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Roles and Responsibilities of a Tourist Guide and their Trainers: Reflections and Recommendations

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My first ever guiding experience, was telling stories to my siblings and cousins, and other friends who would bother to come with me around the streets of my home-town, Valletta. I remember my first visit to an exhibition, back in 1970. As a 15-year old I was impressed with all the exhibits, coming from all over the world. I also remember reading the captions and wondering how was it possible to remember all that information. Maybe the seeds of guiding were already there. Interest in visiting places and guiding continued. For thirteen years I worked as a guide with the then Museums Department (nowadays renamed Heritage Malta). The joy of reading, studying the artefacts and even guiding visitors was my real initiation into the world of professional guiding.

This contribution to the first issue of the *International Journal of Tour Guiding Research* (initially presented at the *6th International Research Forum on Guided Tours*) looks back at some of the most important developments that I experienced as a guide lecturer at the Institute of Tourism Studies and to share some thoughts about the Tourist Guide course presently offered by the Institute of Tourism Studies.

Key Words: tour guide, responsibilities, training

Introduction

Tourism is an ever-changing industry. According to the World Tourism Organisation, tourism is considered as the largest economic industry in the world. It provides about 10.1% of global employment (World Travel and Tourism Council, 2019). The industry is also a vibrant one, with more people now travelling, new markets being introduced, and travellers being better informed. Some present-day travellers are financially better off, and therefore their needs are different from other travellers. It is no wonder that practices and scenarios are changing constantly. The industry provides job opportunities for many, and the tourist guide is one of the front-liners, a very important front liner. In Malta, like so many other countries, the profession is regulated by the Malta Tourism Authority. This is where the Institute of Tourism Studies plays an important role in the formation of future tourist guides.

When I was approached to deliver my first lectures to future tourist guides at the Institute, back in 1992, I was overjoyed. Due to the fact that I was taking care of the historical details in connection with the first-ever Mdina festival, I was asked to deliver historical information on a number of street theatre scenes. My role was to inform the student tourist guides on the historical background to each of the scenes that was being planned. Thus, when they would be going around with their groups, there would be accurate historical information shared with the audience. This was highly successful – both for the event, and the actual practical exercise for future tourist guides. It seems that even the management of the Institute thought that this was a very good idea, as I was then approached to deliver more lectures. This time around, the request was to take students around various places – streets of the main cities, churches and cathedrals, prehistoric sites and museums. Although this was my first experience as a lecturer to future tourist guides, I already had

The Author Guiding a group of fellow Academics , Malta 2013

a lot of experience of working in museums as a lecturer. I had also been conducting Sunday cultural tours organised by the Ministry for Youths for many years.

The next step was when I was employed by the Institute as a full-time lecturer, with my main responsibility being that of the Tourist Guide course. At the time the course was in its infancy, and during the following years, and up to the present day, the course has been developed, changed, and updated to the needs of the present tourism industry.

The necessity to change was more than just superficial. Realising the ever-changing scenario of the industry, it was deemed important that certain modules would be introduced and developed to cater for the industry. The profile of the visitors to Malta were changing as well, and this necessitated a look at what is needed to make sure that future tourist guides would be prepared

in the best way possible. Preparation meant that as much relevant information and skills would be offered during the course.

The language sector of the course was enhanced, and it still forms an integral part. It provides the student with the necessary linguistic skills in order to communicate effectively with their guests.

The course was updated to be in line with European Union recommendations. We adapted to the recommendations without hesitation, and this led to a more modern curriculum for the course. The same course continued to have more modules added – not for the sake of adding more modules, but because the lecturers and management realised the need to offer a better course to future tourist guides, and eventually providing a better service to the local tourism industry.

The Institute of Tourism Studies invested a lot during those years. My participation in courses organised by the World Federation of Tourist Guides Association for tourist guide trainers,^[1] and my subsequent attendance at international conferences, helped me to provide students with more updated information. The need to have lecturers continue attending conferences concerning the different aspects of tourism and guiding is a must. It helps to provide a learning experience to the lecturers involved, and this helps in their sharing of the same information with the students. My personal attendance at international conferences, and my input in participating with academia by offering papers and chapters in international publications^[2] has helped me in exchanging personal knowledge with all my students. This also enhances the international profile of the Institute and thus, its graduates.

Besides participating in foreign conferences and seminars, it is also a good idea, if not a must, to continue to host international conferences here at the Institute. I still remember with joy my participation in a foreign conference in Lecce. This was one of the Religious Tourism conferences organised by the wonderful Professor Anna Trono from the University of Salento. I renewed my acquaintance with Dr Kevin Griffin and discussed the possibility for the ITS to host and organise such an international conference. With my eventual meeting with another friend, Dr Raj Razaq, the discussion led to their support for the 5th International Conference on Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage to be held in Malta. After the successful conference in 2013 (Figure 1), the Institute for Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage grew and has continued to increase their

international profile. It was also at this event in Malta that the very successful International Journal of Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage was launched, an international journal which offers free access to all its issues (Griffin & Razaq, n.d.).

Why am I mentioning this? Because if one is to remain concerned only with the local scene, the information and knowledge is going to be minimal. One needs to broaden one's learning. We travel in order to enjoy ourselves, but we also travel to enhance our own knowledge – no matter what that knowledge is. I travel with open eyes, in order to learn, appreciate and where possible be inspired by what others are doing successfully. This needs to be kept at the forefront of anyone working as a tourist guide – we need to keep up to date with what is happening abroad, in order to be able to offer the latest trends, the latest ways and means, and keep abreast of our own profession.

