‘Malta’s Potential to develop Rural Tourism’

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A long essay submitted in part fulfilment of the requirements of the Degree of Bachelors of Arts with Honours in Tourism Studies

INSTITUTE FOR TOURISM, TRAVEL & CULTURE

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Abstract

Tourism is a multi-faceted, dynamic and complex industry in today’s competitive world market. Rural tourism as a niche segment has become increasingly important and demanded. In fact, rural areas were always considered appropriate for tourism activities. Thus, the researcher chose to study the subject matter, the Maltese rural areas and whether these have the potential to further develop this form of tourism.

In order to do so, secondary data sources relevant to the subject matter were used such as books, reports, academic journals and newspaper articles. The researcher opted to use a qualitative approach to seek and study personal experiences, attitudes, opinions, beliefs and interests of the participants. This was done by conducting one-to-one questionnaires using open-ended questions to obtain a qualitative response. The researcher chose three main rural walks in Malta namely, Imġarr to Mosta walk (Victoria Lines), Mdina to Dingli and Pembroke heritage trail.

After analysing the questionnaires, the researcher determined that rural tourism is generally familiar with couples rather than individual tourists in between 45-54 years of age. This may imply that the younger generation does not seem to be interested in participating in rural tourism activities. From the findings obtained, the researcher identified that Malta do has potential to develop further rural tourism. Although tourists do not consider rural tourism as the main purpose to visit the Maltese Islands, it is concluded that they still do seek to engage in rural activities while on holiday.

Recent trends suggest that rural tourism will continue to increase its popularity. As a result, the researcher suggests that further studies should be conducted mainly on aspects like accessibility, future projects and initiatives and to analyse whether the responses proposed in the current tourism policy regarding rural tourism are implemented or not.

Keywords: Rural Tourism, Rural Areas, Visitor Perception and Maltese Islands.
Declaration of Authenticity

I hereby state that this dissertation has been researched, conducted and compiled by the undersigned.

Any information contained herein which is not my own, has been duly acknowledged.

Tiziana Grech

May 2014
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List of Abbreviations

**EU**: European Union

**GPS**: Global Positioning System

**LEADER**: Liaisons Entre Actions pour la Dévelopement des Économies Rurales

**MICE**: Meetings, Incentives, Conferences and Events

**MTA**: Malta Tourism Authority

**NGOs**: Non-Governmental Organisations

**NSO**: National Statistics Office

**OECD**: Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development

**RTO**: Reserved To Owner

**WoM**: Word of Mouth
Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 Research Background

Tourism is a multi-faceted, dynamic and complex industry in today’s competitive world market. It changed with time from mass package tourism to new alternative, individual and responsible forms of tourism. Nowadays, a number of niche segments such as rural tourism are evolving, catering for the needs of particular audiences or market segments. Thus, rural tourism as a niche segment is gaining increasing importance and popularity. Rural tourism is considered the phenomenon that started more than 200 years when the first tourists traveled to Europe, the wilderness of the American west and the British highlands. Since then the rural setting always captivated a high influx of tourists and visitors, in many countries it is nowadays one of the most prevalent forms of tourism. In fact, “a quarter of the population throughout Europe spends their main holiday in a countryside destination” (Davidson 1992: 142). When calculating secondary holidays, the average increases to one third of the population.

Through the years not only the level of participation in rural tourism increased rapidly, especially since the 1950’s. The range of activities that include rural tourism has also expanded dramatically, increasing the opportunities for tourists and the local community to visit the countryside. Although the traditional rural-oriented activities such as hiking, climbing and camping still are very popular, but new technological advancements and higher levels of disposable income encouraged people to participate and engage in a wider variety of activities. Some of the ‘modern’ types of activities include mountain-biking, off-road driving and hang-gliding. However, it is important to find the right balance between the demands that rural tourists place on the resource base and the impacts of such actions. Hence, the importance of conservation, environmental protection and sustainable
planning and management of rural areas that focuses on the need to conserve and preserve such sites for future generations.

1.2 Importance of the study

Very little is gained when one examines rural tourism in isolation without considering other external factors which have an influence on both the growth and possibility of the participation of rural tourism. The concept of rural tourism first emerged as a result of rapid urbanization of Western societies in the 19th Century. Thus, it was this society transformation “from a rural to a predominantly urban structure that provided the initial incentive for rural tourism” (Sharpley & Sharpley 1997, 2). More recent changes such as the interest in heritage, environmental concerns and healthy lifestyles affected the participation in more authentic forms of tourism, including rural tourism.

Rural tourism is a complex and diverse area of study. This dissertation is important because it gives a detailed account of what rural tourism is, the issues, problems and challenges being faced by many rural areas due to tourism. It is also relevant because in many cases, rural tourism is seen as an alternative or solution for rural areas since the agricultural sector decreased dramatically due to industrialisation. Apart from the research conducted by the researcher on rural tourism, a number of one-to-one questionnaires were conducted amongst rural tourist in a rural setting to highlight Malta’s potential to develop this form of tourism.

1.3 Aims and Objectives

The overall objective of this research was to analyse rural tourism in a complex form by trying to understand and define rural tourism as there is no commonly accepted definition on the subject matter and to explain how this form of tourism is highly dependent on its resource base, the rural
areas. The necessity for a sustainable approach, the need for effective planning and management and the main issues concerned with rural tourism were tackled.

The aim of the research study was to analyse the Maltese rural setting and identify what has been done in terms of development and improvement of such sites. For this purpose, the researcher conducted one-to-one questionnaires with foreign rural tourists in Maltese rural walks. From the research obtained, the researcher had the possibility to identify whether Malta has the potential to develop rural tourism.
Chapter 2

Literature Review

2.1. Introduction

Leisure activities in rural areas are increasingly in demand, making rural tourism a growing niche tourism segment. For this reason, increasing attention has been given to the subject matter by academic researchers. Many countries across the globe are seeking and finding rural tourism to replace the concept of the usual traditional tourism (sun and sea). As a matter of fact, diverse rural tourism development action plans and programmes have been adopted to safeguard and measure the strengths and weaknesses of this segment.

The Rural Development Programme for Malta 2007-2013 aims "to increase competitiveness, conserve the countryside and to enhance the quality of life of the rural setting." (Rural Development Programme 2007-2013, 1,2). The programme has been implemented along with other projects and initiatives such as the Malta Goes Rural- Sustaining Rural Tourism which was implemented by the Malta Tourism Authority (MTA) in 2010.

