

Stairway to heaven



Fomm ir-Rih: Fomm ir-Rih is coveted by many for its idyllic isolation, courtesy of its relative inaccessibility....Etienne Grech should focus on improving public access on beaches dominated by beach concessions, rather than proposing to open up Fomm ir-Rih to the hordes and to commercial interests.

MP Etienne Grech recently hogged the limelight when he made the preposterous proposal that the Tourism Ministry should seriously consider conducting a study on how to improve public access to the beach at Fomm ir-Rih.

The backlash from the public, in whose name the same MP was presumably acting, was inevitable ... the upshot of the same backlash was simple... let the beach retain the blissful isolation it currently does.

In an age where even the most isolated beaches on the islands, like San Blas and Paradise Bay, are being regularly 'sold' for private functions such as beach parties, the public has grown wary nowadays of such pledges made 'in their name' and are craving ever more for the off-the-beaten-track locus, which is the closest replica of untainted nature they can enjoy.

Grech would do well to try to come to terms with the mindset of such a portion of the population, which is coy of being ensnared in the tourist trap which our beaches have turned into, replete with snake-oil salesmen of all types, from those peddling beach furniture to those plonking public space with shacks and kiosks of all forms, with even belvederes recently falling within the sights of kiosk operators.

And 'improving public access', despite all the platitudes and the best intentions on earth, will inevitably bring along such trappings. Too many beaches have gone that route already, with the scenic and ecologically-important (by dint of the sand dune remnants it hosts), Santa Marija Bay on Comino being the latest scalp to be added to the list, with the beach hosting, as from this year, a beach furniture concession. This is not to mention the heavy ecological price which would need to be paid in order to carve out such public access, with coastal vegetation being cleared to etch out pathways where these currently don't exist.



Santa Marija: for the first time this year, the bay of Santa Marija on Comino has been plonked with beach furniture... yet another beach on the route to full commercialisation.

The beach of Spiaggia dei Conigli, a flagship one for the Italian island of Lampedusa, always springs to mind within such debates. The idyllic beach, which each year is visited by nesting loggerhead turtles, is only accessible through a tortuous and uneven walkway stretching for several hundreds of metres, making the beach out of reach to those not prepared for the gruelling transit, with not a single beach concession on site such that pundits have to carry their own umbrellas and related fare.

Grech has indeed taken upon himself a noble mandate, however, he is barking up the wrong tree. Rather than focusing his energy on Fomm ir-Riĥ, he would do well to divert his attention towards other beaches, where the need for his intervention is much more direly-needed. For instance, public access is very much an issue at beaches like Ghadira, Golden Bay and Armier, which, despite being well-served with access roads, swarm from the early hours of the day with beach furniture inching ever closer to the water line, such that the non-paying public is constrained to unappealing back-beach area.

Such an issue, which is a perpetual source of angst to the public, would surely do with a paladin and champion like an MP.

It's not that common to witness a local council to assume a position which is consonant with environmental considerations.

The Fomm ir-Riĥ saga brought along a pleasant surprise, however, with the Mġarr local council pronouncing itself against the proposed improvement of public access to the bay. Hats off indeed for such a commendable stance!

Bolstering the number of Blue Flag beaches we have locally is fine, since it props up tourism figures... but the Blue Flag mindset which revolves around a more rigorous beach management and human intervention system should not be extended to every single sandy patch on the islands.

Some spots, like Fomm ir-Riĥ and Mġiebaĥ, might be difficult to get to, but that's exactly why they are so special... they are the last remaining spots on these boisterous islands where one can get away from the maddening crowd, and some are ready to invest a few hours of sweat-dripping trudging to reach such places.

Opening the same places to the hordes would simply sound the swan song to their uniqueness.

‘Genuine’ environmental NGOs

Parliamentary Secretary for Planning Michael Falzon's recent aspersions on genuine and less genuine environmental NGOs rightly stirred a hornet's nest when he spoke during a parliamentary debate on the Mepa demerger.

He arbitrarily made a distinction between genuine and less genuine environmental NGOs, where he explicitly stated that he takes the latter category with a 'pinch of salt.'

By definition, anyone who gives up a good chunk of his free time to volunteer within an NGO deserves respect... hence, casting doubts on the workings of the same NGO4318s and sowing doubts that they may be harbouring some hidden agenda is callous, to say the least. I might not agree with the approach adopted by all environmental NGOs or with their list of priorities, but I would not go as far as saddling them with ulterior motives, since why bother to slog along as an unpaid volunteer within an NGO when you can pursue these alternative priorities elsewhere and be paid for your troubles?

Falzon should not demur from listing the NGOs he believes are not genuine... I will probably run the gauntlet of getting an unsavoury label from Falzon but I am highly critical of the various

ODZ policies steamrolled through by this government, as I was for those passed by previous legislations.

Latching an increase in development applications with increased revenues at Mepa is tenuous, since it's simply creating a dependence at Mepa for its revenue-generation on the number of applications it processes. Not putting up a blanket moratorium on further ODZ development is simply pandering to the developers' lobby, especially when justified by ambiguous statements such as 'we should be reasonable' and 'there are no absolutisms'.

Statements by another government MP, made during the same debate, made me cringe. Charles Buhagiar, an architect who, in his private practice has a long history of interests in ODZ-sited projects (latest being the proposed old people's home in Vittoriosa), was quoted as saying that more land is needed for development since smaller houses are being built in order to cater for smaller families. Seems like the potential in exploiting the current stock, running in the tens of thousands, of vacant properties so as not to increase further the built-up area, does not even cross his mind.

I hope Michael Falzon does not take me with a pinch of salt, since I am definitely taking him seriously, especially for the long-term repercussions of the changes he is ushering in.

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