As tourist guides, we need to understand and appreciate that our input is more than just helping the visitors to enjoy their visit; it is much more than just sharing good information. It is also our responsibility to remember that besides being a role model and having a responsible behaviour, we can also monitor and sometimes control visitor behaviour, to help protect the natural and cultural heritage resources and our sites (Weiler & Black, 2015).

The tourist guide's responsibility towards our guests is manifold – good communication skills are important to help our guests to understand, appreciate and remember their visit. If it is possible, try and give them an experience. A guide should never be a person to point things out without any feeling, any enthusiasm, any insight into the items on display. They are the interpreters, and as has been claimed

the use of interpretation by tourist guides [is] a key mechanism to enhancing the visitor experience, visitor satisfaction, and positive word-of-mouth advertising (Weiler & Black, 2015:52).

Interpretation helps the tourist guide to provoke visitors to think and feel, and thus to leave an impact on what they are visiting.

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1. The first 'Train the Trainer' course I attended was held in Paphos (Cyprus) in January 1998. This covered Parts 1 and 2. In May 1999 Part 3 was held in Hong Kong. Both courses were organised by the World Federation of Tourist Guide Associations.
 2. Examples include 'Alternative Tours and the Preparation of Future Tourist Guides' presented at the 4th International Research Forum on Guided Tours, 2015 Estoril (Portugal); 'Jewish Tourism in Malta: A Nostalgic Pilgrimage?' presented during the International Research Seminar: Motivation and Identity of Abrahamic Faith, Jerusalem 2020.

Recommendations

Now let me try and share a few recommendations. These thoughts of mine are based on the experience that I have gathered through the years and are meant to be my sincere and humble suggestions to further develop the present tourist guide course that is held at the Institute of Tourism Studies, with possible application to guiding courses elsewhere.

Starting with **field visits** - tourist guiding courses have always aimed at providing a practical learning experience. Field visits are not only a means to introduce sites to the students, but they are an integral part of the preparation of guides. I believe that the more field trips and sessions tourist guide students are exposed to, the better their success will be when they are finally on the job. This has always been one of the main strengths of the courses at the Institute – the practical sessions provide the student with a good learning experience and at the same time an insight into what would be expected of them when they are on the job. Field visits are held in various places, and no matter whether the place is crowded, or the weather is not good, one still needs to hold the field visit – as this is part of the training for the future tourist guides.

There were times when it was suggested that a short **drama** module should be included within the course. This has become an important issue, as more interpretation is being expected from the tourist guide. Such a module would provide future tourist guides with an important tool in order to be successful; it would also provide the tourist guide with more confidence in performing in front of a group, develop skills of vocal production and the ‘staging’ of interpretation.

I also believe that future tourist guides need not be too burdened with written exams – let them have as many **practical** exams as possible, because at the end of the day that is what they will be doing while working. More class presentations are needed, as one of the most common difficulties that I have noticed is the fear of speaking in front of a group – no matter the size of the audience.

The more one practices, the more confident they become and eventually the better presentations they deliver.

Provide students attending the tourist guide course with the opportunities and possibility of **travelling** to have an experience – maybe a working experience. This has always been a difficult part for those following the course, as it is impossible to work, even as a trainee tourist guide abroad. We have had a few occasions when students studying a language managed to travel abroad for a learning experience^[3]. I am sure that their travels helped them to improve their language skills in the language that they were studying, but it also broadened their cultural awareness and experience of how tourist guides operate in other countries. This needs to be looked into and if possible, provided to all tourist guide students.

The worst that can be done is to believe that the present set-up is excellent and needs no changes. No course within the tourism industry can remain static. No course should remain the same for many years, as the tourism industry is an ever-changing one. Thus, each one of us need to understand this in order to **change, adapt, modernise** our courses to continue to provide the best education and preparation to future tourist guides.

What used to be **niche segments** (environmental, religious, cultural, activity, etc) in tourism have become the norm, and for some even the mainstream – one needs to cater to these **sectors** even more, with more information. For the training of tourist guides, awareness of these specialisms is important and where possible particular modules should be offered.

Research needs to be encouraged in order to have a healthy academic foundation upon which programmes and content are built. In the recent past the Institute produced a journal which was one way of spreading information and even research amongst students and lecturers. It is something which is clearly needed.

3. Editor's note - see paper by Ruth Azzopardi also in this issue

Interpretation is the key to make tours enjoyable – one can interpret the countryside, the history of a place, a village or a church; one can also interpret the geographical location to understand the significance of a building or a site; one can interpret a battlefield (Ryan, 2007); one needs to interpret the items in a museum showcase, or the symbols that we meet all around us. Understanding heritage interpretation is a key to successful guiding. It has been said that

interpretation lies at the heart and soul of what any good tour guide can and should be doing (Weiler & Ham, 2000:549).

One also needs to **enjoy** the work, as otherwise this would become a boring routine. Working to make money is one thing but making money while enjoying oneself is a completely different thing.

Conclusion

My final thought – every tourist guide should keep on reading, learning, and having experiences. Everyone should keep abreast of what is being offered abroad, of what tourists want to have, and of what is expected of us by different visitors. For me to keep abreast and up to-date, I need to act professionally for my own sake. Therefore, I always try and make sure that I am up to the job and offering the best. Many years ago, I thought of a simple motto for myself – if you want to call it that – **Innovate or Evaporate**. I believe very much in innovating, changing and challenging myself, in order to provide a good and a professional tour and experience, and above all to avoid being a boring guide.

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