

**Opening Speech, delivered by H.E. Marie-Louise Coleiro Preca, President of Malta, at the Mediterranean Tourism Forum organized by the Mediterranean Tourism Foundation, with the theme “Embracing Mediterranean Tourism Because People Matter”, 15 February 2019**

**[Salutations]**

**Distinguished guests and delegates,**

**Dear friends,**

**It is my pleasure to once again open the Mediterranean Tourism Forum, which is bringing together diverse stakeholders in the tourism industry, from all over the Mediterranean Region.**

**Since the Mediterranean Tourism Foundation was established in 2013, I have been proud to be its honorary patron. Through its initiatives and projects, the Mediterranean Tourism Foundation is making a tangible and positive contribution, throughout the whole industry.**

**Let me therefore begin by commending Mr Tony Zahra and Mr Andrew Agius Muscat, cofounders of the Foundation, for doing so much to implement the Foundation’s vision of tourism for sustainable peace and inclusive prosperity.**

**Furthermore, I am proud that Malta is at the heart of such important initiatives, to promote strategies for tourism that prioritise sustainability.**

**As an island nation in the centre of the Mediterranean Sea, Malta is very well acquainted with the importance of pursuing sustainable approaches, in a world that is undergoing rapid and far-reaching changes.**

**I will share some reflections about why it is so essential, for us to work together as a Mediterranean family of nations, to address environmental concerns.**

**However, let me first mention an even more fundamental contribution, which the tourism industry can, and does, make in our world.**

**I believe that the tourism industry is an influential contributor, by working alongside our authorities and international civil society organisations, to create and sustain global peace.**

**Tourism provides an ideal platform from which to strengthen political and commercial initiatives amongst diverse stakeholders, with a common interest in the Mediterranean Region.**

**By attracting visitors to the Mediterranean throughout the year, all of our countries are attracting people to experience our Mediterranean way of life, and in the process, to engage in the peace-building potential of tourism.**

**For this reason, it is reassuring to note that the Mediterranean is climbing in its popularity among global consumers.**

**According to indicators from the latest European Travel Commission's report of Tourism Trends, published last year, Mediterranean destinations benefitted from double-digit increases in visitors.**

**Malta itself registered over 19 per cent increase, thanks to the efforts of my government and the Maltese private sector, to promote year-round growth across the tourism and hospitality industry.**

**Let me quote from the report, which says that travel trends also strongly "suggest a returning demand for Mediterranean destinations in particular."**

**Bearing these factors in mind, I believe it is also important for the industry to be proactive in maintaining this demand.**

**Therefore, let me draw your attention to the tourism trends being projected by Forbes, for 2019.**

**One area that will see exponential increase is the sector of wellness and wellbeing tourism. The Global Wellness Institute projects that this sub-sector will grow twice as fast as general tourism, to reach over 919 billion dollars in 2022.**

**A focus on fitness, mental and emotional health, healing, and positive lifestyle choices will continue to become more important, as consumers prioritise these factors in their holiday experience.**

**Through the work of my Presidency, we have done a lot to promote the concept of wellbeing here in Malta and abroad, and from studies conducted by my Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society, it is clear to us that wellbeing is built upon healthy and stable relationships.**

**As we also know, holistic wellbeing is intimately connected with the resilience of our communities, our countries, and our ecosystems.**

**Let me therefore share some reflections about the need for the tourism industry to continue working, to become even more environmentally sustainable and respectful.**

**The pioneers of today's sector are those individuals and companies which are setting the agenda for a greener future.**

**Therefore, the focus of this year's forum, on the importance of sustainability and renewal strategies, is particularly important.**

**I urge industry stakeholders to be forward-thinking, building on the successes of yesterday in order to face the challenges of tomorrow.**

**The tourism industry must transform these challenges into exciting opportunities for further growth, for innovation, and for continuous development.**

**This forum provides an ideal platform from which to share good practices, to learn from one another's projects and initiatives, and to strengthen old and new partnerships, to achieve these goals.**

**As Special Ambassador of the UNWTO, promoting sustainable tourism has been one of my key priorities. I firmly believe that tourism has a crucial role to play, to achieve a more sustainable, peaceful, and prosperous future for our communities and our countries.**

**Sustainable tourism maximises the positive contribution of tourism to biodiversity conservation, and thus to poverty reduction, in line with the mandate of the United Nations Agenda 2030 and its Sustainable Development Goals.**

**These goals, which all of our countries are committed to achieving in the near future, are a road map for the tourism industry to take its efforts to a new level of effectiveness.**

**Sustainable tourism also provides crucial economic incentives for the protection of our ecosystems, when our authorities are motivated to work alongside the private sector, to invest in the conservation of national natural heritage.**

**Furthermore, there is the opportunity to invest in capacity building programmes to assist local communities, to become empowered protectors of their own environmental heritage.**

**Sustainable tourism can be a game changer, to give essential visibility to the importance of conservation and sustainability, by nurturing a transformation in mentalities and attitudes among the many millions of visitors who come to the Mediterranean every year.**

