

Proposals by Four Gozitan Hoteliers

PAOLO BARTOLOZZI

General Manager, Ta' Cenc Hotel, Gozo

Since my arrival in this island, which is one of the most, if not the most, beautiful in the Mediterranean, I have been facing a variety of problems. Some are common to hoteliers all over the world but three of them are peculiar to this island. These are:

- handling agents;
- coordination of tourist activities;
- training of local labour and foreign labour.

Handling Agents

Tour operator market represents a significant percentage of our sales. Unfortunately most of the tour operators are represented by handling agents in Malta who deal with the ground handling and the relationship with the final user. The flourishing of these companies stems from the reluctance of the individual hotels to invest heavily in marketing. The handling agent, on the other hand, is one further intermediary between the supplier of the service and the utilizer, generating further cost. Needless to say, such agents are there to sell Malta and then Gozo, since their income depends on the number of accommodated clients and Malta has 95% of the available beds. Obviously, during the shoulder or lean months, very little business is generated in Gozo, since the hotels in Malta are utilised first.

It is therefore imperative that Gozitan handlers be encouraged and helped. Subsidies in many business activities are available in these islands, but none are extended to tourist operations.

The advantages of having Gozitan handlers would include (a) reduction of handling costs (b) better service for the final user who

will have the tour operator representative always available (at the moment this is possible only for some tourist operators who actually pay one representative during the summer months but the services are not all year round) and (c) better penetration of Gozo on the tourist market, not as an appendix of Malta (d) better planning of day tours and trips.

One should not exclude the possibility of such a handler being a company formed with the actual participation of the hoteliers, the transport rental companies, restaurants, catering operations, and possibly the Government tourist office.

The integration between public service and private companies can lead to economies of scale in marketing, better planning of tourist strategies on an island-wide basis, and participation (lobbying) in government decisions concerning tourist activities.

Coordination of Tourist Activities

Tourist activities in Gozo need to be coordinated with regard to:

- opening period policies
- transport policies
- marketing policies
- general enhancement of the Island.

Gozo is a small island, and no individual company has the size and the financial power to perform, in an effective way, real penetration on the international market. The problem is especially severe during the shoulder and lean months.

Various attempts have been made to create an organisation capable of projecting the island of Gozo as a unique product, to enable it to enter in the very large convention and incentive market, characteristic of the Autumn and Winter months. The size, quality of products and location are factors that potentially make Gozo an ideal conference site, especially in Autumn and Winter.

The problem to overcome is a cultural one, and has nothing to do with competition. Division between people, families and compa-

nies is having a negative impact on the market and is giving rise to a loss of business. An objective and neutral organisation, such as the Ministry for Gozo, should be instrumental in the creation of a platform where operators can discuss, negotiate, but especially solve problems associated with divisions for the benefit of everybody involved in the trade.

Training of Local and Foreign Labour

Hotel Ta' Cenc has been investing heavily in training of staff, both on practical and conceptual skills. Such training is mandatory because the amount of qualified staff coming out from tourism schools is insufficient for the needs of the Island. We are therefore forced to employ people from other economic sectors.

Help from the government is needed in this regard, at least by financing the social cost of these trainees. Also, because of the lack of trained staff, ease of obtaining short-term work permits for foreign staff would be very beneficial to the industry.

VICTOR J. BORG

Chairman and Managing Director

V. J. Borg Enterprises

The hotel industry in Gozo is quite secure, both from the investor's point of view and also career-wise for those who opt to work in hotels. As a matter of fact, Gozo is sold mostly by word of mouth recommendations and this is borne out by the comparatively low rate of complaints which Gozitan hoteliers receive from their clients, a relatively high percentage of whom are repeat visitors.

Upgrading of Facilities

Over the past twenty years, tourist facilities – hotels, apartments, restaurants, car-hire, diving centres and others – have increased and upgraded and this has been possible through the development in the infrastructure carried out by the public administration.

Now that the infrastructure has been strengthened one would like to see the upgrading of places of attraction on the fringes like Ghajn Barrani, Wied il-Ghasri, the Panoramic Road, Hondoq ir-Rummien and Ramla Bay.

