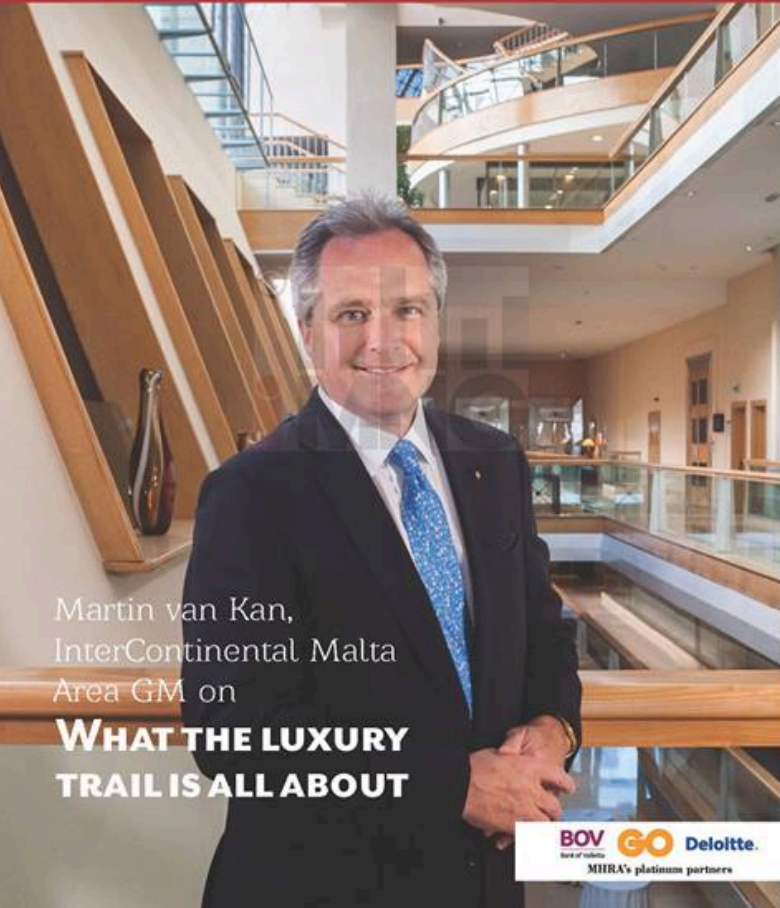


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INSIDER



The publication of the Malta Hotels and Restaurants Association



Martin van Kan,
InterContinental Malta
Area GM on

WHAT THE LUXURY TRAIL IS ALL ABOUT

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INSIDER
Sustainable Tourism

MOVING from words to action

Two diverse but equally interesting speakers recently delivered a masterclass session in sustainable tourism. Both were Italian, both voluble, both passionate about their work, both bubbling with ideas. And their passion for their hometowns and country is reflected in what they would like to see happening here in Malta and everywhere. Both came from very different work-places and backgrounds. Profs Giancarlo Polenghi is a leading art historian and Doctor Chiara Mencarelli the GM of Nun Assisi Relais and Spa museum.



Both were enthusiastic proponents of ensuring we care for our heritage and turn that same heritage into attractive, living monuments. Art and museums, and people who lecture about them, can be boring beyond belief.

Not these two Italians: they challenged all our mindsets and made us think differently about what we should be doing to make visitors and locals further enjoy their surroundings. These two speakers were not just theoretical, as both work in areas which move on to action and delivery.

Interestingly, the art historian started his career in marketing and advertising. He then moved on, helped found an art school and is also a catalyst for the preservation of heritage. The GM of Nun started her professional life in teaching and she now heads the hotel while still teaching in the hospitality field.

Maybe what this proves most is that all professions, all aspects of our life, intermingle, and the more we understand different facets of our life the better our experience of life itself. Closing ourselves up in bubbles does not make us better humans. It does not matter that teachers, hoteliers, artists and carpenters remain stuck to the same trade or profession all their life. But they must use their eyes and mind to see things from different perspectives.

Polenghi touched on many aspects of what art is, how we look at it and experience it. The meaning of art of the past and the appreciation of the present is essential if we are to preserve heritage for future generations. Awareness comes not just through history and expert knowledge, but first of all from local people. Locals, the ones who lived and live with the surrounding heritage, are vital to keeping alive any art or site.

Tourism is an important resource but it must not be seen only as a way to make money. Nature, art and history are part of what we are. All this, according to the Italian advertiser-turned-art conservator, is a gift because we did not build or create it, it is something given. It is a duty because this gift must be accepted, understood, valued, defended, loved, and developed. Wise words which can see us, even in Malta, love and appreciate our patrimony even more. Just as art is universal so we should globalise our efforts to preserve it.

A most important aspect of all that was discussed is the *Genius Loci*, a term which has a beautiful sound but also has a wide-ranging meaning. Literally it was used to signify the protective spirit of the place. This started off in Roman religion but should be the abiding strength of all our endeavours in our art, heritage and historic places.

Polenghi pointed out that it is not enough to save and look after a place. We must also preserve its true identity without turning our sites into glorified Disney-like attractions.

Modern technology pushes us to use Hollywood effects in our heritage, which turn them into a fictional setting. Polenghi emphasised that he, with his marketing background, is certainly not against using instant, impactful language and methods, otherwise no one listens, no one discovers. But the thin line between building a fake scenario should be tread upon with care.

Polenghi here pointed out how sad and unnatural it is that Venice, that most beautiful gem, is losing all its live-in locals. A place without locals becomes a sad, unreal piece of art, as only locals make a place breathe. Fakes, pastiches of Venice and Rome's Foro Italico, can be built anywhere but the true one remains the only one and therefore unique. Tours built around these unique places must provide an experience which touches people's real life.

The talk about the *Genius Loci* fitted perfectly with the story of Nun, a Christian monastery built in the 13th century on the remains of a Roman amphitheatre and the Perlasio springs. After a history of neglect and varied uses it was, a few years ago, turned into a boutique hotel and a Spa museum. And although the emphasis is on accommodation, the main attraction of Nun is its sobriety, its closeness to our own spiritual essence.

At Nun guests are obviously pampered beyond 5-star quality, but at the same time they experience a feeling of peace, an inner connectivity with what the monastery was built to achieve. Colours, design, even usability, are all in line with the spirit of the monastery. Asisi has strong ties with Christianity and remains a most revered Christian place connected to St Francis, one of the most significant saints in Christendom. But Asisi has become a centre for all denominations to meet and try to find common ground and move on to higher, more sublime ways.

In the same way, Nun appeals to different people from diverse religions, all seeking inner peace, all finding it in abundance in the restored monastery. The monastery's true *raison d'être* has thus been, not just preserved, but expanded. Words flowed between these two Italians as they talked about keeping the spirit of all we have in our past to enjoy both now and in the future.

Mencarelli pointed out that spa actually derives from *salsus per aquam*, healing through water. The Nun has a Spa Museum which, during certain times of the day, is free for any visitors to enjoy. The Spa was mainly introduced because over 2000 years ago there was a Roman temple dedicated to water. It had been a masterpiece of hydraulic engineering with cisterns, tanks and pools. The owners have revived techniques used in olden times to make a stay in the monastery a truly authentic experience. Veneration of the history of the place gives the new hotel a feeling of the sobriety of old, the spiritual connection to its history.



Dr Chiara Mencarelli



Prof Giancarlo Polenghi

Both speakers, in very articulate English with that engrossing Italianate lilt, presented an interesting challenge for us to preserve heritage in a way which inspires us. After all, that is art's—and heritage's—true reason for existence. □