2.2. Niche Tourism

In any market, a ‘niche’ is a particular special interest segment which caters for the needs and demands of the customers. Robinson and Novelli defined ‘niche tourism’ as part of tourism that emerged recently to contrast ‘mass tourism’ (2005,1). The main purpose of niche tourism is thus to divide broad markets into more controllable areas. In return, niche tourism provides a context "in which destinations, sites and attractions can be marketed, promoted and, ultimately, consumed as a tourist experience" (Robinson 2012,149).
Different approaches are used to identify diverse niche markets. Rural tourism is a niche segment as it falls under the ‘geographical and demographical approach’ which includes the location and consumers ‘involvement in the consumption of tourism in urban, rural, coastal or alpine environments, and the specific activities that tourists are engaged in’ (Robinson 2012, 149). Niche tourism was defined from the term ‘niche marketing’ referring to "how a specific product can be tailored to meet the needs of a particular audience or market segment" (Novelli, 2005, 5). Consequently, niche tourism is not perceived to be a mass with common needs but involving individuals with specific needs related to the characteristics of a particular product. A number of niche areas exist such as photography, rural, urban, gastronomy, MICE\(^1\), sports and culture and heritage.

Rural Tourism is a niche segment as the visitors who consume it have a particular interest in acquiring knowledge about farm- and agro-tourism, green- or responsible tourism, ecological interest, agricultural tours and other related activities and how these adapted over time thanks to the advancements in technology. In doing so, they can engage themselves in rural related activities such as picnicking, walking, horse-riding and visiting historical and cultural sites amongst many others.

2.3 Understanding Rural Tourism

“Rural areas have long been seen and used as appropriate locations for recreation and tourism activities” (Towner 1996, 3). For more than 200 years, since the early visitors traveled to alpine Europe, the wilderness of western America and the British highlands, rural areas always attracted a large influx of tourists and in fact in many destinations rural tourism is perceived to be one of the contemporary forms of tourism. Not only has the level of participation increased but also the range of rural related activities.

\(^1\) Meeting, Incentives, Conferences and Events.
Considering the spread in tourism activity and the greater attention and emphasis made on local and regional tourism policies, one assumes that a common definition of rural tourism exists and particular characteristics such as; activities and locations are identified. However, no commonly accepted definition of rural tourism is agreed as it involves different activities in diverse areas. Consequently, each area or country does not follow the same pattern of rural tourism development since it has its own distinctive characteristics, culture and environment.

At first glance as Lane (1994, 5) suggests, “Rural tourism involves any tourism activity which takes place in the countryside” outside urbanized areas. However, this simple definition has its ambiguities and can in fact be inadequate for two main reasons. Firstly, urban tourism activity might ‘spill over in rural areas’ mainly through excursions; thus the activities organised in a rural setting might not be strictly “rural”. Secondly, it is difficult to define what rural areas are (European Parliament; Industrial Heritage and Agri/Rural Tourism in Europe 2013, 27). The problem is even more complex as the term ‘rural tourism’ is often mixed up or used inter-changeable with other terms like ‘eco-tourism’, ‘green tourism’ or ‘agro-tourism’.

In fact many do mix rural tourism with other similar terms; mainly agri- and green tourism. Agri-tourism describes the activities taken place in rural areas and for this reason the term is frequently used inter-changeably with rural tourism. Yet, agri-tourism regularly includes tourism products which are directly related to the agricultural environment. Thus, it is linked to agriculture and farm-based tourism. On the other hand, green tourism regularly describes ‘responsible’ and ‘new’ forms of tourism which are associated more to be environmentally-friendly than mass tourism.

In the early 1990’s the OECD\(^2\) Rural Development Programme attempted to work on the definition of rural tourism and concluded that it should be located in the countryside, be functionally rural; that is having space with the nature, heritage and ‘traditional practices’ to generate the long-term

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\(^2\) Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development.
benefits. Yet since there is no one fixed definition, understanding the scope of rural tourism is crucial in establishing a clearer context.

Academics argue that the scope of rural tourism or the variety of activities related to it could be very limited depending on the length of stay, the type of activity, the size of the attraction, the location and perceptions of different individuals of what they classify as tourism and rural. Nevertheless, if the definition is applied to a countryside context, then rural tourism would be much broader. As previously described, not all tourism activity that takes place in a rural setting can be defined to be traditionally rural due to tourism developments such as theme parks.

Post the Second World War era “the relationship between the rural setting and the leisure activities engaged therein has changed significantly” (Cloke 1993, 3). Recreation and tourism in many areas across the globe transformed from being mainly passive to become highly active which brought about changes in the landscape and rural communities. In turn, these changes raised greater attention and awareness on the role of leisure in rural areas/countryside.

2.4 What is ‘Countryside’?

The OECD in its report ‘What Future for Our Countryside?’ claimed that: “Rural areas incorporate the people, the land and other resources, in the open country and small settlements outside the immediate economic influence of major urban centres” (OCED 1993, 11). Therefore, the countryside could be any area which is not urban in character. However, this definition is broad as it encompasses other features which are not usually related to rural destinations such as forests, reservoirs and beaches. Furthermore, not all rural areas are practical and have a potential for tourism development.
"The concept of the countryside possessing symbolic significance is accepted to be a relatively new phenomenon" (Short 1991, 29). In fact the notion of rural tourism resulted from the industrialisation and urbanization of Western societies although the countryside image originated in ancient times. Other factors such as an increase in disposable income, more free time and improvements in transport and technology enabled people to visit the countryside as they escaped from the stressful urban life to a simpler, slower and more natural environment. Thus, “it was essentially the transformation of the society from a rural to a predominantly urban structure that provided the initial incentive for the development of rural tourism” (Sharpley & Sharpley 1997, 2).

Although the difference between what is and what is not rural is not always clearly established, it is generally understood that “for many urban dwellers, it is the rural ambience and the countryside which are the main considerations” (Pigram 1993, 161) when engaging in rural tourism. Hence, the countryside is an important reserve for tourism; a resource which both the tourists and the tourism industry depend upon. Nevertheless, in many rural areas across the globe, rural tourism is being seen as a possible tool to sustain rural economies and societies. Sequentially the tourism industry can serve as a solution to the decline in agriculture. Consequently there is a relationship between tourism and the resource it’s dependent upon; the countryside.

There has been a suggestion that rural tourism should be defined “according to its relationship with its environment” (Lane 1994). For rural tourism to be identified as ‘rural’ specific characteristics such as small settlements, low population densities and traditional economies based on the agricultural sector must be identified. Hence, rural tourism development should reflect the natural, rural environment. Rural areas should utilise natural resources, involve local communities and are restricted by the environmental, social and cultural limitations of the particular rural area to captivate tourism. This is an idealistic version of what rural tourism should entail which is not adapted in many cases. Nonetheless it is a version which is being sought by tourism authorities as it encompasses the importance of sustainability; a notion which has been given great attention and consideration in tourism planning and development. That’s why rural tourism is often associated and related with
green tourism as it is low-scale and should generate low impact tourism development unlike mass tourism.

2.4.1 Rural Areas in Malta

The broad definitions of rural tourism which includes forests are not applicable to the Maltese Islands. As previously stated, every area has its own features attributing to a rural setting. An area is considered rural if it has 5,000 persons per square kilometer and more than 10 per cent of its area being agricultural. On this basis, 47 localities in Malta and Gozo are considered rural. These cover an area of 287 square kilomtres and have 258,000 inhabitants (64 per cent of the total population). In effect, according to the Rural Development Programme 2007-2013 Malta and Gozo are considered rural except for urban areas around the Grand Harbour and Marsamxett Harbour (Rural Development Programme 2007-2013, 12).

