

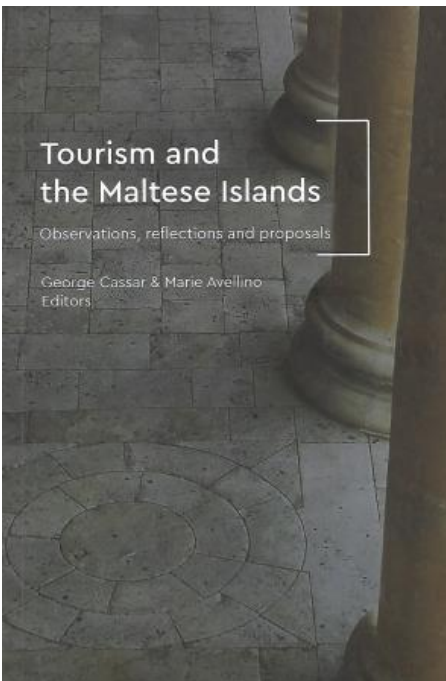
# The role of urban heritage in Malta's tourism: issues and initiatives

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**Abstract:** Changes in the way the tourism industry operates have brought about major changes in tourism destinations worldwide, including Malta. This book chapter considers the role of urban heritage in the development of Malta's tourism. Its underlying theme is Malta's potential transition from 'blue' to 'grey' tourism. The chapter lists several factors that constrain heritage tourism development. In the last two decades there were significant public sector investments in urban heritage and cultural infrastructure. Urban heritage projects are listed under four headings namely fortifications, historic buildings, archaeological sites and public open spaces. The chapter argues that the role of urban heritage in tourism has changed and that different policy approaches should be considered, including one based on heritage tourism dispersal.

**Keywords:** Malta's tourism, urban heritage, heritage tourism, fortifications, historic buildings



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## 1. Introduction

In the 21<sup>st</sup>-Century world, heritage is widely regarded as the principal growth component of the leading global industry, tourism. By 'heritage' we mean here the historical resources from which heritages, more precisely defined, may be variously – and selectively – created. Such historical resources, which constitute 'heritage' for tourism, are primarily anchored in the built environment of urban centres, though they usually include some of their other tangible artefacts and also intangible attributes and associations. So pervasive has such heritage tourism become that, even before this century, the 'tourist-historic city' was recognised not as the exception but as the normal condition of urban centres in much of the world, as they increasingly vied with one another to offer their heritage to the 'golden horde' of tourism (Ashworth and Tunbridge, 2000).

So intense has competition between tourist-historic cities become that they increasingly need to look beyond a fixed heritage offer and rework their historical resources to generate new heritages, thereby sustaining the interest of fickle markets in repeat visits. They may for example invent festivals with more or less tenuous heritage links, or they may receive a helping hand from the entertainment industry displaying their (real or imagined) historic wares on film sets which reach global markets.

In sun-and-sea destinations a discussion on urban heritage and its use for tourism is also relevant albeit in a manner that is different from most European cities. Many coastal towns and cities in the Mediterranean have developed their tourism on the back of beaches, pleasant weather and pleasant coastal environments. They are now however faced with a choice. They can reaffirm their 'blue' credentials to encourage more sun and sea tourism, despite competition from cheaper destinations now accessible in more distant locations. Alternatively they can seek to capitalise on their urban heritage resources to develop transition from blue to 'grey' tourism.

Following initial accommodation investments in the 1960s and 1970s, Malta's tourism experienced significant growth. Until the Millennium, the bulk were British sun-and-sea tourists who came by air on charter packages sold by overseas tour operators. Malta's mass tourism development was focused in the summer. However, the blue-to-grey transition is the choice that has faced Malta for the past two or three decades. To some extent this is a choice imposed by circumstances. Malta is weak on its blue resources as it has few sandy beaches and they are generally small and crowded. On the other hand, Malta is strongly endowed with grey resources, with an unusually rich heritage because of many layers of history and cultural influences (Ashworth & Tunbridge, 2005, 2017).

The underlying theme of this chapter is Malta's potential transition from 'blue' to 'grey' tourism. As implicit above, 'blue' refers to those resources that support a sun-and-sea holiday whereas 'grey' refers to a tourism experience reliant on urban heritage and culture-oriented visitor attractions.

This chapter considers where Malta stands in this competitive environment. Its limited 'blue' resources create a particular need to develop its urban-focused heritage offer. This is discussed and elaborated upon in Section 2. In developing its cultural tourism, Malta encountered impediments and this is considered in Section 3. This notwithstanding, significant investments were made in heritage resources, primarily from 2006 to 2012. These investments are described in Section 4. The changing tourism scenario necessitates a review of the role of heritage in tourism. Section 5 explores the role of Malta's urban heritage within its evolving tourism industry particularly in light of significant developments since the turn of the Millennium.

## **2. Heritage tourism development in a sun-and-sea destination**

The social identity of people is constructed and sustained by means of webs of stories and narratives produced by people (Rickly Boyd, 2009). Heritage narratives are stories that people tell about themselves, about others and about the past (Jamal and Hollinshead, 2001). A narrative is better appreciated by tourists if there is a heritage site which, as Rickly Boyd (2009: 262) describes, provides “the material and the setting to combine lived experience with myth in the production of a uniquely personal tourist narrative.” Many tourism experiences are dependent on the availability and communication of narratives. Some places are part of the tourism itinerary because they are associated with powerful stories (Chronis, 2012).

Our understanding of urban heritage in the present context refers essentially to individual and groups of historic buildings, as well as the urban spaces within them. Urban heritage enables the visitor to see tangible evidence of narratives of the past, thereby making them more real and the tourist experience more interesting and enjoyable (Ebejer, 2015). The urban fabric of Valletta, Mdina, Birgu and other historic areas conveys a range of narratives, some associated with a Maltese identity whereas others are linked to past foreign occupiers. The appearance, form, detail and material of most buildings show that these were built many years ago and that therefore they have a story to tell.

