

A South African's guide to moving to and making it in Malta: The Valletta effect

By  Marcus 'The Maltese Falcon' Brewster

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Because of my public relations background, I flagged a recent story in The Business Observer headed 'A great PR opportunity for the city and for Malta'. Of course, it was about the Valletta European Capital of Culture 2018 (V18) which just launched here this past weekend.

The Valletta effect

No marketer worth their salt would use the adjective 'great' without citing some measurement, since campaign excellence can no longer be celebrated for creativity alone if it's not accompanied by an increase in commercial metrics. Even before the arrival this month of V18, it had already generated an extraordinarily powerful commercial phenomenon, which is being called the 'Valletta effect'.



The Triton Fountain outside the entrance to Valletta | Mark Leach

According to the Malta Tourism Authority (MTA), in the period from 2015 to 2017 the number of guest nights that respondents attributed directly to V18 increased from 254,800 to 526,500. By any yardstick, that's a very sizeable updraft. More so considering that this was achieved in the months preceding V18 itself. Just the PR leverage around the fact that the accolade had been accorded to Valletta was enough to double the numbers. Put into monetary terms, €84 million of tourist expenditure is directly attributed to the Valletta effect according to MTA CEO Paul Bujega.

Upstream investment

But the tourism spend to date is funnily enough only a downstream effect. The upstream Valletta effect has been an infrastructural investment: some €11 million in public funds have been spent over the past four years on upgrades to the capital and a further €19 million will go towards beautification projects of iconic Valletta attractions, including MUZA (Malta's new museum of art and flagship project for Valletta's European Capital City of Culture title), the Grandmaster's Palace and

the Manoel Theatre.

Furthermore, €24 million in EU funds, pledged in September last year, are being put towards the regeneration of the lower part of Valletta. (To my incredulous South African eyes, it begs belief that one of the lowest class neighbourhoods on the island, the Mandrajj, occupies the most phenomenal real-estate location on the side of Valletta facing Marsamxett Harbour – social housing with front row sea views over the baroque fortress of Manoel Island and looking across the bay to the millionaire apartments of Tigne Point!)

Creative economy

The money keeps rolling in: another €50 million in ERDF funding goes towards the development of cultural projects and the restoration of heritage site projects included in Government's strategy for the capital for 2018 – 2025. This is the legacy envisaged – the creation of new jobs in the culture sector and a stimulus to the growth of the creative economy.

While property landlords and boutique hotel owners count up the profits, I and other Maltese residents count ourselves lucky in cultural terms; 400 events and 140 projects are being staged the length and breadth of the island this year. Most weeks there are audition notices in the newspapers for productions that will only run for three nights. (This is not specifically linked to scheduling issues for V18 – we've noticed before that most live theatre, opera etc. only enjoy a handful of performances and often over a single weekend.)

One evening last week, we went to Valletta to see the just-restored Triton Fountains at the entrance to the capital, and around which the launch festivities were staged. At night with its theatrical lighting, the fountains' colour palate of turquoise water, pink limestone and the verdigris patina of the bronze figures contrive to make it look like a cupcake. I had to take off my glasses to check that they weren't rose-coloured!

The business takeout: For those with exposure to local realty, the just-released Q3 2017 figures show property prices increased by over 4% for the quarter, the second highest increase in the EU. The forward momentum continues...

The social take-home: V18's 110,000 crowd – that's a quarter of the population – is the largest we've heard of, and generated two-hour waits for public transport home. But the capital often hosts celebratory events: last year's Science in the City drew 50,000, Notta Bianca 70,000 and New Year's Eve 80,000. To solve the parking problem, take your car through in the afternoon and get a spot, then take the bus home. At night, get a taxi or bus back into Valletta.



A South African's guide to moving to and making it in Malta: The culture of connection

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ABOUT MARCUS 'THE MALTESE FALCON' BREWSTER

marcusbrewster is a brand synonymous with PR excellence in SA. An industry innovator, leader, and inspiration, Brewster affiliated his multi-award winning boutique firm with larger Level 1 BBBEE marketing/comms agency MediaRevolution for scale in 2016 and went on to launch Marcus Brewster International in Europe the following year. Marcus currently lives on - and actively promotes - the Mediterranean island of Malta. For African, S. African and European PR enquiries, contact marcus@marcusbrewster.com or WhatsApp on (+356) 9931 3322

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