

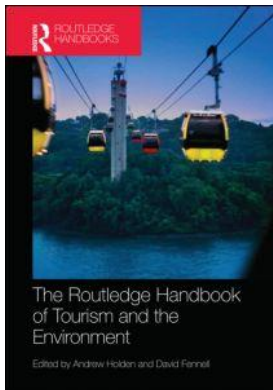
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Island tourism

Godfrey Baldacchino

Introduction: how 'the island' beckons

One comes across travel deals offering 'Island Escapes', but not 'Mainland Escapes'. One can buy an 'Islands' wall calendar, but asking for a 'mainland wall calendar' will surely cock an eyebrow or two. A widely distributed, recent full-page advert by Visa Inc. lists 'Visit an Uninhabited Island' as one of 23 '[T]hings to do while you're alive'. Googling the term 'mainland tourism' on 2 November 2010 delivered 11,200 hits; but googling 'island tourism' on the same day conjured up 717,000.

Tourism has become such an important industry for many island economies that 'small island tourist economies' represents one of three broad classes of development models postulated for island jurisdictions (*about which more below*). In such places, tourism is seen as a mechanism for generating jobs, foreign exchange and infrastructural enhancements, which connects readily with an often fine-tuned marketing strategy that seeks to tap a primordial allure for the exotic, the unexplored and, more recently, the green and pristine.

An enduring Western tradition, dating back at least to the *Odyssey*, has considered islands as special places of mystery, solace, danger or worship, first in the Mediterranean world and then beyond (Gillis 2004). With the onset of the European age of discovery, islands started being constructed as outposts of aberrant exoticism, peopled by innocent and exuberant natives (Lowenthal 1972: 14; Gillis and Lowenthal 2007). Later still, the island became the backdrop for the enactment of a male and heroic paean to colonialism, the subject of Robinsonnades that extend up to the present in the likes of Tom Hanks' movie *Castaway* or the TVB blockbuster series *Lost* (Loxley 1990). No wonder, with all this historical baggage, islands project themselves aggressively today as ideal destinations for the world's burgeoning travelling classes: whether for relaxation, adventure, frolic or self-discovery (Butler 1993). Indeed, as islands can also be bought, they also offer experiences of total control; you do not have to be a mad scientist to 'play God' on your own island (Wells 1896; Vladi Islands 2010; Island God 2010). This hedonistic drive goes hand in glove with the realisation by many developing island states and territories that they can 'sell' their natural capital to such visitors, by appealing to their constructed modern needs for travel and vacation, as much as for escaping stress, routine and responsibility. In this manner, such islands carve out for themselves what suggests itself as a beguilingly quick

and easy route to development (e.g. Apostolopoulos and Gayle 2002; Löfgren 2002; Gössling and Wall 2007). Other island features can be added to the mix, enhancing the overall allure of the island tourism brand: physical separation, jurisdictional specificity, cultural difference, a sense of 'getting away from it all' and a possibility of claiming an understanding of the totality of the locale as trophy (Baum 1996). You can more easily conceive of 'doing' Barbados than Mexico; or doing Mauritius than Kenya.

The sum total of these forces at work is that islands are now, perhaps unwittingly, the objects of what may be the most lavish, global and consistent branding exercise in human history. They find themselves presented as locales of desire, as platforms of paradise, as habitual sites of fascination, emotional offloading or religious pilgrimage. The metaphoric deployment of 'island', with the associated attributes of small physical size and warm water, is possibly the central gripping metaphor within Western discourse (Hay 2006: 26). Expanding tourism development within various islands is today associated with rising income, in-migration of labour, higher literacy and longer life expectancy.

Island types

Aspects of remoteness, isolation and timelessness can be said to apply to most island spaces; but there are otherwise significant differences between 'warm water' and 'cold water' islands and their respective appeal to tourism. The warm water versions are typically densely populated. They generally include references to good food, fun and relaxation on emblematic sandy beaches in sunny and warm locations, and freer sex with friendly island inhabitants willing to tease and please ... as their illustrated colour brochures make a point of describing (Gössling 2002). In contrast, located as they are beyond tropical latitudes, cold water islands have much shorter tourism seasons: strong cold winds and more challenging weather conditions effectively restrict the industry to a few weeks of activity every year. The sea is not for swimming, and there is a lower diversity of food, native plants and animals. Population density is low, and an unadulterated hinterland (typically pristine wilderness or rolling countryside) tends to dominate. Their inhabitants are less attuned to the service culture that global tourism has come to expect. If the Ss – sun, sea and sand (along with sex?) – characterise the first cluster, the second batch of islands are typified by the Is – ice, icebergs, isolation, indigenous people (Baldacchino 2006a).