In traditional seaside/beach tourism areas, notably in the Mediterranean, urban heritage attractions have established a varying relationship with the ‘blue’ resource. The ability of a seaside resort to capitalise on its heritage will provide it with a competitive advantage over other similar destinations in that it could have a significant influence on choice of destination. Urban heritage is moreover a means for destinations to develop a form of tourism that is more resilient and competitive since it is less seasonal and less dependent on the weather.

Malta is similar to many sun and sea destinations across the Mediterranean, except that Malta has an unusually significant number of heritage attractions within easy travel distance from each other. Before the millennium, the advantage that this offered was clearly understood by the authorities and the declared policy was for Malta to diversify its tourism to one that is more culture oriented.

Whereas tourism was an important motivation, there were other reasons that prompted the authorities to invest in Malta’s urban heritage. Having a rich urban heritage is a benefit but it is also a burden in that it places a moral obligation on the authorities to invest adequately in it. In the 1990s and thereafter, public opinion was very much in favour of investment in urban heritage as it was considered as representative of the country’s identity and rich history. In the case of Valletta, tourism was a consideration even if the prime motivation was to make a better capital city that serves the needs of Maltese (Ebejer, 2016). Tourism and other factors motivated the authorities to embark on a programme of conservation of the urban heritage, generally improve its presentation and make it more amenable to tourists and residents.

Malta’s rich urban heritage provides opportunities for destination Malta to diversify towards cultural tourism, if it chooses to do so. Established sun and sea destinations could pursue one of three different scenarios to develop their cultural tourism (Ashworth and Tunbridge, 2005). First, new tourism activity acts as a substitute for mass tourism with a deliberate, centrally directed, shift from one form of tourism to its replacement by another. This would necessitate a radical shift in investment, marketing and product development. Secondly two forms of tourism are developed in parallel, using different resources, with heritage tourism catering for a separate market alongside but substantially different from the existing beach resort tourism. Thirdly, and least radically, heritage tourism products could supplement the beach resort tourism, with heritage tourism being seen as an add-on to the existing dominant tourism.

The transition from one scenario to another would involve the continuous development of new products, and new investments in particular in visitor facilities and attractions.

By and large, Malta has thus far adopted the 'supplement' scenario with beach resort tourism. Despite enhancements in Malta's heritage and cultural tourism product offer, the foreign perception of Malta remains dominantly that of beach resort. 57% of visitors agree their main purpose for visiting Malta was 'agreeable climate', while only 39% chose history and culture (MTA, 2015; Ashworth and Tunbridge, 2017).

Nevertheless there are compelling arguments for stimulating the further development of heritage tourism. Ashworth and Tunbridge (2017) note that tourism authorities in sun and sea destinations have appreciated the value of heritage attractions within the existing tourism development. This possible transition from blue to grey seems to offer operators in the tourism industry access to more visitor sites at little or no cost to them. A further advantage is the daily expenditure of heritage tourists is greater than that of beach tourists, thus offering the prospect of higher income at lower cost. Tourism is less seasonally concentrated and more spatially dispersed beyond beach resorts. Local communities also stand to benefit with vague but important notions of self-esteem and civic consciousness (Ashworth and Tunbridge, 2017).

### **3. Constraints against heritage tourism development**

In the 1960s the Maltese government gave tourism development a high priority, providing funding for tourist infrastructure, airport development and marketing as well as loans for hotel development. Right up to the 1990s, Malta's tourism industry experienced high levels of growth. Most of the early tourists were British who came by air on charter packages that were mainly controlled by overseas tour operators. Despite possessing only a few sandy beaches and a largely rocky coastline, Malta's tourism development followed a traditional summer-focused, mass-tourism trajectory, which was only minimally guided by local or national planning. The growth in Malta's volume of tourist arrivals was matched by poor product development and a series of problems such as environmental degradation, infrastructural overloading, over-dependence on a single source market and seasonal fluctuations with under-employment during the winter (Markwick, 1999). At that time there was no coherent idea of using heritage as a resource for tourism. The focus was solely on sun-and-sea.

The Tourism Masterplan for the Maltese Islands in 1989 advocated the upgrading of the infrastructure, achieving a more heterogeneous tourist market and lengthening the tourist season. The development of cultural tourism was one of the suggested strategies. The Masterplan also recommended tourism products that provide an acceptable balance of socio-economic and environmental costs in line with the overall national development needs of these densely populated islands. Since the early nineties, the Maltese government sought to diversify the destination tourist product to include cultural and heritage tourism, with these often seen as niche tourism products (Benur & Bramwell, 2015). There was a growing realisation that Malta was no longer competitive in the basic sun and sea package because of larger and often newer destinations that could handle much larger volumes. In spite of the initial efforts, Malta's image right up to 2000 was that of a poor quality, low priced, sun and sea destination (Pollacco, 2003). Following year 2000, a process of 'repositioning' was set in motion. The Malta product was redefined with more focus on Malta's rich heritage. Key heritage sites were upgraded to improve their interpretation, accessibility, conservation and promotion (Metaxas, 2009).

Since the 1990s there were consistent efforts at improving the cultural tourism product with a view of reducing Malta's excessive dependence on blue resources. These efforts included a wide range of projects and initiatives. Later in this paper we discuss several projects that were instrumental in the improvement

of Malta's tourism product offer. In spite of these efforts there were, and still are, constraints that make the development of cultural tourism in Malta problematic.

#### Insufficient financial resources

As always limited financial resources is a major constraint for the conservation of urban heritage. Finances are limited and governments are often faced with other more pressing priorities normally related to economic development and social protection. In the 1990s and 2000s, the lack of financial resources was particularly constraining for a small island state such as Malta.

