

# Essaouira

## The new rising star of Moroccan tourism

Casablanca - Nour-eddine Saoudi

Essaouira has exceptional bathing facilities, a nature reserve on Mogador Island and a medina classified as a universal heritage site by UNESCO - no wonder it is the new rising star of Moroccan tourism on the Atlantic coast.

A city of bewitching charm, Essaouira is built on a rocky island at the feet of the High Atlas. The hills, the forests and the dunes that surround it, as well as the marine current of Canaries that rocks it, gives the city an exceptional, moderate and soft micro-climate throughout the year. There are also quiet beaches of thin sand that shelters a reserve of rare falcons - a corner of charm ideal to attract all kinds of tourists.

This singular harbor city is rich in historic monuments. The most prestigious are the Door of the Marine, or the Skala of the Kasbah, a long platform of 200 meters on the port, with many well-kept cannons. Outside the big, majestic defensive walls and small interior defensive walls are the city's three main historic sites: the Médina, the Kasbah and the Mellah (Jewish district).

### Appeal for navigators

Situated on the South Atlantic coastline of Morocco, the Bay of Essaouira attracted many navigators since ancient times. In the VII century C.A. the Phoenicians stopped over on the Isle of Mogador. Juba II, the King of Mauritania built



a factory here and the site was sought-after by the Romans. It was subsequently occupied by the Portuguese and Saadiens in turn. They were the first to name it Mogador,

probably a distortion of the name of the saint of the locality, Sidi Magdoul.

But the city doesn't really make its mark until the 18th century, under the reign of the Sultan Alaouite Sidi Mohamed Ben Abdellah, who established the port and the walled city, to supplant Agadir an area of dissidence.

Essaouira soon became the port of Timbuktu where the products imported from Europe were exchanged for ostrich feathers, gold powder, salt and black slaves. The Gnaouas are the descendants of ex-slaves originally from Africa. Today they are known for their unique music which combines African and Arabo-Berber styles. Their most important and essentially therapeutic ceremony is lila (night of trance).

In addition to its trading activities, this city was also famous for its fishing industry and was the world's foremost sardine port. The cool sardines

grilled in the small restaurants of the port are always greatly valued by travelers.

Rich and varied handicrafts developed in the city displaying Arab, Berber and Jewish ➤



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traditions. Thus, the craftsmen are experts in goldwork, marquetry and woodwork. Arabesque and geometric decors decorate the low tables of expensive furniture and beautiful caskets of all shapes and sizes. There are also many fine jewellers in the city famous for their ornamental necklaces, rings etc sought after by locals and foreigners alike. The city's natural beauty makes it a haven for famous, internationally-renowned artists, singers and musicians such as Pasolinis, Jimmy Hendrix and Cat Stevens, who converted to Islam and adopted the name Youssif Islam. Essaouira was also the setting of the famous Orson Wells movie "Othello".

In recent years the city has attracted surfers, who appreciate the big waves that the trade winds push toward the beaches of Moulay Bouzerktoun and Sidi Kaoukis. It has become popular with tourists due to the intelligent policies of diversification and a

focus on arts and culture.

Since its establishment in 1998, the Festival of Essaouira has been a major cultural event, in which international musicians have taken part. It began with only 20,000 patrons but the number has now risen to 400,000. The influx of festival-goers has been a boon for local shop keepers. One merchant sold as many carpets in three days as in one year.

The centennial music of the Gnaouas is the focal point of this festival which attracts visitors from all over the world. The crossroads of exchange and dialogue, the festival welcomes the main musical currents and invites them to an enriching creative synergy.

The 8th edition of this festival will take place from June 23 - 26, 2005. During the past two years, Essaouira has been the venue for the Festival of Atlantic Andalusia where Malhouns, Arabo-andalouses

musicians, flamenco, salsa and gnaoua delight spectators.

There is also a symposium on "the itinerary of the Almoravids and the Almohadeses", organized by the foundation of Andalusian heritage. During the 12th and 13th centuries, Islamic art reached its zenith in the region as seen by the great Mosque of Seville, the Koutoubia in Marrakech, the Hassan Mosque in Rabat, and the Mosque of Tinnel, in the south.

This considerable expansion of tourism in Essaouira has only been made possible by the cultural and historic symbiosis and co-existence between the Arab, Berber and Jewish communities.

Finally, the region of Essaouira is the place for arganiers, which cover 700,000-800,000 hectares. Morocco has the privilege of being the only place in the world where this unique tree is found - it's oil has nourishing, cosmetic virtues and medicinal properties. ■