

The future of tourism: an interview with Leslie Vella about the future of tourism in Malta

Ian Seymour Yeoman and Leslie Vella

Ian Seymour Yeoman is based at the Hotel Management School Leeuwarden, NHL Stenden University of Applied Sciences, Leeuwarden, The Netherlands. Leslie Vella is based at the Malta Tourism Authority, Kalkara, Malta.

Abstract

Purpose – As the Journal of Tourism Futures celebrates its 10th Anniversary, Dr Ian Yeoman (Hotel Management School Leeuwarden) interviews Leslie Vella (Malta Tourism Authority) about the future of tourism in Malta, drawing upon a series of scenarios as a reflective learning tool.

Design/methodology/approach – A personal interview.

Findings – The interview discusses the future of tourism in Malta raising issues and reflections, through four scenarios that portray the Mediterranean island: Scenario 1: A Regenerative Future – Reposition, Realignment and Refocus (Transformation), Scenario 2: A Sustainable Pathway – Adaption and Innovative Growth (Growth), Scenario 3: Europe's Second Class – Second Choice Destination (Stagnation) and Scenario 4: No Tourism (Collapse).

Originality/value – Upon critical reflection, scenarios can be seen as a powerful learning device to frame, surface and discuss issues associated with tourism, in this case in Malta.

Keywords Future of tourism, Malta, Destination planning, Scenario planning

Paper type Viewpoint

Leslie Vella

I'm Leslie Vella, the Deputy CEO of the Malta Tourism Authority (MTA) and Chief Officer Strategic Development. Within that capacity, and as Managing Director of the Malta Tourism Observatory, which is an offshoot of the MTA, I have direct responsibility for planning for the future of tourism and its strategic development. I have a BA (Hons) degree from the University of Malta in Business Management. I have worked for the MTA and its predecessor organisation, the National Tourism Organisation of Malta (NTOM), for 41 years, starting as a research assistant. I've worked in marketing, administration and, ultimately, as CEO of the authority for three years, between 2001 and 2004. In the last 15 years, I have focused on strategic management with additional responsibility for expanding Malta's airline connectivity.

Ian Yeoman

In particular, what's the role of the Malta Tourism Observatory?^[1]

Leslie Vella

When we were drafting the strategy for 2030 (Ministry of Tourism, 2021), we felt that, as a mature destination with a number of decades of experience of tourism, we were facing some very big questions in terms of where we want tourism to go. Because of climate change and sustainability

Received 17 September 2024
Revised 1 October 2024
Accepted 2 October 2024

© Ian Seymour Yeoman and Leslie Vella. Published in *Journal of Tourism Futures*. Published by Emerald Publishing Limited. This article is published under the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY 4.0) licence. Anyone may reproduce, distribute, translate and create derivative works of this article (for both commercial and non-commercial purposes), subject to full attribution to the original publication and authors. The full terms of this licence may be seen at <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/legalcode>

This paper forms part of a special section "10th Anniversary of the Journal of Tourism Futures", guest edited by Dr Stefan Hartman, Prof. Albert Postma and Prof. Ian Yeoman.

as well as the growth curve being extrapolated, we felt that we needed to create an instrument, with a degree of independence to autonomously widen our measurement of tourism; thus, we established the observatory. The observatory places more emphasis on understanding and measuring sustainable tourism in a wider context than our normal tourism statistics, which are traditionally limited to arrivals, nights, expenditure, etc. Thus, with sustainability becoming more important and taking central stage, we needed to think about measuring tourism from a sustainability perspective.

The observatory intends to join the International Network of Sustainable Tourism Observatories (INSTO)[\[2\]](#), an international network of similar observatories, so that we can compare and contrast our performance from a sustainable tourism perspective at an international level.

Ian Yeoman

What is your role as Chief Officer Strategic Development?

