

Golden Bay - another St Paul's Bay in the making?



Someone applied last February to develop a fully-fledged tourist village on the scheduled cliffs behind the Golden Sands Hotel. The words "nowhere is sacred any more" (paraphrased from Din I-Art Helwa's president) are quite fitting here.

Bedraggled Golden Bay has again been making the headlines for the wrong reasons. Unsavory details about the new Island Hotels outpost there emerged during the public hearing held in the last week of May.

These included the fact that the new hotel would be highly visible from Gnejna Bay (over the clay slopes) and that, although the new Golden Sands Hotel building would cater for the same number of beds as the original, it would be spread out over a larger footprint since it would consist of separate blocks of apartments rather than a single one.

In fact, by scouring the 'old footprint' and the 'new footprint', one can roughly detect a substantial increase in the area gobbled up. It is highly ironic indeed that the decision on the new Golden Sands hotel was taken on World Environment Day (June 5).

Other anomalies in the planning process emerge when talking of the Golden Sands hot potato. How was it that MEPA granted the permit for a partial demolition of the old hotel building to start even before the project was supposedly granted? Also, how is it that the permit was granted just a week after that the public hearing pertinent to the project was held? Isn't there a timeframe, some 10-15 days, during which anyone can raise objections about things which transpired in the public hearing?

Due to these and other points, the case in question has all the hallmarks of fast-track processing. Despite their call for a greater swath of the Golden Bay environs, the developers show no intention of contributing towards the restoration of the natural environment in the area, such as the dilapidated sand dune.

The words of Martin Scicluna, president of Din I-Art Helwa - to the effect that nowhere in our islands is sacred enough to escape the developers' axe - have an uncanny relevance in this following context.

Just behind the new Golden Sands hotel building, an application for a gargantuan tourist village (application number 00144/03) was posted before MEPA last February. The application, which mires completely in a good dose of irresponsibility, has earmarked a whole swath of land extending over the scheduled cliffs and boulder scree of Rdum Majjiesa near the old British ranges.

With about 94 per cent of our accessible coastline already committed to tourist developments, our insatiable developers are setting their sights on the inaccessible western part of the islands. With the Golden Bay environs already sporting the Hal Ferh complex, a hotel of significant proportions, a large car park, a recreational area reserved to the scouts' association with another huge tourist village in the offing and the ever growing Manikata hamlet in the background, the area is showing only the symptoms of full-fledged coastal development as witnessed sadly elsewhere around the islands.

And then there is the Internet Café saga dogging the bay. No rationale seems to prompt our authorities to budge and act against the whim of the developer in question who fails to realise that having such a café in the middle of one of the last remaining sand dunes in our islands is not exactly the right thing to do - is the whim of one person (who appears to be quiet influential) enough to stave off the sacrosanct relocation of the café to a more amenable place, such as the side of the beach?

I can only imagine the highly ironic scenario where people would be browsing over the net to glean information on the ecological importance of sand dunes from a café built right in the middle of one. Even thoughts of young people studying at school about the need to conserve our sand dunes and who end up spending their time in the café during their summer holidays have a definite paradoxical tinge.

The light pollution emanating from such a café is also not expected to be beneficial in any way to the largely nocturnal fauna of sand dunes. Despite numerous calls for its demolition, the illegal flights of steps leading down to the Internet Café (rebuilt after it was demolished at public expense by MEPA) still traverses the dune in defiant mood.

The Internet Café is just one of the many chimeras plaguing the Golden Bay sand dune. The money-spinning film industry also took its toll, with reports that the heavy machinery used on the beach also skirted the dune somewhat, with bulldozer tracks being seen on parts of it.

One wonders if any financial guarantees have been imposed by our authorities on the filming industry as an insurance against such incidents of environmental degradation (as witnessed in the now notorious film *The Beach*, where a sandy beach in Indonesia saw its demise at the hands of the film industry). Such money, which would have been forfeited in the case of Golden Bay, should be used for eco-restoration works, such as the restoration of the Golden Bay sand dune.

