

TO TACKLE THE COVID-19, TOURISM GET TO ADAPT IN THE KINGDOM OF THE SUNSET “ALMAGRIB”

**PARA AFRONTAR EL COVID-19, EL TURISMO TIENE QUE ADAPTARSE EN
EL REINO DE LA PUESTA DEL SOL "ALMAGRIB"**

**PARA ENFRENTAR O COVID-19, O TURISMO PRECISA SE ADAPTAR NO
"REINO DO PÔR DO SOL - ALMAGRIB"**

**POUR FAIRE FACE AU COVID-19, LE TOURISME DOIT S'ADAPTER AU
"ROYAUME DU COUCHER DU SOLEIL - ALMAGRIB"**

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ABSTRACT

The Covid-19 has caused serious damages and has hit profoundly the tourism economy in Morocco. Given his geographic position, as a Mediterranean and North African country, with only few miles away from Europe, Morocco considers tourism not only one of most important contributors to its territorial development, but also a bridge to connect and exchange with different cultures at the global level. It is also a motto to embrace modernization and valuing, at the same time, its identity and patrimonial heritage. Today, it is true that the challenges faced by Morocco are multiple and complex because of the strong impact of Covid-19. But Morocco has cleverly adapted to the crisis linked to this virus without too much damage, even with the gain of a good image at the global level on the effectiveness of its proactive strategy to fight COVID-19.

Keywords: COVID-19, impact in tourism, arrivals, crisis, adaptation.

RESUMEN

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El Covid-19 ha causado graves daños y ha afectado profundamente a la economía del turismo en Marruecos. Dada su posición geográfica, como país mediterráneo y norteafricano, a solo unos kilómetros de Europa, Marruecos considera al turismo no sólo uno de los contribuyentes más importantes para su desarrollo territorial, sino también un puente para conectarse e intercambiar con diferentes culturas a nivel mundial. También es un lema para abrazar la modernización y valorar, al mismo tiempo, su identidad patrimonial. Hoy, es cierto que los desafíos que enfrenta Marruecos son múltiples y complejos debido al fuerte impacto de Covid-19. Pero Marruecos se ha adaptado hábilmente a la crisis vinculada a este virus sin demasiado daño, incluso con la obtención de una buena imagen a nivel mundial sobre la efectividad de su estrategia proactiva para combatir COVID-19.

Palabras clave: COVID-19, impacto en el turismo, llegadas, crisis, adaptación.

RÉSUMÉ

Le Covid-19 a causé de graves dommages et a profondément affecté l'économie du tourisme au Maroc. Compte tenu de sa position géographique, en tant que pays méditerranéen et nord-africain, à quelques kilomètres de l'Europe, le Maroc considère le tourisme non seulement comme l'un des contributeurs les plus importants à son développement territorial, mais également comme un pont pour se connecter et échanger avec différentes cultures du monde. C'est aussi une devise pour embrasser la modernisation et en même temps valoriser son identité patrimoniale. Aujourd'hui, il est vrai que les défis auxquels le Maroc est confronté sont multiples et complexes en raison du fort impact de Covid-19. Mais le Maroc s'est adroitement adapté à la crise liée à ce virus sans trop de mal, notamment en acquérant une bonne image globale de l'efficacité de sa stratégie proactive de lutte contre le COVID-19.

Mots clés: COVID-19, impact sur le tourisme, arrivées, crise, adaptation.

RESUMO

O Covid-19 causou sérios danos e afetou profundamente a economia do turismo em Marrocos. Dada a sua posição geográfica, como país mediterrâneo e norte da África, a poucos quilômetros da Europa, Marrocos considera o turismo não apenas um dos contribuintes mais importantes para o seu desenvolvimento territorial, mas também uma ponte para conectar e trocar com diferentes culturas em todo o mundo. É também um lema para abraçar a

modernização e ao mesmo tempo valorizar sua identidade patrimonial. Hoje, é verdade que os desafios enfrentados por Marrocos são múltiplos e complexos devido ao forte impacto do Covid-19. Mas o Marrocos se adaptou habilmente à crise ligada a esse vírus sem causar muitos danos, inclusive obtendo uma boa imagem global da eficácia de sua estratégia proativa de combater o COVID-19.

