

OPINION&LETTERS

Purchasing Pantelleria: proposal a non-starter



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We have had to contend with cluttered conditions on these islands since the times of the Knights of St John, when the population density of the archipelago first crawled up to around 300 individuals per square kilometre (comparable to corresponding figures for the UK and Belgium). We have recently scaled new heights, mainly due to the influx of foreign workers. It is against this context that Prof. Godfrey Baldacchino's proposition to purchase the Italian island of Pantelleria must be framed.

The motivation behind the proposition – namely that of steering clear of large-scale detrimental land reclamation projects at sea – is not without its merits. But it is the choice of the island, the largest within the circum-Sicilian constellation, that raises eyebrows.

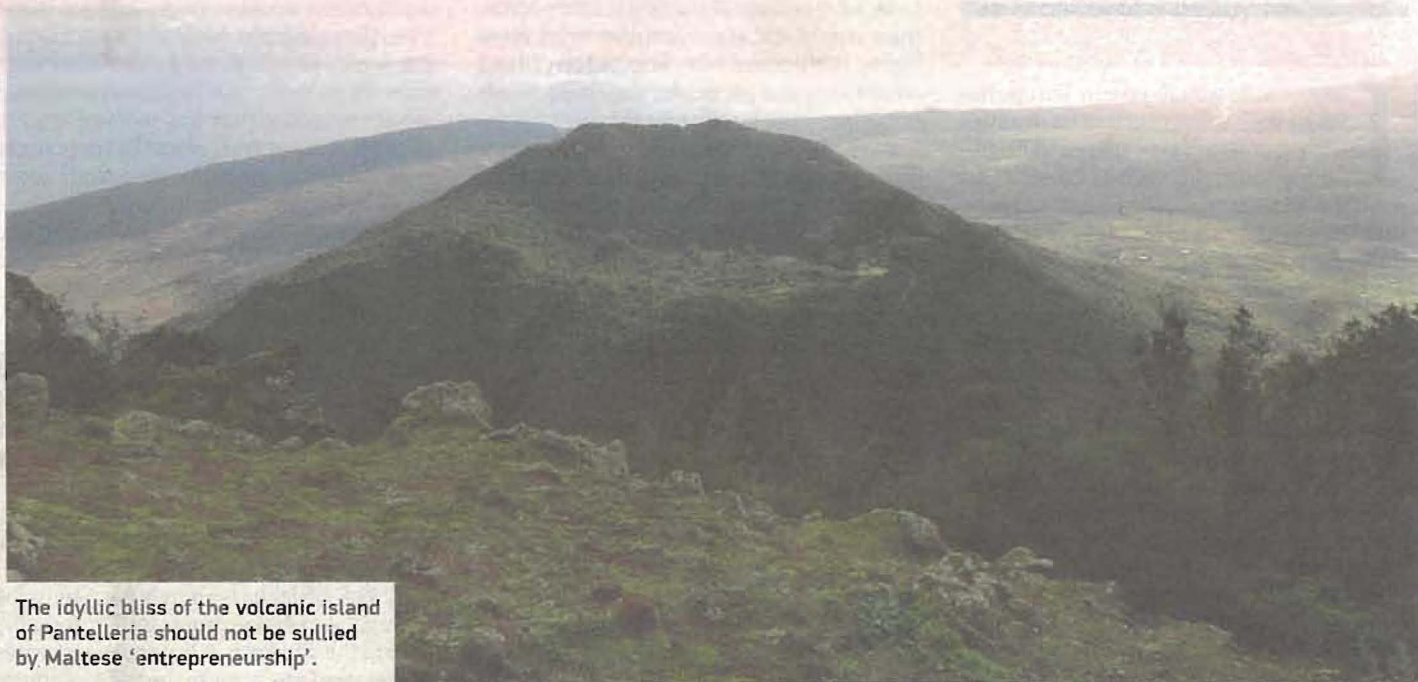
Getting to Pantelleria is somewhat of a convoluted jaunt, having to weave one's way through Trapani or Mazara del Vallo, and thus you may be forgiven for being completely clueless as to the exact whereabouts of this backwater.

The volcanic island, which is only slightly larger than Gozo, is as close to Africa as you can get, with a mere 75km separating Pantelleria from Tunisia's Cap Bon. Despite the similar physical dimensions to Gozo, Pantelleria hosts just under 8,000 residents, contrary to Gozo's 30,000, resulting in the human footprint on the island being much less destructive than on Gozo.

