

Atlas Kasbah Ecolodge: Implementing Responsible Tourism in Morocco

When most people think of Morocco's coastal city of Agadir, long stretches of sandy beaches, mass tourism resorts, souvenir shops, and the sun shining 300 days of the year come to mind. Not many think of ecotourism and sustainable living.



Take a short drive east of the touristy stretch of Agadir, through the UNESCO-designated Argan Biosphere Reserve and enjoy the gentle curves of the roads at the foothills of the High Atlas Mountains. In less than 20 minutes the rose-colored traditional Kasbah appears around the corner, resting at the top of a mountain, and you have arrived at the Atlas Kasbah Eco-lodge. The eco-lodge is owned by Hassan, a Berber and his French wife Helene who both hold a Master's degree in sustainable tourism.

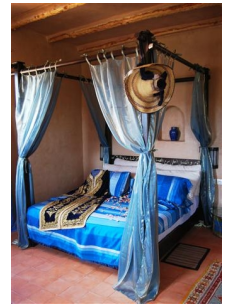
Opening its doors in 2009, Atlas Kasbah is the first ecotourism venture of its kind in the area, and one of a handful in North Africa. The lack of competition may appear as an asset though it is very challenging as the destination of Agadir has been since the 1950's one of the favorite sun holiday spot of the European market. Hopefully the tourism board and authorities will soon understand that they cannot continue to focus their policies on mass tourism.

In fact, the Agadir area has so much to offer as far as rural tourism is concerned (e.g. the Anti-Atlas Mountains in the Tafraout region, the Imperial city of Taroudant, the beautiful coastline & the fortified city of Essaouira...) and that is what the guests of the eco-lodge want to discover during their daytrips.

Among other activities still within community tourism, guests discover Moroccan culture thanks to the artifact exhibits around the Kasbah but also with Berber dialect lessons, educational tea ceremonies, cooking classes, hammam or a trip to the local village to visit the women's argan oil cooperatives... All the warm and friendly team comes from nearby Berber villages and is eager to share its rich culture.

The Moroccan culture is also at its best through the appreciation and use of traditional architecture. Atlas Kasbah was designed in traditional Moroccan fashion with local materials and style even though, in 2006, it was quite difficult to find craftsmen that still knew the secrets of this healthy and eco-friendly building technique. Now, the tendency is spreading and the new generation becomes aware little by little

that this type of construction is the future for its energy value, durability, cost-effectiveness...



This is just one of the many challenges, learning curves, and adventures that tend to come when being the first at anything. Sourcing environmentally friendly equipment and products like solar panels and water purification systems has not been easy either. Partnerships were created with the University of Agadir to install a water purification system that will recycle water from the property for use in the first permaculture garden in southern Morocco. Two permaculture specialists, Anders Drew from Great-Britain and, more recently, Meggen Connolley from the US have come to implement a permaculture garden and share their ideas with the local gardeners. After some time, both the specialists and local gardeners would learn from one another, both having many permaculture ideas!

To practice environmental sustainability, the Kasbah also uses a salt-treated swimming-pool, chemical-free home-made cleaning products, photovoltaic solar panels, 3RV rule for waste etc. But one of the greatest challenges has been to train local staff through a blending of genuine Moroccan culture and needs of international guests. One of the cultural differences was for example the fact that some guests are vegetarian: it happens to be very rude not to prepare a dish with meat to guests in a Moroccan family and Berber cooks couldn't understand that it was the guests' choice!

Another example was when watching the documentary "Home" to enhance the staff's environmental awareness. Everybody would remain quiet until they saw the huge US cities and standardized housing, and would be so impressed that they all say wow. At that point, the road to sustainability has seemed very long!



The Kasbah also supports the local community for example:

A sustainable development association was created in the village nearby. A drawing competition was also organized in the local school with school bags and stationery for the winners. It was the first time that the children would use paint! An Ecology Festival was organized in February 2011 to promote the

protection of the argan forest – 2011 being the International Year of Forest etc.

These projects have taken a long time to prepare but we got the help of the elders of the village. The older Berbers would always respect the environment, even though they were unconsciously environmentalists!

These are just a few advances made in the area after two years of operations. The eco-friendly practices and sustainable lifestyle at Atlas Kasbah are gaining attention and recognition from the communities, the guests, the Moroccan government, and other tourism stakeholders who want to implement similar practices on their properties.

The eco-lodge was awarded the Moroccan Responsible Tourism Award, the Ecoplanet Responsible Tourism Certificate, the Ecolabel Green Key and The ALM Ecology Trophy.

<http://www.atlaskasbah.com>

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