



Case Study 1: Overtourism in Valletta— Reality or Myth?

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Introduction

Tourism is often considered to be beneficial to host communities because of the income and the employment it generates. On the downside tourism imposes negative impacts on host communities (Zaei and Zaei 2013). The term overtourism is relatively new but this does not mean that the phenomenon is a new one. In academia, debates on negative impacts on local communities are often framed within discourses on tourism irritation index (Doxey 1975), sustainable development, mass tourism, carrying capacities (Koens et al. 2018), tourismphobia (Seraphin 2018) and more recently overtourism (Dodds and Butler 2019; Milano et al. 2019). In spite of several debates on overtourism in recent years, the term lacks a clear definition and is open to multiple interpretations. The term overtourism is “ill-defined, lacks clarity, and is highly difficult to operationalize”

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(Koens et al. 2018: 2). This makes an analysis of overtourism at a destination difficult and highly subjective.

The negative impacts associated with tourism include overcrowding in the city's public spaces, traffic congestion, excessive touristification of often-visited areas, inappropriate behaviour by visitors and damage to the physical environment and displacement of long-term residents (Koens et al. 2018; Briguglio and Avellino 2019). Other issues associated with tourism are social discomfort for local residents, undesirable experiences by visitors, overloaded infrastructure, environmental degradation and threats to culture and heritage. Overtourism is understood to be a situation where one or more of these negative impacts are perceived to be excessive or where they significantly exceed perceived benefits (McKinsey and Company 2017). A European Parliament study (Peeters et al. 2018: 22) adopts the definition of overtourism as follows; "the situation in which the impact of tourism, at certain times and in certain locations, exceeds physical, ecological, social, economic, psychological, and/or political capacity thresholds", but even this approach is not without its problems. Establishing thresholds is highly arbitrary and in any case most indicators are difficult to quantify.

In an urban context the intrusion of tourism into residential spaces is almost inevitable. Residents are often willing to put up with the resulting inconveniences when put in an overall context of the benefits that the tourism activity will derive to the place. On the other hand, the level of intrusion and inconvenience could become excessive and could generate anti-tourist sentiment amongst residents, as has happened in some destinations (Milano et al. 2019). Stakeholders feel that the excessive number of visitors has led to a deterioration of the quality of life. Overtourism is associated with a situation where the host community considers it undesirable to have more tourism activity (Briguglio and Avellino 2019).

Academic literature often refers to excessive crowding as being one aspect of overtourism. Crowding is caused by a disproportionately large influx of tourists at a visitor attraction or in an urban area of a destination (Oklevik et al. 2019). At tourism hotspots, residents' lives are affected by the noise, pollution and impediments to daily routines produced by increased traffic, tourist coaches and high concentrations of tourists. Residential spaces are intruded upon. In areas of strong concentration of

tourist activity, public spaces are being taken over for tourism use. For example, Las Ramblas is an iconic avenue that once was the main meeting place of Barcelona society. It is now perceived by the locals as having lost its symbolic significance and its traditional functions have been replaced with intense tourism activity (Russo and Scarnato 2018). In some cities, tourism is considered to be responsible for the severe disruption in residential housing supply. Prague's historic centre is losing its original use and value as a residential area and is being transformed into a 'tourism ghetto' implying "the separation of Prague's tourism from local culture, which has led to erosion of the sense of place and the identity of the historic core" (Roncak 2019: 161). In Barcelona's Gothic Quarter, the sharp increase in short-term tourism rentals¹ has induced 15 per cent loss in population as renting to tourists is more profitable than renting long-term to locals (Russo and Scarnato 2018). Central parts of Venice are subject to overcrowding but a more pertinent problem is that Venice is losing its soul as people are moving out, in part because of tourism but also due to strict restrictions on restoration of residential properties (Ebejer et al. 2018). Milano (2017: 9) refers to the Venice Syndrome as a "phenomenon of tourism saturation" and "the progressive disappearance of the city's social fabric." He notes how the decline in Venice population occurred concurrent with constant increases in the number of overnight tourist stays. A decline in population comes about because of reduced liveability and a reduced quality of life because of excessive presence of tourists.