Malta's membership of the EU in 2004 provided a golden opportunity in the shape of significant funds for projects and initiatives for generating economic activity and employment. Part of these funds were used for projects involving the conservation and viable use of the urban heritage. Some projects would not have happened had they not been allocated European Regional Development Funds. For example places like Fort St. Elmo and Fort St. Angelo, discussed below, would have been left in a derelict state.

#### Location of accommodation with respect to urban heritage

Until the 1990s Malta's accommodation sector grew in line with the demands of tour operators who persisted in selling Malta as a 'blue' holiday destination, peaking in July and August, with little else to offer during the other months of the year (Pollacco, 2003). Most of the hotel construction took place in the resort areas of St. Julians/Sliema and Bugibba/ Qawra thus resulting in very little accommodation being located in or within easy reach of the fortified historic towns, namely Valletta, Mdina and Cottonera (Tunbridge, 2008). The situation has changed slightly with the development of boutique hotels and increased tourism rentals. Nevertheless the location of tourism accommodation away from the fortified historic towns makes it more problematic for tourists to visit them.

#### Weak public transport service

Having the main tourism accommodation away from heritage sites makes visitation to them dependent on some form of transport. Malta's public transport system is designed mainly for travel demand by locals. There are some services that target tourists but they are unreliable, as is the rest of the public transport system. Getting from A to B can be very time consuming. Tourists are able to use tours or the hop-on-hop-off service but most are unlikely to use them more than once or twice in a single visit. In any case there are also tourists who would prefer to do their own exploring and who would much rather use public transport. A weak public transport system is a constraint for Malta's tourism as it limits the choices available to tourists to discover more of Malta's urban heritage.

#### Lack of a thematic network

A major disadvantage of islands is their insularity. This matters little for flight-dependent blue tourism but it is a constraint for heritage oriented tourism. In the UK and on mainland Europe, major tourist-historic cities are often part of wider heritage tourism circuits, accommodating visitors on short stays as part of networks of similar cities accessible to each other. Being an island archipelago, Malta cannot easily forge profitable network links with other destinations. For example a 'Knights of St. John trail' link to Rhodes, Cyprus and the Levant would involve much sea passage suitable only for specialist cruises.

### Lack of awareness of some urban heritage resources

The historic legacy is partially overlooked in debates of Malta's identity as a nation and also in its potential for cultural tourism. A case in point is the rich legacy left by the British including military buildings, naval architecture and Commonwealth cemeteries. The naval heritage has particular potential value since it links the Knights and British periods seamlessly and is central to the revitalisation of the Cottonera districts, which have been economically depressed since the withdrawal of naval activity (Tunbridge, 2008). There are numerous instances where the visitor potential of a historic monument is not appreciated and hence the tourism potential is not fully realised.

### Aesthetically poor urban environment

The poor visual and urban environments in tourism resort areas, such as St. Julians and Qawra, are detrimental not only to the resorts themselves but also to the culture and heritage image of the entire destination. The aesthetic quality of new development and the general upkeep of public spaces has been an issue for many years, but in recent years the situation has progressively worsened. Planning regulations have been relaxed and new development has been actively encouraged. In the past few years there was an exponential increase in development permits for residential units (Times of Malta, 2017). A typical street in these resort areas is likely to include one or more of the following: greatly diverse and incompatible architectural styles, one or more new buildings that are disproportionate with the rest of the streetscape, one or more construction sites complete with a crane and dust emitting from the site, buildings completed but without finishes and apertures. All these add up to excessively poor aesthetics. On the other hand, cultural tourists are more likely to be sensitive to the quality of the aesthetics of a destination. Most tourism accommodation is located in resort areas, thus exposing tourists to exceedingly poor aesthetics. Even if the visitor attractions and the historic areas are what motivates the cultural tourists, the aesthetics of the non-historic areas do matter to their overall perception of the destination.

### Unclear tourism policy direction

The policy direction of Malta's tourism is unclear and there is excessive focus on sectors (such as party island and gambling) that do not refer to Malta's intrinsic strengths. Across Europe many cities and towns have invested in their urban heritage and historic city centres, in part to promote themselves as tourism destinations. Thus there is much competition – and a need not only for focused heritage investment but also for a continuing quest for novel approaches in its presentation and marketing.

## **4. Urban heritage projects**

Up until the Millennium, public investment in urban conservation was slow because of various other priorities for public funding. It picked up momentum thereafter particularly following Malta's entry into the European Union in 2004. In this section we list and describe the more important heritage-related projects in Malta and Gozo. The most intensive period of project implementation was between 2006 and 2012, with virtually all projects being completed by 2015. The projects are listed under four headings namely fortifications, historical buildings, archaeology and public spaces.

Identifying a financially viable use for fortifications is not an easy task. Internal spaces are often small and the layout is not conducive to efficient circulation (Ebejer, 2019). Restoration is expensive. Having a use

that generates enough income to cover capital costs is impossible, virtually in all cases and therefore reliance of public funds is inevitable. The same can be said for historic buildings albeit to a lesser degree. The most obvious use would be that of a visitor attraction or a museum, although other uses could be considered as was the case with St. James Cavalier. Many of the projects were made possible with significant EU funds through the European Regional Development Fund 2007 – 2013 Programme. ERDF funds covered the capital costs but these were allocated on the strict proviso that the running of the newly established uses will generate enough funds to cover the running and maintenance costs.

The objective of urban heritage projects was to restore and bring back to life historic buildings and spaces. In the case of fortifications, the projects converted what were previously war machines into ‘machines’ for tourism, leisure and the appreciation of heritage. The creation of outstanding visitor attractions enhanced Malta’s attractiveness as a tourism destination and also helped to reduce seasonality.

