

Beyond Agadir: the Moroccan ecolodge just minutes from the tourist crowds

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The Atlas Kasbah in the foothills of the Anti-Atlas mountains is surrounded by spectacular landscapes and offers taste of Berber life, finds **Sarfraz Manzoor**.

Agadir, the seaside resort in south-western Morocco, enjoys an average of 300 days of sun per year, is less than four hours from the UK and has a six-mile stretch of golden sand beach, making it very appealing for British tourists. Unfortunately that also means there are bland chain hotels, tourist trap restaurants and English pubs. But that doesn't mean the region should be dismissed. Agadir, which lies at the Atlantic limit of the Souss Valley in the foothills of the Anti-Atlas mountains – is surrounded by spectacular landscapes and many interesting places to visit. To explore them, I stayed at the Atlas Kasbah, a three-year-old, but ancient-looking, ecolodge 15 minutes' drive east of Agadir. The lodge stands imperiously on top of a hill and resembles a giant rust-coloured sandcastle, with towers and ramparts, and was one of the first ecolodges in southern Morocco.

Owners Hassan, a Berber, and his wife H el ene, who is French, have degrees in sustainable tourism. The 11-bedroom lodge uses solar power for 80% of its energy, has solar-heated showers, a chlorine-free pool and a herb and vegetable garden. In its large courtyard and salon we were welcomed with a traditional tea drinking ceremony, then shown to our suite, which had antique red carpets, a large four-poster bed and locally made black olive soap in the bathroom.

We had views of the High Atlas mountains, and farmers tilling the ground and herding goats. Members of the local Berber community work at the lodge, preparing evening meals of beef tagine and grilled fish, but guests can also visit them in their village, Tanfeest, to which we drove the next day. The bumpy route took us along a dry river bed, past prickly pears and cacti. Around the communal olive press, large sacks of black olives gleamed in the sun, giving the village the scent of a giant tapenade, and a donkey hauled a huge grinding stone in a circle, crushing olives to release oil into buckets below. We were invited into the living room of one family for a breakfast of sweet mint tea, flatbread with honey and argan oil.

The village and hotel lie in the Souss-Massa-Dr aa region in the Unesco argan tree biosphere reserve. We visited an argan factory, watching workers peel and press the nuts to make the oil which is used in Berber cookery, and hair and skin care.

Day trips giving visitors a sense of the local culture are the real draw of the Atlas Kasbah – we visited ancient Taroudant, Agadir's busy fishing port early one morning, and the hilltop ruins of Agadir's old kasbah, devastated by an earthquake in 1960 which killed 15,000 people. A new kasbah was built in the 90s by Italian architect Coco Polizzi, but I preferred the Kasbat Souss, where dozens of artists sold everything from bone jewellery and ceramics to art made from shells.

We skipped Agadir's busy beach in favour of the empty stretches a few miles down the coast, and concluded that if you look in the right places, Agadir has everything under the sun.

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