This chapter debates whether Valletta is subject to overtourism. Valletta has changed over the past two decades with increased investment in the refurbishment of historic properties and evident signs of increased tourism activity. Concurrently there has been a sharp increase in the number of visitors to Malta. A study on overtourism in Valletta is timely not least for a better understanding of how Valletta is changing.

Wall (2019) claims that there are two approaches to measuring impacts: physical and perceptual. For this study, a predominantly perceptual approach is considered more appropriate for several reasons. Valletta is in

¹ In some academic literature, short-term tourism rental accommodation is referred to as shared accommodation or simply as Airbnb.

practice one small urban area forming part of a much larger urban conglomeration. Statistics relating to one small area would be difficult to interpret in isolation. Some tourism impacts (for example, on destination attractiveness) are difficult to measure (Peeters et al. 2018: 42), whereas for others there is no data specific for Valletta. Moreover, a perceptual approach allows for the evaluation of impacts within a wider understanding of the overall socio-cultural context.

Rather than delve directly into overtourism in Valletta, this chapter focuses on the impacts of tourism and debates them in the overall context of the changes to which Valletta has been subjected over the past two or three decades. Urban destinations, including historic areas, are shaped by a range of various economic, social and cultural forces. Very rarely can urban change be attributable solely to tourism. Inevitably therefore in discussing how Valletta has changed, the paper does not limit itself to tourism and its impacts but also considers other forces. Once the impacts, both negative and positive, are discussed and the overall context understood, the paper then moves on to consider overtourism in Valletta as perceived by different stakeholders.

The Development of Tourism in Malta

The Maltese Islands of Malta, Gozo and Comino are located in the Mediterranean Sea approximately 97 kilometres south of Sicily. Malta is an independent EU state with a population of less than half a million. With independence in 1964, there was an urgent need for Malta's economy to diversify. Tourism was the obvious choice because of Malta's pleasant weather and extensive coastline. The growth in tourist arrivals was matched by poor product development and a series of problems such as environmental degradation, infrastructural overloading, overdependence on a single source market and seasonal fluctuations (Markwick 1999). Until the 1990s Malta's tourism grew in line with the demands of tour operators who persisted in selling Malta as a sun and sea holiday destination, peaking in July and August, with little else to offer during the rest of the year. The tourism authorities and the industry became increasingly aware that Malta was no longer competitive in the

basic sun and sea package because of larger and often newer destinations that could handle much larger volumes (Pollacco 2003).

For more than half a century Malta's tourism activity was based largely on sun and sea and it is only since the year 2000 that there have been efforts to promote other forms of tourism. A process of repositioning was set in motion. The Malta product was redefined and became more reliant on Malta's distinctive comparative advantage, away from the more traditional sun and sea product to one that also incorporates its rich heritage. Key heritage sites were upgraded to improve their interpretation, accessibility, conservation and promotion (Metaxas 2009).

Changes in the way the tourism industry operates have brought about major changes in tourism destinations worldwide, including Malta. Malta is an island destination and therefore all visitors arrive by air, except for a few tens of thousands that arrive from Sicily by sea. The number of visitors to Malta is dependent on the seat capacity on air travel routes that are available. In 2006, low cost airlines started to operate to Malta. This brought with it lower fares, access to new markets and a significant increase in seat capacity. It was almost inevitable therefore that, following 2006, there were sustained increases in tourism numbers (Ebejer 2019). Tourist arrivals nearly doubled since 2010, increasing at an average annual rate of 8.7 per cent, reaching 2.59 million tourists in 2018 (Briguglio and Avellino 2019).

Apart from low cost airlines, the increased tourist numbers were made possible by two other factors. The widespread use of internet technology gave potential tourists access to information on accommodation and travel without the need for an intermediary, other than online. It also made it possible for individuals to make their own bookings. Moreover, short-term rentals for tourists (through Airbnb, Wimdu, and similar agencies) significantly increased the choice and availability of tourist accommodation. Travel became more affordable making it possible for people to travel more frequently (Dodds and Butler 2019).

