
DOMESTIC TOURISM AND LEISURE IN MALTA

Douglas G. Lockhart

Susan E. Ashton

MOST studies of tourism in Mediterranean countries focus on international aspects such as the growth of resorts, seasonal patterns of tourist arrivals, and the economic and environmental impacts of mass tourism.¹ When the residents of these countries are considered it is usually with reference to the ways in which international tourism has affected their lives, such as rising land and property values, the erosion of traditional values and customs, and employment in tourist enterprises.

Relatively little is known about the tourism patterns and recreational interests of the populations of countries which host large-scale international tourism. Studies of domestic tourism which exist have concentrated on large countries, for example France and Italy, and have laid emphasis on inter-regional flows of visitors, or have examined just one aspect such as second homes. A recent study by the Department of Statistics and Research and the Tourism Organization in Cyprus has shown that local urban populations make a major contribution to the economy of remoter rural areas both in terms of day trips and holidays involving overnight stays in these areas. Moreover, second home ownership has grown appreciably and local populations are becoming more sophisticated in the number and range of their sporting and leisure interests.²

Although the Maltese Islands have a much smaller land area than Cyprus, resorts such as Marsalforn, Bugibba, and Birzebbugia are popular during summer, and a glance at the local newspapers shows that the Maltese enjoy a wide variety of sporting and leisure interests. In winter and spring, especially, countryside-based activities such as walking and picnicking are popular and there are many places of interest like Buskett Gardens and Ta'

1. D. G. Pearce, *Tourism today: a geographical analysis* (London, 1987), 95 – 112.

2. Cyprus Tourism Organisation/Department of Statistics and Research, *Survey on domestic tourism* (Nicosia, 1989).

Qali which attract large numbers of weekend visitors.

Since official statistics on domestic tourism are lacking, it was decided to organize a household survey among local residents. The targeted areas are described in Table 1. Teams of students from University College, Swansea, and the University of Keele visited each locality and interviewed randomly – chosen households within defined streets. The thirteen localities provide a broad spread of housing and socio-economic groups and it is intended that they should reflect a selection of typical communities within Malta.

Comparison of the age and occupational status of respondents and the age and employment structure recorded in the 1985 Census revealed some differences. Because the survey targeted heads of households, few persons aged under 20 were included – however, other age groups represented in the sample showed little deviation from the national population pattern. There was a surplus of about 5 per cent in the professional and managerial grades and in the economically inactive category. Blue-collar workers were under-represented in the survey. These structural characteristics of the sample should be borne in mind when interpreting the results.

Table 1 Household survey interview areas

Locality	Sample size	Type of neighbourhood
Attard	56	high status
Balzan	29	high status
Cospicua	30	inner-urban deprived
Lija	30	high status
Marsascula	22	coastal village, old housing in core, younger population in new estate
Marsaxlokk	30	fishing village, working class core, middle-status periphery status
Mellieħa	43	high status Santa Maria Estate and low-middle status recent home ownership scheme
Mgarr	35	fairly isolated village
Mosta	64	expanding town, much new private and government housing middle status
Pawla	58	low-middle status inner-urban area
San Ġwann	60	new town
Santa Luċija	71	new town
Żabbar	44	interviewing in Bulebel iż-Żgħir housing estate, fairly low status in flats, low-middle status home ownership scheme

In all 572 interviews were conducted. The response from the public was excellent and very few refusals were encountered.

The objectives of the survey were as follows:

- i. to discover key characteristics about foreign and local holidays taken; frequency of visits, type of accommodation, and length of stay,
- ii. to collect information relating to day excursions; modes of travel, places visited, and to establish views on the attractiveness of different recreational environments,
- iii. to examine the sporting and leisure activities of parents and children,
- iv. to provide a useful and realistic teaching exercise for students in their second (Keele) or third (Swansea) year of a geography honours degree course.

The sections which follow provide analyses of the major themes of the household survey together with a brief set of conclusions.

Foreign Holidays

Slightly more than one-third of the sample indicated that they had taken a foreign holiday during the previous twelve months. The proportion ranged from exactly half the households in Lija and 48.0 per cent in Mellieħa to just 11.4 per cent in Mgarr and 16.7 per cent in Cospicua. Socio-economic status undoubtedly had a strong influence upon the incidence of holidaying abroad. The overwhelming majority (71.6 per cent) went on only one holiday while the remainder had taken two or more vacations.