Winter and Special Interest Tourism

Two important, and sometimes overlapping, types of tourists to consider in the case of Gozo are winter tourism and special interest tourism. In this regard I would like to see a Conference Centre purposely built by the government to attract conference tourism. I am sure that the success of the Mediterranean Conference Centre in Malta could be repeated in Gozo. This type of project would require public sector support, since the investment outlay involved would be too hefty for an individual business organisation.

The attraction of winter tourism also calls for the construction of a golf course. Portugal and Madeira have registered successes in this regard, on the strength of the golfing facilities they offer.

Human Resources

Young students should be encouraged to undertake studies leading to careers in the tourism industry. Special emphasis should be laid on the technical aspect, especially in the maintenance of electronic equipment, an area where local entrepreneurs are still very much dependent on expertise from the mainland.

More incentives should also be given to students of the Institute of Tourism Studies and the training of multilingual hotel managers would also enhance the quality of the service we can offer.

Bureaucracy

It is difficult to understand why, to have a hotel licensed, one has to take a long and seemingly endless bureaucratic route entailing a long list of different permits. This problem should be looked into and possibly simplified. With catering outlets mushrooming all over Gozo, some form of control should be introduced if standards of

service are to be kept high, but bureaucracy should be kept to a minimum.

The Future

We all have to strive to keep the prosperous situation prevailing on a steady course. If the tourism industry in Gozo loses its impetus, it would become difficult to halt a downward slide in which we shall all be losers.

JOSEPH P. PORTELLI

Director, John Portelli Group of Companies

One of the major problems facing the Gozitan tourist industry is seasonality. In this brief presentation, I shall dwell mostly on this issue.

It is the policy of the National Tourism Organisation of Malta to reduce the dependence of tourism on the traditional sun and sea holiday. In this respect, we must admit that Gozo drags far behind Malta in its facilities that can help attract visitors in the shoulder and lean months.

Air and Sea Transport to and from Gozo

Through initiatives by the Gozo Ministry, many projects and improvements in the island have taken place. The helicopter service, to mention but one that has had a great success, has given us Gozitan hoteliers the opportunity to show that for a good cause we are able to unite and back wholeheartedly and financially a project that can be beneficial to our island. However, there is still room for improvement. The proposed new helicopter terminal must be of the same category as that of the Malta International Airport. It should be made possible for passengers to check in or clear their luggage in Gozo without having to handle it in Malta. The common rated system used in Switzerland should be introduced for destination Gozo,

meaning that passengers taking an international flight to or from Malta with an ongoing connection to or from Gozo pay exactly the same fare as if the departure point or final destination was Malta. With this system implemented, the helicopter fare would be paid by the international airline carrying the passenger to or from Malta. This will obviously be also highly beneficial to Gozo residents.

On the Malta/Gozo ferries, suitable trolleys should be provided for passengers carrying luggage from one end of the boat to the other.

Intelligent Development

Every effort should be made to protect Gozo's natural beauty, but this must not be at the expense of intelligent development which is vital for our island. One should never forget that when God made man, He did not expect him to remain undressed. Like the human body, we can make Gozo look more beautiful by decently dressing it with the love and care it deserves. We have to bear in mind that in the Mediterranean alone, we face very tough competition from destinations well developed and prepared for the same tourism we are after. We need more seaside hotels and serviced beaches, which I am sure will also be appreciated by the local people.

Tourism Organisation

Like many other tourist resorts, even smaller than Gozo, all over Europe, our island needs its own Gozo Tourism Organisation operating as part of the National Tourist Organisation of Malta, but with full responsibility to represent and market the island of Gozo both in Malta and overseas.

The participation of hoteliers and other business people involved in tourism is of great importance for the success of this organisation.

I am sure that, as already shown in the case of the helicopter service, Gozo hoteliers and others in the tourist industry will not hesitate to back such an organisation.

Tour operators featuring Gozo must have their representative based

in Gozo, directly or through their handling agent in Malta. With the elimination of the extra costs presently involved for the visitor to arrive in Gozo, the handling agent in Malta should then find no difference between handling a visitor arriving in Malta or in Gozo.

