

Adventure Tourism in Gozo

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Introduction

Tourism is a major economic pillar in Gozo. In fact, it makes up 50% of the island's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and 20% of Gozitans work in the tourism industry (Gozo News, 2016). In 2016, more than half of the tourists who visited Malta also visited Gozo (nearly 1.2 million tourists out of nearly two million in Malta), most of whom on a day trip (84%) (Malta Tourism Authority Research Unit, 2017). Seasonality is still an issue in Gozo as the majority of overnight tourists stay in Gozo only during the summer months (51%) (Malta Tourism Authority Research Unit, 2017).

Therefore, rather than depending on tourists who mostly visit during the summer months, Gozo needs to attract tourists who are interested in niche tourism areas, such as adventure tourism. Niche tourism tends to have lower seasonality issues in comparison to sun and sea mass tourism (Novelli and Robinson, 2005). Figure 1 depicts different types of niche tourism. In the literature, there is no standard definition of adventure tourism. Most of the definitions revolve around the notion that adventure tourism offers authenticity and simplicity, a chance to connect with nature and oneself, an outlet to test physical limits and access to remote, wild and unexplored places.¹

This article is divided into six sections. The first section introduces the topic of this article, followed by a review of existing literature in Section 2. Section 3 discusses the research methodology used to obtain primary information, which is then discussed and analysed in Section 4. Section 5 summarises the key results and puts forward recommendations to develop adventure tourism sustainably in Gozo.

Adventure Tourism in Gozo

The National Tourism Policy (2015-2020) describes Gozo as a destination that is marketed in its own

right and having the potential to attract tourists for a number of reasons. It states that an analysis of urban and rural Gozo reveals its distinct characteristics which provide a special appeal to tourists. The Policy also mentions a number of niche tourism segments that have strong potential to increase demand in the low season (including activity holidays and sports tourism) but which need to be supported by all concerned parties in order to achieve the desired results (Ministry for Tourism, 2015).

An issue highlighted by the *National Tourism Policy* relates to the need to position Gozo clearly as a distinct destination. The policy suggests the formation of a strategy and specific action plans as well as the use of e-marketing methods that are in line with the socio-economic profile of the visitors that Gozo seeks to attract (Ministry for Tourism, 2015).

As seasonality is still an issue in Gozo, there is the need for diversification in tourism. Niche tourism, including adventure tourism, can help spread tourists to Gozo more evenly throughout the year. To date, there are a number of adventure activities which exist and take place in Gozo (refer to Figure 1 and Photos 1 - 6). Adventure tourism in Gozo is or can be an all year-round activity, as generally, the island enjoys pleasant weather all year round. The impact of adventure tourism activities on the local communities is considered highly positive, as it has an income and employment multiplier effect since it increases the economic activity (DATE Partnership, 2009). The National Tourism Policy 2015-2020 considers adventure tourism as one of the strong tourism niches that have a lot of potential for Gozo (Ministry for Tourism, 2015). Consequently, there are marketing initiatives by the Ministry for Gozo to support the specific tourism niche markets in Gozo (Ministry for Gozo, 2016).

However, despite its numerous benefits and opportunities, adventure tourism in Gozo also

¹ This definition is derived from various sources (Adventure Travel Trade Association and The George Washington University, 2016; Roberts, 2011; Buckley, 2006; Kane and Tucker, 2004; Swarbrooke et al., 2003).

