

Do we need more hotels?



What will happen to the hundreds of extra hotel beds our developers are busy building once the sector enters the doldrums again?

No sooner had tourism arrivals statistics emerged from Doomsday scenarios that the frenzy of hotel building and expansion resumed. In fact, besides the much publicised Ffondoq ir-Rummiën and Ta' Ċenc projects which both feature an expansion of the hospitality sector, Sea Bank Hotel (Mellieħa) and Ramla Bay Hotel (Mellieħa - Marfa) have applied for extensions in sensitive outside development zone areas, while the Mistra Village high-rise plans have raised more than an eyebrow.

Therefore, while any Maltese environmentalists with a modicum of civic pride environmentalists hail any buoyant tourism figures, they are also gripped by a sense of foreboding that such a windfall will eventually translate into more open spaces being taken up.

The Sea Bank Hotel has already been permitted three different expansions of operation, ever since its humble beginnings in 1984, to reach its current bed capacity of 251.

PA 00720/05 refers to the proposed gargantuan extension of the Sea Bank Hotel, by an additional 320 guest rooms, a 700 square metre outdoor pool, among other amenities, to encroach upon a further 4,900 square metres of land.

The proposed development will shoot up to 10 stories, although developers downplay this by stating that six of these will be below the highest site level so as to mitigate against the obtrusiveness of the project. Will Għadira will the latest site to fall victim to high-rise buildings?

Although part of the earmarked land is currently being utilised as an impromptu car park, the rest is agricultural land. Despite attempts to dismiss such land as lying in various stages of abandonment, and claims of landscaping proposals to be conveniently melanged with the rest of the proposals, and despite the fact that the area in question is designated by the North West Local Plan for 'Restrained Redevelopment', the truth is that the proposals will impinge upon a huge area of uncommitted land.

The project will destroy a number of rubble walls and stifle a number of carob trees, further gnawing away at the rural character of Mellieħa and at the buffer between the Danish Village (for which an extension was recently approved). Will we one day witness the emergence of one large touristic conglomerate between the two?

The Prime Minister recently expressed his full support for the local rural contribution, stating that this should be gauged only in monetary terms. In addition, the same area also rubs shoulders with a number of scheduled/protected (on ecological criteria) sites, such as areas of ecological importance and the Ramsar site of I-Għadira wetland.

The situation concerning the Ramla Bay Hotel at Ramla tal-Bir along the Marfa promontory is even more garbled and convoluted. In fact, developers have submitted five different planning

applications over the last few years.

Nature Trust has repeatedly requested that the applications are collated, rather than the piecemeal submission of four different applications, since it believes that the combined application qualifies for an Environmental Impact Assessment. All the earmarked sites along Marfa Ridge are outside the development zone and close to an Area of Ecological Importance.

Malta Tourism Authority statistics show that the national hotel bed-stock in November 2006 stood at around 40,000 beds, with the figure decreasing by two per cent over the previous year.

Therefore, if both the Sea Bank and Ramla Bay Hotel proposals are given the green light, 422 new hotel rooms will be added in one fell swoop, or over one per cent of the total bed stock of the islands.

Is this sustainable tourism, especially when the bed-place occupancy rate rarely hovers above 45 to 50 per cent on average for a whole year? One of the staple themes of the seventh edition of the Insuleur Forum, the annual European meeting of the Network of the Insular Chambers of Commerce and Industry of the EU, hosted by the Gozo Business Chamber last week, was a policy vision of sustainable tourism.

Local tourism authorities should take a leaf out of the book of a small republic which can be considered as a spring chicken when it comes to experience with tourism - Montenegro. Despite its relatively small size (size is often mooted as the main reason as to why ecotourism ventures are not viable for Malta), Montenegro is marketing itself as the champion of green tourism, harping on its 'Enjoy Wild Beauty' motto. In fact, David Allsop of The Guardian advises readers to visit the 'jewel of the Adriatic' before the developers over-polish it.

Failed tourism ventures of the past, such as the defunct Mġarr Hotel and Jerma Hotel in Marsascala, should provide some useful hindsight into the unpredictable moods of the tourism sector.

What will happen to the hundreds of extra hotel beds our developers are busy building once the sector enters the doldrums again? Will such hotel rooms stoke further the flames of the local burgeoning apartment market or, will the public land they encroach upon be returned to the public domain?

Incidentally, the former site of the Mġarr Hotel was originally the haunt of Garzes Tower, built by Grand Master Grazes in 1605 - in fact, the site, perched precariously at the edge of the cliffs, is still known as tat-Torri by the locals of Ġhajnsielem.

After 243 years, commanding the approaches to the Comino straits and Mġarr Harbour, it was decided to demolish this tower, and with its masonry, the arched bridge linking Mġarr to Nadur road was built. The site can also boast of an extant fougasse, ensconced deep within the cliff face. What about returning the site to its original glory, including restoration of the belvedere on site which was relinquished by the public to make way for the 'hen that lays the golden egg' of the Gozitan economy.