

Anybody on the horizon? Changing the Static, Moving the unchangeable.

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A B S T R A C T

Does a site have an a-priori meaning given to it by history and the events connected to it, or does each one of us attach its own meaning to it? Certainly there are almost uncountable ways of perceiving a site and its value. This paper will try to illustrate the different usage of a geographically well defined site in Gozo, the Dwejra region, as well as the way it is presented to the tourist industry and the importance it holds at a more local level. Local people can often have a perception of their heritage and the way it relates to them that differs from the generally accepted views interpreting and presenting sites to the public and the tourist industry. This research intends to encourage the involvement of local communities living nearby heritage sites in order to promote awareness of the “living heritage approach” to site management. I will therefore address some different aspects of the site as a whole, starting from an overview of Dwejra Tower to examine wider social, cultural and economic issues. I hope this research will offer the opportunity to broaden the understanding of “modern traditions” in Dwejra and complement the information we already have of the site and its users.

A R T I C L E I N F O

Keywords

Dwejra, Azure Window, Inland Sea, Gozo, Malta, Sense of Place, Heritage Management, Cultural Tourism, Local Community.

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Introduction

The value of a place stems primarily from what people make of it, be it something related to the past, present or future, it will always be the result of the interaction between people and places and the influence that they have on each other. This relationship is of course itself the result of a dynamic development of both the place and the above-mentioned people. This is why it is not easy to put a label on heritage and even more on what should be considered valuable about it. But what is a value? And how do we estimate its variability? How does it relate to what actually is on the ground and to the resources available? What is it that makes a place distinctive and who is to decide what is to be kept and what can be changed? Economics and finance are essential factors for both conserving and, unfortunately, valuing a site as well, but a cross-cutting section of the values of a place can depend on much deeper cultural elements.

In order to be able to manage all these values it is imperative to take an anthropological approach, rather than an economic one, to develop and promote the local economy by making the effort to encapsulate also who one is trying to manage and the importance of the territory as a whole, its significance as a place of cultural expression, both tangible and intangible, belonging to both the past and the present. It is this complex interaction between people and their land, let alone the controversial issues of visitors in a foreign country, that this article is going to address.

As Gozo is one of the “contestants” to the status of Calypso’s island, I would like to describe this research of mine as a personal Odyssey, a journey undertaken in the spirit of exploration, of different lands and contexts, one that has indeed expanded my horizon. Trying to use my personal experiences and a bit of an improvised “compass”, it finally got me home, where I now start writing what I have seen.

“Because every second of the search is a second’s encounter...”

(Paulo Coehlo)

Methodology

This research is the result of a three-week stay in Gozo (Malta) in August 2007. During this period I tried to come closer to different aspects of Maltese, or rather, Gozitan, culture. To use a less controversial word, I tried to understand their way of living and daily occurrences during a summer season in Gozo. My base was a village called Xlendi on the South-Western coast of Gozo, from which I was able to travel around the island; I would like to thank the Gozitan people that I came across during my stay, as through them I was able to see different nuances of their life in Gozo. Research results therefore derive primarily from my personal observations during visits to sites, as well as fortuitous encounters, informal interviews with members of the local community, with people involved in the tourist industry and with tourists themselves. While a comparative analysis of these results represents, I feel, an honest spectrum of the use Gozitans make of cultural and natural heritage in their ordinary lives, the information in this article should be interpreted as a personal experience and fieldwork. Due to the limits of time and space during my stay in Malta I engaged principally with the investigation of my case study and some of the main “characters” involved with it. I therefore decided to partly overlook purely economical factors at this stage, as this research is primarily concerned on people’s percep-

tion of the site rather than its economic exploitation. In my research I tried to focus on three main areas: Dwejra Tower, the Azure Window and the Inland Sea, along with tourist resources and the use of recreational space. I hope this study will be inspirational for further initiatives and will open up a discourse for a bottom-up approach to heritage management and community involvement in the area.

Research

Dwejra Tower: History, Heritage and a “Sense of Place”

At Dwejra, on the Western Coast of Gozo island, peculiar geological events have created a landscape made of stunning rock formations and landscapes that are at the heart of the character of this place. Inscribed on the Tentative List to become a World Heritage Site in 1998, Qawra or Dwejra combines fascinating geology, both in its terrestrial and maritime elements, as well as being a landmark of cultural importance to the history of the island as a whole. The seascape features under-water caves and submerged structures, that have formed overland centuries ago and later collapsed below sea level, and above ground archaeological remains in the area span from the 3rd century BC to the 19th century AD (UNESCO, 2007). It is however the general wilderness of the place that particularly impresses onlookers.