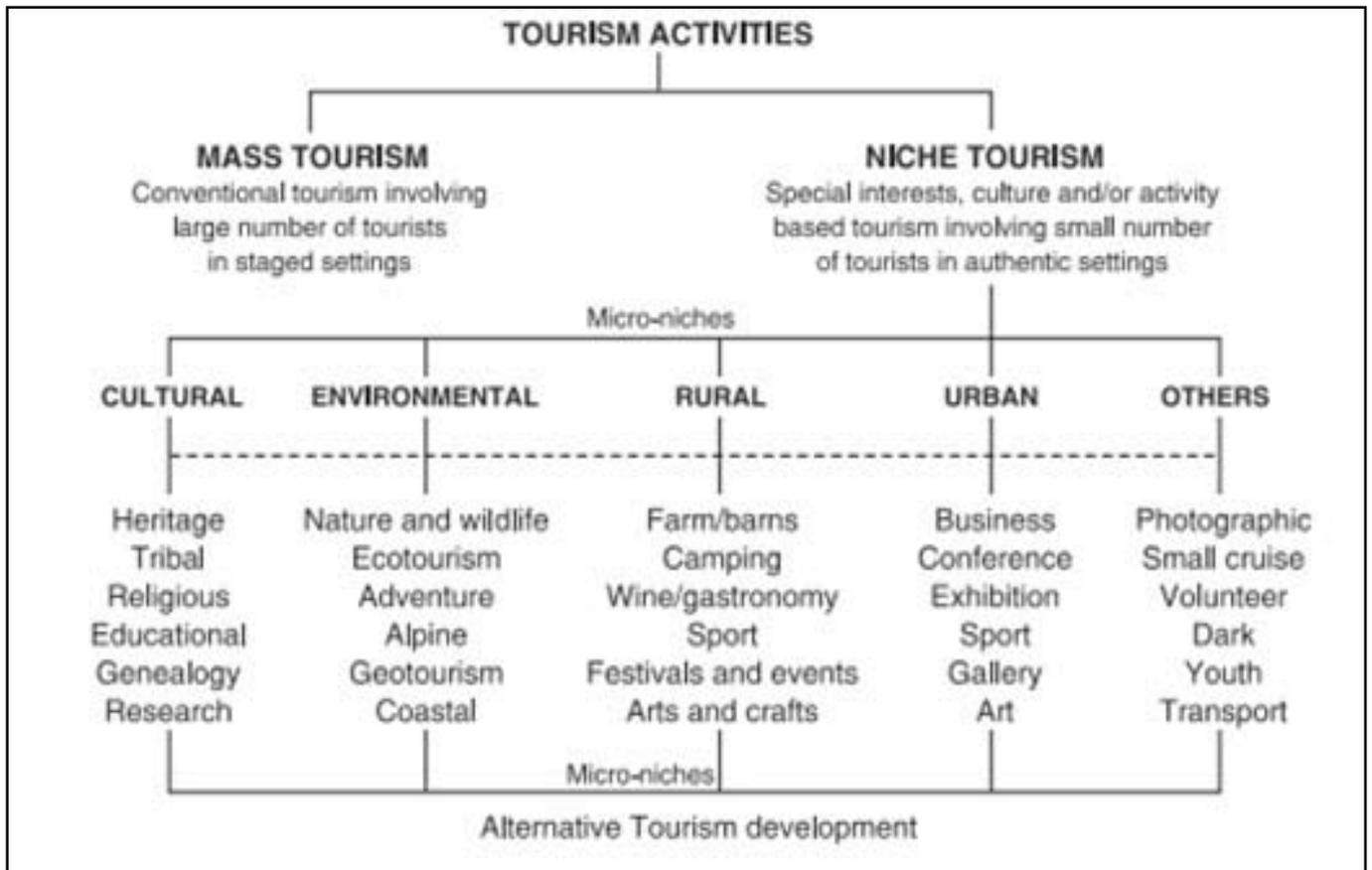


Figure 1: Different types of niche tourism (Source: Novelli and Robinson, 2005: 9).



Photo 1: Climbing in Gozo. (Source: Visit Gozo, 2017).



Photo 2: Hiking in Gozo. (Source: Visit Gozo, 2017).

has its challenges. Firstly, there is a lack of policy documents concerning adventure (or activity) tourism in Gozo. The *National Tourism Policy* dedicated an entire chapter to Gozo as a distinct tourism destination (Ministry for Tourism, 2015). In this chapter, the importance and relevance of niche tourism is noted, however it falls short to indicate direction towards niche markets.

Secondly, there are gaps in the statistical data about Gozo's tourism industry. This makes it difficult to determine the areas of success and monitor the development of niche tourism in Gozo. This issue is even mentioned in the National Policy for Tourism (Ministry for Tourism, 2015).

Thirdly, there are also issues relating to adventure tourism and the natural environment (DATE Partnership, 2009). For example, adventure tourism can lead to a degradation of the natural environment when people who are hiking in the countryside trample on the flora and fauna and on the soil, which may lead to loss of soil (DATE Partnership, 2009). Moreover, the DATE Partnership (2009) also revealed that in Malta there is the issue of right to access 'private' fields when on a hike in rural areas.

Methodology

Research Rationale and Objectives

During the gathering of information through secondary sources (journal articles, books, online publications, websites, other dissertations, etc.), it became highly evident that there was a lack of research about adventure tourism in Gozo. Therefore, this study is aimed at trying to bridge the existing gap between the lack of research about the subject and the adventure tourism reality in Gozo.