Global changes in the way tourism operates impacted on the nature and dynamics of Malta's tourism industry (Fig. 1). Low cost airlines, independent internet booking and tourism rentals have made travelling easier and cheaper resulting in a more diversified and less seasonal industry (Graham and Dennis 2010; Ebejer 2019). In particular it changed

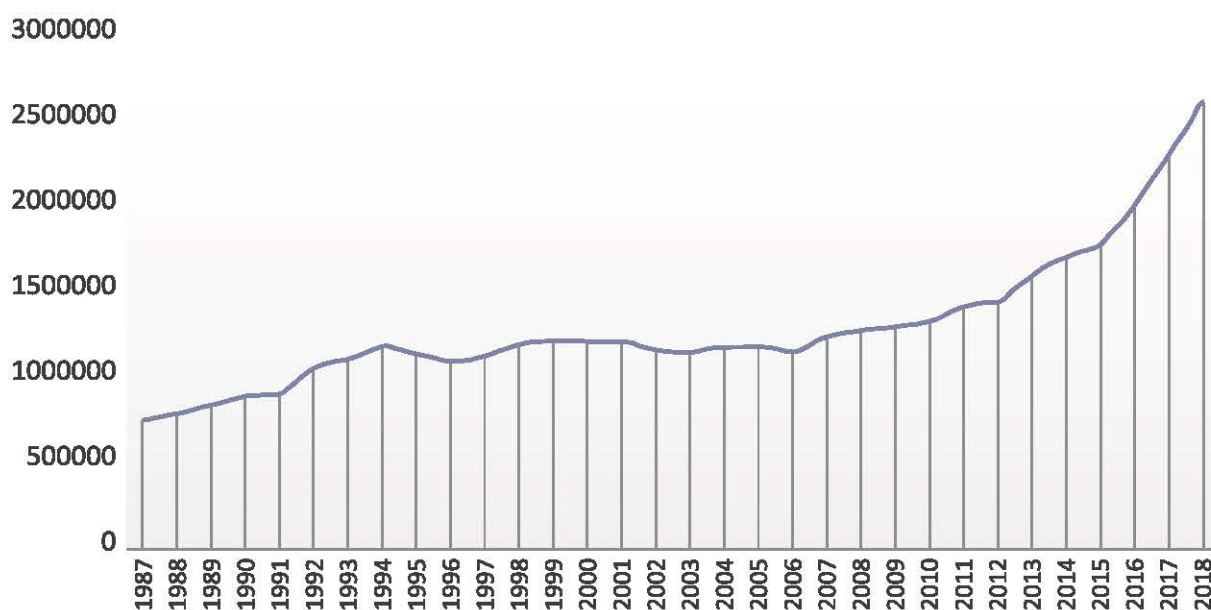


Fig. 1 Number of tourists visiting Malta. (Adapted from Graham and Dennis (2010) and Briguglio and Avellino (2019))

Malta's tourism from one that is heavily dependent on tour operator business to one that is more reliant on the individual travel tourist. The individual travel tourist (as opposed to tour operator tourist) rose from 33 per cent of the total in 2006 to 55 per cent of the total in 2010 (Ministry for Tourism 2012: 5).

Valletta: A Changing City

Valletta is the political and administrative capital of Malta. It is a relatively small area forming part of a much larger urban conglomeration around the Island's two main harbours. During the day it is full of life and activity, with innumerable offices, shops, cafes, restaurants, markets and sites to visit. The social and cultural life of Valletta residents revolves around the parishes, the band clubs and the annual parish feast (Ebejer 2019).

Valletta was built as a military stronghold of the Knights of the Order of St. John which controlled Malta from 1530 to 1798. It is surrounded by impressive fortifications most of which are still intact. The Order embellished it with many administrative, residential, cultural and

religious buildings. Valletta's streetscapes are characterised by distinctive timber balconies and extensive use of Maltese stone. Valletta's iconic nature was recognised with its designation as a World Heritage Site by UNESCO in 1980. Valletta is a city that constantly needs to adapt to changing needs, within the constraints set by the need to conserve the built heritage. Malta has an unusually rich heritage because of many layers of history and cultural influences (Ashworth and Tunbridge 2004). The urban heritage is dispersed throughout the islands but undoubtedly the highest concentration is in Valletta. Up until the millennium, there was very little public and private investment in urban conservation in Valletta. Without investment in maintenance and refurbishment, buildings deteriorate, especially if the buildings are old as is the case in Valletta. Public investment was limited to minor restoration, with projects worthy of note being few and far between. The lack of investment created a gradual yet steady downward spiral and increased dilapidation in many parts of Valletta (Ebejer 2019). Many streets and squares were occupied by moving traffic and the parked cars of office workers and shoppers. This generally detracted from the qualities of urban heritage spaces.