Leslie Vella

For a very long time, there was an unwritten, unspoken strategy fundamentally centred around the principle of “go out and attract whatever you can as long as numbers grow”, as long as our tourism industry keeps growing. This was wrong in a changing world.

The strategic function for which I’m responsible seeks to move away from anything that brings sheer numbers at all costs. I’m responsible for pushing for the attraction of a type of tourist that not only gives greater value in terms of its economic impact but also greater value because it matches the destination in a sustainable manner. This means we preserve and protect. We still need to satisfy those tourists, but in a manner that aligns with what Malta can offer. Thus, a symbiotic relationship between visitor and host is increasingly achieved.

Ian Yeoman

Why is tourism important to Malta?

Leslie Vella

For 500 years, Malta’s economic success has fundamentally depended on it being a service economy for the military powers of the day. The service given by the Maltese economy used to be a military service ([Chirătescu and Păunescu, 2024](#)). It was an important military base at the time of the Knights of St John ([Cassar, 2014](#)) and the time of the British leading up to the Cold War. All of this was very strategic. Its location in the central Mediterranean meant that it could control all shipping moving between the East and West Mediterranean basins. This model’s major shortcoming was that its success depended on conflict: when there was war in the region, Malta boomed; when there was peace, Malta starved.

Once the British period started coming to an end, it was originally proposed that the only way forward for the nation was the export of the people of Malta to Canada, Australia, the USA and the UK through immigration. But this was very defeatist.

In the late 1950s, we started to see the development of tourism and manufacturing as alternatives to military services. The problem with manufacturing was that Malta, as a small country, has no raw materials and thus couldn’t survive and achieve any sort of economies of scale or competitive pricing. The manufacturing we have today is very high value added such as the production of semiconductors, medical equipment and security printing.

Tourism has thrived and become the major industry of Malta. It has replaced military service and become one of the main employers. Tourism is now firmly embedded within Malta’s socio-

economic landscape. It's one of the main industries in Malta that has withstood the test of time. The question is: have we become too dependent on it? On the other hand, it's also an industry of innovation, and Malta has learned to adapt and change as tourism changes, thus remaining attractive and competitive.

Ian Yeoman

How does an organisation like the MTA look to the future?

Leslie Vella

That's a very interesting question. For the past 12 years or so, Malta has continually been successful with year-on-year growth, excluding COVID-19 when international tourism collapsed. There were periods when growth was slow or lagged, especially around the beginning of the Millennium. At that time, we were dependent upon tour operators and charter flights. We were vulnerable.

Destinations like Spain, Turkey, Egypt, Greece and Tunisia would fill up, and we would get the overspill. The big tour operators would then fill Malta up with cheap deals and offerings. This was a sign of underperforming, a focus on volume but not value. We were not clearly positioned and were definitely not a destination of first choice.

But now we have more control over tourism. The market has changed, and the healthy combination of legacy and budget carriers has revolutionised our connectivity and products. Today, compared to our Mediterranean competitor cohort, we continually outperform most of the competition. We have got our marketing right and satisfaction amongst tourists is good. We are a year-round destination, offering a multiplicity of experiences for a wide variety of age groups and interests.

Looking to the future, the big dilemma is the recognition of the small size of Malta, the high densities of tourism in parts of the country, the constant building of more tourism accommodation in many parts of the island and the continuing cycle of dependency on tourism. Tourism needs a long-term vision for the sake of its own future and the interests of the wider community, involving all stakeholders, and how to proceed forward, given the importance of the industry to the country.

Ian Yeoman

The point of doing scenario planning is to create a range of different futures for different pathways with different circumstances. In [Yeoman \(2023\)](#) – “*Does tourism in Malta have a future? If so, what future?*” – we presented four different scenarios about tourism in Malta set in 2040. The first scenario, *A Regenerative Future* (Transformation), represents a new model for tourism in which degrowth shapes Malta as the spiritual capital of Europe. What are the issues you see in this scenario?

