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RESEARCH ARTICLE

REVISED Tourism, Real Estate, and Urban Pressures: The case of Marsascala, Malta

[version 2; peer review: 2 approved, 1 approved with reservations]

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Abstract

This paper examines the urban transformation of Marsascala, a coastal town in Malta, through the lens of tourism development and its social repercussions. Engaging with Young's (1983) model of touristization and landscape change, and drawing from qualitative interviews, field observations, orthophoto analysis, and secondary data, the study traces the town's evolution from a fishing village to a site of intensive tourism consolidation. Findings reveal how population growth—driven by tourism and foreign labour—has led to overdevelopment, infrastructural strain, and a declining quality of life. Building on empirical insights, the authors propose a novel seventh stage in Young's model: real estateisation, wherein real estate speculation and short-term rentals reconfigure coastal localities beyond tourism. Marsascala thus becomes a case study in understanding the entanglements between tourism, migration, housing, and urban change. The paper contributes to debates on sustainable tourism, the Blue Economy, and the need for integrated social impact assessments in coastal governance.This paper is linked to the EU Cost Action CA221222 Rethinking the Blue Economy: Socio-Ecological Impacts and Opportunities (RethinkBlue), in relation to the themes covered by Working Group 3 - Port cities & coastal communities.

Keywords

Maltese Archipelago; Sustainable Tourism; Blue Economy; Touristification; Real Estate; Maritime Sociology; Sustainable Development Goals; Coastal Tourism

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This article is included in the COST Actions gateway.

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REVISED **Amendments from Version 1**

The revised paper integrates the reviewers' feedback to enhance clarity, focus, and academic rigour, whilst maintaining the core evidence-based argument of the study, namely that Marsascala's transformation from fishing village to tourism hub is also being characterised by real-estatisation driven by property speculation and rentals.

The revisions were conducted by the original authors Karl Agius and Michael Briguglio, together with new author Jorge Luis Bermúdez Pérez.

Key updates include the replacement of the 'Tourism and Urban Development' literature review section with a more current draft, ensuring alignment with recent scholarship in relation to tourism and urban development, focusing on processes such as gentrification as well as on theoretical considerations such as the reflexivity of tourists. While a suggested typology of coastal destinations was considered, the authors chose not to pursue this due to the paper's empirical focus on touristification and real estate in Marsascala, Malta. To reflect this emphasis, the title of the study was revised to: "Tourism, Real Estate, and Urban Pressures: The Case of Marsascala, Malta."

The authors also included additional analysis of photomaps and provided further explanation of travel websites such as TripAdvisor and Airbnb. References to the Sustainable Development Goals and the character of the village were removed from the conclusion to streamline content and to remain focused on the scope of the study and the empirical evidence.

The authors also conducted a thorough spellcheck, identified typographical issues, and included new references. The abstract was also revised to improve coherence.

Any further responses from the reviewers can be found at the end of the article

Introduction

Tourism is a vital economic sector in the Mediterranean basin. Coastal tourism is a major sector in the Blue Economy. In its Blue Economy Report for 2023, the European Commission states that the latter is linked to many other economic activities, thus having effects on employment, income, and well-being. From a macroeconomic perspective, the Blue Economy in general is a more significant contributor to national Gross Value Added (GVA) and employment in insular Member States or those with archipelagos, such as Malta (p.9). In its report, the European Commission notes that coastal and maritime tourism is the largest and fastest-growing sector of the EU Blue Economy, attracting many visitors to EU coastal areas.

At the same time, the Blue Economy paradigm is subject to critical engagement, for example in relation to its impacts and opportunities. A practical example of this is the EU COST Action CA221222 Rethinking the Blue Economy: Socio-Ecological Impacts and Opportunities (RethinkBlue), As per its Memorandum of Understanding (COST, 2023), this COST Action centres around the Blue Economy and related policies affecting European societies. Its purpose is to 'rethink the Blue Economy, in two ways. First, by assessing its impact on coastal societies, and second, by exploring opportunities deriving from innovations and potential synergies between established and emergent marine activities.' (p.3)

One of the areas of focus of RethinkBlue is 'Port Cities & Coastal Communities' which is summed up as follows in the Memorandum of Understanding (p.9):

WG3 "Port cities & coastal communities"	Port cities and coastal communities as complex organisations that are deeply connected with local spaces, culture, economy, and environment	• Tourism and recreational use of ports and coastal areas • Coastal demography and new inhabitants, e.g. labour migrants, maritime lifestyle migrants etc. • Conflicts between different users • Identity, maritime heritage and history: different uses of the past

In this paper, coastal tourism is situated accordingly. Here one needs to mention that apart from impacts such as economic growth, this sector also faces high seasonality (Agius & Briguglio, 2021). This is not to mention that coastal zones also face the threat of sea level rise and storms due to climate change (p.37) (European Commission, 2023). This industry's extensive and uncontrolled growth may negatively impact the fragile natural coastline (Mejjad *et al.*, 2022). Several small settlements along the Mediterranean coast have experienced extensive urbanisation because of incentives that encourage tourism development. Construction of hotels as well as other housing projects have increased drastically. The dense construction of multi-storey buildings along the shoreline resulted in loss of green spaces, overpopulation and overstretching of local infrastructure (Burak *et al.*, 2004).

The aim of this paper, which was presented in the first conference of the RethinkBlue Cost Action (2024) is to analyse how Marsascala, a coastal town in Malta, has been urbanized over the years, with particular attention to the development of the tourism industry. In this regard, Bruce Young's (1983) "general model of the process of 'touristization' and landscape change" is engaged with, together with relevant theories and studies of tourism and urban development to understand which stage of tourism development Marsascala has reached, how has tourism development altered the locality, what are the implications on the local community and what are the next changes that the locality can undergo.

Literature review

Tourism and urban development

This section examines key theoretical and empirical contributions from the social sciences concerning the relationship between tourism and urban development, with particular emphasis on the processes of touristification and their socio-spatial and economic implications. In this context, the concept of *touristification* has gained increasing prominence as an analytical tool for interpreting urban transformations linked to tourism, often conceived as a hybrid between "tourism" and

"gentrification." However, due to its polysemic nature, various scholars have proposed distinct epistemological frameworks for its delineation.

Ojeda and Kieffer (2020) advocate for a phenomenological operationalization of the term, grounded in empirical evidence and centred on specific geographic contexts, thereby avoiding ideologically pre-loaded definitions. In their formulation, touristification is understood as an empty signifier that can be filled with the unique characteristics of each tourist territory. This flexible analytical lens is complemented by Young's (1983) conceptualization of *touristization*, which identifies successive stages in the transformation of a locality's landscape and culture under tourism pressure. Focusing on former fishing and agricultural villages, Young's model illustrates a shift from traditional economic activities to tourism as the dominant force, evolving from a complementary activity (Stage 3) to a structuring element of the village's physical, economic, and symbolic configuration (Stage 6). From Stage 4 onward, the real estate market begins to play a crucial role, intensifying in Stage 5 with a marked increase in permanent residents.

A complementary perspective is offered by Butler (1980), who introduces the Tourism Area Life Cycle (TALC) model, outlining seven stages in the evolution of tourist destinations: exploration, involvement, development, consolidation, stagnation, decline, and—optionally—rejuvenation. The model's strength lies in its capacity to anticipate destination transformations and to inform strategic tourism management. Similarly, Knafou (2017) critiques the traditional model of passive tourists shaped by travel agencies, proposing instead the notion of *reflexive tourism*. This concept seeks to overcome the limitations of sustainable tourism approaches that often place blame on tourists without fostering critical reflection. Reflexive tourism emphasizes changing tourists' perceptions and attitudes as a more viable and impactful strategy than attempting to reverse transformations in increasingly saturated tourist destinations.