![Figure 1. Map of Malta’s rural and urban localities.](image)

Source: Rural Development Programme (2007-2013)
The RDP\(^3\) is a funding programme based on EU funds. To maximize funding, the RDP adopts a definition for rural areas which includes most of the Islands as stated above, including areas which are not normally associated with countryside like for example Attard, Balzan, Mosta, Zejtun and Zabbar. However, it is important to note that there are significant differences in terms of the quality of countryside in different localities. In some areas, the pockets of open ‘rural’ land are so small that they have little or no use for rural tourism.

The countryside of the Maltese Islands is mainly categorized in two elements: the natural and build environment (Rural Topic Paper, 2001,13). The natural environment includes the habitats namely woodlands, maquis and garigue; soils and agricultural land. The Maltese countryside is remarkable for its rich cultural heritage ranging from: archeological attractions, monuments and sites and old buildings reflecting the background of ancient agrarian cultures. Farmhouses, country houses and rubble walls are part of the rural inheritance and very significant to the local rural setting.

In the National Rural Development Strategy for the years 2007-2013 it is found that most of Malta’s agricultural land is situated in the North-Western areas which together with the agricultural land of Gozo and Comino account for more than 74% of Malta’s landmass. The North-Western rural areas of Malta encompassing the coastal cliffs areas along with the Buskett-Girgenti area and other areas maintained their rural character which is rich in biodiversity, tomb sites, cart ruts and breathtaking views and consequently they have potential for recreation and tourism as they are the most rural distant areas from urban areas.

Only a small fraction of the Maltese Islands equivalent to 19% is covered by natural habitats. The remaining areas are made up of agricultural land, quarries and build-up areas mostly related to urban development. Unfortunately “various natural areas have been degraded through excavations, intensive trampling and bulldozing or covered with fly-tipping” (Rural Strategy Topic Paper 2003, 24). Recreational activities can have negative effects of rural areas which include environmental

\(^3\) Rural Development Programme
degradation, overcrowding of visitors, increase in traffic flows, a higher demand for parking facilities and destruction of vital build heritage such as the rubble walls and ‘giren’.

However, as the Maltese Islands have potential to develop a rural tourism product having the rural areas as a unique selling point; great consideration must be taken to conserve and maintain the countryside as it is a finite resource. (Lane 1994, 19)

2.5 Recreation and Tourism Activities

“The major attraction of rural tourism has traditionally been, and for many still remains, the countryside itself” (Sharpley & Sharpley1997, 84). At the initial phase of rural tourism development, for many visitors who lived or worked in urban areas; the countryside was a setting where they could escape from the daily stress and enjoy a calmer environment. Such visitors were satisfied with the opportunity to enjoy the physical and cultural characteristics of the pure countryside and thus there was no need for additional attractions and activities.

Yet in recent years, the needs and expectations of the early rural tourists have been substituted with demands for higher service quality. As a result, in order not only to attract a substantial amount of visitors to the countryside but also to keep them there once arrived, it is essential to supply them with a variety of activities. These will help to keep them entertained and to enable them to contribute towards the local rural economy. Since then, a great variety of activities exists in rural areas for visitors to engage in their leisure time. As a matter of fact, “greater emphasis should be given to the activities and the participants, the demands they place on rural areas and the changes they cause” (Butler et al. 1998, 4).

Until 20 years ago or so, the recreational activities were linked to the area’s natural rural setting. Such activities could be described using the following adjectives: ‘relaxing, passive, nostalgic, traditional’. Activities include walking, picnicking, fishing, sightseeing, boating, visiting historical and cultural sites, horse-riding, festivals and other farm-based activities such as educational farm visits and fruit picking (Butler et al. 1998, 9). However only recently, although the above activities are still
common and practiced in rural areas, there are now other different activities which are being engaged in. These could be considered to be more 'active, competitive, prestige, highly technological, modern and fast'. Such modern activities entail trail biking, off-road motor vehicle riding, parasailing, jet boating, windsurfing, snow skiing and other adventure-related activities.

This wider range of activities poses a greater demand on the resource base, namely off-road motor vehicle riding. "Perhaps, the simple traditional rural setting is no longer suitable for the highly specialised contemporary or maybe even postmodern forms of recreation and tourism" which could result in new impacts and conflicts (Butler et al. 1998, 10).

The main rural activities in Malta will be mentioned in the figure below. In order to provide these activities one requires access to particular rural areas, parking facilities and protected rural cultural heritage which consist of the natural bio-diversity, landscape and built rural heritage. Some activities although practiced in the countryside, might not need a rural setting such as off-roading. On the other hand, other activities like hunting, trapping and caravanning require special dedicated areas.

Since there public transport to countryside areas is not offered, the reliance on private transport is encouraged. Thus, there is an urgent need for parking facilities (Rural Topic Paper 2003, 120-121).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of Countryside Recreation Activities</th>
<th>Required Facilities</th>
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<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>Access routes/sites</td>
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<td>Natural habitats</td>
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<td>Built heritage</td>
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<td>Parking facilities</td>
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<td>Nature appreciation</td>
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<td>Natural habitats</td>
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<td>Parking facilities</td>
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<td>Sight-seeing</td>
<td>Access routes/sites</td>
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<td>Diverse and pleasant landscape</td>
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<td>Parking facilities</td>
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<td>Bird watching</td>
<td>Access routes/sites</td>
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<td>Bird habitats</td>
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<td>Bird breeding sites</td>
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<td>Parking facilities</td>
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<td>Country drives</td>
<td>Road access</td>
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<td>Diverse and pleasant landscape</td>
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<td>Walking and hiking</td>
<td>Access routes</td>
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<td>Diverse and pleasant landscape</td>
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<td>Parking facilities</td>
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<td>Abseiling and climbing</td>
<td>Access to sites</td>
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<td>Cliffs</td>
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<td>Steep valley sides</td>
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<td>Parking facilities</td>
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<td>Cycling</td>
<td>Access routes</td>
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<td>Diverse and pleasant landscape</td>
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<td>Parking facilities</td>
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<td>Horse riding</td>
<td>Access routes</td>
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<td>Diverse and pleasant landscape</td>
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<td>Horse riding facilities</td>
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<td>Parking facilities</td>
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<td>Pioneering</td>
<td>Access routes/sites</td>
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<td>Diverse and pleasant landscape</td>
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<td>Pioneering facilities</td>
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<td>Parking facilities</td>
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<td>Caravanning</td>
<td>Road access</td>
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<td>Caravan sites</td>
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<td>Pleasant landscape</td>
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<td>Parking facilities</td>
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<td>Camping</td>
<td>Road access</td>
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<td>Flat ground</td>
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<td>Pleasant landscape</td>
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<td>Parking facilities</td>
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<td>Off-roading</td>
<td>Road access</td>
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<td>Non uniform terrain</td>
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<td>Hunting and trapping</td>
<td>Road access and routes</td>
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<td>Wildlife</td>
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<td>Trapping sites or hunting grounds</td>
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2.6 Rural Tourism Development

Tourism is a dynamic and fast-growing industry. Given the increasing growth in tourism an expected growth for rural tourism is expected. One EU rural scheme which is of importance with relevance to tourism is the LEADER\textsuperscript{4} programme which was first introduced in 1990. The aim behind the LEADER programme is to encourage an integral approach towards rural development by focusing on the involvement and participation of local communities as the main stakeholders.

