

Ouarzazate

Star studded celestial display by night, cultural wonders during the day

By Ian Stalker

The Moroccan National Tourist Office is inviting night owls to view a star-studded celestial display.



Abdelghani Ragala, the tourist office's Canadian director, says those visiting southern Morocco will be certain to see stars appear in droves after the sun sets in a part of the world that has sparsely populated expanses that see little of the artificial light that makes constellations hard to spot in urban environments.

"There are a million stars," he says. "It's the most beautiful spectacle of light."

But much of the region's appeal is also firmly rooted on the ground. Among southern Morocco destinations is Ouarzazate, found some 220 kilometres from better-known Marrakech, the cornerstone of interior Morocco's tourist trade.

Among Ouarzazate claims to fame are area kasbahs, or long-standing forts, including Ait Benhaddou, which tourism officials have described as a "fabulous sand castle transported, as if by magic, to stand in the middle of a field of flowering almond trees." The UNESCO World Heritage Site has appeared in movies, including *Lawrence of Arabia*. Ouarzazate, in a desert-setting, has

numerous resorts that draw both adventurous and sun-seeking Europeans, along with a souk, or market, selling Moroccan handicrafts, and Ragala notes, the community can be used as a base for four-wheel-drive excursions that explore the surrounding desert and possibly have people overnight in tents. The particularly adventurous can go on camel safaris, perhaps retracing parts of routes caravans of traders once used to crisscross the region centuries ago.

Golf is another area option and those who enjoy the sport can "golf on dunes just for fun" in a part of the world that isn't lacking in sand, Ragala reports.

The rugged Atlas Mountains are a particularly prominent feature of southern Morocco and help dispel some preconceived tourist perceptions of the region. "They're surprised because they think the area's flat but it's not true," Ragala says, with the Atlas Mountains offering downhill skiing in a part of the world many are quick to associate with Saharan sun.

Nor is all southern Morocco blanketed by sand, with those visiting Ouarzazate able to continue on to nearby valleys, including the Valley of the Draa, home to palm trees, flowers of different colours and Berber communities, which have their own language and culture.

But those intrigued by desert landscapes in a country that is home to part of the world's greatest desert – the Sahara – might want to visit Merzouga, home to sweeping vistas of sand, with area sand dunes changing shape, height and colour, the latter thanks to winds and a shifting sun.

Dramatic display by nature is Todra Gorge, which attracts rock climbers drawn by steep rock-faces that reach up to 300 metres and at some points are only 20 metres apart.

Although modern resorts are found in southern Morocco, Ragala points out that some kasbahs have been converted into hotels, providing guests with insights into the lifestyles of influential Moroccans of yesteryear. ■