

Summer misdemeanours

The party craze



I had hoped that benign manias, of the Harry Potter type, would dominate the summer months so that we would all get a break. Unfortunately, this is not the case.

The summer heat seems to give youngsters renewed vigour to attend open-air parties. The organisers of such parties are always raring in their search for that exclusive party venue, such as secluded beaches or woodland, two of the least widespread habitats in the Maltese Islands.

The hordes attending such parties, composed of thousands of drunkards in a massive slumber, literally disseminate noise pollution into the environs, breaking the silence of such secluded spots, which visitors so crave for.

Paradise Bay bears the brunt of such parties every summer. It transpired that party organisers need a MEPA permit - a condition which has only been imposed recently. While this is welcome news, it is somewhat galling that the organisers of a particular party held on July 19 had the temerity not to disclose the exact venue of their party and asked partygoers to follow the signs from Paradise Bay.

While the marketing value of such a choice can be understood to a certain extent, one wonders if MEPA issued the necessary permits for such a party if its venue is not even being disclosed! From the colourful way the mysterious venue was publicised, the beach in question should be something of an utopia and hence warrants even more surveillance and monitoring.

The same organisers complained that thousands of people had to be barred from entering the Paradise Bay party due to lack of space and that this problem would be ironed out in the new venue - this should raise many an eyebrow regarding the human impact on the new site.

Yet another party being publicised for last Sunday placed the accent on having as its venue Golden Bay Private Beach - since when have parts or all of Golden Bay been cordoned off to the public for private functions?

With the Internet Café and numerous other kiosks already on the beach, ir-Ramla tal-Mixquqa (the Maltese name for what has profanely become known as Golden Bay), is becoming more and more of an exclusive property accessible only to those willing to pay - a businessman's cove, in other words.

Yet another vintage site being targeted by party organisers is Dwejra in Gozo. Despite assurances that the party will be restricted to the parking area, who can physically deter a youngster in the midst of an alcoholic torpor from throwing empty beer bottles into the surrounding sea or from spilling over onto the rocks below?

Will there be non-condescending monitoring all throughout the night to counter such misdemeanours? I very much doubt it.

Summer parties in our islands should be restricted to established venues only (i.e., those operating for some years to this end now) so that new sites around our islands are spared the agony of massive clean-ups in the party aftermaths - also, secluded sites should be left as such for those who crave for silence.

Another party site could be out at sea in so-called boat trips, as long as these don't come close to shore, as happened at Ramla Bay in Gozo some weeks back, where a highly irresponsible boat trip weaved its way into the bay with mind-blasting music volumes such that those enjoying the moonlit sky in sheer bliss and silence were literally seething.

It seems that the jurisdiction of our law enforcement forces stops at certain boundaries - one of these is Ramla Bay (or any other secluded Gozo beach) late in a summer night.

Bedraggled Gozo

I was tempted to name this article 'Of resorts and spas' as it basically deals with the current rat race to develop every inch of our accessible coastline into resorts, spas and hotels.

What was once the seaside hamlet of Xlendi in Gozo is certainly running the gauntlet of excess attention from our developers. What is especially worrying is that development is now also taking place away from the immediate vicinity of the sea, such as the development of a plush villa resort (Taverna del Ponte, also known as Dar il-Widien) within Wied ix-Xlendi, with the ultimate aim of rental to tourists.

During the illegal additions to the quaint old existing building, a mature carob tree was uprooted and a rubble wall was demolished. Its place was taken by an eyesore franka wall and two fireplace chimneys were erected. The developer also chose to plaster the applications he has submitted to MEPA for the construction of the 'retaining wall' high up, well away from the prying eyes of passers by.

Incidentally, the same developer has already constructed the wall, choosing not to wait for the go ahead from MEPA, in what is becoming quite a widespread fad.

In view of the existing legislation protecting indigenous trees, such as carob trees, MEPA should pull up its socks and bring the developer to heel by enforcing the same enforcement notices it has issued for the site way back in 1997 (510/97) and also in 1998 - 457/98 - followed by a refusal of the development application.

The planting of 50 carob trees on the same valley sides should be imposed on the developer to hopefully act as deterrent to aspiring copycats.

Dating back to 1995 is yet another galling application - this time to develop a mega resort and hotel project along the Xlendi coast in the tal-Kantra area next to the historic tower on site.

Although the permit for such insanity has been refuted, an appeal has been lodged for next September. Let's hope that rationale prevails - all the publicising of the potential of Gozo as an ecotourism gem will have been thrown to the back burner if such a development goes ahead, just one year after the International Ecotourism Year in 2002!