"Rural Tourism is increasingly being used as a development strategy to improve the social and economic well-being of rural areas" (Government of Alberta 2010, 4). Therefore the development and promotion of rural tourism is subject to the potential contribution it gives to the social and economic regeneration of such areas. As agricultural employment and generation of income continue to decline; rural tourism in many cases is often seen as the right solution as it is a new

\textsuperscript{4} Liaisons Entre Actions pour la Développement des Économies Rurales
source of income and employment which encourages the repopulation of rural communities (Sharpley & Sharpley 1997, 30).

2.6.1 Malta’s Potential to develop Rural Tourism

As tourism continues to become more accessible with the main purpose to create new authentic experience; tourism destinations like Malta should diversify the tourism product offered. Rural areas offer a means of escape and tranquility from the stress of the urban environment (Rural Development Programme for Malta 2007-2013; Measure 313,2). The village cores of the Maltese Islands are at the heart of the cultural experience. As a result, visitors are not only interested in enjoying the coastal experience but also "in understanding the authentic culture of these localities, of interacting with the local communities as well as the natural and manmade environment" (Tourism Policy for the Maltese Islands 2012/2016, 59).

As noted in section 2.4.1 above, 47 localities are considered to be rural. For most of these areas, the most important issue is more that of depopulation because in most cases population is increasing. In most rural areas the main issue is that of limited economic activity. A diversification strategy for the core villages and rural areas in Malta is to be adopted; suggesting sources of income and employment that could be generated through sustainable tourism demands in these areas. The former Minister for Tourism Mario de Marco stated that "the next four years include giving due importance to the countryside, which has never been considered as a tourist attraction" (Times of Malta, 2012). He further stated that the MTA will undertake a number of projects which would help to enhance the Maltese rural areas and to encourage rural tourism since the Maltese countryside have potential to attract tourists all year round.

In fact, the MTA’s Malta Goes Rural project is aiming to promote the Maltese rural heritage by upgrading a number of heritage trails to improve accessibility to natural areas and in turn help to shape a competitive rural tourism product. “The routes identified and the trails set up will pass
through rural areas and will focus on the natural areas, scenic spots, village cores, heritage sites and valuable elements of Malta’s tangible and intangible heritage” (MTA, MaltaGoesRural, 2010).

The countryside walks launched in 2002 will be upgraded. These are:

- The Dwejra lines walk
- The Bahrija walk,
- The Girgenti Walk,
- MarfaRidge walk,
- Ta’ Gurdan Walk,
- Dahlet Qorroq walk,
- Saltpan walk and
- Ramla walk.

The MTA would be launching other walks:

- The windmills walks (Zurrieq/ Safi)
- The Victoria Lines walks (2 walks)
- Tas-Silg walk (Marsascala/ Marsaxlokk)
- Neolitichal Temples walk (Siggiewi to Qrendi)
- Fawwara walk (Siggiewi)

Tourism is not viewed as an alternative to other activities but as a complementary activity sustaining new forms of income while supporting the growth of agricultural activities in rural areas and handmade crafts. In fact the aim behind the tourism activity within the Maltese rural areas is to support existing activities while giving them a new dimension for sustainable regeneration. The diversification strategy is aimed to strengthen the tourism product offered and to reduce the seasonality of tourism demand. It would help ‘to spread tourism activity across different localities in Malta and Gozo’ without harming the human and physical environment. As a result, “the tourism product offered would be more varied and activities in rural areas would diversify into high value
added economically sustainable activities” (Rural Development Programme for Malta 2007-2013; Measure 313,2).

Local Councils play a key role in implementing this policy objective as they give value to heritage assets found in different localities. The growth of the tourism activity in Maltese rural areas should be developed further without “prohibiting the development of other future tourism activities and above all, without degrading the natural and idiosyncratic characteristics of these areas” (Tourism Policy for the Maltese Islands 2012/2016, 59).

The tourism policy suggests some responses which need to be implemented with regards to rural areas in Malta such as:

- supporting the re-use and renovate of existing buildings which are falling into decay in some of the Maltese villages,
- encourage environmental enhancement through various stakeholders and to support the role of local councils and other NGO’s,
- promote village museums,
- support small-scale tourism infrastructure based on the locality's characteristics,
- to raise awareness about Malta’s biodiversity and tourism activities,
- to foster a responsible behaviour amongst all stakeholders involved, and
- to develop a rural tourism policy (2014-2020) which “takes into account the specialties of Malta and which seeks to present the holistic potential of rural tourism, agro-tourism and eco-tourism” (Tourism Policy for the Maltese Islands 2012/2016, 59).

Particular reference should be also given to Malta’s sister island which is seeking rural and adventure tourism as a different type of tourism in contrast to the usual sun, sea and sand tourism since one can find a variety of agricultural tours including the Ager Foundation and Ta’ Mena Estate. The island of Gozo has the best potential for rural tourism, apart from the North, North-West and West of Malta. Eco-Gozo is a proposed action plan estimating that Gozo will become an

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7Non-Governmental Organisations
eco-island by 2020 in order to secure the island’s future as a unique selling point. The plan’s vision is based on the sustainable development principles focusing on sustaining more jobs, creating a better quality of life, reducing environmental pressures and cultivating the natural and cultural resources. Tourism is a strong segment of Gozo’s economy. The eco-Gozo strategy is in line with Gozo's tourism strategy aiming to:

- provide infrastructural development to support the cruise liner market
- support cultural events
- increase marketing efforts to promote Gozo as a distinctive tourism destination by
  1. promoting Gozo as a unique diving destination
  2. implementing an agri-tourism policy specifically for Gozo
  3. promoting the website- www.visitgozo.com

2.7 Issues in rural tourism

Tourism plays an essential role in regenerating rural economies and can also serve as a catalyst for the protection and conservation of the rural environment. For this to be achieved, constant planning is mandatory to guarantee that long-term benefits are increased while the costs and negative impacts are minimised. An integrated approach is required to achieve a sustainable and balanced tourism development in rural areas. This is a continual process; as new demands and recreational activities are placed on the rural areas, yet the countryside still remains a finite resource. Innovative approaches are required to plan and manage such sites as new issues and impacts will be faced.