Empirical studies further illustrate how these theoretical models manifest across diverse geographical settings. In Cagliari, Italy, Leccis (2023) examines the negative consequences of overtourism, including the transformation of entire neighbourhoods for tourism purposes and the mobilization of residents in protest. In a different context, Adhinata and Sawitri (2022) explore the touristification of Canggu, a village in Bali, Indonesia, where governmental policies and capitalist development have mobilized local communities to participate in tourism through the provision of diverse accommodation options. Their study reveals a complex interplay between structural conditions and local agency. Similarly, Woo *et al*. (2022) document mixed impacts on residents' quality of life in Bukchon Hanok Village in Seoul, South Korea, underscoring tourism's ambivalent effects on residential areas.

A bottom-up perspective is presented by Freytag and Bauder (2018), whose research in Paris highlights the role of social proximity between tourists and residents in reshaping urban space. Their findings show how the expansion of platforms such as Airbnb contributes to the emergence of new tourist areas, which interact with broader processes of gentrification, mobility, and urban planning—viewed here as mutually constitutive dynamics.

The dialectical relationship between touristification and gentrification is further developed by Jover and Díaz-Parra (2020), who interpret both processes as urban strategies to revalorize real estate and appropriate urban surplus, especially in highly symbolic areas. In their case study of Seville, they observe a loss of authenticity and the displacement of lower-income residents, replaced by lifestyle migrants and more affluent newcomers. This transformation is accompanied by a shift in commercial activity, with an increase in businesses catering to tourists, such as cafés and nightclubs.

In the Balearic Islands, Blázquez Salom and Murray (2010) analyse the evolution from a tourism model based on charter flights and hotels to one characterized by intensive touristification, including the proliferation of unregulated accommodations and luxury housing. This transformation has significantly increased pressure on land and resources, while simultaneously converting housing into a speculative asset, deepening social exclusion for immigrant and working-class populations. As with Young's model, this case illustrates an advanced stage of tourism development dominated by real estate and financial speculation.

Ojeda (2024), in his study of Quintana Roo, Mexico, reinforces this perspective by emphasizing tourism's peripheral nature: it tends to emerge in marginal spaces while central regions function as tourist emitters. According to Ojeda, touristification involves the commodification and massification of these peripheral spaces, aiming to integrate them into the global capitalist core. He argues that this process is neither random nor unintentional but rather driven by a constellation of actors—including tourists, governments, NGOs, international organizations, and local populations—who advance various tourism agendas. The region's trajectory mirrors other models, evolving from domestic tourism and secondary residence development to significant public investment, justified by the tourism sector's framing as the "sole engine of development," and ultimately culminating in the dominance of real estate and corporate actors, backed by neoliberal policies of privatization and liberalization. This real estate-driven phase is widely recognized in the literature as the most advanced stage of destination transformation.

Finally, it is important to note that tourism is not the sole driver of structural change in so-called touristified areas. Milano *et al.* (2023) underscore the role of other temporary residents—such as digital nomads, international students, short-term expatriates, and creative workers—whose presence also contributes to rising housing costs and the erosion of neighbourhood belonging. As Kabil *et al*. (2022) argue, the evolving relationship between tourism and urbanization remains poorly defined and demands greater scholarly and policy attention.

Tourism in Malta

Given that this study focuses on a locality in Malta, it is important to give a brief outline of the development of tourism on this small archipelago.

Since the country's independence in 1964, successive governments have invested heavily in tourist infrastructure. The tourism product has also been enhanced to compete in a challenging market. Tourism numbers and expenditure have increased steadily, throughout the years, with the introduction of low-cost carriers bringing even higher tourist arrivals. Eventually, by the end of the century, concerns about the sustainability of the tourism sector were growing, for example in terms of overdevelopment, congestion, and environmental degradation (Cassar, 2016).

Tourism was thus having both positive and negative effects on host communities. For example, it has been a key economic sector in the Maltese islands reaching 3 million tourists (The Malta Independent (1)). In the meantime, the percentage of Maltese workers in the tourism sector decreased from 82% in 2009 to 40.6% in 2019. The sector thus had to rely on foreign workers due to the growth of the tourism sector and the limited local workforce. As a result, the Maltese islands experienced a construction boom in short-let private accommodation to respond to the demand in accommodation and the sector's dependence on expats who require accommodation (MHRA, 2022).

In the meantime, whilst the concept of sustainable tourism was mentioned in policy documents of different governments, "in practice however, sustainability was often mostly offered lip service only and the success of the industry was generally measured in terms of tourist numbers by the tourism authorities. The dependence of mass tourism continued unabated, and very little, if at all, was done to reverse this trend." (Briguglio & Avellino, 2021, p.134–5).

Besides, Malta did not manage to reach EU and national targets related to alternative energy (Agius, 2022). Thus, the Maltese Islands have experienced large-scale building activity regardless of the environmental impact and the reduction of the basic attractive qualities of the island to future visitors (Baldacchino, 2012).

In the meantime, a perception survey related to people's attitudes towards tourism on the islands, (Briguglio & Avellino, 2021), respondents highlighted the economic, sociocultural, and infrastructural benefits of tourism, as well as the honour and pride of hosting tourists, but they also expressed concerns about the environmental, social and economic costs of tourism, such as pollution, congestion, loss of identity and price inflation (p.137).

Materials and methods

Area of study

This study focuses on Marsascala (see Figure 1), a main seaside town situated in Malta's South-East situated between



Figure 1. Map showing the locality of Marsascala. Map prepared for the authors by Andrea Pace.

two valleys not far from the towns of Żabbar and Żejtun (Malta Tourism Authority (1)).

The locality has witnessed a significant increase in its population over the years (see Table 1). According to Malta's national census, the locality had a population of 888 in 1957, which grew to 1,936 in 1985, before increasing to 4,770 in 1995, 9,346 in 2005, 11,059 in 2011, and 16,804 in 2021. The current population consists of 12,157 Maltese and 4,647 foreigners. Between 1995 and 2021, the population density per square kilometre increased from 2,239, to 3,126. Comparatively, Malta's population stood at 519,562, experiencing a massive increase of 25% in a decade, "the highest intercensal change ever recorded to date." - and the population density was of 1,648.6 per square kilometre in the same year (National Statistics Office – Malta (1)). The increase in residents in Malta, which has one of the lowest fertility rates in the European Union, was mainly due to foreign workers. In fact, more than one in five residents are foreign, with 115,449 non-Maltese persons residing in Malta. In the South-East district, where Marsascala is situated, the top five of non-Maltese nationalities are Italian (2,007), British (916), Indian (518), Filipino (510), and Serbian (494) (National Statistics Office – Malta (3)) (see Table 2).

Table 1. Population of Marsascala and Malta according to Malta National Census.

Year	Marsascala	Malta
	-	212,258
1921	-	241,621
1931	-	305,991
1948	888	319,620
1957	876	314,216
1967	1,936	345,418
1985	4,770	378,132
1995	9,346	404,962
2005	11,059	417,432
2011	16,804	519,562
2021		

Source: NSO (1)

Going back to the mid-twentieth century, Marsascala was primarily a fishing village, and it has also served as a summer resort (Seychell, 2010). Eventually, the locality was earmarked for touristic development - where it hosted a major four-star hotel - The Jerma Palace - between 1982 and 2007 (Hopkins, 2014). This explains why as of the 1980s and 1990s the locality became a destination for both locals and tourists (Malta Tourism Authority (1)).

Previous studies had shown that although a number of international tourists visited or resided temporarily in Marsascala, it was mainly domestic tourism which was responsible for the population increase felt mostly during the summer months (Brincat, 2002). In the 2000s, the locality started to witness a decline in tourism, and this was attributed to a number of factors including the treatment of waste on the outskirts of Marsascala (Azzopardi, 2007), which was itself mired in political controversy (Aquilina, 2011).

Due to its restaurants, hotels/guest houses (see Table 3), bars and clubs, the locality has nowadays developed into a touristic hub and entertainment destination. The locality houses circa 30,000 people in the peak summer months and according to the Malta Tourism Authority's (MTA) Traveller Survey, an estimated 270,000 tourists visited Marsascala in 2019 (Malta Tourism Authority (1)).

During the past decades, the locality was subject to much land and property development (Times of Malta (1)), and in some cases it was the locality with the highest number of new dwellings approved by the Planning Authority (National Statistics Office – Malta (2). Another visual example of social and economic changes in the locality is that there are many more pleasure craft anchored in its sheltered bay than fishing boats (Baldacchino, 2012).

