

## Monte Carlo Malta - Alan Deidun



Bahar iċ-Ċagħaq, which marks the longest stretch of undeveloped low-lying coastline on the islands, should not fall victim to touristic development.

Barely has the dust settled on the controversial approval of the latest fuel station at Burmarrad that our attention is drawn to the current haul of pending planning applications for even more fuel stations on agricultural land.

In fact, it has become evident that the flawed planning decision over the Burmarrad fuel station has not only committed yet another 3,000 square metres of ODZ land to the facility but has also made a compelling statement, one of encouragement to prospective fuel station applicants.

Take the Mosta-Mġarr bypass for instance. A previous planning application for a fuel station of mammoth proportions (nearly 7,000 square metres, just shy of the dimensions of a full-size football pitch), first rejected in 2009, has been exhumed.

What is striking in this planning application is its sheer temerity and brass neck as it makes absolutely no attempt to adhere to the fuel stations policy provisions. The site in question, in fact, is not within or adjacent to a site of containment but is completely immersed within agricultural land, has a footprint considerably larger than the maximum stipulated for such fuel stations sited in ODZ areas (i.e. 3,000 square metres) and is not linked with a relocation of an existing station but is a spanking new one (taking the thunder out of the proponents of the fuel station policy who defended the need for such a policy as it would relocate fuel stations away from residential areas).



Abandoned agricultural land – the perfect playground for avid developers, including those proposing the mega fuel station along the Mosta-Mġarr bypass.

As if they were essential for motorists stopping over for a refill, the proposal brazenly also includes a cafeteria, a kitchen and a dining area, besides the staple carwash. It is worth recalling that at the other end of the same bypass, a gaping hole has been excavated for yet another approved fuel station.

There are at least four other fuel stations in the pipeline, including one for a site in Luqa (adjacent to the WSC premises), just a stone's throw away from the Gaffarena fuel station located further down the

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hill. Yet another one is proposed for the Magħtab hamlet, which was originally rejected but which has recently been given a lifeline by the EPRT (an Appeals Board of sorts composed of two architects and a lawyer) which deemed that the Planning Authority did not give specific reasons for rejecting the development, and others in Burmarrad and in Attard.

The EPRT decision over the Magħtab site is anomalous given that the original justification for rejecting the proposal is as candid as they come: "The proposed development runs counter to Rural Objective 4 of the Strategic Plan for Environment and Development which aims to protect and enhance the positive qualities of the landscape and the traditional components of the rural landscape."

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## **Taming the last few pockets of wild...**

Meandering along the Coast Road provides some solace from our gridlocked roads, as it regales one with evocative views of unsullied, rocky coastline pummelled by crashing waves and a sea spray-suffused air. Baħar iċ-Ċagħaq is a breath of fresh air from the cluttered urban conglomerates of St Paul's Bay and St Julian's, making up the longest stretch of uncommitted low-lying coastline on these islands.

But no sooner had the revamped Coast Road been inaugurated that a number of developers started sizing up their prospects of developing swathes of the road which has been rendered redundant as a result of the new itinerary taken by the road. In particular, a Vietnamese-styled resort extending for a staggering 7,000 square metres (over twice the dimensions of a fully-fledged fuel station), including a gargantuan car park for almost 350 vehicles and two five metre-high gazebos.

The panacea administered by developers is that the land in question is 'disturbed,' a term which is somewhat of a favourite with developers as they seek to allay fears about the environmental impacts of their proposed development.

Besides being revered by many who head down to the same stretch each weekend to unwind through informal recreation (the type which does not rely on surfaced concrete paths, such as windsurfing and barbecues), the same stretch is also the object of a habitat restoration exercise being conducted jointly by Transport Malta and the Environment and Resources Authority.

Such an exercise, which is in its final phases, entails the clearing of asphalt stretches and infilling with soil to allow for the natural proliferation of the marshland habitat currently confined within Għadira s-Safra. The latter is a seasonally flooded marsh which completely dries up in summer (known as a 'transitional wetland') which is also a Natura 2000 site (probably the smallest one across the EU, since it extends for less than one hectare).

One of the reasons for its designation as a protected site is the occurrence of the tadpole shrimp within the brackish pools to be found during the wet season. This crustacean is considered a 'living fossil' since its closest relatives (in evolutionary terms) are extinct. Given the onslaught that Għadira s-Safra is subjected to through, for example, unregulated parking, and given its reduced dimensions, its eventual extension is more than legitimate, representing one of the few cases on these islands where natural habitat is being restored.

How a commercial venture can ever be allowed to jeopardise in any way such laudable plans is unfathomable.

There is also one final detail which is not to be overlooked – the land in question is public, and thus a *carte blanche* must be obtained from the Lands Department. One must not rack his brains overtly to recall the massive public land hand-outs to the tourism industry conducted along extensive swathes of the St Julian's coastline in the name of the 'national interest', since the successive hotel development was perceived as a catalyst of economic growth.

Will the national interest be served better by preserving an unspoilt stretch of coastline cherished by so many for posterity or by handing the same stretch on a silver platter to a developer for private gain?