Beyond the millennium, there was an extensive programme of restoration of historic buildings and fortifications. There were several projects that used Valletta's built heritage in a distinctive and unique way including St. James Cavalier, Fort St. Elmo and the City Gate project (Ashworth and Tunbridge 2017).

Urban spaces and their quality are essential elements of the tourist experience in a historic area. Until relatively recently, only the main road of Valletta, Republic Street,² was pedestrianised. The turning point for Valletta was about 2005 when the authorities decided to invest more in the city. Pedestrian areas were extended to include other important spaces. This created spaces that are more amenable to pedestrians allowing visitors to better appreciate Valletta's urban heritage. Coupled with the extension of pedestrian spaces, transport access to Valletta was improved with the provision of extensive parking just outside Valletta and the introduction of a system of park and ride (Ebejer 2019). Parking in the

²Republic Street is the main spinal road of Valletta leading from City Gate to the main central square, St. George's Square and then on to Fort St. Elmo at the lower end of Valletta.

inner streets of Valletta was reduced and made against payment, except for residents. Bus terminus facilities were significantly improved and a passenger lift was built to connect the waterfront to the City centre. Ferry services across the harbour were improved with better boats and a more regular schedule (Deguara et al. 2019).

After the millennium, public sector investment in Valletta increased markedly in capital projects and in an extended programme of events. It was one of several factors that gave people added confidence to invest in Valletta properties, either for private residential use or for commercial use. Another factor was the designation of Valletta as a European Capital of Culture in 2018. Private investors realised the opportunities offered by a revitalized Valletta. Many historic private properties were rehabilitated and brought into use as high-end residences, boutique hotels, short-term tourism rental and catering establishments (Markwick 2018). Increased private sector investment in the restoration of historic buildings improves streetscapes and reduces the sense of dereliction in some streets. In spite of these developments, however, there are still pockets in Valletta where the dilapidation of buildings persists.

Tourism and Leisure in Valletta

Valletta contains the island's most important attractions all within walking distance of each other. Valletta's diverse and interesting urban spaces give visitors ample scope to explore and discover, this being an essential part of the tourist experience (Ebejer 2015). The main attraction is its historic character which is ever-present in all its streets and urban spaces. Moreover, it has numerous museums, churches and visitor attractions, all set in a historic context. The gardens at the periphery of the city provide quiet enclaves where people can relax and enjoy the open views.

The tourism attractiveness of Valletta inevitably translates into a demand for accommodation in or near the city. Until a decade ago, tourism accommodation in or near Valletta was very limited (Tunbridge 2008). The situation has changed in recent years with the increased provision of tourism accommodation in boutique hotels and tourism short-term rentals. In 2018, eight new boutique hotels added 160 tourist rooms

to the city (Cremona 2019). Moreover, the number of rental units (Airbnb or HomeAway) increased from 186 in 2016 to 530 in 2019³ (Airdna n.d.). When compared to a dwelling stock of 3865 (National Statistics Office 2014), 530 rental units may seem substantial. One could argue that the high number of rental units exerts a further downward pressure on Valletta's population as it makes it more difficult for Valletta's first time buyers to acquire a home in the city. On the other hand, in 2011 one third of Valletta's dwelling stock were unoccupied dwellings and many of them required maintenance and repair⁴ (National Statistics Office 2014). It may well be that many of the units now being used for tourism rental were previously unoccupied and/or on in bad state of repair. Their use for tourism accommodation provided the incentives to the owners to invest in the rehabilitation of their properties. From a destination perspective, increased tourism accommodation in Valletta is a positive development because it increases choice and the potential for the 'city break' market. An added benefit is that it generates more activity, including in the evenings.