Other recent developments include the closing of the same waste treatment plant, the development of a family park, and the announcement that the former Jerma Palace Hotel in Marsascala would be redeveloped into a complex of 130 apartments and a 500-room hotel (Times of Malta (3)). Marsascala has also been subject to environmental contention, for example on the respective proposed developments of a new University Campus, a water polo pitch and a yacht marina. These projects, as well as earlier ones such as the proposal of another hotel complex were eventually discarded, amid pressure

Table 2. Non-Maltese population.

District	Italian	British	Indian	Filippino	Other nationalities	Other EU Member States
Malta	13,838	10,614	7,764	7,571	20,967	22,443
South Eastern	2,007	916	518	510	1,957	1,595

Source: NSO (3)

Table 3. Licensed accommodation in Marsascala throughout 2023.

Type of accommodation	Licensed applications	Number of beds
Hotels	2	104
Furnished premises	39	163
Host families	7	20
Total	48	287

Source: Malta Tourism Authority (2)

from civil society (Boissevain, 2004; Briguglio, 2016; TVM, 2020; Visanich, 2022). Residents have also expressed concern about a public contest for the regeneration of the locality arguing that commercial interests were being given priority over the needs of residents (The Malta Independent (2)).

Residents have also expressed dissatisfaction with the permitted increase in building heights but expressed satisfaction with the number of restaurants and entertainment outlets (Curmi, 2017). In the meantime, residential, commercial, and touristic development kept taking place in the locality. In Baldacchino's words,

"The long-term challenge, for Marsascala 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." (Baldacchino, 2012 p.205).

Methods

As stated in the introduction, the aim of this study is to analyse how Marsascala, a coastal town in Malta, has been urbanized over the years, with particular attention to the development of the tourism industry. For this purpose, a number of research methods were used.

The first was an interpretative qualitative research method which focused on the perspectives of local political elites on the issue under investigation. Five in-depth interviews were held with stakeholders, including residents' civil society representatives and elected local government officials (from the main governing and the opposition parties in Malta's two-party system) to collect relevant data. Interviewees were all male and their age varied between 40 and 70 years. Expert sampling, which involves the selection of 'typical' and 'representative' individuals, was used to recruit interviewees (Finn *et al.*, 2000). This was possible due to the authors' respective social networks, which are made further accessible in a hyper personalized small-island state (Corbett & Veenendaal, 2018). The research method was granted ethical approval by the University of Malta. Interviews lasted over 1 hour and were held online between July and August 2023. Online interviews have been widely used in the field of sociology. This approach is cost and time-effective and ensured that individuals with busy schedules engage in the study causing the least inconvenience (Thunberg & Arnell, 2022). The use of online interviews has been used in tourism research (Power *et al.*, 2017) since the use of virtual platforms also permits valid and high-quality interviews (Suryani, 2013).

No formal questions were prepared; but a checklist of topics derived from the literature review and the research plan was kept in hand to guide the researchers throughout the interview. The major issues tackled included (1) the local economy in the locality, (2) physical changes observed in the built environment over time, (3) how (if any) has the quality of life of residents been impacted and what are the drivers of change, (4) major challenges in the locality, (5) expected impact of development projects planned, and (6) tourism models (if any) acceptable for the local community.

Other secondary data was obtained from major news portals and reports published by authorities and NGOs concerning the area of study. Other portals such as TripAdvisor and Airbnb were used to collect useful information on whether Marsascala still attracts tourism and major attractions. As per Minkwitz (2018), TripAdvisor allows qualitative information to be obtained about a specific area, as well as the type of activity, such as tourist attractions. Hence its search engine was used to obtain information on major attractions in the locality of Marsascala. Airbnb was used as it is the leading provider of travel accommodation within the sharing economy. Scholarly research is devoting increasing attention to Airbnb. The site has been used to study various aspects such as Airbnb supply (listings, lodging and short-term rental) (Andreu *et al.*, 2020), as in the case of this research. This was done by inserting the name of the locality in the search engine of the website.

Another research method made use of visual tools, in line with the recommendations of Sagoe-Addy & Appeaning Addo (2013), and Hernández-Cordero *et al.* (2017). Here orthophotomaps at 20-year intervals (1957; 1978; 1998; 2018) were obtained from the Geomatics Unit, Planning Authority (Malta) and used to observe changes in the development of the locality (See Figure 2). The 1957 image corresponds to the period before the touristic development while the three other photos show various levels of tourism development and degrees of urbanisation.

In addition, a walk-along field trip was conducted during January 2024, where the authors made observations on the use of buildings along the coast of Marsascala Bay. These were categorised into houses, apartment blocks, hotels, bars/restaurants/catering outlets, public/tourist services, major attractions, sports/leisure facilities, unbuilt terrain, open spaces/green areas, retail, and others (including construction sites and socio-political centres). This primary source of data was used to support statements made by interviewees. Some considerations were taken. Buildings with mixed use (example a restaurant at ground floor and apartments on the other floors) were considered separately. During the field trip other observations such as the number of visible tower cranes, activities taking places along the coast and people working or frequenting the area were noted as per Veal (2006).

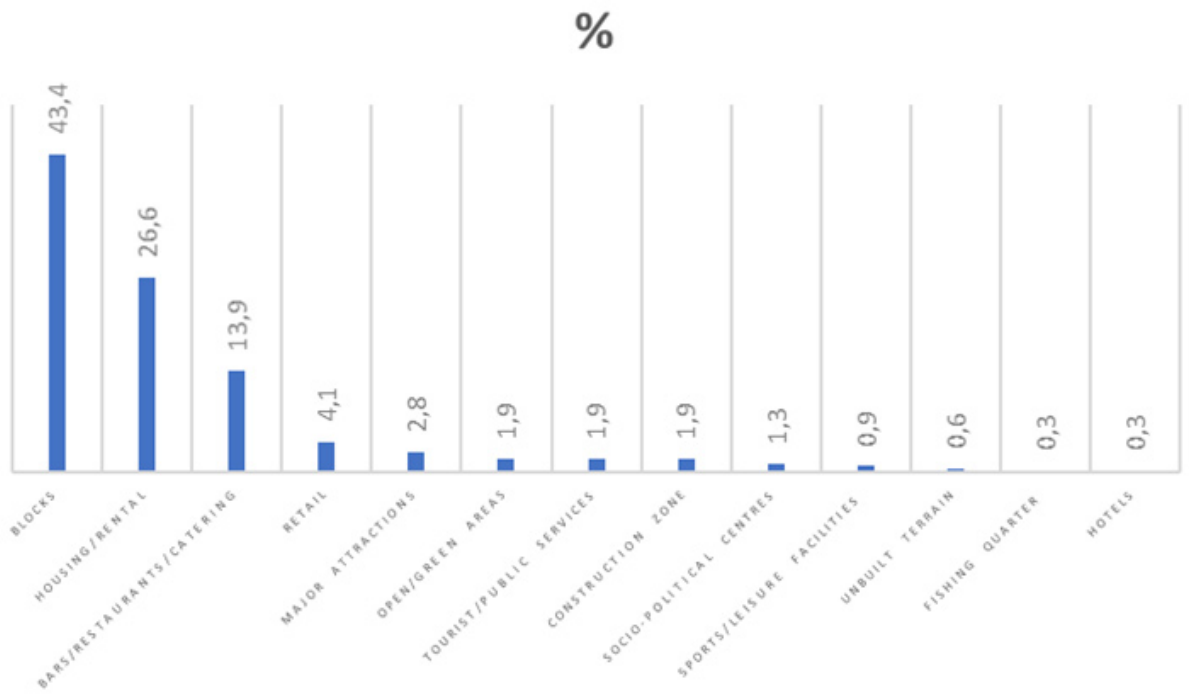

Figure 2. Bar graph showing land use along Marsascala bay.

Data was analysed within the framework of reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022), wherein themes were constructed and engaged upon by the authors in relation to the data in hand.

