

Valletta: what next?

by John Ebejer

WITH THE SETTING UP of the Malta Tourism Authority two years ago, a directorate

specifically for the development of the tourism product was established.

This directorate has its own budget and is, slowly but surely, building up the human resources required for it to carry out its role. This is an important and radical change from the previous NTOM which was almost totally devoted to marketing.

One of the roles of this new Directorate is to have a better understanding of our product, especially that related to cultural tourism.

It is also the directorate's responsibility to raise awareness of those assets which could contribute effectively to cultural tourism (such as historic gardens, countryside walks, historic buildings and museums).

Apart from creating awareness, the new directorate is actively working with other agencies to bring about further improvements in our tourist product.

Within this context, one of the initiatives taken by MTA earlier this year concerned Valletta.

Valletta's tourism potential needs to be considered in the light of two important facts. Firstly, it is Government's strategy to realign the tourism industry from one based on sun and sea to one based on culture.

Malta has much to offer in terms of cultural heritage and a significant

part of Malta's cultural wealth lies within the walls of the city. This is also part of a strategy to improve tourist arrivals during the off-peak season thus making the industry more sustainable.

Secondly, surveys carried out by MTA reveal that nine out of ten tourists, visit Valletta and that the vast majority of them are satisfied with their experience. Clearly, Valletta is an important asset which could take centre stage in Government's and MTA's drive to promote cultural tourism.

Although there have been significant improvements, there are a number of issues which need to be addressed. One concerns the under utilisation and misuse of Fort St Elmo.

Apart from the central importance Fort St Elmo has in Valletta's and Malta's history, the site has substantial potential for leisure and tourism related activities. A sustainable use of the Fort will generate substantial investment in the lower parts of Valletta.

Another important issue which needs to be addressed is the general dirt and shabbiness of the city. Apart from increased cleanliness, the problem of vacant properties needs to be addressed as these degrade the streetscapes of Valletta.

Valletta's importance to tourism is often taken for granted. Most discussions on Valletta focus on its

many problems and tourism is mentioned only occasionally and, in any case, superficially.

Often, reference to Valletta reveals a lack of understanding of what makes the city such an attraction to overseas visitors.

The conference organised by the MTA in April of this year was meant to promote greater appreciation of Valletta and the positive experiences it offers tourists.

A discussion paper, prepared specifically for the seminar, discussed in some detail how Valletta's attraction is a combination of history, architecture, streetscapes, culture, retailing and leisure.

The way the tourism industry operates has not as yet changed to reflect the need to realign the industry towards more culture tourism.

We still think of tourism as a sun-sea business with culture being a useful add-on. For a radical change in attitude to take place, we need to be more fully aware of our cultural heritage. Raising awareness of Valletta as a tourism product is also a means of bringing about this change in attitude.

Here I would like to clarify one important issue. Valletta should be appreciated for its intrinsic cultural value. Ultimately we have a responsibility to our cultural heritage irrespective of considerations related to tourism.

Having said that, I would argue that Valletta's immense economic potential cannot be overlooked,

especially in the context of realigning our industry towards culture tourism.

Even if an initiative is motivated by tourism, this does not debase Valletta's cultural worth in any way and, if anything, it allows a wider audience to appreciate the city.

Another MTA initiative this year was the Valletta Evenings – A City Alive. Leisure and cultural activities (street music, animation, choir concerts, recitals, opening of museums, children's corner, film shows and exhibition of old motors) were held over four consecutive weekends in the evening.

Since then several commentators have put pen to paper to express their views on how Valletta could be revitalised in the evening. Clearly this is positive and reflects a renewed interest in the subject.

Some commentators have overlooked one important and fundamental issue. The evening revitalising of Valletta is not a one-off event – it is a process in time.

It is a process which started years ago with the various investments made by both the public and private sector. Government through its various agencies has invested in the paving and lighting of Republic Street, the St James Centre for Creativity, the improvements at the Manoel Theatre and the many restoration projects. The private sector has invested in new cafes and restaurants and a new cinema complex.

The Valletta Evenings initiative is part of that process. The process of Valletta's evening revitalisation will

continue as long as the private and public sector invest in Valletta, either for its upgrading or for the provision of additional leisure facilities.

The idea for the "Valletta Evenings" was based on the assumption that Valletta can truly provide an enjoyable evening experience.

For most of the eight evenings of the initiative, Republic Street was lively with people and with street music. It was evident from the general atmosphere that people were enjoying themselves, something which was confirmed by the feedback MTA received after the event.

The initial assumption that Valletta, and Republic Street in particular, can be an enjoyable evening venue was proved correct. In this respect, the Valletta Evenings were a success.

People now realise that, even when there is no specific event taking place, there are many cultural and leisure facilities in Valletta to which people can go to (cinemas, restaurants, the Manoel Theatre and the Centre for Creativity).

The initiative was a success also because of the many lessons learnt and the experience gained. The concept was based on having different activities going on at the same time and within a short distance of each other.

Some activities were more effective than others. More importantly, each activity had a cost attached to it. We could therefore establish which of the activities were more cost effective in producing the desired results.

Another important lesson is that the investment is more likely to be cost-effective if the activities are concentrated in a small area. Because of the paving and the street lighting and because of its location, such activities would best be held in Republic Street (from Wembley to Main Guard). Businesses not directly along this stretch of road could still benefit from the spin-off effects.

Several commentators have come up with ideas on what needs to be done and *The Sunday Times*, in conjunction with Malata Restaurant, organised a competition for ideas. It is fairly easy to come up with ideas. The difficult part is finding the human and financial resources to carry them out.

Even simple events, like street music or the opening of museums in the evening, involve an expense which, if repeated over several months, can become quite substantial. Which agency, private or public, would be willing to foot the bill? So clearly, any discussion on Valletta's evening revitalisation cannot be held in isolation of the costs and the financing.

A discussion of Valletta's evening revitalisation should also consider what the objectives are. Clearly, it is not desirable (nor is it achievable, for that matter) to have Republic Street crowded with people in a manner similar to a weekday morning.

On the other hand, there needs to be minimum number of people, or critical mass, sufficient to make Republic Street pleasant to walk along in the evening.

One commentator expressed doubts whether Valletta can actually be revitalised in the evening. I disagree with this view. I am confident that the process of Valletta's revitalisation will continue over the coming years. Initiatives similar to this year's "Valletta Evenings A City Alive" initiative act as a catalyst and accelerate the process.

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