

Tourism Development in Gozo: A Sustainable Approach

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INTRODUCTION

One of the most common words used is the word tourism. It seems that the word tourism is often used as a justification for various improvements. We need to improve the roads because of tourism, a cleaner environment because of tourism, an improved public transport service because of tourism, and one can go on to mention other examples. However, if various individuals are asked to define tourism to see what they mean when using the term, many would come out with different answers and some probably conflicting.

TOURISM AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

When talking about tourism it is important to understand what we are talking about. The United Nations' definition of tourism is the following:

The sum of the phenomena and relationships arising from the interaction of tourists, business suppliers, host governments and host communities in the process of attracting and hosting these tourists and other visitors.

Thus tourism is not only hotels and restaurants, it is not only airports and roads. These are just part of a whole system which includes other elements such as transportation, attractions, service facilities, information/promotion, the host population and the tourists themselves. These elements interact continually with each other and with other external factors, and coordination between these

elements is important to ensure a positive travel experience. This is what is usually referred to as the *Tourism System*. This is not the place to go into further detail on the subject but I feel it is important to point this out to show that the development of tourism is a much more complex issue than many think it is.

The other term which I wish to explain is the term Sustainable. Again this is another term frequently being used to direct the future course of any development. Sustainable development has been defined as:

development that meets the needs of the present community without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

It therefore takes a long term approach towards development and ensures that the natural and cultural resources are not depleted and degraded, thus depriving the future inhabitants of their benefits, and secondly, destroying that which has attracted visitors in the first place. Sustainable development does not stop development but seeks measures that would integrate development with environment and cultural protection. In fact the main pillars of sustainable development are the following:

- *Ecological sustainability* - which ensures that development is compatible with the maintenance of essential ecological processes, biological diversity and biological resources
- *Social and cultural sustainability* - which ensures that development increases people's control over their own lives, is compatible with the culture and values of people affected by it, and maintains and strengthens community identity.
- *Economic sustainability* - which ensures that development is economically efficient and that resources are managed so that they can support future generations:

PLANNING FOR TOURISM DEVELOPMENT

At present Gozo has a bed capacity of 2268 beds which is only 5.2% of the total bed capacity available on the Maltese Islands. The increase in beds projected up to 1997 in Gozo is of 436 and this will



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increase slightly the share of beds in Gozo to 5.4%. Around 30 % of the beds available in Gozo will be in the 4 and 5 Star hotel accommodation.

The Structure Plan states that "the general strategy is to encourage economic development, constrain further urbanisation and give much greater importance to conservation and the quality of the environment....." With reference to the further development of tourist facilities, the Plan provides for the development of a national park with an emphasis on nature and a multi-ownership tourism hotel at Ta' Ċenċ, the expansion of tourist facilities and accommodation at Marsalforn, Xlendi and Mgarr and at other sites subject to further studies. But the plan also states that any further development of tourist accommodation should be confined to the conversion of property in favoured positions in existing built-up areas.

This is the role the Tourism Master Plan consultants saw that Gozo should play:

Gozo offers the country (Maltese Islands) its main opportunity to create a quality resort and attract a high spending and different type of tourist The role of Gozo in the Tourism Plan is to offer an alternative experience to the tourist within the overall Maltese tourism product. Gozo is more tranquil than Malta and it now has the opportunity to develop as a complimentary destination. The development of Gozo should not be rushed.

I think no one disagrees that the goal for tourism development in Gozo should be to develop a high quality product that would attract a higher socio-economic tourist who would expect a quality travel experience. Thus planning for tourism should aim at achieving this goal. I would like to point out at this stage that while tourism to Malta is primarily International Tourism, on the other hand tourism to Gozo is of two types – Domestic (Maltese crossing over to Gozo for a day trip or a longer stay) and International (Foreign tourists crossing to Gozo for a day trip or longer stay). In my analysis I will not distinguish between the two, however I wish to point out that a study on the contribution to and impacts of tourism, both domestic and international, on Gozo needs to be carried out. For example, although statistics show how many tourists stay in the Gozitan hotels and complexes, there is no data about those staying in holiday flats, farmhouses and villas. This and other information is important particularly when planning for tourism development in Gozo.