#### 4.1 Fortifications projects

**St. James Cavalier:** The conversion of St. James Cavalier into the arts centre, Centre for Creativity, was the first in a long series of fortifications projects. It was completed in 2000. The cavalier forms part of the landward fortifications of Valletta and is located just within City Gate. It contains large halls at different levels but it has few windows to the outside. It was for a time used as a government printing press. The Centre of Creativity now houses extensive exhibition spaces, a small theatre in the round, a cinema, a restaurant and a café. Beyond cultural activities, the building itself is of great interest because its construction is a reflection of the building construction techniques at the time of the Knights.

**Fort St. Elmo:**<sup>1</sup> An extensive fortification system, commonly referred to as Fort St. Elmo, occupies a large area at the end of the Valletta peninsula. It is strategically located overlooking the entrances of the Grand Harbour and Marsamxett Harbour. Most of Fort St. Elmo<sup>2</sup> was restored, creating some very attractive spaces within the Fort and along the bastions. The site presented many challenges because of the extent of the area, its historicity and the poor condition of some of the buildings. It also offered several opportunities. St. Elmo fortifications is arguably the most important historic site on the islands mostly because it includes narratives of two major events in Maltese history: the Great Siege of 1565 and that of World War II (1940 – 1944). The site offers exceptional views of both the Grand Harbour and Marsamxett Harbour. It is within walking distance to the centre of Valletta. The project, completed in 2015, consisted of two main parts, namely a military history museum and a walk along the bastions, referred to as a Ramparts Heritage Trail. When originally conceived, the idea was to have the Trail accessible to the public without payment, whereas the museum itself would be with payment. It was intended to bring people, both locals and tourists, to the Heritage Trail and other open spaces of the Fort to explore and to learn about our rich history. Unfortunately this is not the way it happened and the entire Fort St. Elmo, including the Heritage Trail, are only accessible against payment.

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<sup>1</sup> ERDF 244 Fort St. Elmo Heritage Experience – Museum and Rampart Walk. Project cost: €15 million (PPCD, n.d.).

<sup>2</sup> Fort St. Elmo is an extensive fortification system consisting of three parts; the Fort itself, the bastions that surrounded it and Lower St. Elmo. The project involved the restoration and reuse of the first two. Lower St. Elmo has yet to be conserved and brought back into a viable use.

Fort St. Angelo:<sup>3</sup> Fort St. Angelo is physically prominent at the head of the Birgu peninsula within the Grand Harbour. It is strategically located at the entrance to a well-protected inlet (now referred to as Dockyard Creek) and this made it ideal for the siting of a fortified stronghold since well before the arrival of the Knights of St. John in 1530. Its historical continuity from the Knights through the British eras, along with its visual prominence, makes it a commanding heritage feature in the view from Valletta's bastions. Its restoration, completed in 2015, is a major contribution to the reclamation of Malta's naval heritage. It is now a major visitor attraction highlighting its history and its military roles through the ages. Fort St Angelo offers spectacular panoramic views of the Grand Harbour and its surrounding fortified towns.

**Cittadella, Gozo:**<sup>4</sup> The Cittadella is built on a hill overlooking Rabat and the surrounding countryside of Gozo. Because of its strategic location, it is likely that the area was inhabited since prehistoric times. The current shape and form of the Cittadella fortifications date back to the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The southern part of the town, where the cathedral and other buildings are located, is in good condition, but the buildings in the northern part are largely in ruins. Most of these ruins date back to the medieval period, and contain archaeological deposits.

For a cultural tourist in Gozo, a visit to the Cittadella is a must. The Cittadella project sought to improve and better present the Cittadella, providing a greatly enhanced visitor experience. The Cittadella project included the creation of a visitor centre, the restoration of several public buildings, the rehabilitation of public spaces and the provision of improved access.

**The Fortifications Interpretation Centre:** This is housed in a 16th century warehouse and forms part of the Valletta fortifications overlooking Marsamxett Harbour. The project, completed in 2012, involved extensive reconstruction works and internal and external restoration works. The interpretation centre is considered an important milestone in the creation of national awareness of the military architecture heritage of the Maltese Islands (Dreyfuss, 2014).

**Restoration and Rehabilitation of Fortifications:** Significant EU resources<sup>5</sup> were invested in the restoration and rehabilitation of extensive stretches of fortifications of Valletta, Birgu, Mdina and the Citadel in Gozo. This greatly improved their presentation and accessibility and enhanced Malta's historic walled towns. Collectively they constitute a heritage asset with very few rivals elsewhere, a status recognised in Valletta's designation as a World Heritage Site.

**Projects of NGOs:** In heritage restoration, the role of non-government organisations cannot be overlooked. This is the case for Fondazzjoni Wirt Artna (Malta Heritage Trust - FWA) which holds in trust several government-owned historic properties. FWA is concerned primarily with military and wartime heritage from the British period. At Fort Rinella, FWA adopt a proactive approach to heritage interpretation by having live re-enactment displays including live-cannon firing and cavalry (Wirtartna, n.d.). Similarly at the Saluting Battery<sup>6</sup>, eight restored Blomfield-type cannons are fired twice a day, with reenacted military drill of soldiers wearing early 1900s British uniforms. FWA funds are generated from entrance tickets as well as membership fees, voluntary contributions and sponsorships. Being a not-for-profit organisation, all revenue goes towards the restoration, and ongoing conservation of its cultural properties. In the early 2000s, FWA received significant financial support from the Malta Tourism

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<sup>3</sup> ERDF 245: *Fort St. Angelo Heritage Experience*. Project cost: €11 million (PPCD, n.d.).

<sup>4</sup> ERDF 246: *Implementing of Cittadella Masterplan recommendations – Gozo*. Project cost: €12 million (PPCD, n.d.).