Facilities and Attractions

A Conference and Incentives brochure should be produced, featuring the conference facilities that hotels and other organisations can offer, the theatres, the Gozo Sports Complex and other facilities.

With the increase of interest in Gozo from hiking and cycling groups, bicycle and pedestrian lanes should be provided on main roads. Footpaths in the country should be improved with direction signs indicating distances.

Gozo's beautiful theatres should be encouraged, with more financial assistance, to stage more operas and other live shows and festivals. A calendar of events, possibly covering the period from November to May, should feature at least two events monthly, preferably once weekly. This will not only give more opportunity for Gozitan drama enthusiasts to pursue their interest, but will also offer additional cultural attractions to tourists.

A Gozo Discovery Bus Service should be introduced throughout the year, which I am sure, the Gozo Bus Association will find very profitable. The route should have signed pick-up points close to hotels and tourist attractions with frequency of service changing according to season. The passenger, having bought a daily, weekly or monthly pass will be able to board and leave the bus at any pick-up point just by showing his pass.

Gozo can benefit from the 110,000 senior tourists that visit Malta between November and March, not only through the Theatre Calendar, the also through other functions jointly organised by hotels, with the guests in one hotel having the possibility of going to another hotel on a particular day for a particular function. This sharing, or, if you prefer, interchange, will go a long way in filling idle time and giving our guests a true taste of Gozo.

Up-market Facilities

If we wish Gozo to really become an up-market destination we must offer certain up-market facilities, such as a golf course and an underwater park, which are too costly for any one private business to take up on its own. Most hotels have themselves provided many facilities which in many European resorts are provided by the public authorities, because on their own they are not financially feasible. Gozitan hotels have taken the responsibility and the risks that go with it, to build and provide facilities such as tennis courts, squash courts, gymnasiums and so on.

Many operators in the tourist business in Gozo aspire to move up-market. Rightly so. We are still in time to do this. I am sure that with a goodwill and dedication, from both the public and the private sectors, we will succeed in improving our product to the desired level.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Gozo could be transformed into a more interesting place all year round attracting more visitors in all seasons. The suggestions put forward in this presentation are aimed at making Gozo a better place, not only for tourists, but, first and foremost for ourselves living on this beautiful island.

SAMMY RAPA

General Manager, Mgarr Hotel

In this presentation, I shall list a number of proposals aimed at making Gozo a better tourist destination.

The new high class hotels in Gozo have exposed certain problem areas, the main one being human resources. It is difficult to find trained personnel ready to take on the jobs offered in the hotel industry. This despite the existence of catering schools both in Malta and Gozo. In my opinion a review of the programmes presently offered is called for, so as to ensure that the education system in

Malta and Gozo caters more efficiently and effectively for the requirements of the tourist industry.

Upgrading of Facilities

In the process of upgrading facilities - largely through the efforts of the Ministry for Gozo - the now established air link joining the two islands has set the sights high. Even so, there is room for further improvement in the services being offered both in Gozo and at the Malta International Airport.

Another area where improvements are desired to further upgrading of facilities in Gozo is in the leisure area. A casino and a golf course would go a long way to attract high class tourism.

Human Resources

Although Gozo is being advertised as an up-market destination, day trippers who come to Gozo are being offered restaurant meals at ridiculous rates. This type of tourism certainly leaves a negative impact on the product. With the higher class tourist, the high influx of this type of day tourism from the mainland does not go down well.

Good Service is Essential

One clear message which seems to have come out of the seminar on "Tourism in Gozo" is that the best advertising is by word of mouth. In other words personal recommendation is a very effective form of promotion - and for this to happen good service is essential.

Conclusion

During the past years Gozo has made great strides forward in all aspects including tourism. In contrast with the hotel situation about twenty years back, when Gozo had just one hotel, today we have a range of hotels of all classes. This is due to the potential that Gozo now offers the investor, mostly through the upgraded infrastructure and the good qualities of the Gozitan work-force.