Since the dawn of time Malta has been a unique maritime location situated as it is right in the middle of the Mediterranean cross roads. Even the very first inhabitants sailed to Malta from Sicily around 4,000 BC. Later came the Phoenicians, the Greeks, the Romans, the Arabs, the European Knights of St. John, the French and the British to settle in these islands or to make use of the sheltered harbours of Malta. In fact the very name of Malta originates from the Phoenician word for shelter or protection - Malet - and Malta's Grand Harbour is one of the best natural deep-water harbours in the world.

Though small in size Malta is great in history.

On these islands you find the remains of more than 6,000 years of human activity. Being a melting pot in the best sense of the word, the architecture, culture and language of Malta have been influenced from many sides, but as we saw for ourselves over the few days of the Congress, the Maltese population has always managed to take the best from everything and mix it into the charming, vivid and strong society that is Malta today.

Situated in the middle of the Mediterranean, Malta has also been an important strategic stronghold. Some of the battles for this stronghold has positioned Malta firmly in World History. In 1565 the Turkish Ottoman Empire made an unsuccesful attempt to wrest the island from the Knights of St.John in what was later known as the "Great Siege".

Another great siege took place during the 2nd World War when Italian and German troops tried to bomb Malta into surrender. For the attacking troops the outcome was just as unsuccessful as 400 years earlier. King George the VI of Britain awarded the George Cross to the island in honour of her brave people and their heroism and devotion.

During the Congress we had the opportunity to visit the historic buildings of Malta - indeed the sessions even took place within some of those wonderful buildings. The magnificent conference centerr in which we enjoyed most of our sessions was built in late 16th Century and served for more than 200 years as the "Sacre Infermeria," the Holy Infirmary of the Order of St. John. During the week we met or lunched in the Inquisitor's Palace - built in the 1530's - and at the Malta Maritime Museum which is housed in the former British Naval Bakery, built in the 1840's and Malta's first building of the industrial revolution.

However, Malta is not only history, architecture and culture. During excursions on Wednesday and the post conference tour to Gozo on Friday. we had an opportunity to see Malta's countryside, which is also fantastic and very beautiful.

In short: Malta was the perfect location for an ICMM Congress.

On behalf of ICMM I would like to take this opportunity to say thanks to the people and organisations in Malta who not only made this possible but who showed us great hospitality and proved themselves to be very professional and efficient organisers.

Now, we came to Malta not only to learn about the fascinating history of Malta but also to work and work hard.

The theme of the Congress was “Maritime Museums - Reaching New Audiences”. The reason for this was a few simple facts. For decades visitors or audiences at maritime museums have stayed reasonably stable. They have generally been school groups, tourists, families and persons related to or within the maritime industry. However, the last group is slowly but surely fading away as the maritime industry is getting still more mechanized with ever larger vessels, more efficient cargo handling et cetera. And as harbours get still more isolated from the cities around them the common knowledge of the sea as a working place and lifestyle is decreasing too. Both developments may lead to a declining interest for maritime museums and what we have to offer. But that is only one side of our challenge.

While we have developed programmes and services over the years - with engaging and dynamic exhibition and interpretation technologies - another challenge has rolled up rather fast. We live in the internet and the virtual age where information flows continually across the globe and allows everyone who is interested to get information via the internet rather than museums.

At this Congress we looked at what’s ahead for maritime museums.
Will our focus be on the same or new audiences? Are we ready to deal with changes happening around us? Does globalism affect who we are and what we do? How do we get to understand our audiences? With escalating costs how do we best communicate with our stakeholders and potential supporters?
Are we at risk of becoming obsolete?

The few days of the Congress provided us with some answers to these important questions. In order to give us some inspiration we invited two keynote speakers; Sir Neil Cossons – until recently Chairman of English Heritage - and Ken Robinson - Chairman of the Tourism Think Tank and the Visitor Attractions Forum UK.

We also enjoyed a session organized by The Naval Dockyard Society and held three workshops on sponsorship, travelling exhibitions and ship preservation before we finishing the presentations with a series of short papers on a rich variety of themes.

As you can understand, we had a full and rather comprehensive programme.

Morten Hahn-Pedersen, President ICMM.

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