Most tourism accommodation in Malta is located at some distance from Valletta meaning that a bus journey of between 20 and 50 minutes is required to visit. Inevitably the significant increases in tourism numbers to Malta translate themselves into more tourists spending at least a few hours in Valletta. Moreover, the cruise passenger terminal is a short walk away, so inevitably many cruise passengers choose to walk into Valletta. On the other hand, pedestrian areas in Valletta have increased, as have the number of food and beverage outlets. The capacity of Valletta to 'handle' greater numbers of tourists has been enhanced and thus potential impacts from tourist numbers can be better managed.

A rich urban heritage, increased tourism accommodation and more international tourists visiting Malta are factors that generate higher levels of tourism activity in Valletta. Tourism activity is also generated by a busy events calendar and revitalised leisure activity in the evenings.

³ Eight-six per cent are apartments whereas the remainder are rooms in private homes (Airdna n.d.).

⁴ Out of 3865 dwelling units, 1250 are vacant. Moreover, out of 3865 units, 994 are in need of minor repair and a further 1257 units are in need of moderate or serious repairs (NSO 2014).

In the 1970s, Valletta had virtually no evening leisure activity. This trend was reversed after the year 2000 with the opening of numerous bars and restaurants, many of which capitalise on the historic features of Valletta's buildings. Valletta offers numerous spaces where events can be held. Fabri (2016) lists as many as 16 different festivals that are held in Valletta throughout the year. Some target a national audience, others attract an international clientele and still others focus on local culture and religious traditions. These events are part of a long term strategy of bringing night time activity back into the City (Smith 2016).

In the daytime, additional tourism activity is generated by hundreds of cruise passengers. Upon arrival of a cruise ship, hundreds of passengers disembark over a short period of time along a short stretch of coastline. This could potentially be highly disruptive to the immediate area, particularly with regards to traffic. This was the situation in the first few years of the terminal but this has now been resolved with much better management. Some passengers choose to go on coach tours organised by the cruise ship itself. Others opt to take the hop-on hop-off tourist service, which stops immediately outside the terminal. Still others choose to make the short walk to Valletta. It is just a 15 minute walk, even less if the Upper Barrakka Lift is used. Passengers walking to Valletta have the added peace of mind that making it back to the Terminal on time is not reliant on transport services and traffic situations (Patiniott 2012). In 2017 the number of cruise liner passengers arriving in Malta was 670,000 (National Statistics Office 2019). On an average day, the author estimates that there are two to three thousand cruise passengers in Valletta. These are significant numbers, especially considering that central Valletta is a small area already subject to pressures from office workers, shoppers and tourists.

Population Trends and Valletta's Liveability

Being the Island's capital, Valletta was never far from public debate. In the 1990s the main issues were a declining population and a high number of vacant properties. The former was due in part to a trend of residential properties being converted into offices. This was addressed with a

planning policy for Valletta (Planning Authority 2002) that specifically prohibited the conversion of residential properties to office use, with some minor exceptions. This policy was instrumental in preventing widespread conversion of residential buildings to offices and hence prevented further significant population loss. Another issue was vacant dwellings largely due to anachronistic rent laws that acted as a disincentive against property owners renting property (Smith 2010), which in turn resulted in lack of investment in older properties and degraded streetscapes. Rent legislation was changed in the mid-1990s to facilitate residential renting but the problem of vacant properties in Valletta persisted with one third of 3865 dwelling units unoccupied in 2011 (National Statistics Office 2014).

For several decades, Valletta experienced a downward trend in population, with a drop of 20 per cent in population from 7262 in 1995 down to 5748 in 2011 (National Statistics Office 2014). People with family roots in the city are moving out and are being replaced in part by new residents who remain somewhat detached from the local community (Dingli 2016). The buying of properties in Valletta by non-Maltese nationals began in the 1990s but it has gained momentum more recently. Wealthy foreigners seek larger prestigious houses which they refurbish. More than just a property, the new owners are seeking a lifestyle they would not find elsewhere in Malta. The lifestyle sought is that of living in a magnificent historic context, within easy reach of enjoyable pedestrian spaces and gardens and close to several social and cultural facilities. In many cases, rehabilitated old houses are used by their new owners for short periods throughout the year. Gentrification is a process of change that is generally perceived to be a threat because of the increased risk of losing the social and cultural activities that are rooted in local communities. On the other hand, new residents bring much needed investment into the capital. Properties which would otherwise decay are restored and brought back into use.