Landfills - not in my back garden

The landfills bombshell has been finally dropped, after much speculation, with Ghallis being preferred over the Birzebbuga environs and predictably, there were dissenting voices since no one wants a landfill in his own back garden.

Two dissenting voices were those of Nationalist MP Geoffrey Pullicino Orlando and the MHRA in general. While the former's concerns are quiet sacrosanct, with the MP regretting the fact that two quarries in the l/o Qrendi and so close to our megalithic temples had been chosen as interim sites for the dumping of waste, the latter's dissenting voices have a more egoistic hue.

The association is threatening to oppose the location of a new engineered landfill at Ghallis "with all its force" simply because it argues that its siting is too close to Bugibba, where 45 per cent of our tourist bed stock is located.

In addition, the association claims that tourism in the area and the Magtab area residents had already suffered too much due to the existing landfill and that a number of much smaller engineered landfills around the islands would have done the trick.

Regarding the impact on tourism in the area, investing in a project which would eventually mitigate the eyesore Magtab problem should surely be the best way to bite the bullet and eventually help tourism in the long term.

In addition, speaking of the impact on the residents of the area, one wonders if the MHRA would have budged had the new landfill been sited in the Birzebbuga environs, where a much

higher number of locals would have been affected and tumoli of agricultural land would have gone down the drain.

Although not so developed touristically as Bugibba, the south of Malta is still home to thousands of people and has been already overly scarred by misconceived public projects in the past.

As to the idea of having a number of engineered landfill sites around the islands, we should keep in perspective the fact that we are living in Malta and not in the far reaches of the American Midwest - besides the massive footprint required, we would have to wait ages for the red tape to finally identify all the sites needed for so many landfills around the islands.

Now that we have finally earmarked a site for the new engineered landfill after years of laissez-faire, we resort to bickering among ourselves. Surely the MHRA should realise that solving our biggest chimera once and for all is much more important than having some punctilious tourist complaining that he is observing a gaping hole in the ground from his plush hotel suite, which he deems more obtrusive to his seaside views than Mount Maghtab!

Let's hope that the Ministry for Resources and Infrastructure does not buckle under pressure and go ahead with the much needed project and that Geoffrey Pullicino Orlando's suggestions are incorporated with a search for alternative interim sites.

Good and bad news from MEPA

As a kind of balancing act, I am including what I deem to be positive and not so positive news from MEPA. Regarding the former, MEPA decided to repudiate the cheek of a developer who wanted to demolish a centenarian construction, known as Dar ix-Xemx in Gozo, to construct profanely basement garages and a dwelling with swimming pool in what's supposed to be yet another outside development zone (ODZ).

One cannot but welcome urban conservation efforts by MEPA set this site, as had been embarked upon at il-Pjazzetta in Sliema with the restoration of old house fronts. Such efforts should also be extended to the application for the construction of a six-storey apartment block plus penthouse and two basements along Inguanez Street in Rabat partly within an Urban Conservation Area and with a subsequent loss of olive trees and for the construction of a three-storey building in the Ghar Ghasfur area of St Paul's Bay, the old part of the village characterised mostly by one-storey buildings.

Not so inspiring news however was that MEPA unanimously approved a permit application for the construction of phase one of the Sellum Village residential complex in Mellieha. Although the need to bolster the number of residential units is obvious to all, this should not be done in previously undeveloped areas, especially since MEPA itself states that two thirds of all building development takes place on previously undeveloped land.

Viewing the area in question, one doubts whether the residential units will be occupied all year round - rather there may be the possibility that such residential units are occupied only in the summer months by those who can afford it (hence leading to a new 'villeggatura' hotspot) as has happened in other coastal residential villages or that such units are easy pawns for speculation games.

The issuing of permits against financial contributions (in this case, Lm25,000) should also be stalled and projects be judged merely on their own merits. Bank guarantees from the developer should be sought to compensate for any damages wrought, but financial contributions separate the wheat from the chaff, i.e., separate developers who can pay from those who can't pay such financial contributions.

Unsavory memories of the Solemar Hotel case still linger on, whereby permits were granted only after a substantial financial contribution from the developer. Financial incentives should be given to those seeking to develop residential units out of existing derelict buildings.

From pictures carried in The Times when the case was first reported, the site appears to be endowed with numerous carob trees. How can this be compromised when the area lies within development precincts? How will the inevitable uprooting if such trees be compensated?

The author would like to thank Ms Annalise Falzon for helping in compiling this article. Please send any pictures or stories to deidunfever@yahoo.co.uk.