

A South African's guide to moving to and making it in Malta: A shot of mass tourism on the rocks

 By Marcus 'The Maltese Falcon' Brewster

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Question: What do Malta and Iceland have in common besides being *Game of Thrones* locations? Answer: More than you think...

Iceland, sporting the northernmost capital city in the world at a latitude of 66 degrees North, is not exactly a backyard to the Maltese Islands, with 4,000 odd kilometres separating Reykjavik from our shores, notes columnist Alan Dedun.



Grottagja Cave near Myvatn Iceland used in *Game of Thrones*, 9 July 2017 | (c) Emanuel Kaplinsky - 123RF.com

Despite other incongruencies between the two (for instance, Iceland dwarfs our archipelago by over 300 times), the parallels between the two islands could not be more striking. For instance, there is a similarity between the total number of tourists (around the two million mark) who jaunt over to the two islands each year.

Island likenesses

There is also (a) the islands' popularity with the film industry, (b) the GDP contribution ascribed to tourism (roughly 30% in Malta and 35% in Iceland), as well as (c) total population, which does not breach the 500,000 barrier in either territory, although it must be said that the Maltese population density (1,300 individuals per km²) towers stratospherically above the Icelandic one (less than 4).

The current windfall experienced by the Icelandic tourism sector has been most recently powered by the prominent featuring of that island's evocative landscape in the *Game of Thrones* TV series. Malta similarly had its GoT moment in the first season where some of the archipelago's scenic attractions were used as locations.



Azure Window , famous stone arch on Gozo island, Malta, where *Game of Thrones* was filmed © viewingmalta.com | Malta Tourism Authority

According to Dedun, if Iceland is on a path to being sullied by tourism, it is certainly not alone. According to the IP World Tourism Monitor at ITB, 24% of global destination management organisations reported that their destination was overcrowded and that 37% said it affected them negatively.

The current onslaught Iceland is facing from tourism has also been indicted in a perceived swipe at the nation's social fabric. In this vein, the following citation from Thorvador Arnason, director of the Nyheimar Regional Research Centre, is quite telling:

“ Local communities are characterised by a certain proximity between members. There is good social cohesion, it is an open society which likes to be together. People are used to seeing familiar faces and then, all of a sudden, all the faces you see are foreign. We find ourselves with a sort of clash between local interests and those of an international consortium of visitors. Overnight, your beautiful little country is not what it used to be. ”

Destination marketing

Hopscotch to Malta, where the President of the Malta Hotels and Restaurants Association, Tony Zahra, has recently solicited the adoption of sustainable tourism measures by government in future tourist strategies being devised by the Maltese authorities, following the umpteenth record in tourist arrival figures for the first half of this year.

While Mr Zahra's call was met with considerable scepticism, given that it might have been spurred by a dip in hotel occupancy figures (at the hands of a surge in non-conventional accommodation services, such as those offered by Airbnb), it struck a chord with those who have been calling for aeons for more quality tourism.

I found reference to this very issue in the regular [Times of Malta column](#) which looks at headline stories from 10, 25 and 50 years ago. In 1993, the paper reported a decrease in tourism spending generally despite an increase in tourism numbers.

This was interpreted as an increase in mass tourism and a decrease in quality tourism – the holy grail of destination marketing: fewer, richer visitors.

“If Iceland, with its insignificant local population density, feels the urge to take measures to avoid the unravelling of its natural and social fabric,” says Deidun, “the same urge should be all the more appropriate for Malta, whose accessible coastline has been defaced over the decades by unbridled touristic development and for which the only tourism Carrying Capacity Assessment carried to date goes back to 2001.”

And yet, as reported last month, the tourists keep on coming...



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Marcus 'The Maltese Falcon' Brewster 20 Jul 2018



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