Limitations of this research method include the possibility of leaving out various perspectives from within the locality, particularly in view of the convenience sample within the elite interviewing framework. This could be mitigated by an accompanying study featuring a representative sample. Another limitation relates to whether social scientific research is taking a broad enough view when studying such matters (Dahlet *et al.*, 2023). This could possibly be acted upon by "Strengthening the integration of natural and social science research and the effective fusion of the results of that research to inform interested and affected parties of options available to solve common problems." (Burbridge, 2020, p.139)

Results

The results of this study can be grouped into five main themes (see Table 4). These are presented in the following section and are followed by a series of recommendations put forward by the local stakeholders, and subsequently engaged upon by the authors of this article.

Tourism plays a key role in the local economy

The now defunct Jerma Palace Hotel played a vital role in the rhetoric of all interviews held. Those interviewed explained that in the past, the Jerma Palace Hotel used to be fully booked all year round and the overspill used to help smaller hotels. Furthermore, several tourists would book half-board and hence go out to eat at one of the local restaurants. When the Jerma closed, small hotels collapsed and restaurants were also badly impacted. However, the locality continued to be frequented by second home owners who are also good tourists for the locality.

Table 4. Major themes resulting from the study.

Themes
Tourism plays a key role in the local economy
Population increase and overdevelopment are major challenges in the locality
More services are available, but the quality of life is deteriorating
Redevelopment of Jerma Hotel is a major concern
A different form of tourism can be offered in Marsascala

Source: Malta Tourism Authority (2)

In the past 5 years new boutique hotels have opened and old hotels have made refurbishments attracting tourism to the locality. Furthermore, several owners rent extra rooms for short lets through sharing economy platforms (example Booking.com and Airbnb). In fact, a search on Airbnb (November 2023) resulted in over 170 apartments/rooms available for rent. Furthermore, several guesthouses, and apartment blocks used for short-term rentals were observed during the field trip. This is in line with

the data provided by Malta Tourism Authority in Table 3 which shows that there are 287 registered beds. One should also keep in mind that the number of beds might be higher due to rental apartments which are not declared with national authorities. This shows that the locality still attracts hundreds of tourists mostly in private accommodation and contributing directly to the local community. According to interviewees, the revitalisation of tourism boosted the catering sector.

Other sectors which are gaining ground include water sports. This is confirmed by reviews on TripAdvisor. Other activities and attractions outlined on the portal include diving, Spas, the salt pans, towers, and parks. A heritage trail observed during the field trip listed seventeen attractions including chapels and military buildings such as batteries and redoubts. These serve as a pull factor for tourists to frequent the locality.

Population increase and overdevelopment are major challenges

Interviewees explained how the locality used to have a small population and along with few second home owners from nearby villages such as Zejtun and Zabbar, the locality used to be visited by few tourists, mostly British and ex-Royal Air Force, in the summer period.

However, over the past two decades, the locality witnessed a sharp increase in the population. In fact, the size of the local council - which depends on the size of the population in the respective locality - increased from five members (at its inception in 1993) to eleven members. A member of the local council said that when he first joined the local council, the population was of approximate 7,000 people but has seen the population going up to 17,000. In summer, the population is even bigger as there are still some summer residences, and several rent an apartment to stay close to the sea over the summer period. The Ramla ta' San Tumas, has become a small village of 2,500 people. A resident explained that until two decades ago, the population of the locality would multiply during the summer months but now this trend has changed and thousands of people are living in the locality all year round.

The increase in population brought with it extensive development. Figure 2 and Table 5 show how land is used along the promenade of Marsascala Bay, as per results obtained through a field trip carried out for this study. During the field trip alone, fifteen tower cranes were visible from various points along the bay. A resident said, "This is not development but overdevelopment." Another interviewee said that there are always excavations taking place and when one tower crane is dismantled, two others are erected.

A resident said that Marsacala has a history of being targeted for key projects. One example is the project proposed at Munxar which was abandoned because of objections (Boissevain, 2004). He added that even the area of Nwadar Park was in the past threatened by the development of the 'American University of Malta.' A member of the local council said that the promenade is also under threat. However, the local council objects to structures being built on the promenade. The locality has recently also been earmarked for the development of a yacht marina. A member of the local council said that this would have been a positive step as it would have led to organization of boats and a designated swimmer zone but the way it was presented led to several fears among residents.

Table 5. Classification of buildings along the coast of Marsascala.

Year	Number of buildings	Percentage %
Houses	84	26.6
Apartment blocks	137	43.4
Hotels	1	0.3
Bars/restaurants/catering outlets	44	13.9
Tourist/public services	6	1.9
Major attractions	9	2.8
Sports/leisure facilities	3	0.9
Unbuilt terrain	2	0.6
Open spaces/green areas	6	1.9
Retail	13	4.1
Construction zone	6	1.9
Socio-political centres	4	1.3
Fishing quarter	1	0.3
Total	316	100

Source: Malta Tourism Authority (2)

While the population had increased, some felt that investment in infrastructure did not match the new demands. There is still the same network of roads and facilities. Allowing additional floors to be built was causing even more challenges. One interviewee said that paying a penalty fee to the Planning Authority for not fulfilling planning policies was not solving any issues with development and lack of parking.

An interviewee said that the rise in population also brought with it challenges with waste management, but this cannot be blamed on foreigners and tourists. While it is not difficult to manage a huge locality with diverse cultures, building administrators need to do more to inform tenants of waste collection rules. It is worth pointing out that during the field trip no outstanding waste issues were noted along the promenade, however other areas of the locality with a concentration of apartment blocks were less clean and tidy.

Furthermore, the population is now made of various foreigners (see Table 2). This was also observed during the field trip with several foreigners, including third country nationals, both working in the catering sector as well as frequenting other local services. The large Filipino community in Malta even celebrated the feast of Santo Nino in Marsascala (Times of Malta (5)). Echoing some popular sentiments in the country, some concern was expressed on the increase of foreigners by respondents. According to a resident there is

no more a sense of community. Another resident said that overpopulation was a major societal change and criticized politicians for their decisions. "Population is constantly getting bigger - politicians are heading us in the wrong direction."

More services are available, but the quality of life is deteriorating

As a result of the increase in population, the locality now offers more services including several supermarkets, pharmacies, doctors, and dentists. There is also a new police station and a new school which has some 1,400 students, some forty-seven different languages and six classes for every year. However, a resident spoke against the development of a school and a police station saying these took up few of the remaining open spaces in the locality. He said that both national and local governments were giving a bad example. Supporting this argument, another interviewee said that open spaces and green areas have shrunk and criticized authorities for chopping mature trees to make space for other infrastructure. Similarly, a small fuel station made an extension taking up further green space.

A member of the local council said, "Luckily we have the promenade where to walk but even this is under threat from kiosks which to date have been successfully blocked by the local council." While services in general increased, they are not enough for the population size. For example, the public bus service is not sufficient for demand in certain hours.

In addition, the locality was never planned to have seven stories of buildings in certain areas and such a huge population. As a result, there is a big issue with parking. A resident said that the rise in population and traffic had also caused the traditional vegetable vendors to be removed from the square to facilitate traffic management, altering the character of the village.

According to residents the quiet environment related to the locality had vanished as excavation works were constantly taking place. The constant presence of tower cranes has also changed the landscape of the locality. In this regard, one resident said "I want to live in peace, I want to enjoy my property. I do not care that my property has more value."

A common sentiment expressed by respondents was also about the few open/green spaces, and how this has negatively impacted their quality of life. Indeed, high quality public open spaces have been found to contribute positively to people's quality of life (Beck, 2009; Nasution & Zahrah, 2014).

Redevelopment of Jerma Hotel is a major concern

Overdevelopment and lack of planning is a major concern for locals. However, the redevelopment of the Jerma Hotel is even more controversial. An interviewee said that the redevelopment of Jerma Hotel is a complex issue. In the past, it was needed for the Southern part of Malta as it used to serve professionals who visited the dockyard or close by industrial estates. Furthermore, according to a member of the local council the Jerma Hotel used to attract a niche of tourists who used to look for a quiet place and who travelled to Malta to swim, eat and relax. It was also a place where local communities could meet. However, its new proposed development follows current trends that merge real estate with the development of the hotel to make the project feasible.

