

A unique and independent culture

INTERVIEW WITH MARIO DE MARCO

MINISTER FOR TOURISM, CULTURE AND ENVIRONMENT, MALTA



MARIO DE MARCO studied at St Aloysius' College (Malta) and at the University of Malta where he graduated as a Doctor of Laws in 1988. He was awarded a Commonwealth scholarship for academic achievement and furthered his studies at the University of Cambridge where he obtained his Masters in Laws having specialised in International Commercial Law. He is an International Commercial Law lecturer at the University of Malta. Following the March 2008 general election, he was appointed as member of the Cabinet, as Parliamentary Secretary for Tourism. In January 2012 the Prime Minister appointed him Minister for Tourism, Culture and Environment.

Malta is proud of its culture. How do you define and explain the cultural personality of the country?

Maltese culture is unique. Malta is basically a minor state precisely at the crossroads of the Mediterranean and its culture has been formed through thousands of years of civilisation. Each power has somehow left their imprint on Maltese culture. Its fundamental culture has a strong Latin, European influence. If you listen to the language, it has a resounding Semitic influence, though it has always been written uniquely in the Latin way. But then there is also a unique Anglo-Saxon influence due to the fact that we were an English colony for more or less 200 years. However the Maltese culture is fiercely independent. A 7,000 year old diverse civilisation has ultimately made the Maltese race what it is.

How has this culture defined and influenced the character of the Maltese individual?

The Maltese are obviously survivors, but they are also very creative. If I had to sum up the Maltese individual, he has the creativity of the Latin Mediterranean but also the discipline of the Anglo Saxon; giving us the best

of both worlds. And this is probably the reason why, despite the fact that this country lacks natural resources, it has survived as one the most resilient and progressive economies; not only in the Mediterranean region but also in Europe. So without natural resources we have managed to carve for ourselves a niche in tourism, for example. Tourism is one of our primary economies; but we are also doing well in the manufacturing and service industries. So these three pillars push forward our economy today. As a result, at this point in time we have the fifth lowest unemployment rates in the European Union, despite the fact that we're obviously surrounded by other countries which are having their own economic difficulties.

With such a rich and vibrant culture, what programme of initiatives are you developing to celebrate and promote it internationally?

We are looking forward to 2018 when Valletta will be the European Capital of Culture and there's a lot of work being done in preparing for this. We know what the Capital of Culture did for places like Liverpool. We



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are implementing a whole regeneration of Valletta and the environs. We are developing cultural infrastructure and a range of cultural activities. Ultimately the real success of 2018 won't be so much what takes place out here, but the important legacy that one will be able to enjoy beyond 2018. We have various arts festivals taking place on the islands throughout the year. We have just completed our summer arts festival which included some fantastic performances from around 150 different artists, many of which are of international level. We have also just concluded the jazz festival which takes place in July every year. We will soon be having our Baroque Music Festival in Valletta, our traditionally Baroque city. It houses the Manoel Theatre which is probably one of the oldest Baroque theatres in Europe. There is a great deal of cultural activity on the island with events taking place every night of the year. We have culture for the masses including the various religious festas, to a more specialised type such as the Baroque Festival. But we have also become known for popular culture, for instance Malta has been linked with the Isle of Wight Music Concert, which appeals to younger generations and is now considered to be the largest open-air free concert in Europe.

What makes tourism in Malta unique from other Mediterranean islands?

We have a large concentration of people who come here for a multitude of reasons. Malta has a Mediterranean climate and a rich culture and heritage. For example we do have the largest concentration of UNESCO World Heritage Sites in the world. Today people want to travel more often, and for shorter periods, and want to do many different things in as short a time as possible. And this is our unique advantage. You can see different islands – Malta, Gozo, Comino – which are 20 minutes ferry ride from each other. At the same time you can enjoy the beaches and coast of the Mediterranean. But also there are the enchanting cities and villages of Malta to be enjoyed. One can visit the Neolithic temples which date back 7000 years, as well as the fortifications which were built by the Order of the Knights of St John and also by the British. Let us not forget the unique paintings of Caravaggio which are a must see, as are some of the dazzling theatre performances on the island. Not to mention our delicious cuisine. We're also leading the diving industry and sports tourism. Diving is very popular here on these islands. Four per cent of our maritime waters are protected areas. Now we are also developing the rural tourism business, with thirteen per cent of our island protected as natural sites.

Moreover we have a thriving conference business. And we have large conferences ranging from 50 people to possibly over 7,000 people. We manage to

attract these for various reasons. Firstly, we are value for money. Secondly, because we have a wide network of routes connecting Malta. with direct connectivity with 81 different airports. Thirdly, we have fantastic infrastructure to accommodate the biggest of conferences. And fourthly, when people come to conferences, apart from meeting they also want to enjoy themselves. And there's so much to do after the conference over here. So that has been a very successful thing for the conference business.

So people come to Malta for culture, leisure and business – a combination that I believe is unique.

Is tourism a business opportunity here in Malta?

Absolutely. In the last five years we have had four years of record growth, each exceeding the other, showing that the business climate here is as attractive as ever. We are also seeing record spending at a time when other economies in the region are declining significantly. Our arrivals, nights of stay and spending – the three major indicators for any investor – have all gone up. In terms of investment, there is potential particularly in the boutique hotel concept. For example people are identifying various haute palazzos in our villages and in our towns which date back 400 years and which require a degree of investment, and converting them into boutique hotels. I am fully convinced that although our tourism sector has done so remarkably well, we are really only scratching the surface. The ultimate potential of the islands has still to emerge.

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Maltese Joseph Calleja is an internationally acclaimed tenor

