

# Strategies for controlling social space in tourist locations. field research in Gozo (Malta)

by *Stephen Daly*  
Seton Hall University New Jersey  
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## S U M M A R Y

While there is certainly a lot for a small country to gain from tourism, there are also many potential problems. Despite the money and the jobs that tourism can generate, it invites massive numbers of foreigners into the host country, and the resulting crowding, sudden increase in the population, and influences of a foreign culture all take their toll on the local population. However, the benefits of tourism far outweigh any of the negative consequences, and it is clear that the industry will not disappear any time soon. It up to the locals therefore, to create ways to deal with the negative effects that tourism brings on a country. What seem, at first glance, to be the standard rules, regulations, and practices that are always used in public spaces, are in fact ways of dealing with these effects.

## A R T I C L E I N F O

### *Keywords*

Anthropology of Tourism, Gozo, Malta, Social Space, Host, Guest, Tourism, Separation of Social Space

*“Though there are some disagreeable things in Venice, there is nothing so disagreeable as the visitors.”  
(Henry James)*

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## ***Introduction***

Tourism is a double edged sword. While in many countries, it can provide a significant amount of income, there are downsides to it being a main industry. Imagine every summer, large groups of foreign people storming your country, crowding all the nicest places, being loud, and littering everywhere. Imagine all the logistical problems associated with a population that doubles in an instant every June. Imagine living in a place where rush hour was every hour, and restaurants are always full. As nice as the idea of spending a few, careless weeks on a gorgeous, sandy beach sounds to the tourist, the sentiment is completely reversed for those who live near said beaches. This puts the citizens of the host country in an awfully binding position. As irksome as the foreigners can be, the money that their visits bring in to the country cannot be ignored, nor can it be thrown out. Indeed, in many places, tourism is a most necessary staple of the economy. Unfortunately, the necessity of tourism makes its inconveniences no less tolerable. The local residents of a country must therefore come up with certain strategies to control the visiting population during the tourist season.

It is the goal of this paper, therefore, to show that, what at first glance appear to be everyday regulations and ways of acting are, in fact, the ways that inhabitants of tourists destinations deal with and control the foreigners in their midst. This will be shown through two case studies, the first being the way in which the churches of the islands of Gozo and Malta are run, in regard to visiting tourists, and the second being a look at the different bars and restaurants of the island of Gozo.

### ***Methodology***

The research for this paper is based on my stay on the islands of Gozo and Malta, from July 27th to August 17th of the year 2006. During my time there, I gathered data primarily from observation and taking a comparative and analytical look at different setups for restaurants and churches. While it is important to keep in mind the short duration of my stay and the consequentially limited nature of the research I did there, I nevertheless, was able to come up with a few insights, which I hope will be enlightening.

### ***Research***

It seems funny to walk into a humongous fort unmolested. This citadel was built hundreds of years ago to keep people out and here I am just walking in, interrupted only by an old man selling tourist maps and postcards just inside the main gate. The first thing I see is a series of steps in front of me, leading up to the Cathedral. A bright and shiny new statue of Ġwanni Pawlu II (Pope John Paul II) contrasts dusty, aged sandstone that makes up the walls of Citadel and everything else on the island. Within the Citadels walls are a series of Museums providing a plethora of information and a few hours of educational entertainment. The foremost building, right in the center of the Citadel is the Cathedral of the island, the Church of St. Mary. The Cathedral is in many ways a focal point. Not only a symbol of the island's Catholic identity; it is also, quite literally, in the center of the Citadel, which is in the center of the capital city, which is a hub of everything that happens on the island. The Citadel and its church are in the eye of a hurricane of cultural, historical, and resort based tourism that supply the island with such a large portion of its income, and I have come to this spot to get a good look at what is involved one of this island's primary cultural attractions. As I begin to mount the steps to the Cathedral, I am stopped by a young woman in uniform. She informs me that tickets to get into the Church are on sale around the corner. I follow the direction she points in, and eventually find a door