One resident said, "The problem in Marsascala is not an issue of bad planning but an issue of no planning." The area known as Siberia (where the Jerma hotel will be redeveloped) has developed and now has over 10,000 residents but there is no green/open space. As a result, some locals do not want to have a hotel and prefer if the government takes back the land to convert it into an open space for the local community. Another interviewee supported the project saying that plans include a central square open for the public and this will add an open space for the residents.

A big fascia wants the hotel to be rebuilt without any real estate if public space is to be sacrificed. According to a study conducted in 2014, most locals, businesses and authorities regard the overall tourism impact as positive and agree with the decision of placing Marsascala back on the tourist map. Furthermore, they also expressed their wish to see the revitalisation of the former four-star hotel and/or building of other hotels to regenerate tourism in the locality (Hopkins, 2014). One resident said that land was originally given to the private sector for tourism purposes and not real estate, but the new project will include real estate, not just a hotel.

Others have a different view. One interviewee said, "We ruined almost all Malta, now we want to ruin here too?" He said that several believe that the aim is to build eight floors and later make a request to build additional floors causing further problems in the locality. Another interviewee said that while it may be positive for the economy, it will cause further traffic and increase the parking problem. "The bypass is already jammed, and the hotel will bring further traffic to the locality."

A different form of tourism for Marsascala

In general, the respondents are not against tourism. In fact, some interviewees expressed disappointment that the hop on hop off bus does not include Marsascala in its itinerary to bring tourists to visit the locality.

There is agreement that the locality can offer a different form of tourism than other parts of the island. The locality is still home to some fishers and attracts tourists because it is different. One interviewee said "This is why we did not want the marina, not to be similar to other localities. Let's use this different character to attract tourists."

Some want to focus more on sea-based tourism. The locality already has a diving centre and wrecks off the bay which are an attraction for diving enthusiasts. Other suggestions have been to restore the St Thomas tower and repurpose it as a tourism attraction and to value the saltpans found along the coast of the locality. As outlined on TripAdvisor, certain attractions can only be observed from the outside.

The locality also boasts of the Magħluq Natura 2000 site and the Nwadar national park where afforestation of some one-thousand trees is being planned. A resident said that the park needs to be well maintained as some trees were planted but died later. "Nwadar can become a small Mizieb" In addition Marsascala is home to the family park. The site is an interesting place as no further waste management is taking place in the adjacent plant.

Recommendations

Interviewees made several recommendations to address current issues. One resident suggested the implementation of a 5-year moratorium on building to ease overpopulation, overdevelopment, and traffic. 'Freezing development' has also been proposed by Young (1983) to prevent the village from losing its characteristics.

Another suggestion was to invest further in infrastructure to cater for the rise in population. A member of the local council said that the rise in population merits further investment and upgrade in existing infrastructure, not least the promenade. Further investment along the front can lead to the development of a walk from Nwadar Park to Munxar. Such investment will alleviate the issue of lack of open spaces, even if respondents did not consider existing ones to be enough to balance the ongoing urban sprawl. Policymakers need to take this into account when deciding the fate of proposed mega projects and use of open spaces.

Local councillors also suggested the need to support boutique hotels instead of the big hotels describing the former as more ideal since they cause less impact on the locality. Short lets are also considered positive for the locality as tourists are distributed throughout the locality and not concentrated in one area.

Such recommendations are largely coordinated with the list of recommendations of the Marsascala Residents' Network (Times of Malta (2)). In particular, the network is suggesting that "the seaside should be viewed as a natural home and a host for residents and visitors respectively, where sustainable tourism can develop environmentally"; "The provision of high-quality, affordable mixed housing"; smart interventions for traffic "without causing detriment to the locality's natural environment"; "A comprehensive methodology to assess the rising sea levels and severe flooding problems needs… to identify effective preventative investments", and "Finally, creativity, sustainability and well-being must be put at the heart of the proposals, as a means of diversifying and growing the local economy and as an accessible way of getting the whole community on board."

Orthophoto maps confirm transformation of locality

The orthophoto maps analysed confirm the comprehensive transformation of Marsascala over time, as also reflected in the narratives of interviewed stakeholders. The 1957 image (Figure 3a) captures the locality in its pre-tourism development phase, aligning with what Young (1983) defines as the 'Late Traditional' stage—characterised by low-density settlement and predominant agricultural land use.

By 1978 (Figure 3b), the area enters Young's 'Early Tourism Involvement' phase. This period is marked by the initial emergence of coastal development and infrastructure expansion, suggesting the locality's growing attraction for seasonal residents and early tourism-driven investment.

The 1998 orthophoto (Figure 3c) reflects the 'Expanding Tourism Development' stage, as described by Young, with a significant increase in residential density, more structured road layouts, and urban sprawl reaching previously undeveloped inland zones. This corresponds to the consolidation of Marsascala as a mixed-use settlement with strong residential and recreational functions.

The 2018 map (Figure 3d) clearly represents the 'Intensive Tourism-Consolidation' phase. At this stage, Marsascala is fully urbanised, with little remaining open or agricultural land within the core area. Urban saturation, infrastructural maturity, and a built-up coastline define this phase. Notably, Young's model anticipates the proposal of major tourism infrastructure—such as a marina—during this stage. Indeed, a marina project was proposed in 2021. However, the plan was eventually withdrawn following significant opposition from NGOs and civil society actors (Times of Malta, 4).

The contrast between the 1957 and 2018 images underscores a near-total reconfiguration of the landscape. What was once a rural, agrarian, fishing community has evolved into a densely developed urban settlement. This trajectory supports the observations of local stakeholders and reinforces Young's model as a valid analytical framework for interpreting the locality's tourism-driven transformation.

Discussion

Tourism development in Marsascala, demand for short lets as well as accommodation for foreigners (including those working in the tourism and hospitality sector) triggered development of (almost) the entire coastal area and further inland of the locality. This development not only contributed to urbanisation but also brought with it a number of challenges including over population, traffic, lack of green spaces and deterioration of quality of life. Similarly, Crespi-Vallbona and López-Villanueva (2024) argue that damages resulting from touristification include "an increase in the number of tourist apartments to the detriment of housing for residential use; an increase in the purchase and rental prices of these properties; loss of local product establishments and conflicts in the coexistence between the spaces.

Referring to his model, Young (1983) argues that if the tourist product reaches stage 6 (intensive tourism consolidation) tourism would be seriously weakened or diminished. Young had also raised a series of questions, in particular what impact this will have on the quality of life. Stakeholders interviewed indicate not only that this stage of tourism development