Before proceeding further I wish to refer to two research studies carried out by the Department of Tourism. The first was a study carried out in 1991 on tourists staying in Gozo and day-trippers. The second was a sociological study to assess the attitudes of the local community towards tourism. The first study was carried out during the summer months and therefore the respondents were summer tourists. Some important results are that:

- 64.7% stated that they spent their entire holiday in Gozo.
- 70% had made their own travel arrangements

The main types of accommodation used by the respondents were as follows:

| | |
|-----------------------|-------|
| Apartments | 43.2% |
| Friends/relatives | 8.3% |
| Villas and farmhouses | 9.5% |
| Own property | 2.9% |
| Hotel accommodation | 24.6% |

This shows that there is a high percentage of tourists staying in self-catering accommodation as against serviced accommodation. This can be confirmed by NTOM's Visitor Profile surveys carried out last year.

- Respondents thought that Gozo needed more entertainment during the summer, whilst respondents had positive comments on the quality of the environment.
- Gozo's character is the main feature that attracts visitors in the first place. 14.9% stated so. For 11.6% the island was recommended to them, probably by satisfied previous visitors.

From the day-trippers survey, 71.9% visited the island on a tour, 20% used their own transport, whilst 5.7% used public transport.

The main sites visited during the day tour include the Citadel (221), Ġgantija (190), Ta' Pinu (148), Crafts Village (156) and Gozo Heritage (148). The number of respondents was 256.

The main positive and negative comments made regarding the day trip were the following:

| Positive | Negative |
|-----------------------|-------------------|
| Friendly atmosphere | Building Activity |
| Cleanliness | Public Transport |
| Tranquillity | Tours are rushed |
| Not so commercialised | |

The second survey sought to assess the attitude of the local community towards tourism. About 9% of the respondents were Gozitans and I will briefly present the results.

- 95.8% like the presence of tourists and think that tourism is a very important sector, primarily because of economic benefits.

- 77.1% feel a sense of satisfaction when meeting with tourists, whilst 62.5% stated that they relate very well with tourists and 31.3% relate well.
- All respondents think that the number of tourists during the low and shoulder months should increase, whilst 93.8% think that the number of tourists in the summer months should increase.
- 79.2% feel that the islands should be attracting more high spending tourists, whilst 35.4% think that the present tourists spend a lot and behave rather well. 56.3% think that tourists do not spend much but behave well.
- Most of the respondents think that tourism has had a good effect on the local culture, archaeological sites, entertainment, local cooking, recreational pursuits, traditional customs and local crafts. On the other hand most respondents think tourism has had a bad effect on public decency. Family cohesion and morality are not influenced much by tourism.

A high percentage of the Gozitan respondents think that tourism brings economic growth, more leisure facilities, more cultural activities, a stronger national identity and more infrastructural investments.

Whilst 14.6% stated that there is tourism development in their locality, 54.2% stated that there is none. 31.3 % said that their locality can take more development and the same percentage wished there was more tourism development. 10.4% think the present situation is ideal whilst 16.7% do not wish more development. Notwithstanding this, there is a relatively high disapproval towards certain tourist facilities as the table below indicates.

| | Strongly Approve | Approve | Indifferent | Disapprove | Strongly Disapprove |
|---------------|------------------|---------|-------------|------------|---------------------|
| Hotel | 29.2% | 6.3% | 4.2% | 18.8% | 41.7% |
| Bar | 20.8% | 2.1% | 2.1% | 25.0% | 50.0% |
| Restaurant | 20.8% | 2.1% | 8.3% | 22.9% | 45.8% |
| Disco | 4.2% | 4.2% | 0.0% | 16.7% | 75.0% |
| Souvenir Shop | 35.4% | 25.0% | 22.9% | 6.3% | 10.4% |

On the other hand respondents stated that tourism development creates negative impacts on various facilities, particularly the infrastructure, as the two tables in the appendix show. There seems to be some contradiction in wanting more development but at the same time disapproving of certain facilities.