in the side of a passageway. Going inside, I find myself at a desk where a woman takes my money, and gives me a ticket. I proceed back to the main courtyard and climb the steps leading up to the church. I step across the threshold of the outer doors, and an inner set of doors are pulled open for me by the woman who checks my ticket. I can't help but smirk as I remember the story in the Bible in which Christ turns over the tables of the moneychangers in the temple, angry with them for doing business in the House of God. I wonder what Christ's reaction would have been to the idea of buying tickets to get in to a church. Once inside, I am a little taken aback by the level of noise and the size of the crowd. The level of commotion is similar to that of a museum that houses a very famous painting or sculpture that everyone wants to see. The crowds are reasonably quiet, but there is a point when there are just too many people in the room, and their voices add up to be a just a little bit too loud. I look over my shoulder, back at the main doors, and see some tourist women pulling on pieces of blue cloth, similar in appearance to airline blankets, in order to cover their bare shoulders. The fact that these cloths were provided by the people running the church doesn't surprise me at this point. I have been in the church for less than five minutes and I am already getting the sense that this place is run like a museum intended to make money, rather than a place of worship.

All around me are tourists speaking in un-hushed tones to each other, listening to the optional audio tour guide sets that are available at the ticket counter. From a pedestal in the center of the church, a colorful statue of the Virgin Mary smiles benevolently down at the milling masses below her. I can't help but think that her expression seems out of place. She must be unaware of what is actually going on in this church every day. While this place is called a Cathedral, my own ideas, as a Catholic, of what a Cathedral should be like are being flaunted. Surely, Christ would be unhappy if he saw this place. There seems to be nothing sacred about it. I force myself to give up my first impressions, and to take a closer look at what is around. I look past the camera flashes, and the impatient children scampering across the floor. I notice a set of church bulletins, written in only Maltese, and a stack of folded chairs up against a wall, out of the way. Most importantly, I see the altar of the church, roped off from the tourists with a thick velvet line. The elements gradually make sense to me. I remind myself that it is the mid-afternoon on a weekday, a time during which Catholic Mass is rarely celebrated outside of special occasions. I find myself wondering what this place is like on a Sunday morning. The seats would be set up, candles burning, the altar being attended by a priest.

I am struck, suddenly, by the transformable nature of this space. This is an island whose primary industry is tourism, and in a space at the center of the capital city, undoubtedly, tourism and tourists will have a significant presence. Thinking about the church in this way, one can see this place, not as a building built for sacred or ritual purposes and misused in the pursuit of money, but as a way to deal with the tidal wave of foreigners who come ashore every summer. By creating a dual-purpose area, the people who run the Cathedral have come up with a compromise, allowing the inhabitants of the island to use their church for the Mass it was intended for, and giving the tourists a sight to see. They have given themselves the ability to set specific times for specific uses of the church as a social space, giving themselves control that they would not have had otherwise, as in an unregulated area, both groups, tourist and local, would attempt to use the church in the way they wanted, whenever they wanted. As much as the prayerful atmosphere of the Church was lacking when I visited it, it would have been much more severely disrupted had the parishioner's of the Cathedral been trying to celebrate Mass, and tourists had wandered in and began taking pictures. At the same time, following this schedule gives the conscientious tourist the ability to enjoy the church without having to worry as much about stepping on the toes of those who use it on a daily basis. In addition to the employment of transformable spaces, another strategy for controlling tourist access to social spaces is employed within the Cathedral. A much more straightforward strategy, it is simply to deny the tourist access completely. Within this church, it is employed in the altar area, an area considered the most sacred in the church. a heavy velvet rope separates this space from the rest of the church which the tourists are allowed to wander through. In addition to the altar, access to a few of the side chapels was blocked by more roping.

These same strategies were employed in St. John's Co-Cathedral on the other island. This church had even more traffic than the cathedral on the smaller island. Upon purchasing my ticket, I was directed through gates similar to those one would find at the entrance to a ballpark, complete with metal turnstiles that count how many people were there that day. The foot traffic through this church is so immense, that, once inside, the layout of things directed all the tourists along a certain path, taking everyone past all the notable things in the church in a more or less orderly line. Again, the crowds were allowed to roam freely about the floor of the church, taking pictures and speaking in loud voices, but they were blocked off from the altar by marble altar rails, and more velvet rope. As I left this church, however, I passed something a little more unique.