Tourism penetration on islands

There are 36 small island states and territories, each with a resident population of less than one million and a land area of less than 5,000 km² (and for which reliable data is available for the start of the twenty-first century), which have the highest level of tourism penetration by jurisdiction in the world (McElroy 2006). All 36 are 'warm water' islands. The least developed tourist economies within this set are located primarily in the remote Indian and South Pacific Oceans and are characterised by small-scale facilities, absence of cruise traffic, longer average tourist stays and lower occupancy rates. Out of this set of 36, there are nine island jurisdictions, of which seven in the larger Caribbean region – the British Virgin Islands, US Virgin Islands, Dutch Sint Maarten, Aruba, Cayman Islands, Turks and Caicos, Bermuda, Malta and Guam – exhibit the 'most developed' and mature tourist economies of the cluster. They are not just very small and relatively crowded; they also manifest a high mean visitor density and high stock of tourist accommodation per km². When discounting for the particular footprint of cruise or yacht visitors, three island destinations stand out even more sharply with 63–75 tourist rooms per km²: Dutch Sint Maarten (actually a half island) in the Caribbean, the UK Overseas Territory of

Bermuda in the northwest Atlantic, and the Mediterranean sovereign state of Malta. Indeed, Malta is the only sovereign state within this sub-set of nine.

Not surprisingly, these same locales are often cited in the literature for tourism-induced 'ecosystem damage, marine pollution, overcrowding, host tensions and declining vacation quality' (McElroy 2003: 237). These unwholesome effects impact even more heavily on island ecosystems with their low species diversity, small discrete species populations and a high level of biotic endemism that is closely adapted to specific environmental conditions and is thus highly vulnerable to external disturbance (MacArthur and Wilson 1967; Percy *et al.* 2007; Liew 1990). Tourism becomes the latest guise of a 'plantation island' economy model, where island milieux are radically transformed to accommodate a single, key cash crop (itself possibly an invasive species) or service: such as bananas, sugar, copra, cotton and tobacco (Warrington and Milne 2007; Watts 1993; Grove 1995) for the generation of rentier income from abroad. Tourism-related changes of the physical environments of islands include: migration and concomitant population growth, land conversion for infrastructure development, excessive use of (typically expensive) fresh water, high energy use, degradation of reefs and mangroves, and the pollution of coastal and near-shore marine habitats with sewage and garbage (e.g. Pearce 1989). Considerable and irreversible damage can also be caused to cultural and historic assets through frequent tourist visitations. All this without factoring in the impact of global environmental change: sea-level rise may see considerable proportions of some island and coastal nations disappear under water; and rising salinity levels in the water table threaten islander livelihoods. Mass tourism may have contributed to the rise of an indigenous middle class and entrepreneurs on many island jurisdictions; but it has also swamped local culture, contributed to domestic inflation and damaged insular ecosystems, while not necessarily leaving much value-added to the local economy (Beller *et al.* 1990; Briguglio *et al.* 1996; Lanfant *et al.* 1995; WTO 2004, 2005).

Tourism and models of island development

One particular model of 'island development' has been highly influential since its formulation in 1985 and, within which, tourism is noticeable in its absence. This is the so-called MIRAB model, an acronym for migration, remittances, aid and bureaucracy. It describes a strategy for maximising welfare by individuals, households and governments, based significantly on two sets of flows from abroad: remittances from migrants, and aid (which is often more easily procured in small economies, especially from a former or vestigial colonial power), which allows states to support a waged civil service (Bertram and Watters 1985, 1986; Bertram 2006). Once set up, the MIRAB conditionalities tend to lock firmly into place and become hard to dislodge. There have been a number of suggested alterations to MIRAB that take on board the growing importance of tourism in many contemporary island economies (e.g. TouRAB by Guthunz and von Krosigk 1996; MIRTAB by Ogden 1993), possibly taking up the slack resulting from an offshore finance and banking industry that is now reeling from the considerable pressure being applied by such international organisations as the European Union, the G7 and the OECD. Current examples of MIRAB island economies would include Cape Verde, São Tomé e Príncipe and Kiribati.