The destinations for these holidays are shown in Table 2. Several factors explain the dominance of England and Italy. The shopping, entertainment,

Table 2 Destinations for foreign holidays

	Per cent
England	43.2
Italy	34.6
France	4.7
West Germany	2.1
Canada	2.1
Australia	0.9
Spain	0.9
Turkey	0.9
Others	10.6

Table 3 Destinations for holidays in Malta

	Per cent
Gozo	70.1
St Paul's Bay / Bugibba	9.3
Marsascala	6.5
Mellieħa	3.3
Golden Bay	2.8
Birżebbuga	1.8
Comino	1.8
Armier	1.4
Others	1.8

and public buildings of London; historic towns such as York and Chester; the availability of package holidays; and the presence of friends and relatives are powerful reasons for travel to England. Italy (and particularly Sicily) also competes successfully for Maltese visitors largely because of the short distances involved and convenient ferry and air services. Shopping trips and weekend breaks in Sicily were very popular while Rome was the second most-favoured destination. Other countries only attracted small proportions of visitors. Some such as Canada and Australia involve visiting relatives, while sightseeing in major cities (Paris, Frankfurt) and relaxing beach holidays (Spain, Turkey) characterize the remainder. Given the range of destinations, it is perhaps not surprising that holidays were taken at all times of the year: just over half (52.9 per cent) went on summer holidays while about equal numbers took winter and shoulder-season trips.

Finally the sample was asked the number of overnight stays for each holiday. Periods up to seven nights accounted for 37.8 per cent, 36.1 per cent of trips were between 8–14 nights, and 26.1 per cent were over 14 nights. Those staying for a week or a fortnight coincide with the duration of inclusive package tours. The comparatively high proportion of long-stay holidays is explained by visits to relatives in England, Australia, and North America; the relatively high cost of the travel element in a European holiday, which encouraged some households to spend a longer period away from home; and a small number of respondents who went on tours to several European countries.

Holidays in Malta and Gozo

At 35.3 per cent, the proportion of households who holidayed in the Maltese Islands during the last year was only marginally greater than the incidence of foreign holidays. The rate of occurrence ranged from 53.6 per cent in Attard and 46.7 per cent in Lija, both high-status residential areas, to appreciably lower values in communities with larger proportions of labourers and other 'blue-collar' occupations (Mġarr, 22.9 per cent; Marsaxlokk, 23.3 per cent; Pawla, 23.7 per cent). Seven out of ten households took one holiday while the remainder were almost evenly divided between families who had two and three or more holidays. The existence of second homes in Gozo and Marsascala largely explain multiple holidays. Moreover, Gozo was by far the most popular destination (Table 3). Only St Paul's Bay and Marsascala attracted more than a tiny number of families. As expected summer was the most popular season (69.5 per cent) with spring/autumn (19.7 per cent) and winter (10.7 per cent) attracting relatively few local tourists. The marked seasonality of local holidays together with the

	Per cent
Rented flat or house	43.4
Hotels	19.9
Relatives and friends	14.9
Second home	14.5
Guesthouse	4.5
Camping	1.8
Farmhouse	0.9

Table 4 Distribution by accommodation of domestic tourists

paucity of foreign tourists staying in localities such as Gozo, Marsascala, and St Paul's Bay in winter ensure that these areas virtually experience a closed season with consequent effects on employment and revenue for local entrepreneurs.

A variety of accommodation was utilized (Table 4). Rented flats and houses were the most frequented, while hotels were patronized by one family in five; staying with friends and relatives and second homes were the next most popular. Lastly, respondents were asked to state the length of each holiday. Short-stay trips (1 – 3 nights) and overnight stays of between 4 and 7 nights accounts for 36.3 and 38.7 per cent respectively. Only a quarter of the sample stayed away from home for longer periods. The longer stays occurred mainly during the summer months and were mostly in rented accommodation and second homes.

Day Excursions

Respondents were asked whether they had gone on an excursion within Malta during the previous three months. Almost 61 per cent indicated they had and of these approximately half visited four or more locations. The sub-sample were shown a matrix containing the names of fourteen localities and were asked to indicate which places they had visited. The results are shown in Table 5. It is interesting to note that five of the seven most visited places are towns. This could reflect the periods covered by the survey: either mid-September – mid-December or late January – late-April. Nevertheless many of those interviewed, in response to a later question, stated a preference for visiting countryside areas in the cooler winter months.

The survey is useful in pinpointing areas which receive a large volume of visitors. In this respect, parts of Gozo particularly around Marsalforn, the Armier Bay and Mellieħa Bay areas of northern Malta and, to a lesser extent, Ġħajñ Tuffieħa are under considerable pressure at weekends. Moreover, the survey found that 81 per cent of day excursionists travelled by car

thus adding to the congestion at peak times. In comparison, only 14.8 per cent travelled by public bus.

The development of public gardens and parks would be one way of spreading visitor loads. Buskett Gardens and San Anton Gardens are already popular. However, the results appear to indicate that Ta' Qali is less so and the development of a National Park there may intercept some families heading for more pressurized areas. A positive response is likely to be limited as the survey showed that the overwhelming majority of respondents favoured days out on the already-congested coast and countryside area (Table 6). By comparison, visits to ancient monuments, museums, as well as public gardens were less attractive to most respondents.