Increased property values in Valletta has made it increasingly difficult for middle and low income people to move to Valletta. Prices have been pushed up because of demand for tourist uses such as boutique hotels and tourism rental accommodation and also because of the demand by wealthy non-Maltese (Ebejer 2016). There are intrinsic disincentives for

first time buyers to buy a property in Valletta including the high initial and running cost of rehabilitated properties. Planning constraints, even if well-intentioned, create further difficulties, including additional costs, making it more difficult for people to invest in Valletta's historic properties.

Increased tourism activity has reduced Valletta's liveability in several different ways. In recent years inconveniences for residents have increased in part due to increased tourism activity. Since the millennium there have been more bars and restaurants opening in Valletta (Grima 2016). Their initial focus was on lunchtime to cater for Valletta's office workers, but now most cater for both daytime and evenings. Up until the millennium, a widely held view was that Valletta was too quiet in the evenings so increased evening activity is a welcome change. There are, however, impacts. Many catering establishments have tables and chairs outside their premises. These generally create a pleasant ambience for diners and for passers-by. On the other hand, they are noise sources that cause nuisance to residents in the immediate vicinity, more so in the summer when residents tend to leave their windows open (Grima 2016). Noise issues are compounded because some of Valletta's urban spaces are sometimes used for popular music events with loud music playing late into the evening. One Valletta resident spoke about how noise pollution and extensions of entertainment facilities have created a disturbance to residents and that in conjunction with other difficulties "one ends up deciding that one might just as well leave Valletta" (Deguara et al. 2019: 26). Apart from noises, external tables and chairs also have aesthetic implications with far too many spaces being taken up. The canopies and umbrellas that go with them are often visually intrusive and undermine the aesthetics of the historic environment. There is evidence, however, that Valletta is transforming from a residential to a catering destination (Zammit and Taldeiri 2019). In some streets tables and chairs impede the flow of pedestrians resulting in crowding. Weak enforcement exacerbates the problems.

The lack of vehicle parking is another worrisome aspect of living in Valletta. Increased leisure and tourism activity increases demand for parking. This in turn impacts residents. The issue was partly addressed in 2006 with the introduction of a resident parking scheme. Moreover significant parking facilities outside Valletta and a park and ride helps to

ease the pressures but it is never quite enough, and problems of parking for residents persist.

A thriving local community has tourism implications because the social and cultural life of residents add vitality to a destination and therefore make the place more attractive to tourists. When visitors see and share the life of residents, there is a sense of connectedness that enhances the visitor experience (Ebejer 2015). There are several factors that have made Valletta less liveable and this will in the long term detract from Valletta's tourism attractiveness. Similar arguments could be made about Valletta's liveability. Valletta has become more amenable for those who seek a certain city-type of lifestyle, close to pleasant urban spaces with cafes and other amenities. On the other hand, for people starting a family, living in Valletta is much less convenient as families with young children are more reliant on cars to get to schools, health centres, sports and other facilities. As explained earlier, increased leisure and tourism activity in Valletta has made it less liveable, and also less affordable (Grima 2016; Deguara et al. 2019), but at the same time there are other social forces which are causing young born and bred Valletta residents to move out.

Is Valletta Subject to Overtourism?

When discussing overtourism, a holistic consideration of the impacts is required, both positive and negative. The sections above consider impacts to which Valletta is subject relating to increased tourism activity and also impacts on liveability. In spite of many debates on the subject in recent years, the term 'overtourism' lacks a clear definition and is open to multiple interpretations. The lack of clarity makes it very difficult to evaluate whether a destination is subject to overtourism. It is also highly subjective depending on the observer's background and point of view.

Taking anti-tourist sentiment as a marker of overtourism is subjective. At what point should the expression of dissatisfaction with tourism be considered overtourism? Moreover, public expression of dissatisfaction with tourism should be treated with caution. It could be a small group of people who are vociferous and who make effective use of the media. This is not to say that it should not be given due importance but it needs to be

placed in an overall context of both positive and negative impacts of tourism. People's understanding and interpretation of overtourism is dependent on their own perspective and involvement in the historic area.

