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

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SUMMARY

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.

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

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 Gwanni 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, my own ideas, as a Catholic, of what a Cathedral should be like 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 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 purpose 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 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. Peaking 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.
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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 repose 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.