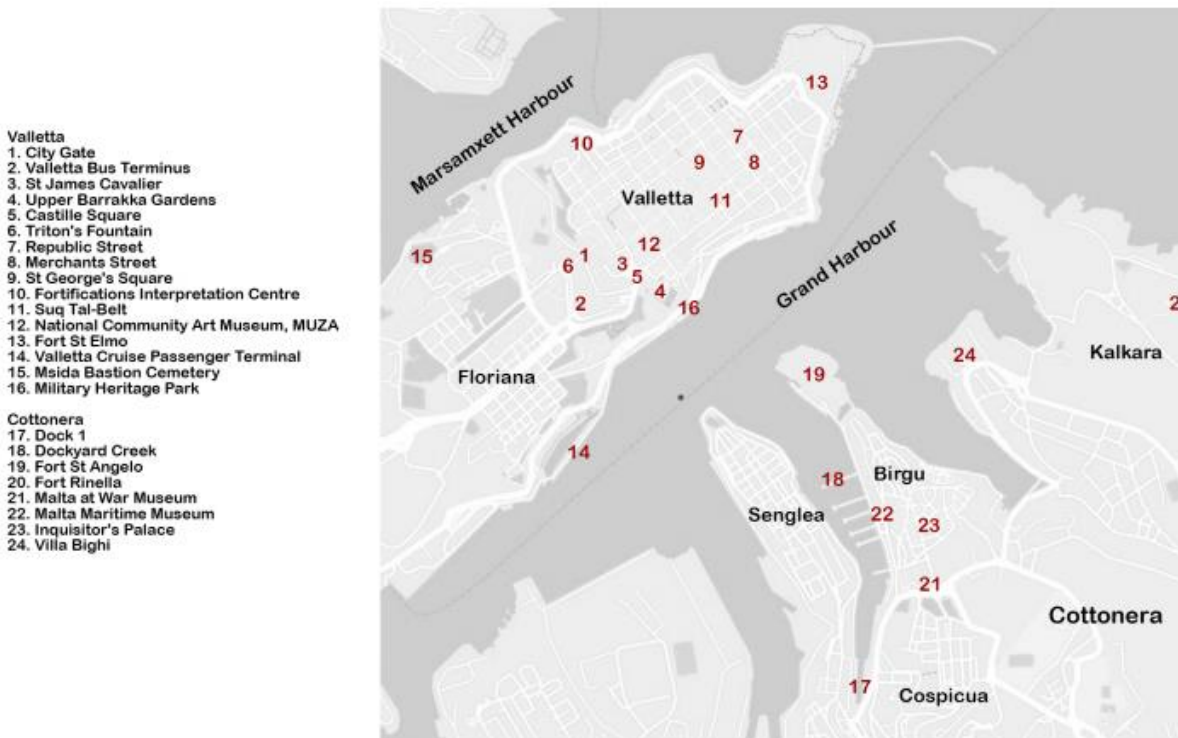
<sup>5</sup> ERDF 039 *Restoration and Rehabilitation of Historical Fortifications of Malta and Gozo*. Project cost: €40 million (PPCD, n.d.).

<sup>6</sup> The Saluting Battery forms part of the Military Heritage Park located at and below the Upper Barrakka, Valletta. The park also includes the Lascaris War Rooms.



Authority (MTA) to finance the initial investments in the Saluting Battery and in the Malta at War Museum in Birgu.<sup>7</sup> At the time, MTA was taking a more proactive role in developing the heritage tourism product as a means for diversifying and making Malta’s tourism industry less dependent on beach tourism. Malta at War Museum is dedicated to the daily life in wartime Malta and includes a massive underground air raid shelter.

Din l-Art Helwa (National Trust of Malta – DLH) is another Maltese NGO that has carried out various conservation and restoration projects, the most important being Our Lady of Victory Church in Valletta and the Msida Bastion Cemetery. The former involved significant fundraising primarily to finance the restoration of various important artworks. The latter was restored by volunteers in the early 2000s and a small museum was set up. It is open to the public a few days a week (DLH, n.d.). DLH relies largely on volunteers to manage various historic properties across Malta and Gozo. Some of these sites are open to visitors, but only occasionally or on request. Funding for maintenance and conservation is derived from donations and from occasional public appeals. DLH’s main focus is on lobbying on nation-wide heritage and planning issues and on development issues relating to specific heritage sites.



## 4.2 Historic buildings projects

**Valletta Cruise Passenger Terminal:** The Grand Harbour is a popular port of call for several cruise liners. The rationale of the Valletta Waterfront project was for Malta to benefit from the expansion of the cruise market and the rise in demand for cruise passenger trips. Historic warehouses were converted to provide facilities for the cruise passenger terminal. The property covers an area of 2.2 hectares along a stretch of Valletta and Floriana shoreline overlooking the Grand Harbour (McCarthy, 2012). The area is of great

<sup>7</sup> This information is based on first author’s recollection of his own past involvement in the MTA.

historic interest, since it was used for trade and commerce particularly in the eighteenth century, and the wealth it generated was used to build many of the Baroque architectural palaces of Valletta (McCarthy, 2003). The project, completed in 2005, was a Public Private Partnership with the government providing the land and buildings and the private sector providing the finance and the expertise to implement and eventually manage the facilities.

The Cruise Passenger Terminal offers excellent facilities set in a historic context, with shops, catering establishments, offices and cultural facilities housed in Pinto Stores, a rehabilitated row of warehouses. They are commonly referred to as Valletta Waterfront even if located outside Valletta, on the Floriana shoreline below Floriana. An interesting feature of the Valletta Waterfront is the promenade along the front of Pinto Stores, part of which is used for external tables and chairs for the catering establishments. Apart from catering for cruise passengers, Valletta Waterfront is popular with Maltese and tourists for eating out and for evening leisure. High bastions separate the Terminal from the residential areas of Floriana. The project was nevertheless criticised because it did not try to integrate the two.

**National Community Art Museum, MUZA:**<sup>8</sup> This is a community-oriented project that seeks to promote art and museums as a tool for social transformation. It is housed in the 15th-century Auberge d'Italie, on Merchants Street, Valletta, once home to the Italian Knights of St John. It houses the art collection of Malta's former national gallery plus new acquisitions and commissions.