Leisure Activities

The final section of the questionnaire gathered information on the leisure interests of men, women, and children resident in the sample households. Among men, the most popular sports were fishing, football, water sports,

	Per cent
Valletta	11.3
St Paul's Bay / Buġibba	10.2
Gozo	9.0
Sliema / St Julians	8.9
Anchor Bay / Marfa Ridge / Mellieha Bay	8.9
Marsascala / Marsaxlokk	8.7
Rabat / Mdina	7.8
Buskett Gardens / San Anton Gardens	7.4
Golden Bay / Ghajn Tuffieha / Fomm ir-Rih	6.5
Ta' Qali	5.4
Dingli Cliffs	5.2
Ghar Lapsi / Blue Grotto	4.3
Marsa Sports Club	2.6
Comino	2.3
Others	1.4

Table 5 Day excursions destinations as a proportion of all excursions during previous three months

Table 6 Preferred locations for day excursions		
	First choice (%)	Second choice (%)
	59.8	15.2
	27.7	56.8
	3.5	9.7
	4.4	6.8
	2.8	6.8
	1.7	4.8

Note: Respondents were asked to name their first and second choice type of locations.

	Men	Women	Children
Fishing	15.1	4.0	7.2
Football	13.8	1.2	18.6
Golf	0.8	0.9	0.4
Horses/ponies	2.3	3.3	4.3
Shooting	7.8	0.6	2.0
Tennis	1.9	3.3	6.2
Water sports	11.3	11.8	13.8
Walking	20.9	37.7	16.3
Cinema/music	10.1	15.2	11.9
Night entertainment	10.2	12.7	13.4
Others	5.7	8.3	5.8

Table 7 Leisure activities in the sample households

Note: Respondents had a free choice to name as many activities as they wished.

and shooting (Table 7). Women in general were less active and many indicated that their participation in a particular activity merely involved accompanying their husband.

Children favoured football, water sports, and tennis. Walking was the most popular family pursuit and both men and women said that they enjoyed short countryside walks as well as early evening strolls along the promenades of the seaside resorts. Lastly, only about one adult in nine said he enjoyed visiting the cinema, music, and night entertainment.

It was rather surprising to discover that 49.5 per cent of married couples indicated that they did not share any leisure activities. About a quarter of the husbands and wives interviewed had one interest in common, 18 per cent shared two interests, and only 7.5 per cent had three or more activities in common.

Conclusions and Conjectures

The survey attempted to cover both tourism, activities based away from home, and home-based recreation and leisure activities, although these two activities are often difficult to differentiate in a small country such as Malta. As expected, the small scale of the islands, mitigated to some extent by a high population density, led to relatively limited domestic tourism. It would seem that the Maltese have not yet become a holiday/leisure-orientated society. This is despite the isolation factor of being an island, the great potential for local vacation opportunities, an established international tourism infrastructure, and a very favourable climate.

Only about one-third of the sample took a foreign holiday which indicates that there is some potential for the development of a home-based domestic tourism industry, with attendant benefits for the foreign tourism industry.

It is particularly important to develop this facet before the habit of taking foreign holidays becomes acquired. It is interesting to note that the foreign holiday destinations do not generally offer competing but different attractions, and for the most part the Maltese do not seek out 'sun, sea, and sand' locations.

Malta has an inherent advantage in that it is an island group and inter-island travel is always attractive, as reflected by Gozo being the most popular holiday location. Such patterns encourage the use of 'informal' accommodation at the expense of hotel-based accommodation. Rented flats or houses emerged as the most commonly used accommodation. The lesser tourist areas in international terms – Marsalforn, Armier Bay, and Mellicha Bay – were particularly attractive holiday and excursion destinations for the Maltese, although market segregation is rather less pronounced than it would be in a larger geographical region. A much wider range of destinations emerged for the one-day excursions, in which urban areas, seaside resorts, and public gardens were all represented. The importance of the urban areas is perhaps surprising, although the evidence is contradictory in that towns did not emerge strongly in the list of preferences: certainly, domestic tourism predominates over foreign tourism in these urban centres. The small scale nature of the Maltese Islands encourages short-stay holidays and one-day excursions such as beach trips, fishing, water sports, walking and other such recreational activities can be accomplished without an excessive amount of time being spent on travelling.

Leisure pursuits were dominated by male interests, a fact that is not uncommon in Mediterranean societies and were concentrated, with the exception of football, in the more informal sphere and in outdoor activities such as walking, rather than cinema and night club entertainment.

Acknowledgements

We wish to thank Mrs I. Chappa of the Department of Statistics and Research, Nicosia, Republic of Cyprus for her advice on the Domestic Tourism Survey of Cyprus. Our thanks are due to those students from University College, Swansea who carried out interviewing in December 1988 and their counterparts from Keele University who interviewed households in April 1989.

DOUGLAS G. LOCKHART, B.A. (Strathclyde), Ph.D. (Dundee) is lecturer in Geography at the University of Keele, UK and is currently doing research on social geography and planning in Malta and Cyprus.

SUSAN E. ASHTON, B.Sc. (Bristol) is map librarian and administrative assistant in the Department of Geography, University College of Swansea, UK. Her interests include tourism in the Mediterranean region.