A doorway into one of the side chapels of the Cathedral was not roped off, but instead had guard sitting next to it. On the other side of the doorway was a sign, in multiple languages saying: "Enter for prayer only". I asked the guard if I could go in. Briefly sizing me up, and apparently assuming I was going to be respectful enough, he allowed me to pass. I proceeded down a short hallway and into the chapel, which contained a gold icon of the Virgin Mary. Below the icon, was a sign, in English, telling the story of how the icon came to be at this particular church. The seemingly contradictory facts that the first sign said "for prayer only" and the second sign was clearly meant for tourists (both by the nature of its information, and the fact that it was written in English) presents a third strategy in dealing with the tourist population. The fact that a guard was there to allow or deny access to the chapel on a case by case basis points to a policy of controlled access to social space. This is obviously a more costly policy to keep in place, owing to the need for a guard, but, like the dual-purpose strategy it allows the best of both worlds, letting tourists into the church to see the site, while leaving a secluded, quiet, and prayerful area for those who still want to use the church for prayer outside of the scheduled Mass times, when tourists aren't let in.

Still other churches deal with tourists in different ways. St George's church, which happens to find itself on the edge of a largely tourist district in town, seems to have taken a strictly no-tourist stance, denying tourist access to the whole church rather than to selected parts in the way that the two cathedrals have. St George's church has a set of large bronze doors at the main entrance, facing a piazza and the street that leads to a sort of open air tourist market only a few dozen meters away. These doors were closed every time I walked by the church. At one point, I passed by and there were some people inside cleaning the church. They had left one of the side doors open to let the fumes from the cleaning fluid out, but had stacked a large amount of wooden chairs directly in the door way. Peeking in, I could see a beautifully decorated interior. There were about ten others, all tourists, who were peaking in as well, none daring to challenge the clear message provided by the chair barricade and the solidly shut bronze doors at the front of the church. Another church, Sacred Heart, had a completely opposite strategy. Sacred Heart was in an inland town, not near a beach, and therefore it didn't have the problems with tourists that some of the other towns had. This church had doors that were completely propped open, and I walked in without having to pay for a ticket or even seeing a postcard vendor. Inside the church was just as beautifully decorated as any of the cathedrals, but due to its placement in a non-tourist town, it was empty except for me.

While the churches of Malta and Gozo are able to employ tourist control strategies through codified rules and schedules, the restaurants and bars of the islands are not able to do so. A sign posted in front of a restaurant saying something like “locals only 7-10 on Sunday”, or having a separate, roped off area for inhabitants of the island would send a message to the tourists that would doubtlessly not be taken lightly, and in a country where tourism is so important, it would not be wise to ostracize these visitors. What then are the Gozitans and Maltese to do? The onslaught of tourism every summer affects every aspect of society, not just the churches, and everyone must develop a strategy to control tourist flow in a way that they find favorable. Because codified methods are unavailable to the restaurant and bar owners, they must utilize more subtle methods that set up their establishments as either tourist restaurants or local restaurants.

One of the first and most obvious strategies is location. A restaurant near a beach or any other popular tourist site is obviously going to get business from the tourists nearby. Beyond simple restaurant placement, there is the matter of advertising. Whether or not a restaurant owner puts up a big flashy sign in an attempt to pull in new customers makes a big difference. These strategies are not surprising. In any city, there are restaurants that have more advertising than others. From a business standpoint, this makes sense, the more people there are who know about a restaurant the more people there will be to eat there. But this technique can be applied in reverse as well. If the only people who know about the restaurant are the ones who have some sort of connection with it, then it will end up keeping a lot of new people out. The same idea is used in Gozo. Restaurants that are targeting tourists will use waterfront locations and have highly visible signs bragging about the traditional Maltese cuisine served there, while restaurants used by, and intended for, locals have nothing more than a simple sign above the door with the name of the restaurant on it.

What is especially notable about these two strategies is how effectively they can be used to define who exactly the restaurant caters to. For an example we can look at two bars: Ganges and The Vine. These two bars are no more than twenty paces away from each other and yet, the clientele are completely opposite. The Vine is a fairly classy place, with a nice outdoor seating area in the middle of a piazza, framed by nice looking old buildings. Among other items, their menu boasts Italian, French, and Gozitan wines, along with Gozitan cheeses and Ftira, or sandwiches. The sign above the restaurant has a catchy logo and the umbrellas over the outdoor eating area match it. Ganges is a short way down a narrow side street leading off of the same piazza. Inside are a few tables, sports memorabilia and the bar itself. The sign

above the door is barely noticeable in the narrow street, and when one does look at it, there is nothing more than blue lettering on a white background. As for the people eating and drinking at these two places, the Ganges is used by local men, looking for a simple glass of wine, while The Vine serves only tourists, aside from a few waiters taking lunch.