Research Sampling of Analysis Documents

The study made use of purposeful sampling with the respondents being twelve professionals from the adventure tourism industry in Gozo in order to collect the right information about the subject.

To obtain primary data for this research study, twelve organisations operating in different adventure-related activities were interviewed. The organisations interviewed included: a dive centre; a climbing association; a horse-riding company; three water sports companies; a kayaking company; a quadbike company; a company specialising in soft adventure



Photo 3: Diving in Gozo.
(Source: Visit Gozo, 2017).



Photo 4: Biking in Gozo.
(Source: Visit Gozo, 2017).



Photo 5: Kayaking in Gozo.
(Source: Visit Gozo, 2017).

activities and another company specialising in hard adventure activities. Two authorities based in Gozo (a tourism association and tourism and economic development directorate) were also interviewed to get their point-of-view on the subject apart from that of the operators.

A qualitative approach was used in this study, to analyse and interpret the data gathered from the semi-structured interviews. The analysis of the data gathered was done through a thematic analysis of the interviews conducted, in a professional, unbiased way in order to reflect the opinions of the interviewees.

Research Limitations

There were a number of limitations that were encountered during this study, both relating to obtaining secondary data sources as well as during the gathering of primary data. There were little to no statistics available about adventure tourism in Gozo. This may be because adventure tourism is relatively unexplored in the Maltese Islands, and so is not yet considered as a tourism niche within the local tourism industry. In addition, some interviews were done by email, hence the researcher could not probe for more in-depth information. Moreover, due to the small sample size for qualitative research, this study may not be representative of all operators related to adventure tourism in Gozo.

Analysis and Discussion of Results

The questionnaires used for the survey were intended to attain the following objectives:

1. To examine the extent to which adventure tourism can be developed (and promoted) as a tourism niche in Gozo;
2. To identify the types of adventure related products on offer in Gozo;
3. To identify and evaluate risks and issues pertaining to adventure tourism in Gozo;
4. To determine the social, economic and environmental impacts of adventure tourism on the local residents, the environment and the tourism industry in Gozo; and
5. To discuss future directions for adventure tourism in Gozo based on the response from the interviews

Objective 1

Adventure tourism entails a physical activity within a natural setting that has adventure in it, which is focused specifically on the enjoyment of nature, and that it has the ability to attract different people and keep them interested to come again due to its range of activities. Figure 2 represents a summary of the activities associated with adventure tourism by the interviewees.



Figure 2: Summary of the activities associated with adventure tourism by the interviewees.

Adventure tourism is considered very important for the respondents interviewed who considered it to have the potential to grow into a sufficient niche tourism market. This is mainly because it has the potential of attracting younger people to Gozo; differentiating Gozo from mainland Malta; mitigating seasonality; spreading the concentration of tourists across the Island; and increasing the variety of activities available in Gozo. Therefore, adventure tourism needs to be regulated by the concerned authorities in order to move forward in a sustainable manner. To do so, there is the need for a public-private collaboration.

Objective 2

Figure 3 shows the adventure-tourism-related activities that the interviewed respondents offer in Gozo, the majority of which are available all year round and are customised according to the clients' needs and wishes. The most popular activities are diving, hiking/trekking and water sports, and the summer months remain the most popular months with the customers of the organisations interviewed. The interviewed businesses do slow down in winter and those related to water sports have to close down due to weather and sea conditions.

Therefore, for adventure tourism to grow as a tourism niche market in Gozo, more adventure activities should be introduced. For example, skydiving in Gozo could be reintroduced. In the past, there used to be the possibility of skydiving from a helicopter, but this service, which used to generate an impressive amount of money, was stopped a few years ago.

Objective 3

During the interviews, two major risks and issues related to developing adventure tourism in Gozo came up. Firstly, there is the risk of investing a lot of money into something that does not attract enough people to make it self-sustainable. According to the literature, this risk is very minimal as the global adventure tourism's compound annual growth rate (CAGR) is expected to grow by 17.4% between 2017 and 2023 (Doshi and Das, 2018). Therefore, more promotional efforts of such activities in Gozo would ensure a higher success rate for Gozitan adventure tourism operators.

