

Ta' Cenc - a flustered developer



The marketing and branding of Malta as a tourist destination should not be rocket science, but based on a modicum of rationale. For example, these photo of Gnejna (taken by Richard Gatt on December 26) demonstrate our authorities' inability to spruce up the islands for tourists - no amount of MTA restructuring appears to be able to address this problem. On the other hand, we seek to solve our ailing tourism problems through golf courses, when a simple facelift would work wonders.

I have no predilection for local TV programmes, such as Xarabank, but I must concede that I enjoyed last Tuesday's Bondiplus, which treated viewers to a flustered Victor Borg (owner of the Ta' Cenc site) being grilled by Lou Bondi. Flustered is quite a euphemism since Mr Borg repeatedly stammered while facing a fusillade of questions, effectively dribbling them.

The fact that he is not conversant with rambling is evident when he claims that he intends to bring 'walkers' to Malta. Yet another grey area is the justification for the proposed villas and bungalows - being a rambler myself, I never opt for such opulent quarters to rest after a walk. Ramblers are after nature, not plush couches. Hence, Mr Borg must be targeting another category of clients for the villas, rather than rambblers.

Mr Borg took Mr Bondi to task for not interviewing, for example, at least some of his employees to get their views on the Ta' Cenc project - he will probably have presumed that the process for selecting interviewees would not have been overtly biased or prejudiced that way! I had to contain myself when listening to Joe Muscat, spokesman for the Gozo Tourism Association, say that his association is in favour of all quality tourism developments on the island - "if it's tourist-related, then you have our blessing, irrespective of the footprint, impact, etc." These people are oblivious to the environmental impacts of tourist projects - bolstering the number of hotel beds in Gozo is their sole preoccupation, it seems.

Mr Borg quoted repeatedly but selectively from Structure Plan policy TOU 10. Rather than complaining of unfair conditions being expected from any development at Ta' Cenc, he should get someone to read the whole of TOU 10 to him, namely that the height of buildings in the area is to be restricted to one or two storeys (with minor exceptions, such as for watchtowers, windmills and domes) and that any development is to take place in the immediate vicinity of the existing hotel, not two km away (as is being envisaged for the villas).

Harping further on the villas, Mr Borg again raised many eyebrows when he stated that the extent of the proposed constructions in the photo montages he himself presented to Mr Bondi was not that evident when considered from other perspectives. This is tantamount to saying that turning a blind eye to an eyesore and gazing at it from further afield can help sugar the pill.

How can MEPA people take in such cheap stunts? Just call a spade a spade, Mr Borg, and simply admit that your proposed constructions, despite a degree of landscaping, are abhorrent even to you and that an eyesore remains an eyesore, viewed from whichever perspective. Perspectives do not make an eyesore less offensive - period.

Mr Borg stated that constructions will only take up 2.5 per cent of the site at Ta' Cenc. Although this is indeed so, each of the 57 villas to be constructed is set out on a tumolo of land (occupying just 2.5 per cent of each tumolo in a land-profligate exercise), with this villa zone (Zone 4) alone accounting for 6.86 per cent of the entire Ta' Cenc area, or 10.23 ha (10 football pitches). This is practically a new village, which, were the permit to be granted (God forbid), should be christened Hal Vilel, or the 15th parish in Gozo!

Mr Borg should give the following guarantees to at least set our minds at rest:

That the hotel extension he is proposing (and the new hotel too) are not converted into and sold as apartments within a few years after the hotel may be forced to close down (as happened elsewhere in Malta and Gozo);

That the 200-odd new jobs he is alluding to are long-term - i.e. that they are secured posts for at least five years after construction works are over;

That the 200 or so to be employed are all Gozitans; and

That he proves that the ramblers he is aiming to bring over to Ta' Cenc have an aptitude for plush villas and the like.

The developer should promise that if any of these conditions are not met, the entire Ta' Cenc area would return to the public domain. My guess is that Mr Borg will not sign any such undertaking.

MEPA should ask the developer to elucidate further on his prospects for Zone 7, rather than stating elusively that the plans for this zone (agro-tourism or a golf course) will only be considered in stage two of the realisation process. The site's agro-tourism credentials have been dented when all of the farmers tilling the land on site were asked to leave - only the vestiges of agriculture remain.

Mr Borg's classic comment came at the end of the programme, when he stated that he would take MEPA and the government to court if he is refused the permit. This is similar to threats made by some contractors that they would lay off workers if they do not get what they want. Will MEPA (and the authorities in general) buckle under such a threat?

Portomaso

All the hype about safeguarding our foreshore and natural habitats for future generations has in no way assuaged the appetite of some developers to encroach upon even more public land.

After the controversial approval of the Portomaso project and its reopening in 2000 (depicted in Jeremy Boussevain's latest book), the Portomaso consortium are at it again. In conjunction with the extension to the Hilton Hotel (application PA 3276/05, granted last summer), part of the scheduled Il-Qaliet wetland is facing the axe as the developer is aiming to uproot trees in this ecologically important site.

Just to give a technical snippet of what's at stake here, this transitional coastal wetland is scheduled as a Level 1 Area of Ecological Importance (AEI) and a Level 1 Site of Scientific Importance (SSI) as per Government Notice 288/95 under Section 46 of the Development Planning Act 1992.