In order to maintain a balance between the demands on the countryside, a number of issues need to be considered when planning rural tourism. First, for rural tourism to exist and benefit the local communities and economies, people must have access to rural areas. An increasingly difficult issue is how to manage access without causing environmental degradation. As the environmental impacts on the countryside have grown; “increasing attention has been focused on the potential of
access fees as a means of reducing some of the pressures and tourism-related problems in rural areas” although this approach is by all means new (Sharpley & Sharpley 1997, 134). The concept that rural tourism is an economic activity and that the tourists are ‘consumers’ of the rural tourism product place a price on the rural areas.

Most of the environmental impacts caused on rural areas are due to the use of transport which is identified to be one of the key factors contributing towards the deterioration of environment quality (Whitelegg 1993). Possible solutions to this issue are to improve the road networks which lead to the main rural areas and provide parking facility; restriction of car access; and promoting effective public transport which would reduce the reliance on private transportation. Another important issue is accessibility with regards to people with special needs and the elderly, and specific rural recreational opportunities should be provided for this sub-group as everyone has an equal right to enjoy rural areas.

“The traditional nature of rural societies has a number of implications for the development of tourism” (Sharpley & Sharpley 1997, 15). If managed well, tourism can contribute to the maintenance of rural areas and serve as an economic regenerator. However, it can also threaten the stability of rural societies and thus constant monitoring and planning is required for rural tourism to maintain the character of such areas.

Chapter 3
Methodology

The methodology chapter includes a review of the data collection methods and the design used, secondary and primary data sources used, a pilot study and the limitations faced due to the selection of methods used.
3.1 Review of Data Collection Methods

Qualitative research is a type of scientific research which seeks to provide and answer to questions and collects evidence. In order to answer the research question “Does Malta have potential to develop rural tourism?”, the researcher opted to use qualitative research as its aim is to understand a given problem or topic from the perspectives, values and opinions of those involved.

Qualitative methods were used since they seek to understand the experience and/or attitudes of the tourists who were interviewed. The goal of such methods is to reply questions by asking ‘what’, ‘how’ or ‘why’ of a particular issue instead of ‘how much’ or ‘how many’ which are answered through quantitative methods since these focus more on quantifying the problem by generating numerical data through statistics. Qualitative methods are used to understand how individuals perceive a particular topic. In the researchers’ case the topic was the Maltese rural areas and countryside and whether these have the possibility to develop rural tourism.

Two main ethical concerns that should be reflected in any study were given great consideration being consent and confidentiality. Although the subject matter was not sensitive to require a written consent, a verbal consent was nonetheless still obtained. Everyone who participated in the study freely consented to participation. The identity of the participants whom the researcher gathered information remained protected and confidential.

3.2 Secondary Data

A secondary research source is an analysis or review of previous research which had been already carried out and thus does not include reports on a new research study, unlike primary research sources. Secondary sources were used in Chapter 2, where the literature review summarized the main findings of primary research which were considered useful and relevant to explain the subject matter, rather than the methods or results of a particular study. The main secondary sources used were books, reports, journal articles and newspaper articles.
3.3 Primary Data

Since qualitative research was used to answer the research question, a qualitative approach was taken when conducting the research study where the researcher was willing to understand the perspectives of the participants, explore their views on the subject matter and observe in-depth. The most common qualitative data collection methods are interviews, group discussions and questionnaires. The researcher opted to use questionnaires. When creating and planning the questionnaire, the researcher kept in mind the importance to have a clear purpose and that the questions should be designed in a way that they would result in qualitative data rather than quantitative data for the scope of the study. Hence, it is important to develop the right questions that will provide the required relevant information to answer the research question. “With respect to questionnaires, qualitative comments (e.g. generated from open-ended questions) can be used to corroborate, illustrate or elaborate on the meaning of quantitative responses” (Bazeley 2006, 67-74).

The questionnaires were conducted similar to the form of an interview as the researcher went on site and interviewed individuals who were enjoying a countryside walk rather than distributing the questionnaires online through social media. The questionnaires were semi-structured made up of open-ended questions and checkbox questions. Such types of questions provide meaningful and unexpected responses and allow the researcher to further ask why or how to encourage the participants to elaborate on their answers. Open-ended questions allow the participants to share their experiences, opinions and perceptions on a particular issue. However, since a large variety of answers may be provided for one question, “open-ended questions can be asked in a style that directs participants into definite channels without actually suggesting responses” (Payne 1951, 249).

The place or setting where the interviews are carried out has an impact on the answers the researcher would obtain. Consequently, the questionnaires were conducted in three days in rural
areas, particularly on 3 main heritage trails: Mdina to Dingli, Imgarr to Most and Pembroke heritage trail.

3.4 Limitations

Despite the positive comments on the value of qualitative research, a plethora of various viewpoints exists on the subject. Some of the common criticisms of qualitative research methods are that the samples or the interviews carried out are generally small and thus they might not represent the broader picture. Qualitative data is based on personal opinions, experiences and insights and thus it is considered to be highly subjective resulting in biased or skewed data. Generally, qualitative research methods are more time-consuming and depending on the compatibility of the researcher (Griffin, n.d. and Lewis, 2014).

Since rural tourism is still a niche segment and thus attracts only a small proportion of visitors, the participation of interviewees in rural areas was quite limited. Due to the nature of the countryside walks, the setting does not attract many tourists. This meant that the exercise was time consuming because there was a lot of waiting time involved until the researcher came across the next tourist couple or group. The researcher had the possibility to collect more responses; however some tourists refused to participate possibly because they did not want to be disturbed while enjoying their walk.
Chapter 4
Analysis and Results

4.1 Introduction

This chapter focuses on the analysis of data and results after evaluating the research findings. These findings are related to the research question that directed the study, i.e. whether Malta has potential to develop rural tourism and if so, what can be done or improved. Data and responses gathered were analysed to identify, examine and explore the relationship between the rural-oriented leisure activities, the Maltese rural areas and how these can be improved according to the opinions and perceptions of foreign tourists. The researcher would compare and contrast these findings with theories and approaches discussed in Chapter 2.

A total of thirteen (13) questionnaires were gathered. The use of open-ended questions gave the respondents the opportunity to elaborate and discuss further their perceptions, ideas, opinions, likes and dislikes. Rural walks were the setting where the questionnaires were conducted as they had an impact on the answers the researcher received. Three main rural heritage trails were chosen by the researcher. These were Mdina to Dingli walk, Imġarr to Mosta walk and the Pembroke heritage trail.

As a result, the questionnaire compromises four sections and the data gathered will be presented as follows:

- The first section is comprised of demographical data including age, gender and nationality.
- The second section includes data about rural-oriented leisure activities.
- The third section compromises data on the Maltese rural areas and the countryside, whether these were what the tourists expected and whether they did come specifically for a walking holiday in Malta.
- The fourth section includes the tourists’ opinions on what can be improved, other comments and suggestions.
4.2 Methods of Data Analysis

Interviews, questionnaires, field notes and other types of data are often not adaptable to analysis until the information they convey has been summarised and compared. There are different ways how one can analyse qualitative data. In the researchers’ case this has been applied by using a coding scheme. This process is commonly referred to as content analysis. Other common methods include thematic analysis, and a descriptive approach.