In the past, stakeholders cooperating in the common space of historical cities had interests that more or less converged towards encouraging more tourism (Plichta 2019). Stakeholders included residents, tourists, business entities or public institutions. Historic areas provided the enjoyable experience for tourists. They also created the economic activity that benefited business entities and created more jobs for local residents. Public authorities also stood to gain from more tax revenue, while politicians gained more support from the electorate. As tourism activity increased and the impacts became more evident and pronounced, this convergence of interests broke down and hence the increased debate on overtourism. In line with this thinking, this chapter considers the perspectives of different stakeholders namely (i) Valletta residents, (ii) persons with an interest in the built heritage, (iii) tourists, (iv) business entities operating in Valletta and their employees, (v) the Maltese public. The presentations of these different perspectives are based on the author's dealings with these different groups over many years in different capacities⁵ such as a voluntary activist, as an urban planner and as a researcher and academic. They are also supported by various opinions about Valletta that are featured in Malta's national printed media. Moreover, as a regular user, the author constantly observes Valletta's urban dynamics including tourism activity and its potential impacts.

- (i) Residents would argue that Valletta is subject to overtourism because of the increased inconveniences from tourism and leisure activity in the evenings. They would also refer to a declining number of born-and-bred Valletta residents because of a growing trend of apartments being dedicated to short-term rentals for tourists (Deguara et al. 2019). There are also concerns that cruise ships entering the Grand

⁵The author was a committee member of Valletta Alive Foundation, an NGO that lobbied in favour of the City, its residents and the business community. In the 1990s, he worked as an urban planner on local plans, including on one that covered the Grand Harbour region. More recently as an academic, he carried out various research on Valletta and on Malta's tourism.

Harbour are very polluting and this affects the air quality in Valletta and surrounding towns (Times of Malta 2019b).

- (ii) People with an interest in the built heritage would also express serious misgivings about building alterations and additions that might compromise their historic value and integrity. Recently, the Valletta Local Council, supported by three environmental NGOs, sent an open letter to the national government appealing for urgent action to safeguard the capital city's outstanding universal value. In their letter (Malta Independent 2017), they wrote:

The recent reports of illegal developments taking place in historic properties are only the tip of the iceberg. Over the past months and years, we have watched Valletta being subjected to an unprecedented barrage of new developments, many of which are not sensitive to the values and fragile nature of the historic setting. As a result, we are gravely concerned that the very qualities that give Valletta its distinctive character are under threat. While acknowledging the great strides that have been made in reviving the city, we must also recognize that this intensification in activity is giving rise to new threats to the liveability of the city and to the safeguarding of its Outstanding Universal Value, which is the basis of its World Heritage Status.

There are concerns that tourism-related development of the upper floors of buildings negatively impact Valletta's iconic skyline (Times of Malta 2019a). Another concern is the visual intrusion caused by tables, chairs, umbrellas and canopies which bars and restaurants put out in the street. The intrusions undermine the appreciation of the historic buildings and urban spaces (Zammit and Taldeiri 2019). Some might attribute this to overtourism. The counter argument to that is that Valletta's built heritage is being made better use of and therefore this is more likely to be well maintained in the long run. As explained above, this is due to increased public investment in Valletta, motivated in part by tourism but also by the state's moral obligation of protecting its heritage.

- (iii) In research carried out on tourist's experience of Valletta (Ebejer 2015), there is nothing to indicate that tourists consider the tourism activity to be excessive. Some tourists expressed the desire to get

away from the more touristy areas but this was due more to a wish to seek more authentic character of the place. There are, however, two instances where tourists may be affected negatively. The first is queuing for St. Johns Co-cathedral. This is Valletta's must-see site and is sought after by tourists and cruise passengers. Because of the arrival of large numbers of cruise passengers in a relatively short period of time, long queues often build up in mid-morning. Another negative situation may be the crowding at peak times in the mornings in Republic Street. This main pedestrian street is very popular with tourists and shoppers. The situation has been made worse with part of the street being taken up by external tables and chairs. In spite of the negative effects, it is debatable whether these two situations could be described as overtourism.

