

FROM HOTEL ACCOMMODATION TO RESIDENTIAL TOURISM IN MOROCCO. BETWEEN REAL ESTATE BUSINESS AND SOCIO-SPATIAL IMAGE REMAKING

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This article aims to analyse the recent evolution and impacts of tourism in Morocco. In the context of financial globalization, tourism has become a major sector of activity in this country. Simultaneously with the expansion of receiving tourism, multinational companies are growing in numbers. These processes have economic, social and territorial effects. It is in this manner that many new tourist resorts have been created, particularly in coastal areas. In addition, urban and architectural heritage are attractive for tourists who are interested in the cultural background.

Nevertheless, tourism is the object of ambiguous and opposite interpretations: it can be beneficial for some or harmful for others, to the point of being measured as a form of neo-colonialism: tourists activity shows an economic and cultural domination adding to the colonial heritage and the current uneven development.

1. INTRODUCTION: THE GENERAL CONTEXT OF TOURISM IN MOROCCO

Between 2008 and 2009, a period of general recession in western countries, about 95000 new jobs were created in Morocco, principally in services and construction sectors and located in urban areas. These numbers could be considered as the indication of an apparent socio-economical change.

Going back in the time, from the 80s and more particularly from the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS), signed in Marrakech in 1994, Morocco has added to the list of international agreements and treaties in favour of trade liberalisation. In 1996, Morocco signed an association agreement with the European Union, in order to create a free trade area. These reforms provide an exceptional opportunity for Spanish and European companies to invest in the country.

Nowadays, foreign investments, tourism and *currency* transfers from Moroccan emigrants are the main engine for economic growth. Therefore, international tourism has become more than an economic sector: it is also a national project and a political choice

in what concerns territory development, in accord with the governmental and monarchist ideology.

2. TOURIST SUPPLY: NATIONAL TOURISM POLICY AND INTERNATIONAL INVESTMENTS IN THE CONTEXT OF THE GLOBAL ECONOMIC CRISIS

During the last decades, Moroccan government has been very proactive in supporting tourism and encouraging inward foreign investment as a mean to promote economic and social development. In consequence, as regards Moroccan tourist policy, a great deal of measures and precise actions have been defined. *Vision 2010* was an ambitious strategy launched in January 2001 to develop tourism and create many new tourist project within the country, but the world economic slowdown has put a brake on previously high growth rates. In this way in 2010, *Vision 2010* was replaced by *Vision 2020* which is set to be a continuation of the original strategy and foresee double the number of entries from now to 2020. In addition, from 2004 the Open Skies policy has also allowed more airlines to come in into the country.

To achieve the goals of the Vision 2010 programme it was recognised that certain areas of the country should be granted special status and many «Plan Azur» areas were identified. These zones were all established on stretches of the coastline recognised for their outstanding natural beauty and untapped tourist potential. This is the case of Mazagan-El Jadida, Mogador-Essaouira and Taghazout.

The main difference introduced by Vision 2020 is a new proposal of tourist regionalization that establishes eight territories, away from administrative limits, all along the country. This demonstrates a more wide territorial approach.

Vision 2020 also aims to diversify the tourism product widening the search for foreign tourists and encouraging domestic tourism.

3. RESIDENTIAL TOURISM: NEW VALUES AND USE OF ARCHITECTURAL HERITAGE

As for tourist accommodation not all are ex-novo constructions. Since the 90s many western tourists have come in the old Arab towns, the medinas, to stay in vacation or to invest and reside. Nowadays, this phenomenon is more and more important in different places with a traditional urbanity as Marrakech, Casablanca, Rabat, Fes, Essaouira, Tangier or Tetouan. As a result of this process, the Moroccan medinas, that offer a great architectural heritage and have traditionally been associated with an identity dimension, have always reached a new patrimony value.

Traditional houses or older palaces with an interior garden or courtyard, called *riads*, have been restored, particularly by Europeans. The basic forms are still used but the style has significantly changed, after a new trend of renovation of many of these often-crumbling buildings *frequently deserted by Moroccans*.

4. THE EVOLUTION OF TOURISM DEMAND IN MOROCCO

According to the Moroccan Observatory of Tourism, Morocco received more than eight million visitors in 2009, which represents an annual growth rate of 6%. Additionally, the growth rate between 2009 and 2010 has been near to 11%. For the most part (60%) they are European tourists, *particularly French and Spanish, but in last years, receiving tourism from other European countries, as United Kingdom, Italy, Holland, Belgium, or Germany, is growing in an important way.*

Concerning the number of visitors, it is also necessary to bear in mind that Moroccan living abroad constitute a great percentage of registered arrivals (45.6% in 2007). At the same time, domestic tourism has also increased steadily over the last decade.

Consequently, during last years there have been many changes in tourist activity, considered as one of the main engines for economic growth in the country and encouraged by official rhetoric as a challenge, seeking to justify monarchical and governmental powers.

5. THE MYTH OF EXOTIC OTHERNESS. THE COUNTRY'S IMAGE ABROAD

Nowadays, international tourism in Morocco remains tributary of the country's image abroad. Being given that foreign visitors are attracted by picturesque landscapes, fascinating coastlines, cultural tradition and architecture with oriental influences, tourist promotion is based on this kind of socio-spatial representations that have the power to form the destination image, a sense of place and a social reality that influence the motivations, perceptions and buying decisions of tourists.

This situation is apparently a paradox: western tourists coming in Morocco want to see or feel differently, but according to a set way that is commercially available. In this sense, the mechanism of representations has become institutionalized: the destination culture is reduced to a dramaturgical event and an operational format of the spectacle, in which simulated experiences usually replace the real ones. Thus, the representation of an identity and the myth of otherness become a tourist product. A good example of this is the process of touristification of the medinas that, on the one hand, supposes their revitalization and an evolution of the mentalities, but on the other carries perturbations in the rhythm of life and in the traditional relationships with cultural heritage being the support of collective patrimony.