Built in 1652 during the time of the Grand Mastership of Jean Baptiste Lascaris de Castellar (1636-1657), the construction of Dwejra Tower (or Il-Qawra) was funded by the University of Gozo, as part of a major project of coastal defences by the Knights of the Order of Saint John. It stands on a 13m sq at its base and is a two-storey building. The first floor was a guardroom leading up to a roof where the gunpowder was stored. Its main purpose was to guard Dwejra Bay from enemy attacks and impede unauthorized landing from intruders on Fungus Rock (or Il-Gebla tal-General - the “General’s Rock”), today a natural reserve, where one can find the endemic plant “fungus melitensis” (*Cynomorium coccineum*), a parasitic flowering plant that was thought to be a fungus with medicinal properties. At the time of its construction the Tower was armed with guns and ammunition and it would have normally had a garrison of three. It was never involved in major attacks, but was occupied intermittently until recent times and became an observation post during World War II (Din l-Art Helwa, 2007). It was not until 1997, however, that it was involved in a restoration project, to repair the heavily eroded stone by wind and salt, as well as restoring internal parts, such as the cistern, pipe-work and the well.

The Tower was also part of a major European project funded by LIFE, initiated in April 2004 to create a Heritage Park. The main partners involved in this project were Nature Trust (Malta) as beneficiaries and responsible to the EU together with Malta Environment and Planning Authority (MEPA) and WWF Italy. The project aimed at reversing the severe degradation process that had worn away parts of the building during the past centuries and at promoting the management of the area, to develop environmental awareness and the establishment of a visitor centre for the benefit of both the local community and the tourist one. Stakeholders involved in the development of the project included the Ministry for Gozo, San Lawrenz Local Council, The Tourism Authorities of Gozo and Malta, the Diving associations, locals employed in the boat-rides business, fishermen, Din L-Art Helwa, tour operators, the boat house's owners, and the local church among others. Consultation with these very diverse groups for the development of management strategies is in fact essential to make sure consideration is given to all different elements of the sites and to those aspects that are valued by its users. This initial approach therefore underpins the development of sustainable management strategies, taking onboard different features of the site, as well as its users. Dwejra Tower was finally opened to the public in October 2006, making 2007 therefore the first summer season during which it could be possible to gather an estimate of visitor response.

A Solitary Tower in a Sea of Tourists

When I first arrived at Dwejra, after a significant de-tour due to shortage of reliable public transport, the waves were crashing on the huge rock formations. Describing the sound of the wind from the top of Tower would not make justice to the experience: it was overall a stunning view, and, in the words of Mario Gauci, care keeper of Dwejra Tower, this was "Dwejra at its best". The atmosphere was indeed invigorating.

The nature of this place however is somehow solitary, despite the masses of tourists crowding its main and only square. Descending on the wide road that leads to the well-known Azure Window, a primary destination for all tourists coming to Gozo, it is almost unthinkable not to catch sight of Dwejra Tower, and yet... somehow I had to witness it happen. Most people drive passed it, walk next to it, sunbathe underneath it and yet do not know that the few people who actually made it up to the tower are probably watching them from above, just like some lonely knight might have stared at the horizon some 400 years ago.

The Tower dominates the landscape in an obvious yet distant way that makes it pass almost unnoticed. I cannot help wondering if this is the way it wished to be seen in the past, not to be perceived by potential enemies, just like a protecting genius loci, guardian of this place. Are today's tourists enemies then? Today's threat to the spirit of this place? Funny enough tourism seems to be the second religion of this island, almost sacred to the economy of its people. It is interesting to explore the way in which in history this island has tactfully dealt with its colonizing nations or potential dominators in the past and how it now scans the horizon to carry people to its shores. It is indeed the sea itself that acts as a primary attraction to this sun-blessed Mediterranean island and is becoming its primary economical resource. The reasons for coming here nowadays are of course very different indeed, but the striking change is reflected in the shift of attitude in the local people. Gozitans are amazingly welcoming of tourists and all that they bring of course, unaware perhaps, that what they bring can often become another form of domination.