**Valletta's indoor market:** The iconic Victorian building, referred to as 'Is-Suq t al-Belt', was built in the 1860s under British rule. It is a reflection of the innovative construction techniques and materials of the time, including the use of cast iron. The building was extensively restored and refurbished to convert it into a food court at ground level and a supermarket at basement level. The project was carried out by means of a public private partnership with the private partner investing 14 million euros in the project (MaltaToday, 2018). The eventual outcome is not without its critics. The excessive commercialisation detracts from the appreciation of the urban heritage value of the site. In particular a substantial glass accretion on the front of the building is incompatible to the aesthetics of the structure. Most of the public piazza in front of the building has been taken over by tables and chairs thus limiting space for pedestrians (Times of Malta, 2018).

### 4.3 Archaeological projects

Malta is renowned to have important prehistoric temples and archaeological sites. Given the spectacular nature of the Neolithic temples and megaliths, archaeology is considered by the tourist stakeholders and the authorities as a potential resource offering possibilities for further commodification into tourist attractions (Barrowclough, 2014).

Several archaeology sites have been conserved and upgraded, including Ggantija Temples and Tarxien Temples<sup>9</sup>. Ggantija Temples were provided with a visitor centre incorporating a permanent Gozo archaeology display, a museum shop and other basic amenities. The agricultural land around the Ggantija Temples was designated as a Heritage Park. At Tarxien Temples a shelter was constructed over the site and walkways provided. St Paul's Catacombs in Rabat is another archaeological site that had improvements. These included a visitor centre, walkways and specialised lighting as well as the rehabilitation of the overlying garden. These three projects were funded by the EU through the

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<sup>8</sup> ERDF.05.019: MUZA – The National Community Art Museum. Project cost: €9 million (PPCD, n.d.).

<sup>9</sup> These sites were two of seven temple sites that were collectively inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List as 'Maltese Megalithic Temples'.

Archaeological Heritage Conservation Project.<sup>10</sup> Other improvement projects were carried out at Hagar Qim and Mnajdra, the Hypogeum and the Roman Domus (Rabat). Archeological projects ensure the sustainable enjoyment of the sites by providing essential facilities for visitors. They also contribute to their long-term preservation. A significant caveat, however, is that the sustainable preservation and upgrading of these exceptional archaeological resources cannot be expected to accommodate mass tourism pressures.

#### 4.4 Public open spaces

**Extension of pedestrian areas in Valletta:** In the past two decades Valletta has undergone a process of change. Urban regeneration is a process spanning years and even decades. A central feature of Valletta's regeneration was the implementation of many important projects for Valletta, some of which are referred to and discussed above. The creation of new pedestrian spaces is part of the process of renewal and also part of the conservation of the City.

Until relatively recently, only the main road of Valletta, Republic Street<sup>11</sup>, was pedestrianised. As from 2008, pedestrian areas were extended to include other important spaces in the city, most notably St. George's Square, Merchants Street, Castille Square and Tritons Fountain.

St. Georges Square, for example, is Valletta's main square and includes buildings of particular historic importance, the Grandmasters Palace and the Main Guard. Before 2009, the piazza was used for parking. It was not uncommon to see tourists walking in between parked cars to take photos of a monument that was within the square. The square has been pedestrianised and provided with seating and landscaping. Research (Ebejer,2015) suggests that the pedestrianised square is very popular with tourists because of the relaxing and enjoyable environment it provides.

Another interesting example is Merchants Street. Until 2007, most of the width of this shopping street was taken up with tarmac for moving traffic and parking. Pavements along the side were usually crowded making walking difficult. Merchants Street boasts several historic buildings and it was not uncommon to see groups of tourists crowding the pavement while listening to the tour leader. All that changed with pedestrianisation. People can walk freely down the road for shopping or sightseeing, safe from cars and without the nuisances of noise and pollution. The street also includes tables and chairs, although in recent years this private appropriation of public space has become arguably excessive. The street is characterised by the presence of people, creating an enjoyable ambience.

Urban spaces and their quality are essential elements of the tourist experience in a historic area. The pedestrianisation created spaces that are more amenable for pedestrians allowing visitors to better appreciate Valletta's urban heritage.

To be successful, pedestrianisation has to be part of an overall transport strategy for the area. Parking in central Valletta was reduced and made against payment, except for residents. To compensate for reduced vehicle accessibility resulting from pedestrianisation, various measures were taken to improve people access to Valletta. This included the provision of extensive parking just outside Valletta and the introduction of park and ride. The Valletta bus terminus, located outside City Gate, was renovated and

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<sup>10</sup> ERDF 32: Archaeological Heritage Conservation Project. Project cost: €10 million (PPCD, n.d.)

<sup>11</sup> Republic Street is the main spinal road of Valletta leading from City Gate to the main central square, St. George's Square and then on to Fort St. Elmo at the lower end of Valletta. The upper part of the road has been pedestrianised since the 1970s.

improved. The Upper Barrakka lift was reinstalled<sup>12</sup> to connect Valletta's Grand Harbour shoreline to the centre of Valletta. Public ferry services across the harbour were improved.

Urban spaces and their quality are essential elements of the tourist experience in a historic area. The pedestrianisation created spaces that are more amenable for pedestrians allowing visitors to better appreciate Valletta's urban heritage. These and other projects contributed to making Valletta a more attractive and a much-improved tourism product. Some restored the built heritage and brought it into financially viable use. Others created spaces that are more amenable for pedestrians. Still others established new visitor attractions based on Valletta's heritage (Ebejer, 2013). It will be apparent that the attention given to pedestrian spaces in Valletta is not only a vital heritage contribution in itself, but is largely inseparable from other heritage initiatives. The same is more generally true of the open space initiatives discussed in this section.