A SUSTAINABLE APPROACH

Tourism to Gozo should develop within a framework of sustainable development. Tourism is not the only sector of economic activity in Gozo. There are other important sectors, such as industry and agriculture. These sectors too have a role to play in the economic development of the island and these too create pressures on the scarce resources available, particularly infrastructure, finance, land and human resources. What is termed as the Integrated Planning approach is important to ensure the sustainable development of Gozo in the future. Through this interactive planning process there will be a careful monitoring of Gozo's development. At the national level, this type of planning would be concerned with tourism development policies and how these could be integrated into the development policies of other sectors and vice versa.

The integrated approach to tourism development also ensures that all the various demand and supply factors of tourism are coordinated to achieve a concerted approach to developing the tourist product. It will also integrate tourism into the overall development policies and plans of the island. It is important to establish the role tourism should play in the development of the island. The integrated planning approach ensures that the infrastructure, as well as resources, particularly human resources, can meet the demands from the various development sectors. Unplanned development can bring a shortage or over supply of certain resources. This may reflect negatively on the tourist product.

Another important aspect which needs to be given greater importance is the Carrying Capacity issue.

The carrying capacity with regards to tourism is that level beyond which visitor satisfaction starts to drop

and which will bring unacceptable changes and impacts to both the host community and the cultural and natural resources.

It is difficult to set this threshold level and say that Gozo cannot take more visitors beyond a certain number. However, it is important that through scientific research aimed at assessing visitor satisfaction, community attitudes towards tourism development and measuring impacts on the various resources, one can monitor the consequences of increased development and immediately sense whether visitor satisfaction is decreasing and the host community's tolerance limits have been exceeded. There is also a physical carrying capacity and this will depend on the infrastructure available and its limitations, particularly supply of water and electricity. It is important to identify the limitations of Gozo space is one, so that from the start a level of development can be set.

From the surveys carried out by NTOM an average 65% of tourists to the Maltese Islands visit Gozo on a day trip. Therefore in 1993 the number of excursionists to Gozo could be estimated at around 689,000 or an average of 1887 per day. In the summer months, daily excursionists to Gozo can exceed the 2000 figure. Working on the 1992 figures, the number of tourists to Gozo (i.e. those staying at least one night in Gozo) is estimated to be around 60,000, and this is a conservative figure. In the peak summer months this may mean that around 1800 tourists stay in Gozo each day, and around 2000 excursionists visit the island each day.

The Carrying Capacity can vary from one season to another and depends on tourists' behavioural patterns, facility design and management, the dynamic character of the environment and the changing attitudes of the community. Through careful management and planning of tourism flows the island can increase its carrying capacity. Capacity cannot be used as an absolute limit but as a means to identify critical thresholds which need attention and by doing so remove obstacles where possible and apply controls.

Sustainable Development of Tourism is achieved through an Asset-Led Approach rather than a demand or market-led approach. Tour-

ism in the Maltese Islands has developed very much on the latter approach, increasing facilities to meet the continual demand for more beds during the seventies. The Market-Led approach examines the needs of the customers and tries to satisfy those needs in a profitable manner. In tourism this does not work. The Asset-Led approach to tourism development first examines the destination's assets and resources available and then seeks to develop tourist market segments that are attracted by such resources. This means that tourism development stems from the destination's product offer rather than from an emphasis on promotion. This approach will ensure the appropriate use of and not the degradation of the resource. In this way there can be no Product-Market mismatch.

The comments received from tourists with regards to Gozo is that it is still a relatively unspoilt island and it has to remain so. Tourism will not survive in the long-term if Gozo caters for both the mass tourist as well as the 'quality tourist'. Going for mass tourism will destroy the environmental quality and character of the island. This means that accommodation projects should be of a restricted size and would attract niche markets rather than depend heavily on the large mass tourism tour operators.

Day tripper activity in Gozo needs a more managed and planned approach. Day tours usually follow the same pattern and visit the same localities, resulting in too many visitors at the same place at the same time. This is creating various impacts. Visitors will not be achieving the desired experience from the visit whilst the resource succumbs to pressures as a consequence of this crowding effect on site. The industry needs to collaborate more in this respect and create a varied programme and pattern of tours. A *laissez-faire* attitude not only damages the resource but also denies visitors the quality experience expected.

