

THE TIMES, THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 28, 2006

Strategy for tourism (II) **Golf courses in Venice**

Joseph Farrugia

One of the proposals the Malta Employers' Association made in a bid to boost Malta's image abroad is to publicise its colourful maritime history, which few countries, if any, can claim to have. Malta also has the perfect stage to project this image, namely the majestic Grand Harbour. Ask any tourist who visits Malta on cruise a liner and s/he will vouch that the Grand Harbour is unmatched by any other harbour visited.

A massive crowd puller and revenue generator in Venice is the September Regatta, with the boat races and a spectacular pageant celebrating its rich culture and history. The Grand Harbour is at least an impressive venue as the Grand Canal in Venice for such events, and would be an ideal setting for a marine pageant with a display of ships from different chapters of Malta's history, spanning from prehistoric times to the present day. It will be a unique spectacle in the world, bringing together a display of Roman vessels, galleons of the knights of St John, Turkish warships, possible replicas of World War II ships, like those that formed part of the fateful Santa Marija convoy. All of these, and others, shaped the glorious history of the Grand Harbour.

I am convinced that in this manner the regatta could be built into a global event that attracts thousands of tourists to Malta, if marketed properly and produced professionally.

Our ship builders can collaborate with our historians and specialists from the Malta Film Facilities to create replicas of the ships from different eras. Our film facilities have had extensive experience in building boats for films like Troy and many others. The vessels themselves will be an attraction all year round and may be an extension to the Maritime Museum. Alternatively they can serve as venues for events. Who wouldn't grasp the opportunity to be served dinner on a galleon of the knights of St John in the middle of the same harbour that witnessed one of the most dramatic battles in history? (New Zealand is successfully compensating for its limited history by attracting Japanese tourists who dress up as Hobbits to roam the landscape where Lord of the Rings was filmed.) The vessels would also serve so that the positive initiatives being taken around the harbour - the yacht marina, the Valletta Waterfront, and, eventually, Dock No. 1 - will become a distinctive product of global standing.

This project becomes even more tempting if one factors in the fact that SmartCity will be set up just a couple of kilometres from the Grand Harbour. Tecom Investments Ltd may be more than interested in stamping their brand on such an endeavour, and such co-branding may in turn be instrumental in drawing deserved international media attention to our harbour.

The event can be marketed among major sailing clubs that could also be invited to join the pageant by having their member boats sail through the Grand Harbour. This could be used to attract the most spectacular sailing boats to Malta.

Various employment opportunities will be created, not only in the building of the vessels themselves, but also in organising the pageantry and related activities.

In proposing this project, the Malta Employers' Association seeks to put forward ideas that are alternatives to conventional approaches to tourism, that fit within the limit of our resources and respect the historical and natural environment, that are ultimately the source of our tourist attractions. The regatta pageant will project the image of a small nation with a large harbour and a unique history. This image will have spill over effects on other sectors of the economy and will fit perfectly with the concept of Malta as a hub and as a bridge between continents and cultures. More than a tourist attraction, the pageant will be a massive PR campaign for Malta.

The details of this and other proposals MEA submitted to the government may be found on the association's website at www.maltaemployers.com.

Mr Farrugia is director general of the Malta Employers' Association.