

OPINION & LETTERS

Tourism sustainability: lessons from Iceland

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Iceland, sporting the northernmost capital city in the world at a latitude of 66 degrees North, is not exactly a backyard to the Maltese Islands, with 4,000 odd kilometres separating the city from our shores.

Despite other incongruencies between the two (for instance, Iceland dwarfs our archipelago by over 300 times), the parallels between the two islands could not be more uncanny. For instance, there is a similarity between the total number of tourists (hovering around the two million mark) jaunting over to the two islands each year.

There is also the islands' popularity with the film industry, the GDP contribution ascribed to tourism (roughly 30 per cent in Malta and 35 per cent in Iceland), as well as total population, which does not crawl above the half a million mark in both cases, although one might contend that the Maltese population density (1,300 individuals per km²) towers above the Icelandic one (less than four).

The current windfall experienced by the Icelandic tourism sector has been most recently championed by the prominent featuring of the island's evocative landscape in the Game of Thrones tv series. Initially considered a miraculous shot in the arm for the ailing Icelandic economy following the devaluing of the krona in 2008, the 'tourism bomb' is increasingly being perceived as a risk to the traditional Icelandic mores and to trademark landscapes of the island.

The surge of the tourism industry in Iceland is a very recent phenomenon, with tourists hailing from the US alone (exceeding 400,000) outnumbering locals, such that what was originally a honey-glazed perception that locals had of the industry has quickly soured as a result of the trappings that such a sudden surge entails. So much so that the Icelandic government is mulling the introduction of measures to address the unpalatable impacts that the tourism industry is exerting on the country by, for example, putting the brakes on the Airbnb network, accused by many young Icelanders of driving them off the property market through the cut-throat spike in rental prices it has fuelled. Within Reykjavik main thoroughfare, Airbnb vaunts of at least 100 flats, in testimony to the prodigious expansion of the network's dimension on the island.

The burgeoning environmental footprint of tourism in Iceland mainly stems from an inadequate infrastructure ill-conceived to handle the current tourism flows, translating into inflated construction activities to address the enhanced accommodation demand, more frequent traffic gridlocks through the more profuse presence of rented cars, incursions into natural areas of new road connections as well as occasional off-roading activities onto pristine natural areas. Even micro-infrastructure, such as signage, parking and toilet facilities at tourism hotspots, are being stretched thin through the tourism surfeit. Iceland is certainly not alone as a destination



Iceland – Despite having a population density of less than four individuals per square kilometre, Iceland is concerned that the annual 1.8 million tourists it gets are impacting its natural environment and social fabric.

reportedly being sullied by tourism. For instance, according to the IP World Tourism Monitor at ITB, 24 per cent of global destination management organisations reported that their destination was over-crowded and that 37 per cent said it affected them negatively.

While some of the tourism-calming measures being touted by the Icelandic authorities appear to target a reduction in tourism numbers, such as the proposed restriction on short-term accommodation, others are simply aiming to re-distribute tourist numbers away from the currently-congested Reykjavik environs to more remote areas on the island, emanating from the existence of just one gateway airport (Keflavik). The environmental credentials of the latter set of measures, which include



Comino - It is amply evident that the carrying capacity for most touristic areas on the Maltese Islands has been breached, so the Icelandic experience could be useful.

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the opening of a number of regional airports, are dubious.

The current onslaught Iceland is facing from tourism has also been indicted in a perceived swipe at the social fabric in Iceland. In this vein, the following citation from Thorvador Arnason, director of the Nyheimar Regional Research Centre, is quiet telling: “Local communities are characterised by a certain proximity between members. There is good social cohesion, it is an open society, which likes to be together. People are used to seeing familiar faces and then, all of a sudden, all the faces you see are foreign. We find ourselves with a sort of clash between local interests and those of an international consortium of visitors. Overnight, your beautiful little company is not what it used to be.”

The term ‘puffin shops’ has been coined to denote shops peddling wares for tourists, including many Viking-themed ones, which have sprouted all over downtown Reykjavik.

Hopscotch to Malta, where the President of the Malta Hotels and Restaurants

Association, Tony Zahra, has recently solicited the adoption of sustainable tourism measures by government in future tourist strategies being devised by the Maltese authorities, following the umpteenth record in tourist arrival figures for the first quarter of this year. While Mr Zahra's call was met with considerable scepticism, given that it might have been spurred by a dip in hotel occupancy figures (at the hands of a surge in non-conventional accommodation services, such as those offered by Airbnb), it struck a chord with those who have been calling for eons for more quality tourism.

If Iceland, with its insignificant local population density, feels the urge to take measures to avoid the unravelling of its natural and social fabric, the same urge should be all the more appropriate for Malta, whose accessible coastline has been defaced over the decades by unbridled touristic development and for which the only tourism Carrying Capacity Assessment carried to date goes back to 2001.