Content analysis is defined broadly as “any technique for making inferences by systematically and objectively identifying special characteristics of messages” (Holsti 1968, 608). Thus, a coding scheme was developed by gathering similar replies and opinions together. For example, with regards to the rural-oriented leisure activities, each activity mentioned was given a code. After listing the number of responses under each code, the researcher started to write down the common responses and was able to form a discussion and conclusion on the findings.

4.3 Discussion of the findings

4.3.1 Demographical data

Since the demographical data was not part of the primary purpose of the study and thus not of critical importance, it was not analysed in great depth. As a result, the demographical data consisted only of age, gender and nationality. The demographical data was asked intentionally to describe the demographic variables of the questionnaires and to assess whether these had any influence on the research findings.

54% of the participants were males whereas 46% were females. Most of the respondents were indeed a couple and only a small number of the respondents were individual travelers. The participants were asked to choose the age category or group appropriate to them. The age group method was found convenient because the researcher wanted only to get an idea about the average age group of rural tourists and on the other hand many respondents felt comfortable to
reply to the question as their particular age was not revealed. 38% of the respondents had an average age between forty five (45) and fifty four years (54) and constituted the bulk of the questionnaires. This was followed by 31% of the respondents who were in the 65 and over age bracket. It is important to note that all the respondents were above the 35-44 age brackets.

Consequently, one can notice and conclude that the rural tourism is mostly popular and familiar with tourists in between 45-54 years of age. This could be due to the fact that the latest average age bracket of incoming tourists visiting the Maltese Islands as calculated by the NSO\textsuperscript{6} is that between 45 to 64, amounting to 457,760 visitors in 2010. Thus, rural tourism and rural-oriented activities seem to interest more the adult and older generation rather than the younger generation.

31% of the respondents were British. This could possibly also be due to the fact that the UK is Malta’s top source market. However, the researcher came across other participants with less popular nationalities including Russian, Turkish, Australian, Swedish and Dutch.

4.3.2 Rural- oriented activities

The next part of the questionnaire dealt with rural-oriented leisure activities. The respondents were given an opportunity to choose more than one option from the rural activity groups which were provided. These included:

- Agricultural Tours including activities like typical wine tasting and food tasting and fruit picking.
- Countryside Walks compromising also heritage trails.
- Soft Adventure including horse riding, camping, abseiling and canoeing.
- Rural Cultural Heritage including the natural and also build heritage like chapels and towers.

\textsuperscript{6} National Statistics Office
- Ecological Interest including the landscape, diversity of habitats and species and bird watching.
- Others Section where the respondents could mention any other rural oriented activity of their preference.

As analysed in Chapter 2, generally the countryside itself is the main attraction. This was clearly identified in the research findings as all the respondents were interested in countryside walks or heritage trails. This could have also resulted from the fact that the questionnaires were conducted in a rural setting. The following category which was of interest to a substantial number of respondents was rural cultural heritage, amounting to 62%. Many of the respondents who chose this option stated that when walking or trekking along a countryside walk they are interested to learn more about the cultural heritage they come across.

After the researcher explained that the agricultural tours option included also wine and food tasting or even fruit picking, 46% of the participants were interested in this category. With regards to this rural-oriented activity, agricultural tours are only provided on the sister island of Gozo primarily by the Ager Foundation and Ta’ Mena Estate. This could possibly result from the fact that Gozo has more rural areas than Malta, thus considered to be greener to support forms of agri- or rural tourism. An activity which is considered to be more specific attracted a lower percentage of the respondent’s interest. This was the ecological interest category amounting to 31% which included the landscape of the rural areas, diversity of flora and fauna found in such areas and bird-watching. As a matter of fact, the category which had the lowest percentage was soft adventure. Although sports- and adventure-related rural activities could be practiced by everyone who is physically fit irrespective of the age, the majority of the respondents were not interested in it. Thus, one can also note that soft adventure activities are generally triggered by the younger generation. Some of the participants listed also other activities which they find appropriate to categorise with the previous activities. In fact, some were interested in diving and beaches situated close to a rural setting.
When asked whether they have engaged in any rural-oriented activity which hinted and suggested in the previous question, all of the participants replied yes. All of the respondents have participated in countryside walks or heritage trails both in their free time or while on holiday. 15% of the respondents mentioned also coastal walks while on holiday. The coastal zones do not only play a vital role in the tourists’ experience, but have also an effect on rural areas. Coastal zones are defined to be geographical spaces made up of land and sea areas incorporating activities on land and sea which can influence the quality of the natural resource base. Usually the coastal zone boundary is close to the coastline, however in rural areas

"the boundary is predominantly characterized by ecological systems and extends further inland" (Coastal Strategy Topic Paper 2001, 2).

4.3.3 Malta’s Rural Areas

The next section of the questionnaire tackled more in depth the Maltese rural areas. It included questions which gave the researcher an insight on whether these areas were as expected by rural tourists, what interested them to visit and if so what was their main source of information.

In order to answer the question whether the Maltese countryside was as they had expected it to be or different, the respondents were given four suggestions to choose from. These varied from the countryside being what the tourists expected to totally not what they expected, to slightly or very different. After stating their opinion, the researcher was able to probe the respondents’ initial responses by further asking why so as to give reasons to sustain their chosen option. The majority of the respondents’ equivalent to 38% claimed that in terms of the Maltese countryside and rural areas, they were as expected. As mentioned in the literature review, the broad definitions of rural tourism encompassing also forests are not applicable to the Maltese Islands. However, rural areas are situated and spread in 47 localities around Malta. The majority of the respondents who answered the questionnaire were satisfied with the conditions of these areas as they knew what to expect. Nowadays, tourists are being more prepared and informed on these areas by using the Internet.
The data for the rest of the respondents was equally distributed amongst the three remaining options being slightly different, very different and totally not what I expected. All the respondents who chose these options believe that the rural areas were actually much better than they thought.

“I remained impressed with Malta’s natural beauty.” [Australian tourist]

“Totally not what I expected, it is actually so much better!” [British tourist]

“Partly what expected, but before I thought it would be more dry and arid which was not as much” [British tourist]

The aim of the following question which was linked to the previous one was to identify the reasons why the respondents were interested to go for a countryside walk in Malta. This open-ended question evoked meaningful yet different reasons based on the respondents’ personal opinions. The data gathered was distributed into six main reasons. Since most of the questionnaires were conducted at Dingli where the walk finishes, the respondents’ opinions and perceptions on the walk and the surrounding rural areas tend to be clearer and well formulated. The main common interest of rural tourists to go for a countryside walk in Malta were culture and heritage, sightseeing, spectacular views, tranquility and the interest in the Maltese natural habitat. However, there were other specific and non-specific reasons. One particular specific reason was to dine in a restaurant in a rural setting, offering typical Maltese food and other non-specific reasons included going on a countryside walk simply out of curiosity, decided to go on a similar activity only if they had time, visiting such sites because they are close to their place of stay and others were interested because they received a leaflet about the rural walk.