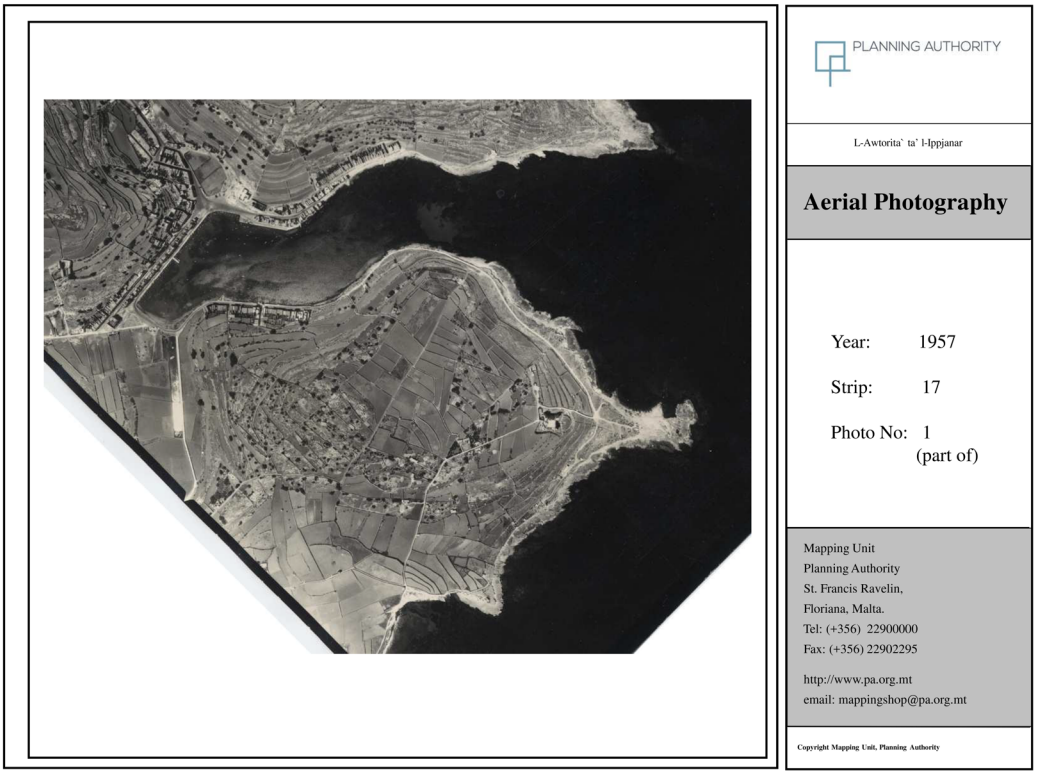

Figure 3a. Map showing the locality of Marsascala in 1957. Photo provided by the Geomatics Unit, Planning Authority.

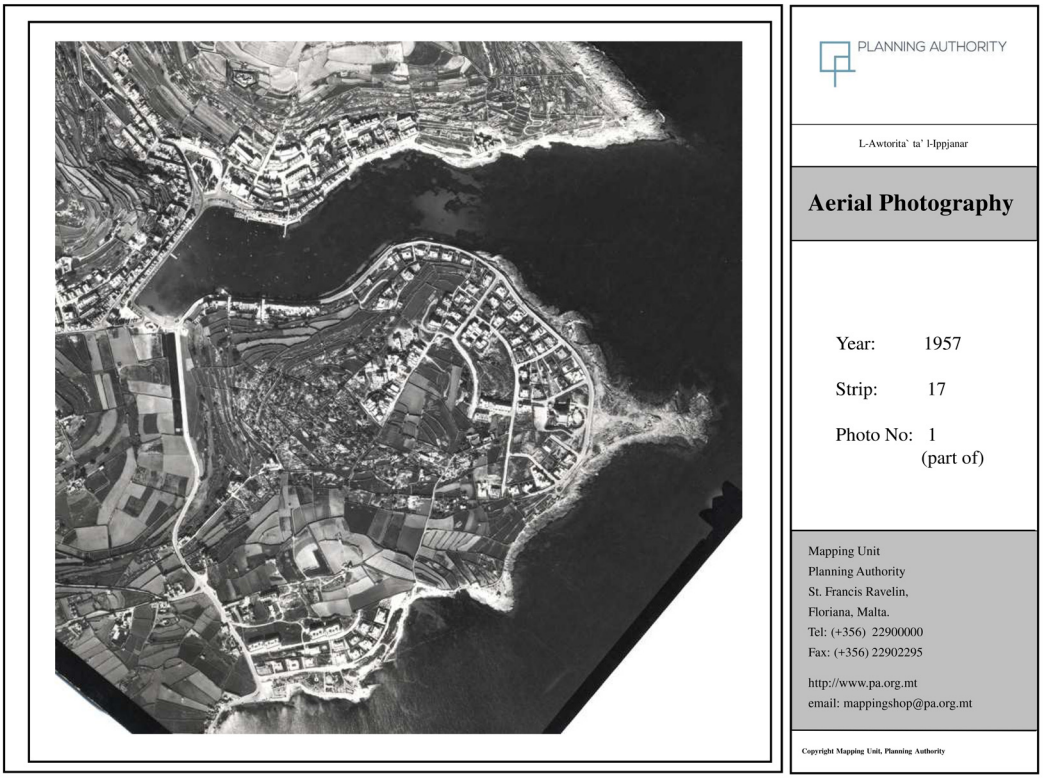

Figure 3b. Map showing the locality of Marsascala in 1978. Photo provided by the Geomatics Unit, Planning Authority.

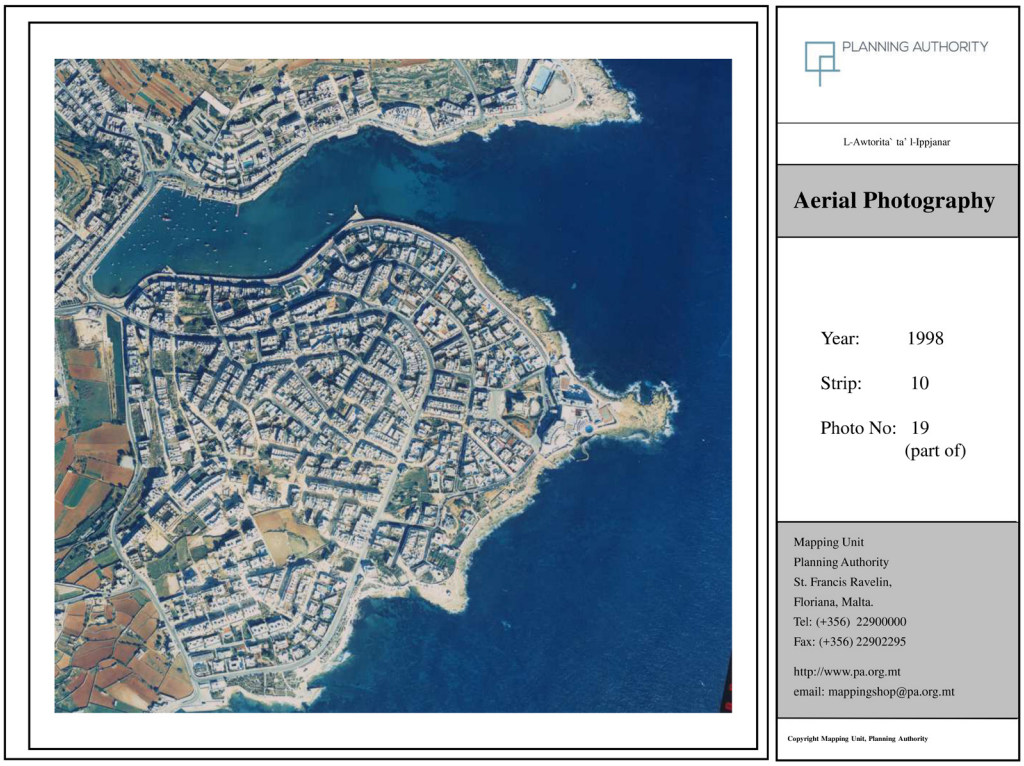

Figure 3c. Map showing the locality of Marsascala in 1998. Photo provided by the Geomatics Unit, Planning Authority.