Various small island states and territories fit this model of structural dependency; but there are other development paths and models that differ markedly from MIRAB. One such alternative is based on five capacities that characterise the creative political economies of another set of small-island societies. This is the PROFIT model, another acronym that stands for people considerations (affecting citizenship, rights of residence and employment), resource management, overseas engagement and recognition, finance and transportation. In contrast to MIRAB, these island societies are characterised by economically strategic migration policies, toughness in negotiating

exploitation of local resources, control over viable means of transportation, and tax regimes designed to attract foreign investment, all of which are based on self-rule. The PROFIT model favours a more proactive policy orientation and a disposition towards carving out procedural and jurisdictional powers, with a smart use of jurisdiction and paradiplomacy to establish endogenous policy formulation (Baldacchino 2006b, 2010). Clear candidates for the PROFIT model are Malta, Mauritius and Singapore.

These models are dynamic and island jurisdictions do find themselves shifting from one type to another as their economic and political fortunes change. Greenland is moving decidedly from MIRAB to PROFIT (from the status of a poor and aid-dependent colony to a resource-rich and self-reliant independent state); whereas Nauru has gone from riches to rags and has been defined as a 'failed state' (Connell 2006): moving from PROFIT to MIRAB.

One needs to appraise the impact of tourism on both MIRAB and PROFIT economies. Tourism comes with 'genuine comparative advantages' for small island states and territories (Connell 1991: 265). Treadgold (1999) has argued that tourism has helped to break Norfolk Island, a previously classic MIRAB case, out of this structural mould, 'erasing' its MIRAB characteristics or rendering them insignificant. However, tourism is in itself a rent-accruing activity bearing its own 'geo-strategic' services; these hardly vest jurisdictional muscle in the provider. The industry remains fickle and vulnerable, mainly to economic uncertainty and both local and regional political instability; it is also a largely private-sector activity lying outside 'managed' external-relationships syndromes.

Small-island tourism economies (SITES) have originally been proposed as a new and distinct, third, small island development syndrome altogether (McElroy 2006), but more recently as a subspecies of the PROFIT syndrome (Oberst and McElroy 2007; Parry and McElroy 2009).

Tourism and infrastructure: a tale of two economic sectors

Even discreet tourism infrastructure on small islands can have considerable environmental impact. The opening of a new hotel, the extension of an airport runway, or the inauguration of a cruise liner terminal, in particular, can each significantly increase tourist visitations, and challenge the state of nature that was arguably the prime attraction (Newsome *et al.* 2000: 51–6). The expansion of tourism has been challenged on India's Andaman Islands (e.g. Earth Times 2010), but this is an exceptional case: the penguins on the Falklands, and the 'dragons' on Komodo, continue to act as tourism magnets. Even World Heritage Sites, like the Galápagos Islands (Ecuador) or Rapa Nui/Easter Island (Chile), can have, and have had, their (already fragile) locales and biota endangered.

On densely populated islands, tourist-driven infrastructure development can command considerable tracts of land. The building of airports (including landing strips/runways long enough to accommodate long-haul airplanes), seaports (including cruise ship terminals), roads, hotels, restaurants and other 'tourism product' sites (museums, fun rides, recreation parks ...) provides a major injection of cash into the economy. Island tourism infrastructure and services can suffer from considerable economic leakages: food, furniture and equipment may have to be imported; and especially so where tourism is dominated by foreign-owned resort enclaves. Yet, other associated services can have compensatory domestic multiplier effects on demand: these include printing, transportation, communication, energy and various other trades and spinoffs. Such large-scale building activity may be indicative of the contribution that the construction and real estate industries may make to the island economy; possibly one as considerable as tourism. Indeed, whereas tourism is lauded for its significant contribution to island economics, the construction and real estate sectors are not usually accorded much, and certainly no equal, praise.

Unless such an appreciation is acknowledged and recognised, it may become hard to understand why so much construction activity goes on regardless of not just the environmental damage but also of the reduction of the basic attractive qualities of an island place to potential future visitors. As currently presented, neither MIRAB nor PROFIT island development models get close to this vital acknowledgement.

Case study

Malta

A 'monster' and an 'ugly conglomerate' block of apartments is rising at the seaside village of Marsascala, Malta, looming directly over the parish church (Inguanez 2010). A main tourist attraction in Malta's southeast, Marsascala is a 'popular, relatively laid back ... location; a fishing village since Roman times [with] a considerable number of good restaurants [and a] lovely seaside promenade' (Ta' Monita Residence 2010). This quaintness has become suspect of late: there are many more pleasure craft anchored in its sheltered bay than fishing boats. Even if the fantasy has survived so far, it is now being rudely challenged: covering 16,000 m², the Ta' Monita development is heralded as 'the first exclusive development' in the locality, towering over the parish church, and is targeting foreign purchasers (typically expatriate retirees or second home tourism).

