

No place for a sand castle



Sadly there's no longer place for children to build a sand castle at Ghadira Bay, with beach furniture occupying a large swathe of the coast, starting from the waterline, from the very early hours of the morning.

A family trip to the seaside, and specifically to a sandy beach, with all the experiences this entails, such as building sand castles, younger children wearing arm bands and the applying generous dollops of sunscreen cream, is perhaps one of the most enduring of children's memories, which they subsequently pass on to successive generations later in life.

But nowadays, most Maltese families embark on their weekly trip to the seaside on Sunday mornings, negotiating traffic snarl-ups and countless other obstacles, only to be confronted by a chronic lack of space on the most coveted of their beach haunts. No matter how early in the morning these families arrive at the seaside, it seems the beach 'concession' operator has already beat them to it, as the entire shoreline is tightly packed with beach furniture from the very early post-dawn hours.

If I am not mistaken, the operators of such beach concessions are only allowed to spread out their beach furniture after customers demand such a service; in reality, row upon row of vacant sunbeds are laid out on the beach on the pretext that they have been reserved by customers. Even if this is the case, these customers only head down to the beach hours later, so precious beach space is being occupied by vacant sunbeds for quite some time.

At the onset of every bathing season, each successive government wages a symbolic 'war' with the operators of beach concessions, with each one boldly claiming that they are tackling the issue and that, in the public's interest, they have managed to restrict the beach area occupied by the beach concessions.

A trip to the beach and the accompanying photos suggests otherwise. Overcrowding on local beaches is already greatly exacerbated due to the fact that in our archipelago sandy beaches are extremely limited (just two per cent of the coastline is sandy) and two-thirds of the annual 1.4 million tourists visit the islands during the summer months. Thus, the power wielded by beach concessions is tremendous. It is tantamount to giving only a few private operators a licence to sell freshwater at exorbitantly high prices in an arid country.

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Some may argue that beach management has greatly improved in recent years, with the number of Blue Flag beaches on our islands rising and beach concessions extending only over certain parts of beaches, not over all of them.

What they fail to say, however, is that it is the most coveted parts of the beaches, those fringing the sea, that are given as beach concessions, with all other beach users being relegated to stay many metres further inland, to more inhospitable parts of the beach, where one feels very detached from the sea, which can only be accessed after meandering in the scorching sun between countless rows of sunbeds.

The drive to have more and more Blue Flag beaches on the islands is a laudable one, but a comparable effort should be invested in ensuring that the beaches remain truly public, not simply public on paper.

Other detractors of my argument point out that revenue generated by the beach concessions is used to finance useful beach management initiatives, such as the lifeguard posts. Granted, but does the government have to rely on private operators to provide the funds necessary to install such essential beach facilities, in a country where one-third of the economy is directly dependent on tourism?

I would certainly consider a public investment in such facilities as a worthwhile cause, given the economic dividends it is giving our country.

Privatising San Blas?

The recent kerfuffle at San Blas has once again raised the ugly spectre of beach privatisation. As is frequently the case when debating such important issues on these islands, the wood is mistaken for the trees.

The onus of the argument was placed on whether Gozitan developer and entrepreneur Joseph Portelli actually owned the land at San Blas which he cleared of vegetation and which he enclosed behind a gate, not on the odious actions themselves, namely clearing vegetation in a supposedly scheduled area.

Portelli went out of his way to convince reporters that the land in question was his and that he was ready to challenge the Lands Department on this point. In so doing, Portelli is unwittingly shooting himself in the foot as he is indirectly confirming that he was responsible for clearing the coastal vegetation.

The public outcry led to the Malta Environment and Planning Authority sending enforcement officers en masse to painstakingly document infringements on site. While airing his views with the media, Portelli personified the prevailing mentality that if I own a plot of land, I am answerable only to myself as to which interventions I choose to do on the land, irrespective of the degree of protection or scheduling it enjoys.

Some online commentators echoed this view: "This is much ado about nothing... if the land is his, he is free to do what he wants with it". Even if one were to adopt such a blinkered view, then there is no issue with some flagrant illegalities blighting our coastline, such as the shanty boathouse village at St Thomas Bay, since this is largely built on public land.

One wonders what will come of all this? Once the dust has settled and the momentum has fizzled away, will Portelli's actions at San Blas be conveniently allowed to drift into oblivion, as is probably happening at Monte Kristo, which is open for business and hogging the commercial headlines, despite the spectacular enforcement action initiated on site last year?

I have spoken to farmers owning land at San Blas and they contest Portelli's claim that he has been camping in the area for over 20 years. The figure is closer to three years, they claim.

Irrespective of this detail, may I ask Portelli if he believes he enjoys the trust of San Blas farmers? Can he publish the documentation which unequivocally shows that the land he claims is his is actually privately-owned and not public?

Portelli is not the only person seeking to exploit San Blas in some way or another. Years back, Nadur local council, with Chris Said as mayor, had attempted in vain to block all vehicular access to the beach, except to vehicles carrying out essential maintenance work or used by farmers.

The local council's efforts were foiled by people having ulterior financial interests in the beach, and which necessitated vehicular access to the beach, irrespective of the fact that this access is contributing to the rapid deterioration of the concrete pathway leading to the beach.

Private parties are occasionally held on the beach, entailing the closure to the public of the entire beach for whole evenings and turning this idyllic spot into a mess and diesel-powered generator cacophony.

The privatisation of the Gozitan coastline, so evident in the cases of the Dwejra boathouses, the restaurant at il-Kantra in Mgarr ix-Xini, the boathouses at Daħlet Qorrot and the proposals for Hondoq ir-Rummien, should not be allowed to proceed at San Blas. Otherwise, why did we invest so much effort in putting an end to sewage outfalls on site – just for the good water quality to be enjoyed by a select few?

alan.deidun@gmail.com

www.alandeidun.eu