The next question dealt with the sources of information that is from where the respondents knew about the Maltese rural areas. For this question, four (4) options were given to the participants to choose from. Nonetheless, they had the ability to choose more than one option. These were: the Malta rural tourism website, social media, books or travel brochures, World of Mouth (WoM) or others. Since as previously mentioned, most of the respondents knew beforehand what to expect in terms of the Maltese rural areas, their main source of information were websites, (69%). Another influential webpage apart from the Malta rural tourism website was VisitMalta.com, the official
promotional website for the Maltese Islands. The following common popular source was books and travel brochures amounting to 46%. Surprisingly enough, some friends and relatives of the respondents suggested the Maltese rural walks by spreading the word (WoM) rather than using social media. 15% of the participants became aware of the Dingli rural walk by means of a leaflet.

In order to conclude this section, the researcher asked the respondents whether they did come specifically for a walking holiday in Malta and why. As described in the methodology section, qualitative data methods can give the researcher meaningful yet surprising results. This was the case with regards to this question. The majority of the respondents stated that they did not come specifically to enjoy a walking holiday in Malta because they had other multiple reasons. Some of the main common reasons were main attraction including heritage such as cultural museums and temples. Some particular respondents visited Malta to learn the English language or visiting friends and relatives, whilst one particular respondent stated that:

“War history and museums are what prompted me to visit Malta.” [British tourist]

As described and in the literature review, the Tourism Policy for the Maltese Islands 2012-2016 proposed a diversification strategy for the core villages and rural areas in Malta by suggesting sources of income and employment that could be generated through sustainable tourism demands in these areas. Consequently, rural tourism is not seen as an alternative to other activities but as a complement. In fact this would help to strengthen the tourism product offered, to generate tourism activity all year round and thus help to reduce the seasonality of demand by attracting tourists in the shoulder and winter seasons. The policy seems to be successfully promoting Malta’s rural areas, because surprisingly enough 31% of the respondents stated that they have visited Malta specifically for a walking holiday since they were interested to experience the Maltese rural areas as well as to learn more about the ecological habitat of such areas.
4.3.4 What can be improved, comments and suggestions

The last set of questions focused on what areas can be further improved with regards to the Maltese rural areas, and other comments and suggestions that the participants wanted to share with the researcher. When the respondents were asked to answer what areas can be further improved, they were given five (5) options to choose from being accessibility, promotion of such sites and activities, maintenance, interpretative tools and others.

The majority of the respondents, amounting to 46% claimed that there is a lack of interpretative tools, mainly information panels. They sustained that these panels should be constantly maintained since most of the participants have come across information panels which were faded due to natural elements. These panels should contain more informative material on the history of the sites, the natural habitat and also on the areas build rural cultural heritage. Another substantial amount of tourists equivalent to 38%, complained on accessibility to rural sites and walks in Malta. The findings on this matter correspond with the research as referred to in the literature review.

One of the main issues with regards to rural tourism as mentioned in Chapter 2 is access to rural areas. An increasingly difficult issue is how to manage access to such sites without causing negative environmental impacts, mainly degradation. Most of the environmental impacts caused on rural areas are due to the use of transport, which is identified to be one of the key factors contributing towards the deterioration of the countryside’s quality (Whitelegg 1993). Possible solutions to this issue are to provide parking facility or restriction of car access. However, as some of the respondents rightly claimed effective public transport would reduce the reliance on private transportation.

Other respondents insisted that promotion of rural sites and activities should be further improved by advertising more the sites. This is currently being tackled since, as described in the literature review, one of the key responses proposed in the tourism policy with regards to rural tourism is to promote village cores and rural areas. The Malta Tourism Authority is responsible for promoting and
marketing the Maltese Islands. Other suggestions as to what should be improved focused on cleanliness. One particular respondent stated that:

“The amount of garbage left over in such areas surprised me!” [Russian tourist]

The final part of the questionnaires dealt with comments and suggestions. One of the benefits of qualitative research methods is to understand the experiences, attitudes, opinions and how the respondents perceive particular issues. As expected by the researcher, not all the participants had further comments or suggestions to make, however those who had, did come up with interesting observations. Some respondents claimed that there is a problem when it comes to directions. They personally thought that it was difficult to follow the rural walk since no signage is provided to indicate which way to follow. Others emphasized that there are restricted areas due to bird trapping or R.T.O. areas being restricted solely to the land owners. Some respondents claimed that since there is a lack of informative panels, they used a GPS to guide them. Unfortunately, the GPS marked the shortest paths possible, and many of these were actually RTO areas. Consequently, many tourists were confused and lost track. Other respondents were amazed with Malta’s rural areas and thought that the sites are well maintained. They suggested solely the installation of informative panels so as other rural tourists could better understand what’s around them. Other participants were so impressed with Malta’s natural beauty, the tourism product offered and the island’s potential to develop further rural tourism that they actually claimed to:

“Keep Malta as it is. In English we have a saying that if something is not broke, you don’t need to fix. And Malta does not need to be fixed. It’s perfect the way it is!” [British tourist]

4.4 Conclusion of the findings

The finding of the research study mainly corresponded with the theories, practices and principles discussed in the literature review. The main conclusions of the findings are as follows. The most common rural-oriented leisure activities the participants were interested in were countryside walks,
agricultural tours and rural cultural heritage. The majority of the respondents stated that they have already engaged in a rural experience; mainly countryside walks.

Sightseeing, spectacular views, culture and heritage and tranquility were the main factors that motivated and interested rural tourists to opt for countryside walk. The main sources of information used were websites, books or travel brochures and WoM. The majority of the respondents did not come specifically to enjoy a countryside walk in Malta since they had multiple reasons; however this trend is on the increase. Accessibility, promotion and informative tools still remain the key issues when it comes to rural sites.

Chapter 5
Discussion of Results, Conclusions and Recommendations

5.1 Introduction

In the last section of the study, the researcher is able to draw conclusions on the research statement upon which the research was conducted. The research question of the study was set out not only to answer but also to justify the necessity and importance of this research study. This was set to analyse whether Malta has potential to develop rural tourism. Rural tourism is a complex field of study. The research study is important because it tries to define and understand what rural tourism is and how this economic activity is dependent upon its resource base, the countryside. Hence, for the scope of this study the researcher identified the Maltese rural areas whether these have the possibility to develop this form of tourism, and if so how.

7 Word of Mouth
5.2 Aims and Objectives

The main objective of the research study was to analyse the Maltese rural setting and identify what has been done with regards to development and improvement of such sites and identify how rural tourism can be further developed. Very little is gained when one studies rural tourism in isolations. As a result, the researcher examined other external factors that influence both the growth and scope of participation in rural areas.

