

# Ouarzazate:

## The pearl of the oases

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Its serenity bewitched the fuqahas and intellectuals, its immaculate natural beauty attracted international artists, and the diversity of its ecosystem drew tourists from the four corners of the planet: it is Ouarzazate, the door of the desert, the oases and the area of a thousand and one kasbahs.

Ouarzazate is a splendid city of the Moroccan south whose name means City of Serenity in the Berber language. Visitors will testify to the profound sense of peace experienced in Ouarzazate on the edge of the desert, at the extreme point of the south-east of the Kingdom of Morocco. It is located at the crossroads of the Dera'a, Dades and Ziz wadis which majestically cross the beautiful sand dunes of the desert. Approximately 200 km south-east of Marrakech (520 km from the capital Rabat), Ouarzazate, with its vast eternally green palm plantation, its gigantic gorges, its kasbahs and castle of dreams, is an enchanting mirage in the desert.

It is the gate of the Sahara and the starting point of the circuit of the oases of the Moroccan south. The trip to Ouarzazate is rich in moments of pleasure, emotions and suspense, largely because of the varied ecosystem. From Marrakech, the continental city par excellence, the traveller passes by the majestic Atlas Mountains, whose peaks are covered with snow most of the time, and descends - after travelling through the pass of Tizi-N-Tishka at 2,260 m - towards the arid eastern slopes, plateaus and the Dera'a Valley.

### Deep historical roots

Ouarzazate and the neighbouring cities and oases stretching for more than 200 km are tributaries of the Dera'a wadi - the true heart of this area. Until recently it was the longest river in Morocco – reaching

out to the Atlantic Ocean. The river begins a few kilometres to the east of Ouarzazate. It moves towards the south-east to cross the Saghrou Mountain, takes many turns, traverses Jbel Bani and draws a kind of a loop westwards before losing itself in the desert.

The area of Ouarzazate is rich with sites and engravings dating back more than 4,000 years. They include Jarf El Khil with 109 engravings from the Libyan-Berber era depicting riders and jewels; Foum Shena with the largest collection of engravings of

the Libyan-Berber era, representing riders, horses, camels, ostriches, scorpions, hunters' weapons etc.

The Zagora oasis, located approximately 170 km to the east of Ouarzazate played a distinguished role in the history of Morocco. In the 16th century, it was the launching pad of the Saadiens who conquered the area of Souss (in the south of the country), then the whole of Morocco, and finally a good part of central and Western Africa. The Saadien Empire reached its peak by including Timbuktu, ▶



The characteristic architecture of the region

شكل معماري خاص بالمنطقة

Ghana, and Libya, when the Sultan Ahmed El Mansour called Addahbi (gilded) beat the kings of Spain and Portugal during the famous Battle of the Three Kings (1578), close to Wadi El Makhazine around Ksar el Kebir City (north Morocco).

Approximately 20 km to the south of Zagora, one finds Tamgrout, which was the centre of the largest and strongest Zawiya of the Moroccan south, Zawiya Nasiria. The zawiya a socio spiritual institution, established in the 16th century, shaped local society on all levels. It was built by Sheik Sidi Amr Ibn Ahmed Al-Ansari, in 1575 and reached its golden age, under his successor Sidi Ahmed Ben Naser: its influence extended through 366 branches throughout the kingdom. It became the centre of the desert trade caravans, the meeting place of the fokahas and the most prestigious men of letters and science. It also became a religious and intellectual beacon thanks mainly to its famous school and library with tens of thousands of manuscripts embracing various scientific, religious and literary disciplines, works explaining and interpreting the Koran, studies on Islamic asceticism, rhetoric, astronomy, etc. Its founder Sidi Abu Abdallah Ben Naser, bequeathed more than 60,000 manuscripts to Zawiya Nasiria.

The zawiya still commemorates its saints through an annual, three-day Festival, Moussem de Tamgroute Al-Boukhari, held on 10th Moharram of each lunar year. The members of the zawiya meet to read the Koran and recite Al Amdah (praises) of Prophet Mohammad and Dikr. During the festival different products such as fruits, vegetables, spices, henna, pottery and various handicrafts are available from the large popular souk.

Tamagrout is also famous for its mosques with their original architecture, painted with pure white lime and terraces covered with blue tiles in contrast to the local Saharan clay architecture.