Leslie Vella

This is a scenario in which Malta is the spiritual capital of Europe: small scale, community-focused, with regenerative tourism, climate change, positive with ethical and responsible tourism and 2 million international arrivals, which is capped. Therefore, we're talking about 2,000,000 tourists, which are capped.

This looks like an attractive scenario, but it portrays a 40% drop in international arrivals in 2026, which is not acceptable and would be a huge shock to the economy. Going from 3.5 million international arrivals to 2.0 million is not feasible. We have an economy that is dependent on tourism and couldn't adapt to that change both in terms of scale and in terms of rapidity. The political, social and economic consequences would be huge. At the moment, there is huge investment in tourism

accommodation, with a continued expectation that growth will continue to feed that investment, especially the construction industry. Many small investors have bought property based on speculation and are dependent on tourism to cover borrowing. We simply couldn't go cold turkey.

However, the scenario has many positives. It gives Malta a plateau to work with. But just not for now, but for the long term.

I don't believe it's about the physical capping of 2.0 million tourists. I think we can limit the number of international arrivals we attract through our message and marketing – how we position ourselves, how we sell ourselves – thus, deterring certain categories and profiles of tourists.

Ian Yeoman

But what if this scenario occurred? What would be some of the decisions the government could take to manage this scenario?

Leslie Vella

I think the answer lies with our dependence on the construction model, as this has been our economic model for 12 years. The construction industry turns rural or undeveloped land into an economic benefit, and this becomes more prevalent given that traditional agricultural land is in danger of becoming less productive as a result of climate change. However, the balance is not right, as the construction industry, for example, is building within the so-called "outside development zones" for a number of reasons, which in my opinion is wrong.

We are not conserving and protecting land for nature; it's as simple as that. Besides providing for an element of food security, undeveloped land also projects unique Maltese landscapes as part of the visitor experience whilst also providing open breathing space for the residents of a densely populated archipelago.

Ian Yeoman

In Scenario 2, *A Sustainable Pathway* (Growth), which represents the challenge of how tourism in Malta can grow the right way through change, adaption and mitigation, Malta has adapted to change in the new world through strong investment from the government and European Union (EU) with a mitigating and adaption strategy pathway, through tax incentives, investment opportunities and legislation to offset indulgence. Examples include, if you have a meal, it has a CO₂ measurement and the development of a green infrastructure. All international arrivals are by electric planes or hydrogen cruise ships. Tourism in Malta is a €5 billion industry and a top ten green destination, according to eco-indicators. So, if you looked at this scenario, what are some of the issues that you see and why?

Leslie Vella

In this scenario, Malta is very beautiful and idealistically attractive. This is something we should contemplate. Something which would be very beautiful to contemplate. Malta is the Mediterranean destination of the Avant Garde, forward-looking, clean and futuristic.

However, I have concerns about this scenario. First, it involves a very radical paradigm shift in thinking, in terms of governing the country. I think to an extent and, perhaps it's one of the problems of having to go to the polls once every five years, a lot of decisions taken by politicians tend to be dragged down by the lowest common denominator. For example, how do we make cars cleaner? We could make petrol and diesel obsolete, but what happens to the, say, 3,000 car mechanics on the island and their families who need to have dirty, polluting cars to repair? They still need a job. So, the concept of being dragged down by the lowest common denominator is that 3,000 unemployed car mechanics will make a difference to which government is elected, as in Malta, 1,000 votes

make a difference. Thus, the paradigm shift, to move from the antiquated to the cutting edge, requires leadership, vision and a willingness to change.

Second, how would Malta fund this paradigm shift? Malta is small, and raising capital for a small country is not always possible without a huge burden. I was debating with Geoffrey Lipman [3] about converting our organic waste into sustainable aviation fuel. The fact is that the organic waste generated by half a million people does not ever justify the economic investment for such a process. We simply are a small island, and everything we do is inevitably small in scale.

