

Open season for Bermuda's forts



4. Alexandra Battery represents the major rearmament of Bermuda's forts in first decade of 1900s.

HERITAGE MATTERS by Dr. Edward Harris

Heritage and culture, when combined with leisure and tourism may be considered one of the most significant and fastest growing components of this tourism phenomena in the world.— The Journal of Tourism Studies

The new year of 2013 is upon us and it is time for new resolutions, most of which will not be met, as enthusiasm to be a nice person or shed the kilos unnecessary for a good life dwindles as the months grind into spring, summer and the autumn. By popular demand, the new Editor of this newspaper has been informed of a resolution to continue to produce this column, though the writer is mystified that he is not awarded 'columnist status' for 'heritage' on the RG website, while his big sister is so esteemed for 'business'. Would that the authorities understand that heritage is the biggest sector of the largest business in the world, namely, tourism, then we might be able to improve on our slice of that significant economic pie, while enjoying a piece of cassava (a heritage pie if you will) next Christmas. It is time overdue to declare 'Open Season' for Cultural Heritage in these very historic islands, but not necessarily on those who would stand, target-like, in the way of such a strategic advance. Tourism derives from the first part of the word and came into being with the 'Grand Tour'. According to writer Matt Gross in The New York Times, that touring began 300 years ago, when 'wealthy young Englishmen began taking a post-Oxbridge trek through France and Italy in search of art, culture and the roots of Western civilisation. With nearly unlimited funds, aristocratic connections and months (or years) to roam, they commissioned paintings, perfected their language skills and mingled with the upper crust of the Continent'.

As a middle class developed in the mid-1800s, 'lesser mortals' took to the road, many eventually with the organised 'Cook's Tours' of Thomas Cook. After the Second World War, inexpensive transportation by air increased the number of tour persons, and of late, cruise ships have added more numbers on the ground, if not money in the pockets of the localities visited. Nonetheless, it all began with the financial ability to have leisure time, to take 'holidays' from normal life and tourism remains firmly rooted in touring to see historic monuments and other forms of heritage and culture, foreign to the traveller. As one writer put it recently, heritage tourism is 'escapism to enrichment', which 'is reflected in data showing the dramatically increased importance of culture as a travel motivator'.

That is all well and good, but of course a country must have some monuments to claim its rightful place on the tourism gravy train, and those heritage items must be in some semblance of care and repair. Bermuda has much to offer (and indeed part of its legacy has been declared 'World Heritage' by UNESCO), but for many years, it has been Open Season on our monuments in the traditional sense of that phrase, like the opening of deer hunting time on the nearby continent. Using the shotgun of the bulldozer, we have laid waste to a number of our irreplaceable heritage tourism assets, and with the blunderbuss of neglect, we have allowed others to slide into the passage to oblivion. For such anti-tourism and anti-heritage activities, few have ever been held to account, mostly to due the lack of understanding of what really matters for the future of Bermuda tourism. A report by an Auditor General on heritage assets of the last sixty years would make heartbreaking reading. We spend millions to get visitors to the island, but paltry sums to restore and maintain all of those monuments that make Bermuda Bermuda: that has to change.

So perhaps we can declare an Open Season in reverse for the assets of Bermuda's Heritage Tourism by starting to place major investments in those assets, and also by advertising what we have, we can indicate to potential visitors that it is Open Season for exploring, understanding and appreciating our unique monuments, be they natural, architectural, archaeological, military, und so weiter.

For one such category a decade ago, the then Premier, now Dame Jennifer Smith, to the credit of her government, commissioned a report into the important heritage class of fortifications, part of which was to suggest a way forward for those monuments. The fortifications and historic artillery collections of this small place are astounding and require at least three days of touring, if one is to see all that can be viewed. They are of particular appeal to the often frustrating male sector of society and all are of international significance, even if some, through local parochialism, were left out of the World Heritage designation. Had Dame Jennifer's report been fully followed up, Bermuda's historic guns and forts would perhaps by now have been restored as 'world class' assets, of great economic value to tourism and a creator of jobs on the battlefield of local life.

That is all to say little of the value to ourselves of the preservation of all heritage monuments which give us our identity as Bermudians, but rather to say that looking ahead to this year and this decade, we must resolve to invest much more in the real, tangible and permanent assets of Bermuda tourism. We must defend, for example, our fortifications of old, so that they may defend us by drawing in the tourist bacon, without which, those other international businesses aside, we face emigration or starvation.

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