The second issue that came up is that presently, there is no policy that governs adventure tourism,

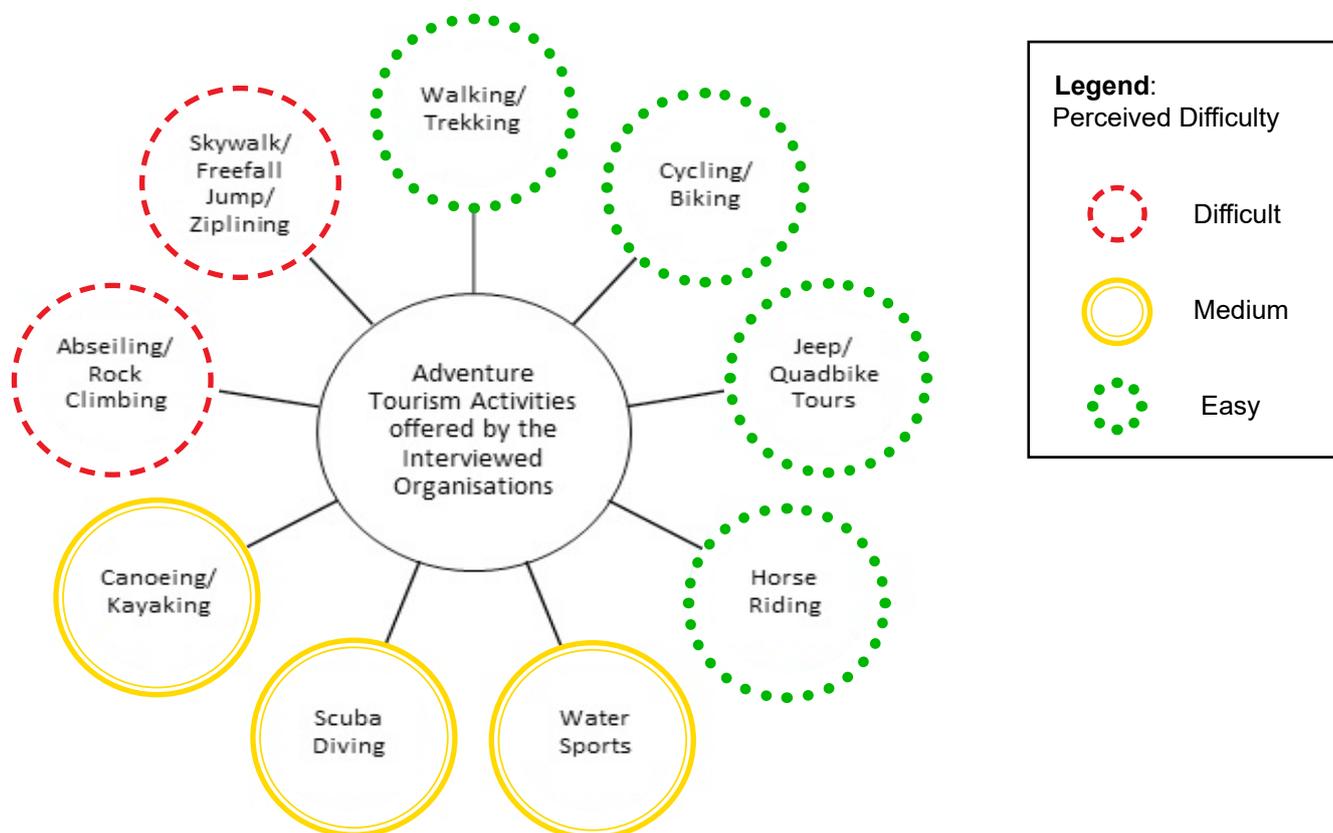


Figure 3: Adventure tourism activities offered by the interviewed organisations.

nor a risk management policy for each or any type of adventure tourism. Consequently, there are untrained and poorly-prepared companies operating which could risk lives and damage the reputation of the island as an adventure tourism destination.

Therefore, in order for adventure tourism in Gozo to move forward, there is the need for a legislative framework which defines, gives a vision and outlines how adventure tourism should be developed, while taking into consideration the risk factors and environmental impacts. However, despite there not being an official policy, which regulates risk management in adventure tourism, the majority (75%) of the organisations interviewed claimed that they made up their own risk management policy which meets or exceeds the standards abroad. This figure is similar to that resulting from the ATTA's (2017) study where it was revealed that only 71% of adventure tourism operators, globally, have documented safety and risk management plans.

Objective 4

This objective was split into three questions: one about the social impacts of adventure tourism on the local residents; another question about its impacts on the economy of Gozo; and the last one was about the possible impacts of adventure tourism on the environment.