However, I think, if there is willingness for this scenario to occur, the scenario represents a paradigm shift, which has been achieved in the past when the British forces left. We have transformed the economy in the past, so there is a strong sense that we can do it again, with a clear vision and determined leadership. The challenge will be the pace of change, as this is Malta, and change can either take centuries or ease in quickly under the right conditions. The changes in the scenario will require a longer period of adjustment if one is to retrofit infrastructure, hotels, facilities and services. I would say we could achieve a lot in the next 15 years. So, it's a process of transitioning into the future rather than the future of tomorrow.

Ian Yeoman

Let us say Malta was to follow this pathway. If you were prime minister, what would be the plans to achieve this scenario?

Leslie Vella

To start with, we need to have a thorough stocktake of what we have and what's in the way of achieving the scenario. Secondly, we would need to consider the scenario in the context of land, densities, energy provision, water supply and transport. These are the factors we need to use for tourism to change. These five major elements influence life on this group of islands. We will need a more informed picture of the effect of tourism development on this infrastructure, because currently we don't.

Should we go for better value that maximises tourism satisfaction and protection of the sociocultural fabric of the destination? In this scenario, careful planning of change is required because our biggest problem is that tourism everywhere is horizontal. What I mean is that planning for tourism is horizontal, but the administration functions in a vertical manner, so everybody has to dig into one limited element of that very horizontal function, and once you're standing vertically and taking care of your own hole in the horizontal line, you're not really looking at what the others are doing. Then, we start blaming each other. Thus, we don't understand the big picture! The macro is always bigger than the sum of all the micros put together.

Ian Yeoman

Let's consider the third scenario. Scenario 3, *Europe's Second Class – Second Choice Destination* (Stagnation), presents inaction and political malaise in which change is ineffective at dealing with the challenges of the future. Consequently, tourism sees a sclerosis of decline. In this scenario, Malta is looking to the past; it's stagnate and complacent. Malta can't react to the changes in the world regarding sustainability and becomes bogged down with political malaise, malaise and a lack of transformation.

We've got ideas; however, it's just that year on year, and Malta becomes more like the Spain of the 1970s – cheap, tacky and going downhill. From the scenario, you can see incremental decline and the competition overtakes you. By 2040, it's only an industry worth €,1.5 billion, employing 25,000 people, with fading resorts, falling revenue and very British. There is a cholera outbreak in 2032, but because of the lack of investment, the outbreak is severe.

So, in the scenario, what are the issues for tourism in Malta and why?

Leslie Vella

It's obviously very bleak, but it has happened. If you look to what happened to us in the 1970s and early 1980s, this is the scenario repeating itself.

Tourism at the time was amateurish, against a background of what was going on in the Mediterranean.

In the 1970s, basically you had the troubles in the Mediterranean, with the invasion of Cyprus and the Lebanese civil war. Egypt and Israel were at war, and Turkey was not really tourist-friendly territory ([Mutlu, 2005](#)). Greece was under a military regime, Italy had terrorism and Spain was a fascist dictatorship. Economically, Europe was in the middle of an oil crisis; we had labour discontent and soaring inflation. Against this background, Britain was our core market and they loved us. So, during this period, we actually grew because of what was happening in the rest of Europe and the Mediterranean.

In spite of this relative advantage, in Malta, tourism planning and development in the 1970s and early 1980s was amateurish; there was no government direction to encourage the building of hotel-type accommodation. So instead, a lot of opportunists built self-catering apartments due to weak planning regulation. So, by the end of the 1970s, 86% of our accommodation stock was made up of apartments, especially in Saint Paul's Bay. All the apartments appeared quickly with no supporting infrastructure. There was no water and no electricity.