**I am confident that we can make the Mediterranean Region a role model, for the kind of respectful and environmentally conscious tourism that we hope to achieve.**

**I believe that sustainability is an ethos that must underpin all tourism activities, with an integral role to play in every aspect of tourism development and management.**

**Moreover, sustainable tourism in our Mediterranean will make the industry, as a whole, more resilient, by producing net benefits for the social, economic, environmental, and cultural sectors of our countries.**

**Dear friends,**

**I hope that you will keep this long term vision foremost in your minds, throughout this forum, and beyond.**

**We all know that environmental consciousness among consumers is rising.**

**The Green Economy Report, published by the UN Environment Programme and the UNWTO, emphasises that transforming the tourism and travel sector into a more green industry will require a paradigm shift.**

**It means embracing less carbon intensive transport, better energy management, and a conscious choice to “think green” in the years ahead.**

**One example of how this is being achieved, in practical terms, is through a pioneering project that I have been proud to support, to develop energy efficiency in Sant Anton Palace.**

**This palace is a perfect example of Maltese historical architecture, and receives numerous visitors from all over the world.**

**Thanks to the research of Architect Amber Wismayer, we have developed a strategy to increase the energy efficiency of the palace while also optimising the wellbeing of its occupants. This research can be expanded to other examples of built heritage in Malta, and other Mediterranean countries.**

**It is this kind of perspective, which links tradition with innovation, that must be our guide for the future.**

**Investment in greener and more sustainable tourism can, in itself, also be a means of creating jobs while improving the environment for local populations. Taken within the context of increasing tourism flows, this investment can lead to significant resource conservation, by improving the efficiency of the sector as a whole.**

**Naturally, any effort towards a more sustainable tourism industry needs the active involvement and co-operation of the business communities in our countries.**

**This is why the Mediterranean Tourism Foundation developed a groundbreaking app in partnership with the Maltese authorities, that measures energy efficiency in the hospitality industry.**



**This app is addressing the high cost of energy expenditure in the hospitality industry, and most importantly, it is contributing towards the reduction of CO2 emissions.**

**These examples provide clear evidence of the effectiveness that can be achieved, when the tourism sector and our authorities work together. Such synergies will definitely lead to significant benefits, in both the national and international economy, while also addressing the effects of climate change.**

**Diversifying tourism will be another essential strategy for regional resilience.**

**This fact was highlighted in a report financed by the Foundation for Science and Technology, last year, entitled “Diversifying Mediterranean Tourism”.**

**The report states that Mediterranean destinations which solely rely on sun and beach tourism are in an increasingly precarious situation. Challenges related to an ageing population and climate change will also have long-term consequences on the development of Mediterranean tourism.**

**In this context, changing demographics and environmental degradation are set to have a disruptive impact, throughout these touristic regions.**

**A strategy to enhance regional resilience is necessary, to smoothly transition from mainstream touristic activities to alternative and more sustainable tourism opportunities, such as environmental and cultural initiatives.**

**I propose that we work together, as a Mediterranean region and a united industry, to explore the possibilities of such regional strategies for resilience and innovation.**

**Our authorities, our private sector stakeholders, and our civil society activists all have an investment in such strategies for resilience, and the empowerment of our communities.**

**Malta's diversified tourism portfolio, which maximises the historical, cultural, and natural resources of our islands, is an example of how our authorities and private sector stakeholders have embraced these new opportunities for expansion.**

**As the tourism sector changes, it is vital that stakeholders collaborate, to build this important global industry into a source of positive benefits for our entire region.**

**This is because, at the end of the day, we are all members of one Mediterranean family of nations.**

**I believe that we are natural collaborators, and not competitors.**

**We share a common vision, and we understand that when the tourism industry in our region is enabled to grow, then we all stand to benefit.**

**On concluding, let me propose a few questions to stimulate thought, during your deliberations.**

**I would like you to consider:**

**How can the tourism industry do more, to reconcile new technologies with the importance of person-to-person contacts and realtime access to a culture and natural heritage of our countries?**

**How can the industry protect the environment and reduce climate change, while also empowering our communities to prosper and thrive?**

**How can the industry facilitate travel and make it easier for visitors to enjoy their experience, without compromising the security of our borders?**

**How can the tourism and travel industry be a champion of social justice, by ensuring that vulnerable communities are not forgotten or left behind?**

**These are big questions, which demand a united response.**

**We are a region of immense heritage, and yet our focus must always be on the world of tomorrow, working together to face tomorrow's challenges.**

**We all know that tourism and travel are a gateway for economic growth, and long-term prosperity. Moreover, it is through the personal connections which come with travel, that people can really begin to know and to understand each other.**

**These are the precious relationships which form the strongest foundations, for us to continue building the tourism industry, and promoting travel and tourism as a path for holistic wellbeing, positive peace, inclusive prosperity, and global sustainability.**

**Finally, I augur all of you every success with your endeavours, and wish you a pleasant stay in Malta.**

**Thank you.**