Social Impacts

In general, the interviewees were in complete accord that the development of adventure tourism as a tourism niche would affect positively the local community. They stated that the adventure tourist does not want the locals to change, but they want to experience the island as it is. Moreover, the interviewees also mentioned that adventure tourism spread tourism towards rural areas which are not usually engaged in tourism activities, and hence, engage the local community.

Economic Impacts

The organisations interviewed agreed that the economic impact of adventure tourism would be mostly positive. Firstly, it will spread the number of tourists who come to different parts of Gozo and in different months. Secondly, the development

of adventure tourism as a tourism niche in Gozo would stimulate and create new economic activities. Thirdly, adventure tourism will help to disperse the economic benefits directly to the wider population, as adventure tourists tend to spend their money at smaller and local businesses rather than large companies.

The only drawback mentioned by one of the interviewees was that if someone dies doing an adventure activity in Gozo (for example diving), it could negatively affect the whole tourism industry in Gozo.

Environmental Impacts

Adventure tourism gives value to the countryside – it focuses specifically on the enjoyment of nature, especially with heightened senses. During the interviews, the majority of the organisations revealed that they organise clean up days to clean the environment on land, in the sea and on the seabed. Other organisations mentioned the importance they give to operating low-impact activities, that they do not pollute, make noise or leave a negative impact on the island during their adventure activities.

However, despite this, if not regulated or developed correctly, adventure tourism can have a negative impact on the natural environment. Activities such as climbing can damage the environment (due to drilling holes in the rocks and the bolts they use eventually start to rust). Hence, a guiding policy which considers the environmental issues as well, is doubtlessly required so that the negative impacts of adventure activities on the environment would be reduced.

Objective 5

To discuss the future directions for adventure tourism in Gozo, the interviewees were asked about the benefits of and the threats hindering the growth of adventure tourism. Apart from the aforementioned benefits, the interviewees mentioned that developing adventure tourism would attract higher spending tourists (and hence support the local economy) and give tourists, especially youths, more reasons to visit Gozo. Notwithstanding these benefits enhancing the further development of adventure tourism in Gozo, there are some threats that hinder its growth, such



Photo 6: Horse riding in Gozo. (Source: Visit Gozo, 2017).

as the conflict of traditional industries (fishing, agriculture, construction, hunting) vis-à-vis tourism; the overdevelopment of natural areas; and dangerous practices by existing companies that can damage the growth and reputation of this industry.

Currently, there are some opportunities offered by the Government of Malta (the Malta Tourism Authority and the Ministry for Gozo) and EU schemes that help the growth of adventure tourism in Gozo, however, all organisations interviewed insisted that more help is needed, especially from the regulatory aspect and financial help. The interviewees agreed that any type of adventure tourism that leaves no permanent scars on the landscapes should be developed and promoted. They insisted that it cannot be limited to only one type because tourists have different interests and then, only a limited number of locals would benefit from it.

Therefore, decisions need to be taken by the Tourism Authorities as to which direction Gozo's tourism

should take. The setting up of a team managed by MTA (Malta Tourism Authority) or GTA (Gozo Tourism Association) would certainly be beneficial in streamlining the growth of the tourism industry in Gozo. From the interviews, it became highly evident that most of the drive in this area is coming from independent organisations who are forced to battle against, rather than collaborate with, the authorities, especially to obtain permissions to operate.

Conclusion

It emerges from the interviews carried out in connection with this study that the development of adventure tourism is desirable but it requires investment in features that complement the natural, cultural and adventure assets for such niche tourism to grow and prosper. This in turn requires extensive stakeholder consultation and responsible policy development, as revealed during the interviews with some of the adventure tourism operators in Gozo.

The success of the sector depends on the creation

of innovative and compelling adventure products by the private sector.

Based on the information derived from the interviews, the following recommendations are being put forward:

- The Maltese tourism authorities, in consultation with the private sector should collaborate to come up with a policy regulating adventure tourism in Gozo and a plan for the sustainable development and growth of adventure tourism in Gozo;
- The further development of activities which have a strong potential for growth by the private sector, such as climbing, kayaking, rambling/ hiking, cycling and diving should be encouraged;
- New adventure activities in Gozo (such as skydiving and camping) should be introduced to increase the appeal of the island as an adventure tourism destination;
- The local adventure tourism operators could take advantage of funding and promotional schemes by the Malta Tourism Authority, the Ministry for Gozo and EU schemes;
- The Malta Tourism Authority (and other concerned authorities) should increase their marketing and promotional efforts regarding adventure tourism in Gozo.

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