

The **ECO** thing

Morocco is focused on preserving organic biodiversity, creating integrated regional development, and intent on becoming one of the world's leading ecotourism destinations, says **Vago Damitio**

Ecotourism, also called environmentally friendly travel or green travel, is a great way to have a wonderful vacation and feel great about it when you go home. Morocco is a wonderland waiting to be explored by those eager to visit Africa, experience exotic landscapes, learn about indigenous cultures and explore the Arab and Berber world in safety and security. Morocco is a stable developing nation that has committed

to fostering sustainable tourism over the coming decade.

The rugged Rif Mountains, the scenic Middle Atlas Mountains and the thousand-kilometre-long High Atlas Mountains offer everything from trekking and kayaking to skiing and birdwatching with peaks that climb more than 4,000 metres. The stark desert landscapes of the Sahara, beautiful Atlantic and Mediterranean coastal areas and tribes of indigenous

people all contribute to some of the best eco-experiences on the globe. The environmental ethics of the Berbers and an active government that encourages 'green' tourism have led to eco-resorts, ecotours and responsible tourism for travellers with a conscience. Visitors can watch Barbary apes at the Cascades Ouzoud, trek across the desert by camel or snap photos of indigenous bird species nibbling on cactus flowers. Morocco is filled with >

organic

Chefchaouen is the perfect place to start your ecotourism experience



Chefchaouen offers a lesson in sustainable eco-friendly living

caves, lakes, rivers, springs and plentiful opportunities for outdoor recreation.

THE GREEN INITIATIVE

Morocco hasn't always been known for sustainable development, but the Kingdom's focus is firmly on ecotourism under the rule of His Majesty King Mohammad VI. Last year the monarch outlined the Vision 2020 plan for Moroccan tourism including creation of the first 'neutral carbon' tourist destination in Africa at the southern city of Ouerzazate. This combined with the National Initiative for Human Development (NIHD) shows a nation focused on preserving organic biodiversity, creating integrated regional development, and intent on becoming one of the world's leading ecotourism destinations. The government has participated in replanting

more than 1.2 million acres with trees and is actively pursuing sustainable development and environmental protection as part of its strategy to promote tourism. This has included providing financial assistance, zero interest loans and direct investment into sustainable tourism-based projects in regions throughout the kingdom. The Kingdom has also partnered



Barbary apes can be found in plenty during a Cascades Ouzoud trek

with foundations and sustainable development organisations such as United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the Millennium Challenge Corporation, the World Travel and Tourism Council, and the Zakoura Foundation, which provides micro-loans for human development in Morocco.

IN GOOD COMPANY

Journey Beyond Travel is a leader of ecotourism in Morocco. With



Atlas Kasbah Ecolodge is the first in southern Morocco to use the sustainable design system called permaculture



more than 20 years of experience in providing sustainable trips, it works hard to protect and give back to the land.

A percentage of every trip goes towards sustainable projects in the villages it works with.

Morocco Sahara Expeditions is owned and operated by the Berber Nomad family of Muha Oualibou in the desert city of Merzouga.

The family has built a mud brick hotel in traditional style and works with local guides to provide tourists with camel treks through the Sahara. Using local materials, locally grown foods, and providing local employment — Morocco Sahara educates guests about the realities of Berber Nomad life while leaving a minimal carbon footprint and having very low impact on the desert environment.

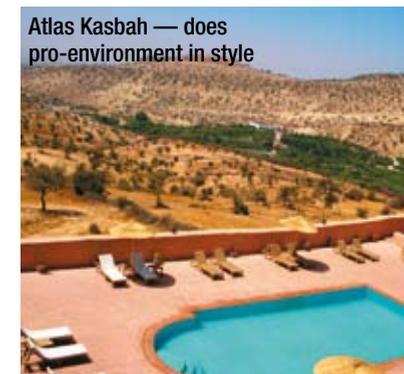
Morocco is filled with small, family owned hotels and guesthouses. Most of these can be considered as a great option for those interested in responsible travel because the money they generate stays in Morocco and benefits the local people. In terms of ecotourism, a few stand

out as exceptional.

THE RIGHT CHOICES

Atlas Kasbah Ecolodge near Agadir is owned by Hassan Aboutayeb and his wife Helene. The couple are innovators in Moroccan ecotourism and have implemented policies and features into their lodge to combine sustainability, innovation and awareness. It uses renewable energy, recycles materials and provides fresh seasonal food to guests.

In addition, Atlas Kasbah Ecolodge is the first in southern Morocco to use the internationally recognised sustainable designs known as permaculture. Atlas Kasbah Ecolodge is the recipient of the 2009 Ecoplanet Sustainable Tourism Certificate, the 2009 Morocco Responsible Tourism Award,



Atlas Kasbah — does pro-environment in style



the Green Key in 2010 and 2011 and was selected among six responsible tourism projects in the world by the International Responsible Tourism Network.

Little Morocco is a joint venture of a Berber family (The Gushelys) and a Welsh family (The Harts) in the Middle Atlas Mountains. With a traditional environment focused on green ethics, this small hotel is a jewel. The hotel is built of stone and mud using traditional techniques, which keep the interiors of the building cool in summer and warm in winter using minimum energy. The hotel sits near the village of Bin el Ouidane and guests have prime opportunities for enjoying nature and exploring the local culture. The nearby farms use no petrochemicals for fertiliser or pest control. Hiking and kayaking are available nearby and it's common to see otters, eagles, Barbary apes and turtles. Little Morocco is careful in the selection of ecological products and supplies that many travellers take for granted.

Saharan Camp Atta near the village of Remlia uses no electricity and thus has a very low carbon footprint. The camp is big on recycling and even feeds organic waste to the local trash compactors — a herd of goats.

A major part of ecotourism credential comes from educating guests and employees about responsible travel behaviour. The goat hair tents used at Saharan Camp Atta were purchased from Berber Nomads and renovated using traditional techniques. Guests are introduced to Berber crafts and skills such as finding water in the desert, cooking with local ingredients, and making traditional meals. ■