- (iv) Business entities operating in Valletta are not unduly concerned about the impacts of tourism as long as the character and attractiveness of Valletta are not compromised. These include people who operate in retail, visitor attractions, catering establishments and hotels which are located in or close to Valletta, as well as their employees. There is also a growing number of Valletta property owners who rent out to tourists.
- (v) The reaction of the Maltese public to tourism in Valletta is mixed. Valletta is a symbol of Malta's nationhood and therefore many people are pleased about the city's newly found splendour and vitality. In particular, people welcome the revitalisation of Valletta in the evening, in part because it makes the city attractive at night and in part because it provides a suitable alternative for evening leisure. Regular users of Valletta are concerned about the daytime overcrowding in the more touristy areas. In some streets pedestrian flows are disrupted because far too many tables and chairs are put out. The excessive take up of public space is generally viewed negatively by the public. Although there are concerns, the view held by the wider public is that Valletta is not subject to overtourism, at least not yet.

Some stakeholders would argue that Valletta is subject to overtourism. Others would claim that the tourism impacts are within reason and justifiable by the benefits. The author's stand is that there are the initial signs

of overtourism. These are related mostly to the loss to Valletta's long-term resident community. There are also concerns relating to the impacts of evening leisure as well as the occasional instances of overcrowding at some tourist hotspots. If no action is taken to mitigate, it is likely that some of these impacts will become severe and unacceptable. Over several decades, Valletta's population has declined significantly due to a range of socio-economic forces other than tourism. Increased tourism rental units and reduced liveability will accelerate the downward trend in population to the extent that there will not be enough people to sustain the social and cultural life of the city.

Limiting Tourism Impacts

To safeguard liveability for Valletta residents, there is a case to be made for preventing further increases of tourism rental units. This can be achieved through better enforcement as it is likely that some of the 530 units are being rented out without the appropriate license. Moreover, impacts on liveability necessitates better regulation and control of the use of public space by catering establishments. There is, however, a reluctance by the authorities to introduce better regulations and to enforce current ones. The authorities are more focused on pushing forward the commercialisation of parts of Valletta without any consideration that this will be detrimental to residents (Times of Malta 2015). Dodds and Butler (2019) discuss different approaches to address overtourism. No two destinations are the same and there is no one-size-fits-all solution for overtourism (Koens et al. 2018). One approach to deal with tourism impacts is the dispersal of tourists. An earlier section referred to the pedestrianisation of several streets and piazzas in Valletta. This was instrumental in creating more space for tourists and hence make the crowding less likely. Before the extension of pedestrian areas, the author distinctly remembers instances of groups of tourists crowding onto narrow pavements, blocking other pedestrians, while the guide explains. With extensive pedestrianisation, crowding is far less likely to occur.

Tourism activity in Valletta is concentrated in the central part. At the lower end of Valletta there is some tourism activity largely generated by a

couple of tourist attractions. The tourism impacts are limited and well within acceptable levels. To ease the pressures on the central area, one approach could be to encourage tourists to walk beyond the central area and explore other parts of Valletta. This would require investments primarily to improve the streets and piazzas in these other parts of Valletta and make them more pedestrian friendly. The counterargument to this approach would be that this could result in detrimental negative impacts on areas that are predominantly residential.

Conclusion

Urban areas are dynamic and evolve over time. Historic areas adapt to meet new social and economic demands. They do so within urban planning constraints intended to manage change in a manner that will safeguard the history and the cultural value of the area (Bandarin and Van Oers 2012). The predominant issues facing an urban area also change over time because of changing values and socio-cultural context. Prior to the year 2000, the issues in Valletta were a decaying built heritage, poor quality urban spaces, unutilised tourism potential, lack of activity in the evenings and issues of parking. To varying degrees these issues have been addressed through public and private investment but in the meantime new issues have come to the fore.

Tourism has impacted Valletta in many different ways. On the plus side, it has brought in investment for the rehabilitation of properties for tourism related uses. Although pockets of dereliction still exist, these have been reduced to some extent. The more important urban spaces in Valletta have been greatly enhanced mostly through pedestrianisation. There were also negative impacts primarily because of gentrification with long-term Valletta residents moving out and being replaced by people with no roots in the city. Leisure activities in the evening create noise and reduce liveability. A trend has been established with more and more tables and chairs occupying public spaces. Tourism was not the only force that brought about these changes. Social and cultural forces were also in play particularly the widespread desire in the Maltese population that the capital is treated in a manner that is appropriate to its status and its symbolic significance.

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