Tourism development needs to be seen from a different angle. Rather than a means to achieve economic stability immediately, tourism should be an activity that seeks to protect the social character and the environmental resources of the island. Unfortunately, tourism is still seen solely as an economic activity. This is a mentality that needs to change. Tourism development is a gradual process and needs

to adapt itself to external influences which very often are not under the control of the tourism bodies. It has to support the needs of the local community which has to live with the tourist development. This must not compete with the local community for the scarce resources. On the other hand it should enhance total community life. Through this partnership tourism can develop with minimal opposition from the residents. Tourism cannot be given a cosmetic approach, but rather, requires a deep community-wide integration of every facet.

CONCLUSION

Gozo still has the potential for further development of its tourism industry. However, it is important for this growth to follow a planned approach to development. It is important that tourism relates with other sectors of development and vice-versa, to avoid pressures on the infrastructure and a situation where sectors compete for the scarce resources. Development should be sensitive to the environment and contribute to minimising environmental problems by, for example, treating sewage at source, reducing solid waste and using recycled materials whilst respecting the character of the island and its inhabitants. This can only be achieved by adopting a sustainable approach to tourism development ensuring the survival of the resource in the long term.

APPENDIX

Tourism Impacts in the Summer Months

| Facility | Positive | Indifferent | Negative | Cannot say |
|--------------------|----------|-------------|----------|------------|
| Electricity | 2.1% | 12.5% | 85.4% | |
| Water | 2.1% | 10.4% | 87.5% | |
| Road traffic | 4.2% | 43.8% | 47.9% | 4.2% |
| Sea traffic | 41.7% | 25.0% | 29.2% | 4.2% |
| Air traffic | 58.3% | 3.3% | 6.3% | 2.1% |
| Parking space | 4.2% | 35.4% | 58.3% | 2.1% |
| Crowding | 37.5% | 33.3% | 29.2% | |
| Cleanliness | 12.5% | 75.0% | 12.5% | |
| Level of noise | 8.3% | 75.0% | 16.7% | |
| Quality of air | 6.3% | 50.0% | 43.8% | |
| Leisure facilities | 89.6% | 6.3% | 2.1% | 2.1% |
| Restaurants | 91.7% | 6.3% | | 2.1% |
| Tranquillity | 12.5% | 64.6% | 22.9% | |
| Shopping | 33.3% | 62.5% | 4.2% | |
| Level of prices | 2.1% | 72.9% | 25.0% | |
| Beaches | 43.8% | 18.8% | 37.5% | |
| Public transport | 22.9% | 35.4% | 41.7% | |
| Public gardens | 43.8% | 54.2% | 2.1% | |
| Cost of living | | 81.3% | 16.7% | 2.1% |

Tourism Impacts in the Winter Months

| Facility | Positive | Indifferent | Negative | Cannot say |
|--------------------|----------|-------------|----------|------------|
| Electricity | | 47.9% | 35.4% | 16.7% |
| Water | | 43.8% | 37.5% | 18.8% |
| Road traffic | 4.2% | 60.4% | 16.7% | 18.8% |
| Sea traffic | 22.9% | 56.3% | 2.1% | 18.8% |
| Air traffic | 33.3% | 47.9% | | 18.8% |
| Parking space | 2.1% | 68.8% | 10.4% | 18.8% |
| Crowding | 25.0% | 54.2% | 2.1% | 18.8% |
| Cleanliness | 4.2% | 75% | 2.1% | 18.8% |
| Level of noise | 8.3% | 70.8% | 2.1% | 18.8% |
| Quality of air | 2.1% | 41.7% | 35.4% | 20.8% |
| Leisure facilities | 75.0% | 2.1% | 2.1% | 20.8% |
| Restaurants | 79.2% | | | 20.8% |
| Tranquillity | 39.6% | 39.6% | | 20.8% |
| Shopping | 4.2% | 75.0% | | 20.8% |
| Level of prices | 2.1% | 62.5% | 14.6% | 20.8% |
| Public transport | 16.7% | 56.3% | 8.3% | 18.8% |
| Public gardens | 43.8% | 37.5% | | 18.8% |
| Cost of living | | 66.7% | 14.6% | 18.8% |