Dwejra and The Inland Sea: A Different Context

It is almost impossible to write about Malta or Gozo without mentioning the tourist-factor: it is an influence that shapes most encounters on this island, affecting not only the relationship between locals and visitors, but also between visitor and visitor and, I dare say, local and local. Tourism is a topic of much of their conversation, is embedded in their lives and surely today has become a feature influencing Maltese/Gozitan identity. This is a place where everybody, one way or another, is involved in tourism, a place where this symbiotic relationship is part of everyday occurrences and yet where space and time seem to have been divided accordingly, social roles carefully chosen and where seasons and years seem to be assessed according to the volume of tourist that disembark on their shores.

Analysing the division between public and private spaces in Dwejra was an interesting experience. These spaces seem to be strangely intertwined, but with some imperceptible and yet obvious boundaries. Around the Inland Sea, boathouses belonging to locals are now used as alternative summer residences for people coming from villages all over the island to relax and let the kids run free in and out of the water. Sounds of cheerful splashes match those of refreshing drinks at the bar, and the silence of people snoozing off in their "door-wide-open-to-let-the-breeze-in" boathouses is only echoed by tourists' cars arriving and taking pictures of the stunning rock formations.

It is indeed the different uses of this site, that is of Dwejra as a whole, that particularly stroke me when I started observing the life of this place. Locals and tourists live their lives and experiences in totally parallel ways without bothering each other. The locals involved in the industry, such as those running the boat rides for tourists or owning the few shops and bars on site, of course depend on the daily tourist influx, but as for the rest, they seem to have adopted a system of “live and let live” and have divided accordingly time of the day for the use of its resources.

The two bars have, generally speaking, divided their premises in two parallel business, one of which catering the tourist business, the other used mainly by residents. In the mornings and early afternoons there is a busy buzz of tourists, coming and going, some exploring the place, some relaxing by the sea, taking pictures, buying souvenirs. In the afternoons and evenings, when the sun is not scorching anymore, the local presence is predominant, with the exception of the sunsets, of course, when coaches arrive once again with crowds of tourists and depart soon after. What I encountered at Dwejra links well to the idea of a Backstage and Front Stage presentation, a living space for residents, as well as an accessible resource for economic return. What is unique to the place is the way it is used by everybody at the same time and the diversity of land uses becomes then essential for a holist approach to the management of the area, making the site perceivable as a mosaic of land uses.

As it gets dark Dwejra comes to life once again, but in a different way, not generally perceived by foreign eyes. Due to the lack of electric power in the area, the shimmering of candle light and the sound of the sea make this place just magical. I was able to “shed some light” on what goes on after all the tourists have gone, through the words and stories of some local residents of the nearby village of San Lawrenz, to a background noise of fireworks and cheerful chattering during the local Festa. Barbeques take place almost every night during the summer months down by the Inland Sea, starting when it gets dark and leading on well into the night, an occasion for boathouses’ neighbours to socialise over a dish of fresh fish and enjoy this place in its essence. The next morning I explored the place with different eyes and looked around, behind houses, on side roads, as well as on main roads: everywhere remains of used barbeques were to be seen. It made me smile, as nobody else seemed to notice them and yet they were just there to prove that Dwejra’s life is not only the Azure Window.

Important as they are for the local economy, tourists are not the heart and soul of this place although they are no doubt an unavoidable image of Dwejra today. There is

something there that tourists do not experience unless they look a little closer. On the very last day I spent there, after having observed people from all angles, I decided I wanted to break that barrier that normally exists in the visitor-resident relationship. I saw a lady doing the washing up with a large baking-tin coming out of her house to throw the water away. I stayed out there looking at the masses of tourists passing by in front of her, heading to the Inland Sea with their camera and bathing suits. I knocked at her door as she went back in. Her husband was snoozing off on the sofa and looked at me as I peeped my head through their open door. Before I even knew it I was sitting down sipping a glass of home made red wine and eating fresh cut melon while discussing about life in Dwejra. I wanted to prove to myself that the barrier between visitors and locals is very thin indeed and that it only takes a minute to break it and have the chance of experiencing a place in a totally different way.