What happened was that by the early 1980s, several events happened that affected tourism to Malta. First, as we moved further away from Britain economically, we removed parity between the Pound Sterling and the Maltese Lira. Therefore, Malta became more expensive for the British. Second, the competition woke up: the resurgence of Greece, Cyprus and Egypt, the emergence of Turkey and the growing capacity of tourism in Tunisia and Morocco. These destinations became more iconic and better value compared to us. Then Egypt invested heavily in tourism, Spain was growing, Tunisia opened up and Malta found itself moving from the top of the market to the bottom. We lost half our market in three years. It was sudden and brutal. For tourism in Malta, it meant a spiral of decline. Just like in your scenario. Every year, fewer tourists are spending less, as we became even less than a 2nd choice, 2nd class destination.

I find this scenario very scary; as if it did happen, it would take a long time to turn it around again!

Ian Yeoman

Looking at the scenario in greater detail, what issues can you identify with?

Leslie Vella

The obvious issue, like in the other scenarios, is climate change. The heat at times can be unbearable. So, it's a very serious issue. We are in a situation where climate change in Malta is having an impact on infrastructure, from the increasing use of air conditioners, which has increased electricity demand and the cables that connect the electricity to localities and consumers are not able to cope. Then, there are issues like coastal erosion, water usage and the impact on land. Another most noticeable issue is algae bloom, which is turning the blue seas green ([Langeneck et al., 2023](#); [Mutlu, 2005](#)), exacerbated by periods of very calm, warm weather, which reduces water circulation in enclosed bays. Could this mean the end of the blue lagoon in Comino? The seas are becoming warmer and more stagnant; thus, the green algae blooms. This is the clearest sign of climate change in Malta and shows how the ecosystem is changing.

We need to start thinking about how the ecosystem will change tourism and its unintended consequences. What happens if the beaches disappear because of rising sea levels? This means

the experiences and activities change. No one is lying on the beach getting a suntan, as there aren't any beaches anymore.

Ian Yeoman

Let's move to the final scenario, Scenario 4, *No Tourism* (Collapse), which represents the sudden impact of change due to the accelerated trend of rising temperatures and other external factors which converge, leading to collapse. This is a scenario of contagion, when uncontrollable events join, leading to a tipping point and the end of tourism. In the scenario, the heat of the Mediterranean has become unbearable with continuous wildfires. It becomes impossible for tourists to get insurance for summer holidays, and for Mediterranean countries, water is the big issue on their islands – as no water, means no life. Tourism, from a European perspective, has moved northwards to the Netherlands, Scotland and the Nordic countries as a consequence. The Baltic Sea is the new Mediterranean. Malta is no longer a desirable place, as the migrant crisis has become a calamity and the island is overrun.

Leslie Vella

I think this scenario is extreme, but the scenario raises lots of issues. Malta realised the water crisis many years ago and invested heavily in seawater reverse osmosis plants ([Andrews and Bergman, 1986](#); [Kim et al., 2019](#)). Although this is an expensive process, it means we (Malta) have water.

Ian Yeoman

What is the point in the future when tourism in Malta becomes unsustainable or collapses?

Leslie Vella

No aeroplanes and lack of connectivity. As an island, we are dependent on international aviation. It's as simple as that!

Ian Yeoman

Anything else?

Leslie Vella

If you get a mix of uncontrolled growth, with a focus on growing numbers, density becomes a real issue. The relationship between host and tourist breaks down, as is happening in the Balearic Islands, amongst other places. The host population, thus, becomes negative towards tourism. It is an antagonistic situation. When is too much tourism too much for many communities?

So far, we have managed to adapt, evolve and change as tourism has grown. As a small island, we are nimble and can change.

Ian Yeoman

I'll just ask you one more question. What is your final message about the future of tourism in Malta for future generations?

Leslie Vella

I remain optimistic. Malta has faced adversity in the past and adapted many times. It will again, as we move into the future.