**Dock 1, Bormla:**<sup>13</sup> The historic area of Cottonera overlooks Dockyard Creek in the Grand Harbour and includes three settlements namely Vittoriosa, Cospicua and Senglea (also referred to as Birgu, Bormla and Isla respectively). Dock 1 is located at the innermost point of this inlet. It was built in the mid-1800s by the British but it eventually fell into disuse in the 1980s as larger docks had been built around the harbour. Although not in use, it remained closed off and inaccessible to the general public. Dock 1 and its immediate surroundings were remodeled and embellished as part of a wider regeneration project. The shoreline was made accessible to the public thus providing an uninterrupted promenade connecting Birgu, Bormla and Isla to each other. In terms of public open space this was a significant improvement of the area benefitting both locals and tourists. The project, started in 2008, was mostly complete and accessible to the public by 2013. Apart from remodeling the waterfront, the project sought to regenerate nearby neighbourhoods with improvements in a social housing estate. More recently, the Knights Building and the British Building overlooking Dock 1 are being refurbished for use as a university campus.<sup>14</sup>

**City Gate area, Valletta:** The City Gate project, completed in 2015, consisted of three parts namely the City Gate itself, the new Parliament building and an open air performance space in the opera house ruins.<sup>15</sup> Each has a remarkable symbolic and cultural significance (Ashworth & Tunbridge, 2016).

The Gate has a symbolic meaning as a gateway to a fortified city and also an element of welcome. It is at the point of entry into the city that visitors will get their first impression. The City Gate spaces are the interface between the wider urban agglomeration (the outside) and the compact historic city (the inside) (Ebejer, 2018). Apart from physical buildings and structures, a central feature to the project was the creation of a network of new pedestrian spaces that extend into and connect with other urban spaces in Valletta. Worthy of note are also the two flights of steps on either side of City Gate. These create a more dramatic entrance and can also be used for informal seating, thus enhancing the liveliness around City Gate.

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<sup>12</sup> *The new Barrakka Lift was constructed in 2012, on the site of a previous lift which had operated from 1905 to 1973 and which was dismantled in 1983.*

<sup>13</sup> *ERDF 104: Stronger Cottonera Communities - The citizens right to accessibility and mobility. Project cost: €8 million (PPCD, n.d.).*

<sup>14</sup> *The Knights Building and the British Building have been controversially allocated to the American University of Malta, a highly dubious tertiary educational institution with very few programmes and students.*

<sup>15</sup> *The opera house at the entrance to the City was demolished in 1942 during World War II.*

The new Parliament building houses the legislative body of the smallest member in the EU. Because of its iconicity, the new Parliament building offers a new attraction for visitors and thus adds value to Malta's tourism product.

The ruins of the opera house are a reminder of wartime bombing, but before that of Malta's cultural past when opera was perceived to be central to Malta's cultural and social life. The re-use of the space for open-air performance rekindles some of the nostalgia, but in a different context. Because of the symbolic meaning of the site the decision on how to redevelop it was highly controversial. Many arguments were put forward for and against the rebuilding of the opera house (Smith and Ebejer, 2012). The choice of having a gap in the fortifications rather than a formal gate was also objected to by some on the grounds that for a fortified city one would expect a proper formal gate.

When discussing conservation projects very often the focus is on the building or structure that is being renovated. Most of the funds are spent on those elements of the building (the stonework, the apertures, the internal finishes and the furnishings) that make the building functional again. As explained earlier, in the City Gate project, however, the public open spaces around the buildings are almost as important as the buildings themselves.

In an interesting study, Ashworth and Tunbridge (2016) explore the different approaches to urban heritage as adopted in the City Gate project, Valletta. On the one hand, the project was an act of preservation. The fortification walls, ditches and cavaliers were carefully preserved including the removal of some incongruous elements added in recent times. The Opera House ruins were also preserved and retained to be appreciated as ruins, with the internal space adapted for open-air theatre and musical performances. On the other hand, a dominant element of the City Gate project was the construction of a large conspicuous contemporary style parliament building. The new building is a reflection of today's architecture, even if the height and bulk are broadly compatible with the historic skyline.

## **5. Conclusion: Dealing with a changing tourism scenario**

Changes in the way the tourism industry operates have brought about major changes in tourism destinations worldwide, including Malta. The number of visitors to Malta is dependent on the seat capacity on air travel routes that are available from Malta. In 2006, low cost airlines (LCC) started to operate to Malta. This brought with it lower fares, access to new markets and a significant increase in seat capacity. It was almost inevitable therefore that there were sustained increases in tourism numbers. Tourist arrivals nearly doubled since 2010 reaching 2.59 million tourists in 2018 (Briguglio and Avellino, 2019). Apart from LCC, the increased tourism numbers were made possible by two other factors. The widespread use of internet technology gave potential tourists access to information on accommodation and travel without the need for an intermediary, other than online. It also made it possible for individuals to make their own bookings. Moreover short rentals for tourists (through Airbnb, Wimdu and similar agencies) significantly increased the choice and availability of tourism accommodation. Travel became more affordable making it possible for people to take more frequent holidays. The changing dynamics of tourism changed Malta's tourism from one that was heavily dependent on tour operator business to one that is more reliant on the non-package tourist (Table 1).

	Package tourists		Non-package tourists		Total
	Number	% of total	Number	% of total	
2006	802,000	66.8	398,000	33.2	1,211,000
2012	683,000	47.3	761,000	52.7	1,443,000
2018	887,000	34.1	1,711,000	65.9	2,598,000

Table 1: Tourist arrivals; package and non-package tourists. (Adapted from NSO, 2019 and MTA, 2018).

