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Malta tourism losses due to second wave of COVID-19

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ABSTRACT

The world continues in the grip of COVID-19 with devastated tourism industries and global economies. In a previous paper, it was noted that a country’s failure to dampen a first wave of infection or the recurrence of a second wave would serve as disincentives for greatly needed tourists in summer 2020 and would further significantly reduce tourism revenues and potentially accelerate job losses and bankruptcies in affected countries. Countries in the first wave of infection would need to restrain COVID-19 spread swiftly in order to benefit from summer 2020 tourism. Countries that had controlled COVID-19 and who experienced second waves would manifest the same negative effects. In the case of Malta, up to the beginning of July, the country had the lowest COVID-19 numbers in Europe but this ended abruptly when two mass events took place. In a fortnight, the steep escalation of cases led to a downgrade of the country’s status to a high-risk destination, with a host of European countries enacting quarantine measures. The Maltese government re-imposed restrictions and COVID-19 numbers slowly started to temporarily decline. As an economy, Malta is highly dependent on the tourism industry, with approximately 17% of GDP reliant on this sector, directly and indirectly. Malta’s red listing wrought a heavy toll on the industry. The World Health Organisation has mandated clear criteria for the release of restrictions and this sequence of events should serve as a cautionary tale: heed the advice of our public health colleagues.

1. Introduction

The world remains in thrall to COVID-19 and with international travel bans affecting over 90% of the global population accompanied by social distancing measures to try and slow down viral spread, tourism effectively ceased in March 2020 [1]. There will be huge economic losses in 2020 with trillions of dollars in lost revenues globally as tourism plunges by ≥80% [2,3]. This is expected to continue to have major impact also in the forthcoming years. Furthermore, this shock acutely threatens one in 10 of the global workforce who are employed in the tourism/hospitality industry and account for almost 10% of global gross domestic product (GDP) [2] and this ill impact virtually every sector of the economy in one way or another. Economies have been severely negatively impacted with countries easing out of lockdowns in summer 2020 hoping to revive economies by wooing spending tourists [1]. Furthermore, many predictions do not anticipate a return to normal levels in the short term for the tourism sector.

In a previous paper, it was shown that inevitably, competition will arise between countries for tourism since tourists have become a scarce resource [1]. It was anticipated that apart from the usual factors that govern choices where holidays are taken, destination decisions would also be influenced by two additional factors: individual country incentives to woo visitors even in the presence of COVID-19, and perceived destination safety [1]. Both factors would need to overcome the more onerous airport experience which strives to accommodate the principles of social distancing [4]. The paper also pointed out novel websites that compare different incentives that countries currently offer to lure tourists, as well as websites that compare country safety vis-à-vis COVID-19 for travellers [1].

COVID-19 is a respiratory betacoronavirus and it is expected that infections will rise again, followed by declines as lockdowns (in various degrees) are lifted and re-imposed, and so on, leading to successive waves whose amplitudes and lengths are determined by various factors including herd immunity, behaviours and adherence to measures and stringency/enforcement of applied lockdowns [5].

In the previous paper, it was stressed that a country’s failure to dampen a first wave of infection or the recurrence of a second wave would serve as disincentives for potential mid-year tourists [1]. This was averred to be a crucial period as tourism is usually maximal in spring and summer i.e. spring and summer 2020. The paper concluded that persistent first waves that extended into July would put off tourists, further significantly reduce tourism revenues and potentially accelerate job losses and bankruptcies in affected countries. These countries would need to restrain COVID-19 spread very quickly in order to benefit from any 2020 tourism. Countries that had controlled COVID-19 and who experienced second waves would manifest the same negative effects [1].

2. Malta – first and second waves

Up to the beginning of July, Malta was well prepared, and had the lowest COVID-19 numbers in Europe [6,7]. This ended abruptly when lifting of measures including that of limitations on gatherings permitted...
two mass gatherings to take place [8–10]. Youth partying which inadvertently spreads COVID-19 is an unfortunate international phenomenon and not just in Malta [11].