I remember Carl Sagan (2000) saying that when they conducted tests about the size of the bumblebee's body and its wingspan, technically it shouldn't be able to fly because its wings are too small for its body. But it flies anyway because it doesn't know that. From a larger country's perspective, an economy like Malta's simply shouldn't function. But in the famous words of Galileo Galilei, "nevertheless it moves". Malta is resilient and capable of adapting under a variety of adverse circumstances. This is what gives me hope. However, this adaptability should not be seen as panacea, and we need to be more considerate and conscious in how we tread in the coming years.

So, from the optimistic perspective, I have faith that the model of tourism will continue to reinvent itself, adapt to change and give a good standard of living to its inhabitants.

Ian Yeoman

Thank you.

Leslie Vella

My pleasure.

Notes

1. <https://www.mtobservatory.org/>
2. <https://www.gstcouncil.org/about/>
3. [linkedin.com/in/geoffrey-lipman-85a0256](https://www.linkedin.com/in/geoffrey-lipman-85a0256).

References

- Andrews, W. and Bergman, R. (1986), "The Malta seawater RO facility", *Desalination*, Vol. 60 No. 2, pp. 135-144, doi: [10.1016/0011-9164\(86\)90004-4](https://doi.org/10.1016/0011-9164(86)90004-4).
- Cassar, C. (2014), "The Jews, Catholic policy, and the Knights of St John in Malta", *Journal of Mediterranean Studies*, Vol. 23 No. 2, pp. 169-184.
- Chirițescu, I.M. and Păunescu, F.A. (2024), "Maltese history and its cultural heritage", *Revista de Stiinte Politice/Revue des Sciences Politiques*, Vol. 81 No. 2, pp. 43-50.
- Kim, J., Park, K., Yang, D.R. and Hong, S. (2019), "A comprehensive review of energy consumption of seawater reverse osmosis desalination plants", *Applied Energy*, Vol. 254, 113652, doi: [10.1016/j.apenergy.2019.113652](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.apenergy.2019.113652).
- Langeneck, J., Bakiu, R., Chalari, N., Chatzigeorgiou, G., Crocetta, F., Doğdu, S.A., Durmishaj, S., García-Charton, J.A., Gülşahin, A. and Hoffman, R. (2023), "New records of introduced species in the Mediterranean sea (April 2023)", *Mediterranean Marine Science*, Vol. 20 No. 1, pp. 1-23.
- Ministry of Tourism, C.P. (2021), "Recover. Rethink. Revitalise: Malta tourism strategy 2021-2030", Veletta: Ministry of Tourism and Consumer Protection, available at: <https://tourism.gov.mt/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/National-Tourism-Strategy-2021-2030.pdf>
- Mutlu, D.K. (2005), "The midnight express (1978) phenomenon and the image of Turkey", *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, Vol. 25 No. 3, pp. 475-496, doi: [10.1080/01439680500236581](https://doi.org/10.1080/01439680500236581).
- Sagan, C. (2000), *Carl Sagan's Cosmic Connection: An Extraterrestrial Perspective*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Yeoman, I. (2023), "Does tourism in Malta have a future? If so, what future?", in Piscopo, M. (Ed.), *Malta Tourism Insights 2023*, Malta Tourism Observatory, Valletta, pp. 94-99.

About the authors

Dr Ian Seymour Yeoman is Professor of Disruption, Innovation and new Phenomena at NHL Stenden University of Applied Sciences, Leeuwarden, Netherlands. Dr Yeoman is the Co-editor of the *Journal of Tourism Futures* and Editor of the *Journal of Revenue and Pricing Management*. In

addition, Dr Yeoman is Visiting Professor at Victoria University of Wellington and Ulster University. Ian Seymour Yeoman is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: ian.yeoman@nhlstenden.com

Leslie Vella is the Deputy CEO/Chief Officer Strategic Development of the Malta Tourism Authority as well as the Managing Director of the Malta Tourism Observatory.

For instructions on how to order reprints of this article, please visit our website:
www.emeraldgroupublishing.com/licensing/reprints.htm
Or contact us for further details: permissions@emeraldinsight.com