While these two methods, placement and advertising, are very useful, the strategy I saw most frequently and effectively employed was the way in which customers were treated. It would be a lie to say that I was ever treated badly by any of the owners of restaurants or bars on Gozo, but there was a very noticeable difference in the way locals and tourists were treated. We can look, for an example, at the Ganges again.

As I enter the bar, I immediately come under the intense and scrutinizing stare of the only man in the room. He is an older gentleman, and after a few moments of semi-awkward silence, I, assuming he is the owner of the bar, ask if I should just take a drink from the fridge. He bellows “YES!” at me in an odd way. Not sure he really understood what I was saying I walk over to the fridge and take out a drink, which is promptly taken away from me by a woman who has materialized out of the back room. She opens the bottle and gives it back to me and I take a seat at one of the tables. The old man, goes back to reading his paper, and the woman begins cleaning the bar. All of the sudden, I find myself an invisible and inconsequential patron. Another man comes in, and begins to talk to the woman in Maltese. It becomes obvious that none of the three of them really speak English. The younger man begins to load a shipment of drinks on the shelves around me, hardly acknowledging my presence, except to clear my empty bottle from the table. He seems to be a very nice man, and he showed me no lack of courtesy, but he doesn't seem to make much of an effort to talk to me. Perhaps this is because he assumes that I don't speak Maltese. But there is more to it. There isn't any eye contact between us, no smiles, no polite head nods. He simply does his job, serving me and then quickly moves about the other business required of him. It would be silly of him to refuse business, and the distinction between outsiders, like me, and regular customers is never taken that far, but it is very easy to see that impressing the tourists is not the goal of the people who work at the Ganges. Similar treatment is received at any of the other local restaurants and bars. No owner on the island would ever go so far as to refuse business entirely, but there is always a certain lack of feeling at a place like the Ganges, everything is done in a business like manner. I think it is important here, to note that I am not saying that Gozitans who work outside the tourist industry are rude or unhelpful.

Rather, they seem to treat tourists in the same way that one would treat an acquaintance, whose presence isn't really desired, with a kind of detached courtesy. At another local bar I went to, called Terry's, I was treated in a similar way. This bar was situated on the edge of a traffic circle, and therefore, constantly had both tourists and locals driving by. And yet, I never saw any non-Maltese patrons at the bar other than myself. This was accomplished through all the same strategies I have mentioned earlier. Once again, the service was definitely good. I was given everything I asked for but as when I took my food and found a table to sit down at, the owner came out from behind the bar and began chatting and laughing with the Gozitans who were there. I was left alone to finish my sandwich and leave quietly.

The way that tourists are treated in tourist restaurants, however, is very different. While in Gozo, I stayed in a tourist resort town. It was situated around a small bay where visitors could swim and snorkel. Surrounding the bay were a number of hotels and restaurants. One restaurant in particular, Ta Cenc, was an excellent example of a tourist restaurant. The owner was a tall thin man, who was constantly rushing around trying to get everything his guests needed. He was very accommodating of our large group, and was constantly smiling and joking with us, as was the rest of the wait staff. In addition to the good service, Ta Cenc had signs out front advertising the rooftop area overlooking the bay and signs for the specials of the day. Inside the restaurant, one could see that great care had been taken in decorating the place. Once again, I never did see any Gozitans inside the restaurant except for those who were working there. It seems almost backwards that the local restaurants would try to have bad advertising, poor locations, and only adequate service, but in reality, it serves their purposes very well. In not going the 'extra mile' in these areas, they tend not to attract new customers. In doing so, however, they are able to attract the customers they really want, local restaurant patrons who, perhaps above all else, are seeking respite from the large numbers of foreigners who are pressing upon their daily lives.

While tourism is one of the biggest industries in Malta, and therefore remains very important, there are still plenty of negative effects to deal with. Aside from the annoyance presented by the many visitors, there are cultural impacts to be taken into account. What are the effects of foreign customs on the Maltese way of life? As with any country, things are changing in Malta, and while some see the influx of tourists every year as a problem, the Maltese and Gozitans are very capable of handling themselves and maintaining their identity. In many ways, tourism can bring out native culture and cause the people of a country to connect more strongly with their past. Indeed, the people of Malta

and Gozo have created many ways to preserve a distinctly Maltese way of living. They have found a way to maintain the parts of their lives that could be adversely affected by tourism, while still being able to allow the tourists to come to their country, gaining the best of both the tourist industry, and a life uninterrupted by foreign visitors.