Indeed, large swathes of the volcanic island, especially in the heavily forested and mountainous hinterland, are enclosed in a Special Protected Area (SPA) under the Birds Directive, with only a handful of locals being licensed to hunt birds. The island's numerous endemic plant species have justified the designation of two Special Areas of Conservation (SAC), while a Marine Protected Area (MPA) has been designated to enclose the entire extent of the island's coastal waters.

Besides Pantelleria's naturalistic prowess, it is the aggressive nature of Maltese 'entrepreneurship' that should put the brakes on Prof. Baldacchino's audacious proposal. For instance, the almost complete lack of gently-sloping beaches on the island, courtesy of its prohibitive coastal topography, would definitely serve as grist for the artificial beach mill we have in Malta. Lo Specchio di Venere, an evocative sulphur-laden pool of water fed by thermal springs, would definitely be within the sights of beach concession advocates, fuelling all forms of commercial development, ranging from kiosks to the fully-fledged lidos, as we have so sadly grown accustomed to here in Malta. Public access and unfettered views would probably be the first scalps of a Maltese take-over of the island, courtesy of our knack of privatising and ring-fencing public resources.

And for those casting doubts on the Maltese 'abilities' to sully the natural



The idyllic bliss of the volcanic island of Pantelleria should not be sullied by Maltese 'entrepreneurship'.

environment of Pantelleria, precedents do exist. For instance, in 1800, the Maltese identity was etched in the most indelible ink on the island of Lampedusa when a group of Maltese colonisers took under emphyteusis a part of the island. In 1810, about 300 such pioneers, guided by Salvatore Gatt, constructed a long wall on the western part of the island, thus effectively dividing it in two.

The Maltese legacy on the island did not stop here, however, and even involved less palatable aspects of the Maltese character that still bedraggle our own islands even today. The arrival of the Maltese, in fact, was accompanied almost simultaneously by an upsurge in the rate of deforestation on the island so as to harness the land for agricultural purposes. This sounded the dead knell for the countless wild boars, deer and rabbits that could be found on the island, while endowing Pantelleria with its current lunar landscape.

Quiet predictably, relations between the Tomasi family and the Maltese descendants soured such that not only was the emphyteusis not renewed, but King Ferdinand II of the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies acquired the island for 12,000 ducats.

My cynical guess is that, given the chance, we would probably reserve the same treatment for Pantelleria.



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The Spittelau waste incinerator in the centre of Vienna, literally cheek and jowl with the Vienna University.

Halland Hotel redevelopment

The current application to develop a nine-storey residential complex on the enlarged footprint of the Halland Hotel has rightly raised the hackles of residents and the local council alike, given the sensitivity of the upper valley reaches that the hotel overlooks.

The current hotel structure overlooks dense maquis vegetation characterised by numerous mature indigenous trees. Despite the plans for the redevelopment of the hotel indicating a higher number of trees than there are currently on site, no stone should be left unturned in safeguarding the integrity of the existing mature trees. Planting saplings to replace their loss would be scant solace. Public access to the valley should not be usurped by the development.

Environmental considerations aside, the conversion of tourist facilities into residential ones should be objectionable in principle, given that the access of tourists to prime sites on the islands was originally made against the proviso that the country would capitalise financially as a whole on their success. Now that the touristic element is defunct, is the granting of prime sites for residential development still justified?

From the heart of Vienna

Those familiar with Vienna may be aware of the fact that the flamboyantly decorated Spittelau waste incinerator graces the very heart of the city, literally cheek and jowl with the University of Vienna.

The incinerator, whose energetic outputs support the heating of 60,000 households, is described as a state-of-the-art facility, spewing its innocuous flue gas through a 126-metre-high chimney that dominates the Viennese skyline on a par with the steeples of St Stephen's Cathedral.

For Malta to emulate Spittelau is no mean feat. The installation runs on gargantuan volumes of waste – 250,000 tons of municipal waste each year – and is supported by efficient waste separation at source.

The efficient site management and judicious disposal of the 60,000 tons of clinker, filter cake and ash it generates are an inherent part and parcel of its operations.

The main justification behind the questionable siting of the incinerator, which was first constructed in 1971, is the treatment of waste in the same place where it is generated. Ample food for thought for the current Maltese waste management conundrum.