

National

Record tourist arrivals in June

Kurt Sansone

June was hailed "the best ever" by Tourism Parliamentary Secretary Mario de Marco as official figures yesterday recorded almost 137,000 tourist arrivals at the start of the summer season.

According to figures released by the National Statistics Office, tourism grew by 20 per cent in June compared to the same month last year.

Dr de Marco pinned the increase on better connectivity

with other airports. Malta, he said, was now linked to 76 airports via scheduled services.

Most of the new routes launched in May belonged to Ryanair, however, when asked whether Malta was overly dependent on the low-cost airline, as the Air Malta chief executive had suggested two months ago, Dr de Marco said there was a happy balance.

"We will do business with whoever is interested in operating to Malta," he added.

The statistics for the first six months of the year also registered an increase of almost 11 per cent

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when compared to last year. Around 550,000 tourists visited Malta between January and June.

Increases were recorded in both repeat tourists and first-time visitors. There was a 25 per cent rise in the number of tourists on shorter stays and the majority of tourists opted for non-package travel.

Between January and June, total nights spent went up by nine per cent, surpassing 4.1 million nights. Nights spent in collective and private accommodation went up by 10 and seven per cent respectively.

The average length of stay stood at 7.5 nights, 0.1 less than in 2009. Tourist expenditure was estimated

at €397 million, indicating a growth of 11 per cent over 2009 levels.

At €721, expenditure per capita for the first half of the year increased marginally, the NSO said.

In June alone, all the main source markets registered higher numbers with Spanish tourists increasing by a whopping 134 per cent followed by an increase of 42 per cent from the Italian market. The UK remained the largest market.

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Sexual jokes at workplace may be no laughing matter

Claudia Calleja

Verbal harassment occurs frequently in the workplace as perpetrators often fail to realise that unwelcome sexual jokes directed at colleagues are illegal, according to the equality watchdog.

"Once a joke has the effect, even if not the purpose, of violating the dignity of a person or of creating an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment, then that joke has gone too far," a spokesman for the National Commission for the Promotion of Equality said.

Last week, Doris Bonello, was awarded €2,000 by the Industrial Tribunal which found that she had been a victim of verbal sexual abuse.

In November 2007, Ms Bonello was asked to attend a meeting with the company directors at General Soft Drinks. When she walked in, there was nowhere to sit on and when she asked where she could sit, the sales and marketing manager, Martin Agius, who was chairing the meeting, told her: "Sit between my legs."

"Most companies have much more to do in order to be well-equipped to deal with sexual harassment cases."

Company general manager Maria Micallef testified that despite having 260 employees, she had never received any complaints on sexual harassment at work over the past 10 years.

Mr Agius got away with a verbal warning by the company and was asked to apologise formally to Ms Bonello who no longer works at the firm.

The tribunal heard that although the company had a sexual harassment policy, this was only distributed to management and had not been given to all employees. The tribunal found that the company lacked a proper mechanism for employees to feel "safe" to report their superiors for bad conduct.



Sexual harassment at work can manifest itself through degrading comments.

Lawyer Ian Spiteri Bailey, who specialises in employment and industrial relations law, said: "Most employers and companies have as yet much more to do in order to be well-equipped and trained to deal with sexual harassment cases."

He added that although he had seen improvements over the past six years, there was still room for progress.

The NCPE noted that each employer must have a formal and effective policy indicating that sexual harassment was not allowed at the workplace. Furthermore, they

are also expected to have an internal procedure to deal with incidences of harassment.

"Internal procedures are important since these can better address the situation. This could involve issuing a warning to the perpetrator which could lead to dismissal, removing the perpetrator from the department in which the victim works, or other internal arrangements.

"What is important is that whatever measure is taken it is clear that the victim is not penalised for having been harassed," the NCPE spokesman said.

Malta airport has best July ever

Malta International Airport registered a record number of passenger movements for July, breaking through the 400,000 mark for the first time.

Passenger movements increased by a substantial 15.8 per cent, or 54,279, over July 2009. Aircraft movements also went up, by 10.8 per cent, as did seating capacity, by 12 per cent.

"This confirms our positive outlook for 2010. These results are indeed attributable to the close cooperation with the Malta Tourism Authority as well as the input of all other stakeholders," CEO Julian Jaeger said.

Traffic from the Spanish, Italian and French markets all increased significantly, by 41.5, 31 and 17.5 per cent respectively. The UK market, which is the airport's largest, increased by a modest 5.2 per cent. A very small drop of one per cent was registered for the German market.

During the first seven months of this year, passenger movements went up 11.5 per cent to reach 1,782,757 when compared to the same period last year.

MIA pointed to a 9.2 per cent in plane seating capacity as the main factor behind the increase.

Residents complain about poor air quality

The Sliema Residents' Association has expressed concern over poor air quality in the locality.

It said the town had high particulate matter, nitrogen dioxide and benzene levels, which often exceeded acceptable levels as set out by EU directives.

It added that the Malta Environment and Planning Authority's air monitoring technology, used in most localities, did not give real-time air monitoring results, which meant no action was being taken to mitigate high pollution levels.

It doubted Mepa and Transport Malta's abilities to meet targets and timeframes as set out in the January 2010 Air Quality Plan. The plan outlines traffic measures aimed at achieving a reduction in vehicle emissions, a reduction of the impact of development projects on traffic, managing the road network and promoting cleaner vehicle technologies.

The association said it had not seen any tangible measures aimed at improving Sliema's traffic problems implemented so far and air pollution levels still exceeded acceptable EU levels.

It suggested that real-time air quality analysers be put in place to keep better tabs on "deteriorating" air quality in the area. It urged Mepa, Transport Malta and the Sliema local council to act to "safeguard Sliema residents' health and quality of life".

Earlier this month, Mepa rebutted claims by three NGOs that its air pollution monitoring stations were "placed incorrectly", giving wrong readings.

Fliemkjen għal Ambjant Aħjar, Friends of the Earth and the Ramblers' Association claimed that the disparity between evident pollution and Mepa's "allegedly favourable" air quality monitoring results was because the air monitoring stations were located incorrectly, were not providing data on the real situation or were not functioning properly.

Mepa said it carried out air quality monitoring through a diffusion tube network, introduced in 2004, to have better spatial coverage over the island. It includes 44 localities and 131 monitoring sites in Malta and Gozo.

The authority rejected claims NGOs had made that it was "taking the easy way out" by convincing the EU that almost half of the 52 occasions when Malta exceeded EU limits of particulate matter in the air were due to natural causes, such as dust from the Sahara desert and sea spray.

A recent Mepa survey of public attitudes showed that 43 per cent of respondents considered air quality to be the most worrying environmental problem, 83 per cent said air pollution was affecting their health and 89 per cent agreed with measures to cut vehicle emissions.