The Azure Window and Touristic Resources-Recreational Space and its Users

I felt however that a cross cutting element is the diving activities that go on in this area. Dwejra is perhaps one of the most well-known regions for divers not only in Gozo or Malta, but in the whole of Europe. It is one of the most spectacular diving localities, featuring underwater caves and archways, long tunnels and dramatic cliffs, as well as abundant marine life, allowing for immersion up to 60 meters deep. Diving centres bring to Dwejra an incredible of visitors everyday. Facilities for hiring diving equipment are of course available on site, but also in other centres all over the island. Organised diving tours both in day time and at night (weather permitting) take place every single day. While interviewing divers and instructors I became more and more aware that divers attracted to Gozo thanks to Dwejra’s fame contribute hugely to the local economy and well-being of this activity nationally, both in Gozo and Malta, as they of course end up exploring other diving sites around the area. From the observation I gathered I realised that there are three main types of divers: those who come to Gozo specifically to dive, attracted by the fame of this place, or so-called diving-tourists; those who embrace this discipline while being in Gozo, due to the high popularity of the sport on the island and the widely publicised courses; and finally locals, who in many cases also approached diving thanks to courses that developed primarily to cater for visitors. The second type, I reckon, is becoming more and more prominent on the island, creating a reliable economy for the business.

This activity presents an essential link to the site as it involves different sections of society and different users, creating powerful bonds among them and eliminating barriers that would normally exist between visitors and residents or different age groups. This “equalization” includes both divers and diving instructors, who are not usually Maltese, as opposed to owners of diving shops who normally are, therefore contributing to the mutual exchange of resources and the “blending” of cultures. It also provides an opportunity to explore the site on a different level, not normally readily available to everybody, therefore encouraging responsible tourism and environmental awareness. Moreover, if managed correctly, it can prove to be a sustainable form of local economy, fostering local employment in the business and promoting the preservation of the sites for national well-being.

Conclusion - We Live in a Living Heritage

The ways in which places come to be valued, but also the perceptions of its inhabitants, necessarily change through time. So what are the main features that impact on the perception of a place? In today’s changing society, the ties that once bound people to their own past come more and more undone, a phenomenon partly caused by the escapism offered by mass tourism worldwide. While history is certainly being “consumed”, there are many lost audiences to be engaged with. What is then that in our Western conception makes us define and associate heritage with ruins? Sites have more often than not a continuous life even when they stopped being used in their primary function. It is therefore necessary to give attention to all of their dynamic components, whether they are social, economical, environmental or cultural. When managing heritage sites it becomes then vital to take into consideration not only its national importance, but also the sensitivity and awareness that exist at a local level, in order to retain a long-term vision of the site. The historic environment is by nature a very strong and rooted concept, as much as it is vulnerable. There is often a tendency to build a mythic time on the historic time (Settis, 2004: 107), digging up elements from the past, and over-imposing them to the current significance of the place. Superficial or static approaches to perceptions are of course easier to interpret, rather than a broader understanding of the social dynamics associated with the usage of a site. Preserving the ephemeral is in fact much more difficult than preserving the tangible, but heritage sites will always be first and foremost living spaces. As a living space, however, a site cannot be easily interpreted, as meanings should never be considered to be static or labelled onto places.

Visitors are active participants in the cultural heritage exchange and its conservation, even though they often carry out their own interpretation while they appropriate the place. A multi-disciplinary approach would encourage a more informed interpretation of the sites and a deeper appreciation of today’s cultural role in society. Dwejra Tower has, I trust, a huge potential to become more central in the life of not only the tourists, but most importantly of local communities living around it and in the educational system. It encapsulates many different issues at its interior, presenting informative panels both on cultural and environmental awareness, maritime distinctiveness, as well as issues on biodiversity, geological and ecological significance of the area. It does not compete with the landscape as most visitor centres do, as it is an integral part of it and it could potentially be part of a wider project linking it through cultural trails to other remaining coastal towers on Gozo and Malta. Events could be organized to maximise public interest and engage the people with issues that have contemporary relevance. After all, the study of heritage is not only an academic exercise concerned with long-lost periods of history, but it should also renew an understanding of the site and its value to today’s society.

All in all it was a great experience to be able to look through a window (an azure one perhaps?) into this bizarre Mediterranean culture, developed from the most disparate elements of influence, both in the past and in present time. An experience that had many thought-provoking facets to it, and I believe it was enlightening like a diamond that shines more when edges are cut on its surface.

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