In contemporary history, the evolution of this area was closely related to the Glaoua tribe, whose power developed particularly since the mid 19th century and was consolidated following the visit of Sultan Hassan I (1873-1894) to the area in 1893. Confronted with a snowstorm at the top of the High Atlas, the royal convoy could be



General view of the city

منظر للمدينة



The remains of an ancient kasbah

آثار قصبة قديمة



Statues in one studio

تمثال بإحدى الاستوديوهات

saved only thanks to the assistance of Glaoua. As a reward, Hassan I appointed their chief, Madani Glaoui, as his representative in the south of the kingdom and presented him with a German Krupp gun, giving him a decisive military superiority over the other tribes and enabling him to dominate the Moroccan south. During the colonial period, the French had to rely on the forces of Al Tuhami Glaoui, Madani's successor, to extend their influence in the south-east of the country. Glaoui enabled the colonisers

to depose Sultan Mohamed Ben Youssef and replace him with his cousin Mohamed Ben Arafa in 1953.

### The road to the Kasbahs

This city and its environs extending along the Dera'a wadi are rich in original architectural heritage dating back thousands of years. Qusour, Kasbahs and Agouddine, are the principal types of traditional habitat, which reflect a specific socio-economic mode of the oases of south Morocco. The area of ▶

Ouarzazate, on its own, has some 300 Kasbahs - nearly a third of the Kasbahs listed in the Kingdom.

UNESCO has registered the Kasbahs of Ait Ben Haddou, Taourirt and Tifoultout as World Heritage Sites.

The village of Ait Ben Haddou, located approximately 30 km from Ouarzazate was founded in the 11th century. The beauty and original architecture of its famous Kasbah has lured the giants of world cinema to the area even before it was registered a World Heritage Site in 1987. It was the first Kasbah to profit from the national programme of conserving the kasbahs of the south.

The Kasbah of Taourirt, was the residence of Al Tuhami Glaoui. It is an architectural jewel, testifying to the high standard of living and luxurious tastes of Moroccan notables of the past. These two kasbahs were selected for international films including the famous "Lawrence of Arabia" and "Tea in the Sahara".

But many of these architectural jewels are threatened by ruin. It is imperative, for the tourist development of the area, that efforts are co-ordinated to preserve and restore these witnesses of the prestigious and ancestral history of Morocco.

### The Sahara's Hollywood

Ouarzazate is also a city of the cinema

and big stars, thanks to its vast palm plantations, imposing and narrow gorges and surreal Kasbahs. That is why it has been nicknamed "Hollywood of the Sahara".

If the splendour of this city and its area were discovered since the sixties by great international directors, as a location for films such as "Lawrence of Arabia" and "Ali Baba and the 40 Thieves", the great rise of cinematographic activity in this area started in the eighties and was consolidated at the beginning of the new millennium, thanks to the construction of studios of international standard, such as those of Atlas Corporation, Kanzamane, Taourirte, Ester-Andromeda, and Dino de Laurentis. They facilitated the filming of many superb cinematographic productions; such as "The Mummy", "The Ten Commandments" (with Omar Sharif and Dougray Scott), "Kundun" (with Brad Pitt), "Kingdom of Heaven" by Ridley Scott, "Gladiators", "Alexander the Great", "Asterix and the Obelix" and "Babel".

Ouarzazate is on the way to becoming the first cinematographic pole of Africa. The budgets invested for cinematographic productions reached \$140 million annually and the income from filming foreign films was estimated at a billion dollars in 2005. Moreover, these activities

create job opportunities in the area. In addition to the dynamism they generate in the activities of hotels, restaurants, cafés, means of transport and guides, they also offer important work opportunities for Moroccan professionals in the film industry (actors, technicians, etc) and for various tradesmen (craftsmen, carpenters, dressmakers, etc). Lastly, the area has 1.7 million date palms trees, accounting for 40% of the palm trees of the kingdom. They provide 45,000 tons of dates per annum, i.e. 56% of the national production. The area is also characterized by high quality carpet production. Ouzguita is famous for its bright colours and beautiful geometrical patterns and high quality henna with which women embellish their hair and hands.

The development of tourism in this area encouraged the growth of hotel infrastructure. Ouarzazate and its environs have more than 5500 beds in classified hotels, realizing more than 450,000 nights per annum.

Ouarzazate is a tourist station of great quality, due to its natural diversity and the richness of its original architectural heritage. The generosity, kindness and hospitality of its inhabitants are legendary.

Everyone is welcome in Ouarzazate. ■



One of the cinematographic studios

احد استوديوهات السينما



Kasbah

قصبة