A recent State of the Environment Report (MEPA 2006) has noted that there is in Malta '... [an] increasing tension between protective mechanisms and the desire of owners to redevelop their properties. This is resulting in loss of historic fabric, inappropriate design of new and restored buildings, and illegal excavations within archaeologically sensitive sites' (Camilleri *et al.* 2011; also Boissevain 2004).

The Maltese islands [Malta, the main island (population 380,000); Gozo (30,000) and Comino (barely inhabited)] are a set of arid, semi-desert, dry limestone blocks that today bear the full weight of a sovereign state with 410,000 residents and some 1.2 million annual visitors. Some 25 per cent of total land area is built up. Housing stock is running at some 20 per cent excess of supply over demand. Space is at a premium. When it acceded to the European Union in 2004, Malta obtained a permanent derogation, limiting foreigners from buying secondary residences on the islands.

Meanwhile, the Maltese must contend with a considerable stash of artefacts and cultural assets that jostle each other for priority conservation and management. A number of these – like Ġgantija, Haġar Qim and the Tarxien Megalithic Temple Complexes – are lucky enough to have made it on the list of UNESCO World Heritage Sites; the bulk, however, struggle to attract attention. Standing stones or giant's rocks survive surreptitiously between rows of houses. Perhaps, in some cases, these assets' best defence against the practices of appropriation for private use or vandalism is, simply and sadly, wanton abandon and benign neglect (Baldacchino 2007).

For those who look on 'from the outside in', it is easy to adopt a judgemental stance. The Maltese are not appreciative enough of their priceless heritage, they may say. In their enthusiasm to sample and experience the past, foreign observers may forget that Malta is *not* a living museum, and that its people are *not* just commodified quaint natives, but members of a society firmly wedded, for better or for worse, to the twenty-first century (e.g. Boissevain 1996: 235).

Indeed, an appreciation of personal property is absolutely fundamental to a more complete understanding of the Maltese socio-economic psyche. The construction industry has a huge multiplier effect on the local economy; there are also significant cost advantages involved in using globigerina limestone as construction material – it is one of the few, locally mined, natural resources.

Property assumes a towering importance as economic and cultural capital in Maltese society. In spite (or because) of the phenomenal cost of residences, many Maltese would undergo enormous sacrifices to purchase an owner-occupied dwelling. Owning a house is a major investment; an heirloom; a source of family pride; a fortress to protect its owners against an all-intrusive society where privacy comes at a premium. If there is money to spare and an own house is already available, a second summer house is a favourite acquisition. Housing is such a key rampant investment that no Maltese Government has yet mustered the courage of taxing it. As Margaret Mizzi has argued, the Maltese remain comfortably wedded to 'The *Stone Age*' (personal communication, November 2006). These insights collectively explain the glut of housing in space-starved Malta; and the continued tendency of appraising public space as potential private real estate. This also explains why, in the choice between construction for private gain and maintaining a cultural-historic asset for the common good, the choice for the former is, often, a foregone conclusion. Heritage (in its physical form) is tolerable and acceptable as long as it is functional; it is appreciated best if appropriated as a private good; but insufferable if it clashes with private and individual interests.

Thus, although crucial to the Maltese economy, tourism must rub shoulders with a construction industry that contributes even more significantly to the island country's gross domestic product. Between the census years of 1957 and 2005, the Maltese population has almost doubled, and yet the built-up area of the Maltese Islands has increased almost eight times in the same period: from 11 to 87 km² (MEPA, private correspondence, 2009). Coastal regions are under special threat. The long term challenge, for Marsasala as much as for Malta as a whole, is to avoid the 'Benidorm-isation' of the coastline, with hardly any control or regard for local culture, environment and landscape.

Conclusion

As long as islands continue to lure tourists, tourism will continue to lure island 'developers', maintaining its position as a strategic sector for many island societies, whether of MIRAB, PROFIT, SITE or any other mould (Clark 2009). The circumscribed nature of islandness, the inordinate impact of tourism, and the relative smallness of size and high population density, exacerbates the tensions surrounding heritage and landscape conservation, while making them visible and glaring.

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