more likely will the tourist have a good time.

In the summer, this may not be too difficult but in the winter it can be problematic. It is not uncommon for hoteliers to receive complaints from residents stating that they have nothing to do in the evening.

Marketing a tourism destination is an expensive business. Malta spends millions of liri annually to market Malta

overseas. Competing destinations have significantly more resources at their disposal for marketing.

We need therefore to make the best possible use of marketing opportunities. One such opportunity is the experience which we offer tourists visiting Malta. According to one tourism writer. The best and least expensive form of promotion is to provide existing guests with an exceptional experience. Not only are they more likely to return, but they will naturally tell their friends about their wonderful experience.

The potential of providing a positive experience to tourists as a means of promoting repeat business is often underestimated by the tourism industry. Some hoteliers have the view that it is good business to keep guests at the hotel bar in the evening rather than trying to find something more interesting for them to do elsewhere. This is clearly a short-sighted view. Tourists who spend six evenings within the same two or three hotel catering facilities will get the impression that there is nothing to do in Malta in the evenings, hardly an impression to encourage another visit.

One hotelier has taken a different approach. During the winter and off-peak season, he actively encourages hotel residents to engage in activities outside the hotel. The end result is a very high level of repeat business.

Hotels should be proactive and find activities and events which the tourist can attend and, if necessary, make arrangements for their transport. Ultimately, if the tourist decides to visit Malta again he/she is more likely to stay at the same hotel (provided of course that the service is good).



John Ebejer, consultant on Product Development with the MTA

Arts and entertainment activities for the tourist

The performing arts provide opportunities which to date have not been sufficiently tapped by the tourism sector. The perception that there is not much to do in the evenings is, in my view, incorrect. In any one weekend, there are several cultural activities taking place, many of which are of interest to the tourist.

There are a number of constraints, however, which might prevent the tourist from attending. The relevant information may not be readily available to the tourist and acquiring tickets is sometimes problematic especially in the last few days

before the event. Transport from the hotel to the cultural venue may be difficult and/or expensive.

Information on culture events could be better organised and presented to make it comprehensive and more accessible to the tourist.

At any one time, the number of tourists in Malta in the shoulder months (October, November, March, April, and May) ranges from 15,000 to 24,000. Most of the tourists visiting Malta during the winter and off-peak season visit a museum or an archaeological site. Allowing for problems of lack of time, language barriers, lack of interest, it is not unreasonable to assume that up to a third of tourists in Malta may be interested in attending, say, a classical concert, theatre or a dance spectacle. This means that there are some 5,000 to 8,000 additional potential clients at any one time for these kinds of activities.

The MTA comprises a section specifically for the organising of events. The bulk of the activities are held in the winter and shoulder months (October to May) in an effort to improve seasonality. Over the past year, new events have been introduced providing a fuller programme of activities targeting tourists. A three-year programme of events has been launched enabling the trade to plan in advance and tour operators to include selected events in their brochures.

Over the past few weeks, the product planning and development directorate of MTA organised the Mediterranean Food Festival and the Valletta Festival. Over the winter, the directorate staged a series of weekly evening entertainment entitled the Tuesday Nite Show. The evenings were held in different hotels and featured top quality musicians and artists. In conjunction with the Manoel Theatre and the University of Malta, the MTA supported Windows on Music, a series of classical concerts in different venues in Valletta.

The MTA has taken a more proactive role in promoting its events to increase attendance by tourists, thereby providing them with a more enjoyable holiday experience.

It is useful to distinguish two types of "arts tourists". The above discussion focused on arts and entertainment events which target tourists whose main reason for travel is something other than arts (relaxation, conferences, and so on). These could be described as "arts-peripheral" tourists. Another type of arts tourist is the "arts-core", the visitor who comes specifically for an arts events.

Currently, the events that generate, or have the potential to generate, arts-core tourists include the Jazz Festival, the Malta International Choir Festival, the Manoel Baroque Festival (second edition to be held in May 2003) and the Mediterranean Festival in Gozo (first edition postponed due to 11 September events). Events targeting an overseas clientele should be developed gradually over time so as to increase their overseas attractiveness.

The private sector, particularly the larger corporate entities, should take note of these events and support them financially. They stand to gain from augmented commercial activities that increased visitor flows to Malta will generate.

The MTA has an extensive network of overseas offices which could promote these events, provided the information is made available well in advance. The internet provides new opportunities for marketing cultural activities as well as for ticket sales.

The tourism industry spends thousands of Maltese liri annually on entertainment and arts activities. Better utilisation of our cultural potential for tourism will provide a larger audience for cultural events. It will generate increased revenue to the culture industry revenue which could be re-invested to further improve the quality of our cultural productions.

Kindly note that because of lack of space we have had to remove Mr Ebejer's notes and references.