With a changing tourism scenario, does the role of urban heritage in tourism change? More crucially should there be a different policy approach to urban heritage and to cultural tourism? Before the Millennium, Malta’s dominant form of tourism was ‘blue’ and it was very reliant on tour operators. The role of heritage was seen as a means to diversify tourism activity and make more effective use of the rich urban heritage that Malta offers. The more important heritage sites are today much better maintained and presented. They offer a more diverse experience to tourists, over and above leisure based on good weather and seaside activity. In the last 15 years, there has been a sharp increase in the number of tourists visiting Malta, coupled with a greater proportion of tourists who make their own travel arrangement. Malta’s tourism accommodation offer is now more diversified in type and quality because of short-rental accommodation.

Since the 1990s, debates on the impacts of tourism were frequent, including potential negative impacts. Property speculation had significant impacts on the urban environment of many towns in Malta, especially on tourism resorts such as St. Julians, Sliema, Qawra and Marsalforn. Sometimes the impacts of property speculation are confused with those of tourism, although obviously the two are interlinked. With sharp increase in tourism numbers, concerns about tourism impacts have been amplified, with signs of anti-tourism sentiments in some areas (Briguglio and Avellino, 2019).

In public discussions on tourism, the possibility of limiting tourism numbers is cited as a means for limiting the impact of tourism, not only upon environment but also on host communities (Ebejer, Butcher & Avellino, 2018). Apart from practical difficulties on how this could be achieved, such an approach is unlikely to meet with support from most tourism stakeholders. Besides the impact of such an approach would be limited, unless a draconian approach is adopted.

With a changing scenario and sharp increases in tourism numbers, we would argue that the role of urban heritage in tourism has changed. Different policy approaches should be considered including one based on heritage tourism dispersal. The need for providing alternatives to blue tourism activity remains but now what takes a greater priority is the need to increase the collective capacity of visitor attractions and sites, both paid and unpaid. This necessitates continued investment in existing attractions. The possibility of opening up further sites and areas for tourism should also be explored.

One excellent opportunity for the dispersal of tourists is provided by Fort St. Elmo which is within walking distance of central Valletta. The restoration of the Fort, completed in 2015, consisted of a military history museum and a Ramparts Heritage Trail along the bastions. The Trail offers extensive open spaces with exceptional views of the harbours. When originally conceived, the idea was for the Heritage Trail to be open to the public without payment. The intention was to make it a focus of tourism activity and thus draw some tourists away from central Valletta to the lower end of Valletta (Ebejer, 2019). This would relieve some of the pressures in the more popular tourist areas. Unfortunately, as noted earlier, the Trail

was made against payment, together with the museum, and thus the number of tourists attracted to the area is significantly less than envisaged.

Beyond Valletta, the Cottonera area offers an obvious opportunity for heritage tourism dispersal. The active cultivation of Valletta's link with the Cottonera area across Grand Harbour would constitute the expansion of the tourist-historic city (Ashworth and Tunbridge, 2000) of Valletta. Cottonera is sometimes referred to as 'the Three Cities' and includes Vittoriosa, Cospicua and Senglea. Each has a waterfront facing onto Dockyard Creek. The refurbishment of the Dock 1 area was instrumental in giving new life to the area primarily because it connected the three cities to each other along the waterfront (as explained in Section 4.4 above). The Birgu (Vittoriosa) waterfront has a well-established nucleus of tourism amenities in former naval buildings, centred upon a super-yacht marina. Beyond the waterfront, there are other urban spaces and sites in Cottonera that offer an interesting experience to visitors because of the historic context and the various narratives tied to them. There is clear potential for further extension of tourism-friendly amenities along the waterfront and also to other parts of the Cottonera area. The presence of a number of museums and visitor attractions<sup>16</sup> in the area makes the heritage tourism dispersal to this area a more viable option. However, the discussion of this and other heritage-related improvements to the Cottonera area is beyond the scope of this book chapter; in particular, it awaits further promotion of the naval heritage of Malta, which evolved in this vicinity over many centuries and entails interesting narratives of contest – and perhaps of contested heritage meanings (Tunbridge, 2008).

With a changing tourism scenario, the number of tourists who are now organising their own holidays has increased sharply. The number of non-package tourists increased from 398,000 in 2006 to an estimated 1,711,000 in 2018 (Table 1). Inevitably this signifies a sharp increase in demand for transport, including public transport. A visitor attraction is of limited tourism use if tourists are unable to get to it at a reasonable price and without undue difficulty. For a heritage tourism dispersal policy to succeed it requires a public transport that is able to meet demand. As explained in Section 3 above, the public transport system has many weaknesses and the tourist demand for travel on Malta is not well served, particularly since urban traffic congestion is not conducive to car rental. This necessitates a redesign of the public transport system, one based on detailed studies of use by tourists and of potential demand. In 2018, the number of tourists that visited Malta (2.6 million) was more than five times the resident population (less than half a million). This suggests that two overlapping and interlinked public transport networks are required, one addressing the needs of locals and a second one addressing the needs of tourists. The 'tourist network' would seek to connect tourism accommodation areas to historic towns and heritage sites, including those that might currently not be so popular with tourists.

There is evidence to suggest that the Malta destination is vulnerable, if not already subject, to overtourism (Briguglio and Avellino, 2019). Resources for potential expansion provide the opportunity to avoid the excesses of overtourism such as that which besets certain continental European cities, most infamously Venice. Malta's foreseeable issue is the better management rather than the curtailment of growing tourism numbers. In this process, dispersal strategies have a clear role to play. Public consultation on the where, when and extent of tourism growth is recommended if a heritage tourism dispersal policy is to be successful.

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<sup>16</sup> In Birgu and Bormla, there are Dock 1, Fort St. Angelo, the Maritime Museum, the Inquisitor's Palace, Malta at War Museum, Couvre Port Counterguard and St. Laurence Church. In Senglea, there are the promenade and the Gardjola Gardens. In nearby Kalkara, there is the Esplora Interactive Science and Villa Bighi.

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