

CRUISE TOURISM IN MOROCCO GRADUALLY WEAKENING



Morocco is no longer on the radar of the world's cruise giants. The figures are alarming: barely 227,000 cruise passengers docked at Moroccan ports in 2018, compared to almost twice as many in 2010.

The number of cruise ships that dock at Moroccan ports has been declining rapidly, by as much as -80% in Casablanca. And the trend is not likely to reverse overnight. **It will take until 2021 to just hope for a return to normal and to the performance of 7 or 8 years ago, according to the experts of the sector.**

The 2019-2020 seasons are no exception either. "Operators in the sector will still have to suffer hoping that 2021 will be a better year," says Jalil Madih, CEO of Alizés Travel, an operator that claims an 80% market share of Moroccan cruise tourism.

Indeed, the booking schedule (for global giants such as Carnival Corporation, MSC or Royal Caribbean...) is established 2 to 3 years in advance. And it is Tangier and Casablanca, the two leading cruise tourism destinations, that suffer the most while Agadir to a lesser extent.

The economic capital alone attracted more than half of the cruise passengers during the boom years. In fact, cruise ship flows are in free fall due to the lack of reception infrastructure, but mainly because of the disorganization of the sector (transport problems, guides...) and the anarchy in the ports, especially that of Casablanca.

It is therefore far from the time of record attendance, as was the case in 2015. The port of Casablanca had received 15,000 cruise passengers in one day. The official figures are more nuanced, but they are still alarming.

According to ANP figures, the number of cruise passengers in the ports managed by the agency increased by 39.5% in the first quarter of 2018, or 91,157 compared with 65,341 a year earlier. It is the city of Agadir that is doing the best with 53,755 cruise passengers or +77.7%. Unlike Casablanca, Agadir does not suffer from the lack of reception facilities. Moreover, the metropolitan area only received 31,154 cruise passengers over this period, an increase of barely 3.1%.

According to the ONMT (Moroccan National Tourist Office), the trend is on the rise between 2017 and 2018 for Agadir and Tangier destinations. Passing from 93,000 to 108,000 cruise passengers for Agadir and from 24,000 to 31,000 cruise passengers for the city of the Strait. However, the average annual growth rate of the number of cruise passengers who stopped over in Morocco between 2009 and 2018 is on the decline by 5.7%. Pending the commissioning of the cruise quay, operators are calling for improved access to the port.

Delays in administrative procedures (customs, police, etc.) and the lack of signage are, among other things, obstacles to the development of this niche. Morocco's growing attractiveness and modern infrastructure (especially in Tangiers and Casablanca) hopefully will reverse the downward trend.

Professionals are also hoping for a revival of activity with the long-awaited commissioning of the new cruise terminal (scheduled for March 2020) in Casablanca (which alone accounts for half of the traffic).

With an annual capacity of 350,000 cruise passengers, the new terminal will be able to accommodate ships 350 m long and 45 m wide, with a depth of 12 m. It is also intended to build a ship parking basin and a wharf with a total length of approximately 665 m.

The port of Casablanca is distinguished by its central position which allows the travelers to visit the hinterland in less than 3 hours (Rabat, Marrakech, Fez, El Jadida...).

Indeed, the cruise passengers' itinerary is generally well timed with 3 hours of driving time on the outward journey and as much on the return journey in more than 6 hours on site. **In addition, the port of Casablanca has the advantage of being halfway between Spain and the Canary Islands.** This makes it a must for the largest cruise ships. Knowing that a cruise line spends an average of 200 dollars on the spot, not to mention the revenue for carriers, restaurateurs, stopovers, etc.

For its part, Agadir, which does not have major infrastructure problems, does not suffer as much as Casablanca or Tangier. The city is integrated into the cruise routes with destinations such as Las Palmas or Tenerife.

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