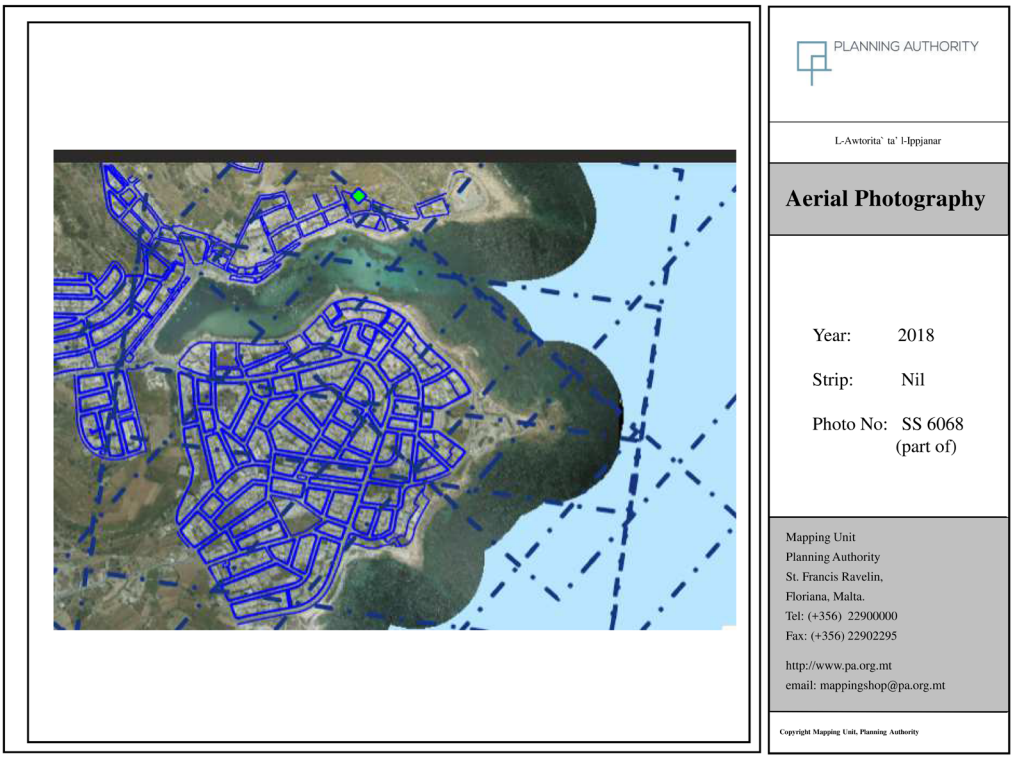

Figure 3d. Map showing the locality of Marsascala in 2018. Photo provided by the Geomatics Unit, Planning Authority.

and urbanisation has been reached but also that the quality of life has deteriorated considerably.

Furthermore, Young had also asked what stage would follow 'intensive tourism consolidation.' We are hereby proposing a seventh stage which can be analysed further in subsequent studies: 'real estateisation'. Here, we are proposing that more areas which previously served for other purposes start to merge or gradually be taken over by real estate projects, as is the case with the proposed redevelopment of the Jerma Hotel into a tourism and real estate project (Malta Today (1)).

Various residences are already used to host non-Maltese nationals, whether as tourists or residents, in what looks like a hybrid process of real estate, urban, and touristic development. Gil (2023), refrains from calling this touristification or gentrification and instead refers to this model as short-term rental housing assetization strategy. This leads to speculation and increase in property prices as short-term rentals induce rent gaps. This explains why property prices keep increasing in Malta, not least in the Southern region (Times of Malta (6)). In this regard, and with respect to literature on gentrification, we propose that the processes of development characterising Marsascala are more in line with Gil's analysis, particularly in a society where, according to the National Census (National Statistics Office – Malta (4)) almost 75 % of Maltese individuals own their main residence, whilst almost 53% per cent of non-Maltese residents rented furnished accommodation, and where the majority of housing stocks were flats or penthouses (in Marsascala, these amount to 4,614, in comparison with 571 Terraced houses, 210 Semi/Fully-detached houses, 1592, Maisonettes, and 76 Others (National Statistics Office – Malta (4)) At the same time, it must be emphasized that the price of property is becoming increasingly unaffordable for prospective buyers/tenants, and high rents have been cited as the major reason for Malta's high turnover rate of foreign workers (Malta Today (2); Malta Today (3)).

This phenomenon requires further quantitative and qualitative social-scientific evidence on the usage of such properties. We are aware of at least one study currently being conducted in Malta in this regard. It is also interesting to note that Malta's reliance on foreign residents is also exemplified by the fact that the country's passport is ranked joint fifth most powerful in the world (Times of Malta (7)), though many foreign workers, especially in lower paying jobs, do not afford such luxury.

The touristization and real estateisation' process of Marsascala can be contextualised within the challenges of the Maltese tourist industry and beyond. In this regard, various recommendations have been made by a group of experts at the University of Malta, "in the quest for sustainable tourism which is defined by the UN Environment Programme and UN World Tourism Organization as "tourism that takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment and the host communities." (Avellino *et al.*, 2023). The authors of this article are not aware of any sustained and holistic attempt by Maltese governments to follow recommendations of the sort.

Here one could also refer to the importance of tools such as social impact assessments, which can be defined as "includes the processes of analysing, monitoring and managing the intended and unintended social consequences, both positive and negative, of planned interventions (policies, programs, plans, projects) and any social change processes invoked by those interventions. Its primary purpose is to bring about a more sustainable and equitable biophysical and human environment." (International Association for Impact Assessment - IAIA). In this regard, some ad hoc social impact assessments and surveys were carried out on development proposals, including two controversial ones at Marsascala which were eventually withdrawn (the American University of Malta and the Yacht Marina respectively), and one can also refer to the 2019 policy development wherein the competencies of Regional Councils include the social aspect, which, in turn, includes researches and report of social impact evaluations. (European Committee of the Regions, n.d.). At the same time, Social Impact Assessments, particularly as recommended by the IAIA, are yet not mainstreamed in Maltese policy making.

Such tools can help us understand the interactions such as those between the built environment and the well-being of local communities. Various strategies have been proposed to improve the well-being of local communities including improving public transport while restricting cars, include forms of urban nature and public spaces, maintain the upkeep of public areas and vegetation, as well as develop aesthetically pleasing buildings and public spaces based on residents' needs and preferences (Mouratidis, 2021).

From a more critical perspective, one could also situate the social changes under analysis within a treadmill of production (Gould *et al.*, 2008) which is dependent on consistent economic growth to feed the needs of the system and its dominant social classes. In this regard, a symbiotic relationship between developers and the State, could be theorized. Here developers provide economic growth and other incentives. The State provides policy and operational support. This relationship rests on the ideological commitment to such development through the exploitation of land (Briguglio, 1998). Here, we note that current development processes of the Marsascala type are even more nuanced in view of multi-directional impacts, such as, on the one hand, the capitalization of assets even by small-scale owners, and on the other hand, the spread of housing precariousness in view of unaffordable prices amongst both Maltese and foreigners.

Conclusion

By assessing the impacts of coastal tourism and related activities, this paper provides an empirical case study that falls within the purpose of the RethinkBlue Cost Action. In this regard, the locality of Marsascala has experienced extensive urbanisation over the years. This has been initially triggered by second homes and tourism. In recent years, the locality has continued to experience further urbanisation to cater for an

increase in residents who live in the locality all year round, due to short-term rentals as well due to the demand for accommodation by foreigners who work in various sectors including the tourism and hospitality sector. This brought with it benefits including additional services but also a series of challenges for residents including traffic, lack of parking, lack of green/open spaces and inconvenience due to construction projects which in return led to deterioration of the quality of residents.

The locality has not only reached stage 6 (intensive tourism consolidation) of Young's model (1983) but risks to pursue the route to what the authors refer to stage 7 'real estateisation' whereby tourism facilities and other areas in the locality are taken over by real estate projects fuelled by national demand for housing. Considering that several houses/second homes are still present along the coast, this trend may lead to further agony to the local community as such dwellings make space for further blocks. As Gil (2023) outlines, as long as tourist demand continues to grow and regulations allow for the development of short-term rentals, investors and landlords will likely convert large numbers of properties and switch capital to this model.

Ethics and consent

Research was conducted after submitting a Research Ethics Review Procedures (REDP) Form ARTS-2023-00296 to the Faculty Research Ethics Committee (FREC) Arts which reviewed the application and determined that the research is in conformity with the University of Malta's Research Code of Practice. Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study. The interviews were held online, and the invitation was sent to the participants via email or WhatsApp, together with a disclaimer form as well as a recruitment letter, providing information on the research and how data collected will be used. Given that the interviews were held online, it was more practical to obtain verbal consent. Before each interview, participants were asked to grant consent as per document circulated reminding them that they are free to accept, refuse or stop participation at any time without giving any reason. Once participants confirmed their willingness to participate in the study, the researcher started to field the questions.

Data availability

Data collected through interviews is available in the results section. As outlined in the methods section, interviews were held online and notes were taken. These notes were fully integrated in the results section removing duplicated content and merging points raised in the process. The draft notes were later erased to ensure confidentiality. Therefore, there is no additional data to be shared.