The Il-Qaliet wetland consists of a number of coastal pools. The largest of these is characterised by dense growths of the rush *Juncus acutus*. This area is very important for a number of reasons: it is the only known locality for an unnamed endemic *Limonium* hybrid. This area is one of two localities for the Prickle-grass *Crypsis aculeata* (RDB, i.e. listed in the local Red Data Book) and one of the three localities for the Wedge-Footed Grass *Sphenopus divaricatus* (RDB).

Other flora with a restricted distribution that occur in this location include the Pygmy Groundsel, *Senecio pygmaeus* (RDB), a Siculo-Maltese endemic, the Crystal Plant *Mesembryanthemum crystallinum* (RDB) and *Cressa cretica* (RDB). The Tadpole Shrimp *Triops cancriformis* (RDB) occurs in this area, as does the Fairy Shrimp *Branchipus visnyai* (only known from one other locality in Malta). The shallow coastal waters upon which the wetland abuts also teem with local species having a restricted distribution, such as protected *Cystoseira* species, while (at least till a few years ago) the area also harbours a vermetid reef.

Apart from its ecological timbre, the area also provides the visitor with a welcome undeveloped corridor, hemmed in from all sides by development scars - do planning people or the developer expect residents of the St Julian's-Sliema area to venture up to Bahar ic-Caghaq to enjoy the sight of an undisturbed coastline?

MEPA should finally clamp down on cheeky developers, irrespective of their financial or political weight, and start enforcing its own legislation, especially that concerning scheduled natural landscapes.

As a parting shot, Hilton was listed as an eco-certified hotel in 2005! Operators of this hotel probably believe that planting some indigenous trees on their premises will compensate for the ecological havoc they are wreaking - so much for their green credentials! In addition, all this is undermining the sterling work conducted by the Hilton staff, who every year sponsor tree-planting sessions in a number of localities.

A barmy country

YES, that's right - barmy! This is indeed a barmy country and I shall explain why. With all the problems the country is facing, local newspapers seem bent on imbibing us with trivia, such as the irrelevant euro/ewro 'debate'. Should this flimsy topic obscure other more pressing issues, such as the efforts to return the Fomm ir-Rih bay to the public domain, for example?

While several ministers or departments (such as Lands) keep mum when repeatedly asked to comment on bones of contention, such as public rights of access in the countryside, they certainly have no qualms to hog the limelight when it comes to trivia such as the euro one.

The fact the government has not yet been able to expropriate the Fomm ir-Rih site (even though its endeavours started back in 1975) certainly raises more eyebrows than the euro/ewro issue.

An unenviable record

Beneath the languid façade, the village of Gharb can vaunt an unenviable track record - per capita, it (and especially the former hamlets of San Pietru and Birbuba) is the village which last year had the most ODZ (Outside Development Zone) applications.

A case in point is 06544/05, referring to the proposed construction of an underlying garage and two maisonettes along Triq Birbuba, published on December 24, along with the proposed ODZ construction of a basement garage, apartments and a penthouse at Triq in-Noqra in Birzebbuga (see photo - PA 07538/05) and the proposed ODZ construction of a dwelling and pool high up on the ridge at Triq Marsalforn, Xaghra (PA 07135/05).

Highly relevant to the proposed Wied Zembaq proposed development in Birzebbuga is Policy MB20, "Wied Zembaq - The open land north of Triq in-Noqra which marks the start of Wied Zembaq will be maintained. No development will be allowed in this area", and policy ME06, which states that "Informal Open spaces in the Built-up Area - Areas of informal open space located within the built-up area which add significantly to the amenity of the settlement will be protected from development". MEPA should abide by its own rules and not set any further dangerous precedents.

When will the scourging of Gozitan villages stop?

(This item was compiled with the help of Annalise Falzon).

Need to confine fine aggregates

Mr Ronald Formosa (Letters, The Sunday Times, January 8) certainly hits the nail on the head when he clamours for coarse aggregates to be entirely confined within the sheltered precincts of tarmac or batching plants in order to reduce the incidence of asthma.

Our population is in fact no stranger to asthma, with 17 per cent of all Maltese adults being occasional asthma sufferers. Asthma and respiratory diseases are not the only consequences of air-borne aggregates - so too are the smothering white blankets covering vegetation during the dry months, such as the mature Aleppo pine trees at Lija, close to the Blokrete facility, or the environs of the bitmac batching plant in San Gwann. Operators of such facilities should be brought to heel and asked to periodically douse blanketed vegetation with water.

MTA - still the wooden spoon for ecotourism

When announcing the appointment of the seven new 'section leaders' to head its different tourism sectors, the Malta Tourism Authority failed to list eco-tourism as one of its key target sectors. 2002, International Ecotourism Year, might be four years long in the tooth but eco-tourism tenets should not be shunned so easily.

By omitting any mention of eco-tourism, MTA is undoing the sterling work being conducted with BA (Hons) tourism students, when they are lectured on the importance of biodiversity conservation and the potential for bio-diversity in our islands in the credits titled 'Environment and Tourism'.

One can imagine their delusion when, after being imbibed with viable eco-tourism alternatives for the islands, they hear that the MTA is omitting eco-tourism from its list of priorities.

Silver linings

Seed - it is indeed heartening to witness the blossoming of so many green-minded Young Enterprise ventures. The most recent of these is SEED, from St Aloysius College Sixth Form, whose mission statement is "producing affordable, yet high quality miniature greenhouses (mini-seeds)".

By reproducing the environmental conditions inside a greenhouse in a restricted space and watering down the secrets of gardening, these students aim to make gardening and seeding more attractive to their peers.

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