In a fortnight, the steep escalation of cases (Fig. 1) led to a downward grade of the country’s status to a high-risk one destination, with a host of European countries enacting quarantine or testing measures for travelers from Malta [12]. A spike of over 70 cases in middle of August led the Maltese government to re-impose restrictions and COVID-19 numbers slowly started to decline, although they are rising again as the virus has entered nursing homes [13,14].

3. Impact

Malta is highly dependent on the tourism industry, with approximately 17% of GDP reliant on this sector, directly and indirectly [15]. In fact the tourism industry remains one of the largest employers on the island. Malta’s red listing, travel restrictions and mandatory quarantine or testing for tourists returning home from this country have wrought and continue to wreak a heavy toll on the industry [16]. Five-star hotel daily room rates in July were down by 25% compared to the same period in 2019 with industry sources predicting that five-star hotels would run at 35–40% occupancy in August [17]. Hotels in the capital city “Valletta are close to dead with very, very low occupancy... it is also going to be very ugly winter and subsidies must remain until March next year for sure.” [18].

It has been estimated that Malta lost €251 million in tourism revenue in July with visitor spending dropping by 88% in this period and an 84% drop in actual visitor numbers [19]. The first half of August was better, 42% higher than late July with hotels running at 50% occupancy, but as coronavirus-related travel restrictions to key markets started being imposed, it spiralled down to 29% by the end of the month. Looking ahead, hoteliers forecast occupancy to range between 10 and “optimistic” 20%, but the feeling is that “nobody knows, and we have no trends to go by” [20].

4. Conclusion

In retrospect, the opening up of the borders, without pretesting of individuals may have been the error of all countries. The European Union failed to lead on this and delegated this decision to individual countries. WHO mandated these six clear criteria for the release of restrictions [21]. The impact of reintroduction of measures on the number of new cases reported was clearly evident.

1. Evidence shows COVID-19 transmission is controlled;
2. Public health and health system capacities are in place to identify, isolate, test, trace contacts and quarantine them;
3. Outbreak risks are minimized in high-vulnerability settings, particularly in homes for older people, mental health facilities and crowded places of residence;
4. Workplace preventive measures are established, including physical distancing, handwashing facilities and respiratory etiquette;
5. Importation risks can be managed; and
6. Communities have a voice and are aware, engaged and participating in the transition.

This sequence of events should serve as a cautionary tale. In the absence of an effective vaccine which is available to all the population, COVID-19 should be given the respect it deserves, as advised by our public health colleagues.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

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Victor Grech\textsuperscript{a}, Sarah Cuschieri\textsuperscript{b, c}, Martin Balzan\textsuperscript{d}, Peter Grech\textsuperscript{d}, Stephanie Fabri\textsuperscript{e}, Charmaine Gauci\textsuperscript{g}

\textsuperscript{a} Mater Dei Hospital, Malta

\textsuperscript{b} Department of Anatomy, Faculty of Medicine & Surgery, University of Malta, Msida, Malta

\textsuperscript{c} Department of Respiratory, Mater Dei Hospital, Msida, Malta

\textsuperscript{d} Economics Student

\textsuperscript{e} Department of Management, University of Malta, Malta

\textsuperscript{f} Health Regulation, Office of the Superintendence of Public Health, Pieta’, Malta

\textsuperscript{g} Department of Public Health, Faculty of Medicine and Surgery, University of Malta, Msida, Malta

Corresponding author at: RM 425, Biomedical Building, Department of Anatomy, Faculty of Medicine & Surgery, University of Malta, Msida, Malta.

E-mail addresses: victor.e.grech@gov.mt (V. Grech), sarah.cuschieri@um.edu.mt (S. Cuschieri), martix@maltanet.net (M. Balzan), stephanie.fabri@um.edu.mt (S. Fabri), charmaine.gauci@gov.mt (C. Gauci).