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Open Peer Review

Current Peer Review Status: ✔ ? ✔

Version 2

Reviewer Report 10 September 2025

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✔ **José Antonio Barragán Ojeda**
ENES-Mérida, UNAM, Merida, Mexico

I agree with the current version of the article. The authors made the relevant changes, and I believe the text meets the requirements of the previous review.

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: Human geography, Tourism Geography, ecotourism

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard.

Reviewer Report 05 September 2025

https://doi.org/10.21956/openreseurope.22782.r59287

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✔ **José Alberto Rio Fernandes**
University of Porto, Porto, Portugal
Jorge Ricardo Pinto
Instituto Superior de Ciencias Sociais e do Turismo, Porto, Portugal

The article has been significantly improved.
I keep my criticism on the methodological approach, especially on the fact that several conclusions are based on just 5 interviews. With a note on that limitation in the text, I think that it may be indexed.

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: Urban geography. Urbanism.

We confirm that we have read this submission and believe that we have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard.

Version 1

Reviewer Report 21 October 2024

https://doi.org/10.21956/openreseurope.19061.r43419

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José Antonio Barragán Ojeda
[1] ENES-Mérida, UNAM, Merida, Mexico
[2] ENES-Mérida, UNAM, Merida, Mexico

the topic of study is pertinent and appropriate, but part of the literature used is obsolete. An update of the Young (1983) model is understood and appreciated, but it is necessary to compare other models such as Butler (2008), Knofou (1999), Ojeda (2024), Murray and Blazquez (2011) among others.

Blázquez, M., & Murray, I. (2011). [Ref 5]
Ojeda, A. B. (2024).[Ref 1]

Butler, R. (1980). [Ref 2]

Butler, R. (2008). [Ref 3]

Knafou, R. (2017). [Ref 4]

I declare that the article I reviewed raises a very well-founded issue. However, I consider that the research development was insufficient, so I propose to accept it with serious modifications.

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Is the work clearly and accurately presented and does it engage with the current literature?
Partly

Is the study design appropriate and is the work technically sound?
Yes

Are sufficient details of methods and analysis provided to allow replication by others?
Yes

Are all the source data and materials underlying the results available?
Yes

If applicable, is the statistical analysis and its interpretation appropriate?
Partly

Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the results?
Yes

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: Human geography, Tourism Geography, ecotourism

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard, however I have significant reservations, as outlined above.

Reviewer Report 19 September 2024

https://doi.org/10.21956/openreseurope.19061.r43418

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Melanie Kay Smith
[1] Budapest Business University, Budapest, Hungary

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This is a really interesting study and the authors make a good effort to provide a critical analysis of tourism development in the location. However, the central narrative needs to be explained a bit more clearly and carried through to the end. It seems that the article is mainly about 'no planning' and the consequences of that, but it would be important to clarify this from the start. Then it would be logical to explain why gentrification and touristification take place, including the growth of unsuitable forms of accommodation provision (or at least, those that can become problematic like Airbnb). The lack of clear narrative/focus means that the Abstract is a bit disjointed.
Unfortunately, many of the issues relating to overtourism, gentrification, STRs, etc. have become so widespread and complex that it is hard to do justice to them in a couple of paragraphs. The result is that the Literature Review seems rather superficial and random. This is why a more focused narrative is needed (e.g. the shortcomings of top-down planning or no planning). Please unpack and discuss this sentence, which could hold the key to the narrative: "urban development, gentrification, and mobility interact with planning and the two are mutually constitutive".
I would welcome a brief typology of coastal destinations and the differences between them. Please contextualise Malta within this typology. After all, a Mediterranean coastal resort/island is very different from a Baltic or North Sea destination, and it is questionable whether Asian coastal destinations are directly comparable (are they?). For example, is the "new socio-economic climate" developing everywhere? If so, please explain how/why (e.g. the impact of SDGs or other international factors?).
The Young model works well in this context, although many authors select Butler and variations of the lifecycle model instead. The authors might want to explain in slightly more depth why they chose Young's model instead.
The selected research methods are quite novel, especially the use of photomaps. Slightly more analysis of these would be welcome.
The interviews are a bit limited and offer mainly a 'top-down' perspective. The authors should somehow relate this choice of method to the central narrative about planning (which tends to be 'top-down' in many cases).
Overall, the explanation of research methods is rather rushed and it would be useful to explain in more detail and more systematically how portals like TripAdvisor and Airbnb were analysed. The information yielded is nevertheless interesting. Reviewer comments could also have provided some insights, although the article is rather about planning than tourists' experiences.
The references to SDGs is a bit tokenistic at the end and should be more integrated into the findings and earlier discussions.
Figure 2 is not very readable.

Is the work clearly and accurately presented and does it engage with the current literature?
Partly

Is the study design appropriate and is the work technically sound?
Partly

Are sufficient details of methods and analysis provided to allow replication by others?
Partly

Are all the source data and materials underlying the results available?

No source data required

If applicable, is the statistical analysis and its interpretation appropriate?
Not applicable

Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the results?
Yes

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: cultural tourism, urban planning, city tourism, health tourism, wellbeing

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard, however I have significant reservations, as outlined above.

Reviewer Report 10 September 2024

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José Alberto Rio Fernandes
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Jorge Ricardo Pinto
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[2] Instituto Superior de Ciencias Sociais e do Turismo, Porto, Portugal

I read with interest the article.
To associate tourism with urban development in the XXI century was a promising idea.
However, the authors fail to deliver. I try to explain why. And I begin with the two main problems:

1. When taking Young (1985) model as central it is mandatory that:
- the linear evolution of "touristization" and landscape change is debated. It has to be noted the possibility of tourism territories to be rejuvenated and other nonlinear evolution possibilities;
- the model is outdated. It has to be noted that it dates back to 1985 when there was no "platform economy" (AirBnB, Uber, ...), the globalization process was not so intense, low-cost flight were not what they are today... The world changed a lot in 40 years! Anachronism is a big scientific error. Also, on the linear scientific approach to tourism I don't understand why the authors fail to mention f Butler cycle of the tourism product.

2. The theoretical chapter is very fragile and not coherent with the following chapters.

- What is overdevelopment? Is there a measure for "adequate development" - there's no discussion about this;
- What's overpopulation? Is Bangladesh overpopulated? London? Malta? ...
- What is touristification? Just the hybrid combination of tourism and gentrification? Touristification can't happen without gentrification, only by increase of low-middle class tourism? There's no discussion on concepts and processes...
Only one page and some lines for literature revision is not enough and all the discussion is rather vague and fails to debate what becomes fundamental in the Discussion, globalization, and the increasing relevance of real estate multiscale investment in local areas.
Also, curiously, in the last lines of the conclusion, the authors express their concern about what is left of the character of the village. However, nowhere in the article the concept of character is discussed, as the idea of its dynamic dimension is completely forgotten.

3. The text is rather descriptive after the Revision of the Literature and before Discussion. It should be more reflexive.

4. There are much other aspects that should not appear on a text before being indexed. I am sure the authors can easily improve:

- punctuation and small mistakes (", As" in p. 2; "th" in p. 21)
- avoid the mention to "qualitative interviews", in the absence of quantitative interviews (p. 1);
- include comparative statistics of others islands as Baleares, Canary, Creta and/or Madeira before (or as) presenting "Tourism in Malta" (pp. 5,6);
- avoid the expression "l phenomenon of lack of sustainability" (p. 6);
- the presentation of and use with the inclusion of a map (p. 11);
- that conclusions from a 10 years old study should not be taken as actual (p. 15);
- the mention of Nwadar Park and Munxar being illustrated with a map (p. 16);
- by considering all maps of fig. 3 in the same format and scale.

Is the work clearly and accurately presented and does it engage with the current literature?
No

Is the study design appropriate and is the work technically sound?
Partly

Are sufficient details of methods and analysis provided to allow replication by others?
Yes

Are all the source data and materials underlying the results available?
Yes

If applicable, is the statistical analysis and its interpretation appropriate?
Yes

Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the results?
Partly

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: Urban geography. Urbanism.

We confirm that we have read this submission and believe that we have an appropriate level of expertise to state that we do not consider it to be of an acceptable scientific standard, for reasons outlined above.