

# Ouarzazate:

## Ahwash, heritage in the service of tourism

>Ouarzazate -  
Nour-eddine Saoudi

Ouarzazate, the pearl of southern Morocco, known for its calm and tranquillity, had an exciting and dynamic exceptional weekend, with the “Ahwash (village music) Festival” which transformed the streets of the city into a happy feast with the rhythm of enchanting folk music and beautiful collective dances, to delight local residents and tourists, domestic and foreign.

Islamic Tourism magazine was invited to Ouarzazate (located 528 km south-east of the Moroccan capital Rabat) to cover the events of the “Ahwash Festival” in its third edition, held from 11<sup>th</sup> to 13<sup>th</sup> of April. The theme was Ahwash: a dynamic for development. It was organised by a partnership between local authorities, professionals in the tourism sector and the public. This event is part of the “Spring of Ouarzazate Programme” extending from March to

August. It aims to consolidate cultural activities as a real catalyst for sustainable development in the region, including tourism development.

If the first two previous editions put the festival on the map of major festivals of the Kingdom of Morocco, the current edition worked to consolidate and enrich it, in order to ensure sustainability, through a comprehensive programme to activate and diversify tourism. That was the message at a

press conference by Mr. Abdul- Sadeq El-Aalem, Director of the Festival.

The festival is a multi-faceted affair: There is the cinema museum in Ouarzazate, the Carpet Museum in the village of Taznakhte, the Dinosaur Museum in Tazouda Iminoulaouen, the Palm Museum in Skoura, and the Museum of Biodiversity in Ouarzazate. “Ouarzazate Spring” aims to consolidate and diversify cultural life and tourism in Ouarzazate to make it an independent tourist



attraction. It also aims at encouraging investment in tourism and film.

Thus, on the first level, the festival saw the signing of an agreement for a large tourism project, with a budget of 5.4 billion dirhams (DH), to be called "Lake City". The signing took place in the presence of the Minister of Tourism and Handicrafts, Mr. Mohamed Bousaid, the Minister of Agriculture Mr. Aziz Akhenouch and the President of the Region Souss-Mass-Draa, which includes the province of Ouarzazate.

Regarding the 7th art, a "Commission of cinema" was formed by professionals to organize the work of all stakeholders: actors, technicians and craftsmen. Ouarzazate is rightly dubbed the "Hollywood of Africa". It is known for its studios, its spaces and its famous kasbahs, including that of Ait Benhaddou, which has been a UNESCO world heritage site since 1987. Lawrence of Arabia, Babylon, Alexander the Great, Gladiator, The Mummy and many other films were made here.

This edition was characterized by its opening carnival, which covered the main arteries of the city, bringing together all Ahwash groups, and local actors in their professional dresses. There was also a well organised symposium to discuss the main issues of developing this festival. The children were not to be outdone, since the municipality of Ouarzazate devoted a morning to Ahwash children. In sum, young and old experienced three days of

fun and happiness with lovely folk songs and dances.

### What does Ahwash do?

The Ahwash Festival aims to raise awareness of the multi-cultural, artistic and civilizational heritage of the province of Ouarzazate, focusing primarily on Ahwash, Berber culture to rehabilitate their art-rich symbols with its human and social values, through all the components of the civilizational heritage of this region of south-east Morocco.

At the meeting on "Heritage and Local Development," the researcher Ahmed Choukri (a graduate of Michel de Montaigne University in Bordeaux-France) defined the meaning of the term Ahwash saying: "Ahwash is the term used to indicate this type of local heritage, where there is a beautiful marriage of words and rhythmic dances in Ouarzazate. If we look further, we find that the term Ahwash comes from the word "hawash" designating "grouping" or "collecting", in reference to the role of this art, which brings together rural inhabitants, at various community events celebrated throughout the region". He added that Ahwash dance was performed by volunteers. It is an expressive dance with a poem sung with the participation of men and women.

This expressive art, particularly related to Ouarzazate, extends to the High Atlas. The entire region is inhabited by the Chleuhs

(part of the Amazigh), from Demnate to Assif M'goun, according to a study by a French musicologist Lorta Jacob in 1982.

According to Choukri, Ahwash in Ouarzazate is both the support and witness of history that has survived until today despite the changes it has known in form and content. It is also a form of oral popular culture, one of the voices of collective and individual artistic creativity, by which people express their joys and tragedies, their sufferings and their hopes. It is an art which includes social values of solidarity and cooperation.

Present generations and tourists only see three-dimensional music (rhythm, movement and sound) since that is all that is left of Ahwash; in the past it was a vehicle of ethical values and a means of communication par excellence. It is noteworthy that Amazigh woman played a major role in preserving this cultural heritage and its transmission to subsequent generations, for decades.

### Questions about the festival

The festival's organisers drew on local resources and skills, choosing the 20 participating groups on professional and geographic grounds. They paid special attention to the social situation of groups of Ahwash (receiving 45% of the budget) and the renewal of artistic elites. They did an excellent job with a limited budget of only two million dirhams. (The famous "Gnaoua ▶



Festival” of Essaouira requires a budget of 10 million DH).

However, to put this festival on the list of the major tourist cultural events of the Kingdom of Morocco, we must deploy more efforts in media coverage and promotion, as pointed out by Professor Benmoussa, during his contribution to the discussion: “The marketing of festivals for development”. He said that most festivals (93%) held in Morocco have a limited development, because of their lack of professionalism, differentiation and coordination on local and national levels.

Mr. A. S. Shakiry, the publisher of ITM magazine, was a guest of honour. He stressed the need to create a national body responsible for organizing and coordinating festivals and to determine the targeted categories of tourists (local, national or foreign). He also asked a question on relations between the roots of Ahwash and Islamic beliefs in the region.

I made two observations: the first concerns the concept of tourism development. We should not only see the quantitative aspect (increasing the number of tourists at any price), but take into account the quality aspect, encouraging responsible or ethical tourism and environmental tourism, which aims to preserve water resources, particularly rare in this province close to the desert. There is a need for regional coordination for organizing and scheduling festivals in the region of Souss-Massa-Draa. In sum, during the festival, a thousand and one questions were raised by journalists and participants, out of interest in this event and this province which is rich in tourist attractions such as exceptional nature (mountains, oasis of palm trees, sand dunes, giant and narrow gorges), culture (diversified popular arts, high quality crafts), and heritage, historical and architectural sites (the kasbahs of Ait Benhaddou and Taourirt, where Ahwash dances took place).

It is undeniable that it is good to work to preserve folk heritage and to develop it in accordance with the time. The will must be there to make it a catalyst for tourism and the economic development of this province in south-east Morocco. However, this requires a clear vision of the concept of



sustainable development based on preserving the natural, social and heritage environment, and the fact that the local population should be the first beneficiary. During the festival copies of the magazine ITM were distributed. It aroused the curiosity of many participants who appreciated both its editorial line and its artistic format.

Ouarzazate and its province really deserve a visit. Tourists will find places of accommodation suitable for all budgets (hotels from one to 5-star, family homes, and even tents). Carpets including Ait Ouaouezguit and Taznakhte, silver jewellery and local daggers, are the best souvenirs but the most treasured memory will be memory of a unique cultural experience. ■