Rural tourism was first researched extensively in a complex form though secondary research by using books, academic journals, newspaper articles and other online material. The researcher was able to understand the subject matter and define further the meaning of rural-oriented leisure activities. The need for a sustainable and inclusive approach, constant planning of rural areas and the main present and future issues and challenges faced were tackled. After gaining substantial knowledge on the subject matter, the researcher was then able to conduct primary qualitative research which enabled the participants express their perspectives, values, opinions and experiences on the subject matter. The researcher chose to conduct one-to-one questionnaires with foreign rural tourists in a rural setting. Through extensive secondary research and the questionnaires (13), the objectives of the research study were reached. After conducting secondary and primary data, the researcher was able to evaluate the research findings and compare and contrast them with the theories and approached discussed in the literature review.

5.3 Discussion of the results

The researcher divided the findings obtained from primary data into four main sections: demographics, rural-oriented activities, the Maltese rural areas and what can be further improved according to the participants along with other comments and suggestions. To identify whether rural tourists do come specifically for a walking holiday in Malta was the main focus of the research. The current Tourism Policy for the Maltese Islands 2012-2016 proposed a diversification strategy for the
core villages and rural areas in Malta. Rural tourism is not seen as an alternative to other activities but as a complement which would help to strengthen the tourism product offered, to generate tourism activity all year round and thus help to reduce the seasonality of demand by attracting tourists in the shoulder and winter seasons. All the respondents were interested in rural areas; however the majority stated that they had multiple reasons to visit the Maltese islands not specifically to enjoy a walking holiday. Yet, the policy seems to be successfully promoting Malta’s rural areas, because surprisingly enough 31% of the respondents stated that they have visited Malta specifically for a walking holiday since they were interested to experience the Maltese rural areas and to learn more about the ecological habitat.

The majority of the respondents were couples and only a small proportion were individual travelers. From the findings obtained, the researcher concluded that the rural tourism is mostly popular and familiar with tourists in between 45-54 years of age. This may imply that the younger generation does not seem to be interested in participating in rural tourism while on holiday. The rural setting where the one-to-one questionnaires were conducted proved that the common rural-oriented leisure activities that the participants were interested in were countryside walks, agricultural tours and rural cultural heritage.

The broad definitions of rural tourism including forests are not applicable to the Maltese Islands. Thus, one of the questions of the questionnaires was to identify whether the Maltese countryside was different or as expected by the participants interviewed. The majority of the respondents claimed that the Maltese rural areas were as expected because they researched beforehand. The participants’ main sources of information were websites like Malta Rural Tourism website or VisitMalta, travel books and brochures and word of mouth. However, others stated that rural areas were slightly different from what was expected because they were actually much better. As stated by one particular participant:

“I remained impressed with Malta’s natural beauty.” [Australian tourist]

The four common options chosen with regards to what can be improved in terms of the Maltese rural areas were interpretative tools and the need to install information panels, the
promotion of such sites and related activities and accessibility which is one of the main issues of rural tourism as analysed in the literature review. The general comments and suggestions were on more information panels since in some areas no signage is provided and restricted areas reserved for owners. Others were simply amazed with Malta’s natural beauty and claimed:

"Keep Malta as it is. In English we have a saying that if something is not broke, you don’t need to fix. And Malta does not need to be fixed. It’s perfect the way it is!"
[British tourist]

From the research conducted it has been identified that Malta do have potential to further develop rural tourism due to the fact that from the responses obtained although tourists do not consider rural tourism as the main purpose to visit Malta, they do seek to engage in rural activities whilst on holiday.

5.4 Recommendations

From the research obtained, the trends show that rural tourism will continue to increase its popularity. The researcher recommends that future studies should be carried out on the subject matter focusing more on transportation issues and how public transport could improve and allow better access to rural areas. Another interesting factor would be to analyse future projects and initiatives such as the MaltaGoesRural project set up by local authorities to improve the overall rural tourism product. After 2016, one could research whether the responses and initiatives proposed in the current Tourism Policy for the Maltese islands with regards to rural tourism, were implemented or not. Thus, one can analyse whether this form of tourism reduced the seasonality of demand by increasing tourists in the shoulder and winter months.
References


Appendices

Appendix 1

Questionnaire in English
1. Demographical Data.

   Gender:   Male □   Female □

   Age:    21 and under □  22 to 34 □  35 to 44 □  45 to 54 □  55 to 64 □  65 and over □

   Nationality: _________________

2. What rural-oriented activities are you interested in?

   □ Agricultural Tours

   □ Countryside Walks

   □ Soft Adventure

   □ Rural Cultural Heritage

   □ Ecological Interest

   □ Others: _______________________

3. Have you ever engaged in any rural-oriented leisure activity? Yes □ or No □

   If yes, state what type of activity and where: _____________________________

   If no, why? ___________________________________________________________
4. In terms of the Maltese countryside, was it what you expected or was it different? Please state why. (It was what I expected, Slightly different, Very different, Totally not what I expected)

5. What interested you to go for a countryside walk in Malta? Explain your answer.

6. What was your source of information? (WoM (World of Mouth, Books or Travel Brochures, Social Media, Malta Rural Tourism Website)

7. Did you come specifically for a walking holiday in Malta? Yes □ or No □

   Why? _______________________________________________
8. In your opinion, what can be further improved to in the case of the Maltese rural areas?

☐ Accessibility

☐ Promotion of such sites and activities

☐ Maintenance

☐ Interpretative tools (e.g. information panels)

☐ Others: ____________________

Other Comments and Suggestions:

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________
Appendix 2

Data in Graphs

Q2. What rural-oriented activities are you interested in?

- Others (diving): 8%
- Soft Adventure: 8%
- Ecological Interest: 31%
- Agricultural Tours: 46%
- Rural Cultural Heritage: 62%
- Countryside Walks: 85%

Q6. What was your source of information?

- Others (Leaflets): 15%
- Word of Mouth: 31%
- Books and Travel Brochures: 46%
- Website: 69%
Q7. Did you come specifically for a walking holiday in Malta?

- No (multiple reasons): 69%
- Yes: 31%

Q8. In your opinion, what can be further improved in terms of the Maltese rural areas?

- Others (Cleanliness): 8%
- Maintainance: 8%
- Promotion of sites and activities: 23%
- Accessibility: 38%
- Interpretative Tools: 46%
Appendix 3

Imġarr to Mosta Walk Photos

Figure 3. Victoria Lines
Figure 4. Information Panel

Appendix 4

Mdina to Dingli Walk Photos
Figure 5. Dingli Walk.
Figure 6. Dingli Project to enhance and protect the tourism potential.

Appendix 5

Pembroke Walk Photos
Figure 7. Start and End Route near the Pembroke Tower.
Figure 8. Interesting Facts on the flora found in Pembroke’s Walk.