The value of the word 'scheduling'

One can feel smug that about 11 per cent of our territory has been earmarked for conservation purposes. Such a figure compares with our EU counterparts. However, the actual protection bestowed to land having such a status is doubtful.

Theoretically, the clay slopes around Gnejna are scheduled - however, since enforcement officers from MEPA are highly elusive such that they are nowhere to be seen, people felt free to camp for the first time on such slopes just beneath Lippija Tower in the first weekend of June. Camping and parking has already claimed the last vestiges of sand dune habitat at Gnejna, where plans to reform the parking system close to the beach have stalled.

Wied il-Lunzjata (Xlendi Valley) in Gozo is scheduled at the highest levels - despite this, an eyesore concrete passageway was constructed over part of the valley at break-neck speed just before election time. Now that the Rural Development Plan is no longer in its embryonic stages, issues such as bridge-build and land reclamation can be tackled in a more holistic way by such a plan. Also, rubbish is accumulating on the valley sides and swanky villas are mushrooming around the valley - a very old carob tree bore the brunt, in fact, of a recent construction, when it was ruthlessly cut down.

The conclusion from all this - MEPA needs more people in the field and less desk-shackled technocrats. To enjoy a morsel of credibility, the scheduling of land should be enforced and publicised as much as possible. A highly motivated and untainted group of people should be out in the field and taking note of any new illegal building developments since the resources of NGO's like Nature Trust have been stretched to the limit.

MHRA takes a stand or not?

The Malta Hotels and Restaurants Association (MHRA) adopted a laudable position when it submitted proposals to Cabinet for a moratorium to be imposed on future hotel projects so as not to over-saturate the local market with available tourist beds.

In fact, the rationale given by MHRA president Winston Zahra is quite watertight - to justify the foreseen increase in hotel beds by a total of 4,000 by 2005, Malta will have to lure about 1.5 million tourists a year. However, there are two flies in the ointment in the MHRA's position.

Mr Zahra chipped his watertight arguments when he said that Malta needed to develop niche tourist markets, such as conference travel, diving and golf. While he failed to mention ecotourism as the most viable niche market, like all orthodox hoteliers he is keen on developing golfing in our islands, despite the slew of valid arguments against such a development in our islands.

In addition, the Golden Sands team could have been the shining beacons of the position paper presented by MHRA by opting for a decrease in the bed capacity of their new hotel. By clinging on to their old number (coupled with a larger footprint) of beds, the Golden Sands developers are being somewhat incongruent with the position taken by the MHRA.

Needless to say, and quite predictably too, the Cabinet turned MHRA's proposals, with Tourism Minister Zammit Dimech stating that Cabinet felt the recommendation to restrict new bed stock was seen as a drastic measure at this point in time, which could hamper development of new markets. New markets? We are speaking here of over-saturated Malta which needs to reduce its nagging reliance on tourism rather than open up new markets.

As soon as Cabinet's position was known, Mr Zahra reacted by saying that now we needed to boost our international marketing to lure 1.5 million tourists a year - talk indeed of carrying capacities. By continuing with the natural degradation of our country (wrecking walking trails and diving spots, for example), hoping to host so many tourists by spreading them out on the leaner months of the year is wildly optimistic.

Silver linings

Unfortunately, few silver linings have surfaced this month. We have had the announcement by HSBC that it would be providing Lm3,500 each year for the next five years to help conserve endangered or rare Maltese endemic and indigenous species through mass propagation programmes at the 250-year-old Argotti Botanic Gardens in Floriana. If one considers that about half of our plant species are threatened with extinction, one can easily understand the dire need for such laudable initiatives.

In addition, the Civil Court declared that land at Marfa on which the Solemar Hotel was built was government property. This is a more than welcome development in the case which has tarnished public confidence in the planning system. The Director of Lands has claimed damage from Riviera Resort Hotel Ltd and Polidano Brothers Ltd. We wait the outcome of such a decision with bated breath.

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