



With or without the golf course? An artist's plan of what the new Intercontinental Hotel would look like once completed.

New Verdala refurbishment will cost Lm11.5m

□ Developers sign agreement with Hong Kong-based group for running of golf course

The world is moving at a fast rate and Malta has to keep up with the ever increasing pace of travellers. A large number of these travellers are today carrying golf clubs.

This was how the president of Inter-Continental Hotels and Resorts Europe, Mr John Wright, replied when asked at a news conference yesterday if Malta really needed another five-star hotel with a golf course.

"We have a strong record of success. I expect it to be repeated here. And a project having a golf course is a tremendous draw for anybody in the tourism industry," Mr Wright said at the signing of the partnership agreement between Inter-Conti-

Herman Grech

mental Hotels and AX Holdings yesterday.

The agreement effectively gives birth to the new Hotel Inter-Continental Malta, which is replacing the Grand Hotel Verdala in Rabat, and the people behind the project want it to be "among the best in Europe."

The hotel will cost Lm11.5 million and another Lm3 million will be used to upgrade the AX-Holdings-owned buildings in the immediate vicinity of the hotel.

The golf course would cost Lm4 million.

The steering committee appointed by the government to decide on the development of golf courses in Malta in Gozo has submitted its recommendations to Cabinet. AX Holdings is one of the applicants.

Described as a "milestone in the history of the local hotel industry", the five-star deluxe-hotel will incorporate 200 all-suite rooms and include a state of the art business centre and, if approved, a golf course.

It will also offer an artificial lagoon with fresh water and salt water pools, a health club,

Turkish baths and a shopping arcade. The hotel will also boast a number of original artefacts, helping to promote Malta as a culture destination rather than just a sun and sea island.

However, AX Holdings chairman Angelo Xuereb was still eagerly awaiting the green light for the whole project from the Planning Authority.

The application was filed three and a half years ago.

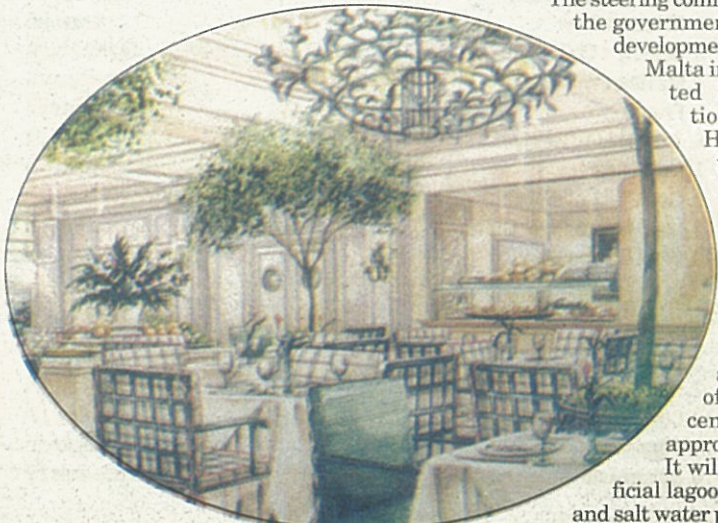
Once approved, Mr Xuereb said he intended to complete the project within 15 months.

Mr Xuereb stressed the importance of the golf course. He said top international golfers could be invited to Malta to participate in tournaments, subsequently attracting vast media coverage, and luring the ever increasing number of tourists interested in golf.

Mr Xuereb read an extract from the 'Structure Plan for the Maltese Islands' which quotes that: "any golf course should be located where associated development could be satisfactorily accommodated, preferably as part of an adjacent built-up area."

This, Mr Xuereb claimed, was what AX Holdings was doing, so he could not see what the problem was.

When asked whether the excessive bureaucracy might have hindered Inter-Con-



tinental's decision to partner the project, Mr Wright said it did not, replying: "I am sure once this agony is over, there will be very positive returns."

Mr Wright said around 3,000 people visited the Intercontinental Hotels' Internet site daily. The Malta hotel would also be listed there, increasing the possibility of attracting more upmarket tourists.

Asked whether he felt the hotel industry had reached saturation point, Mr Xuereb said that, unfortunately, Malta was still recognised abroad as a "mass-tourist" location. However, he thought there was room for the upmarket tourist.

"People also thought I was crazy when I opened the Suncrest Hotel. But 10 years on I guess I have proved that Malta had not reached saturation point."

Mr Xuereb also announced that AX Holdings would be signing a joint venture agreement with the Hong Kong-based CCA Group to manage and operate the golf course.