Palavras-chave: COVID-19, impacto no turismo, chegadas, crise, adaptação.

Covid-19: the arrival of an unexpected evil!

In Morocco, since the first positive tests of Covid-19 revealed in March 2020, Moroccan tourism, like other countries, has faced immediate disruptions causing the sector to become paralyzed, especially with the closure of borders and airspace, the declaration of the state of emergency, and a three month strict curfew over the entire country. These protection measures have had an immediate impact in containing the spread of the virus. Morocco is the main tourist country in Africa. Tourism revenue accounted for 11% of total GDP for 2018, according to the tourism ministry. Industries in the sector, such as air and land transport, food service and hospitality, generate important employment opportunities for young people (Bourhis, 2019). The National Tourism Confederation has revealed that Moroccan tourism reached a growth rate of 5.2% between 2018 and 2019, registering almost 13 million tourists (Agade, 2020). Yet, they have led to a decrease of around 45% on arrivals and 43% of overnight stays for the first quarter of 2020 compared to the same period of the previous year. This drop far exceeds the decline experienced during previous crises such as the MERS and SARS health crisis, where the decline in activity was only 4%.

Experts in economics project that the tourism industry will be one of the sectors that will have the greatest impact on its economy. For its part, the National Tourism Confederation (CNT) calculates that the losses for 2020 would be approximately \$ 34.1 billion in total tourism revenue and \$ 14 billion in the hotel sector alone. CNT foresees a 98 percent drop in arrivals in the country, which will put 500,000 jobs and 8,500 businesses at risk (Laroussi, 2020).

Not only accommodation establishments were concerned by the shutdown, but also the whole touristic value chain activities such as restaurants, guides, transportation companies, and travel agencies. This unprecedented situation of paralysis in the tourism sector has had a direct impact on the balance of payments and macro-economic balances. Indeed, travel receipts have fallen by 15% during the first quarter of 2020 compared to 2019. This decline is less significant in overnight stays due to the time lag in payments and arrears not paid yet by tourism companies. Data from the ministry of tourism show that between January and April alone, travel receipts fell from MAD 23 billion (\$2.307 billion) to MAD 20 billion (\$2 billion), a 13% drop (Africaincmag, 2020).

However, with the on-going curfew and borders closure, all indicators will deteriorate further for the months of May and June 2020. These negative outcomes have also impacted the flight industry and caused significant financial losses to all global companies and especially the Moroccan RAM (Royal Air Maroc) which was forced to stop all domestic and international flights since mid-March 2020.

RAM reported a 60% traffic loss in March and a staggering 100% loss in April. Abdelhamid Addou, the CEO of RAM, estimated the financial losses at MAD 50 million (\$5 million) per day. To put this in perspective, the airline recorded an annual operating profit of MAD 162 million (\$16.2 million) in 2018 (Nazaruk, 2020).

Morocco responds to the Covid-19 effects: Prioritizing the social aid and supporting the economy

In order to deal with this unprecedented health crisis, Morocco, and in accordance with the guidelines of HM the King Mohammed VI, has given priority to the health and safety of its citizens, without neglecting the support of vulnerable categories and those affected financially by the pandemic. The results of those decisions were quickly materialized on the ground. Indeed, thanks to the mobilization of all the components of the State and society, under the effective patronage of His Majesty the King, the health situation in Morocco was quickly and constantly contained. In this context, and as a response to the Royal guidelines for the creation of the Coronavirus fund with more than 3 billion Euros for the management of the Covid 19 pandemic (as confirmed by the Minister of Economy, Finance and Administrative Reform, in a parliamentary session held in April 2020), Morocco has come

up with urgent measures to support the most affected social groups, maintain jobs and mitigate the economic impact of the health crisis and its negative effects over businesses (Amuedo, 2020). These measures mainly concern tax, banking, bills payments, securing a minimum salary to employees, and limiting business failures.

The tourism sector has also benefited from the previously mentioned measures. Officially registered employees in the tourism sector did benefit from the fund and received a monthly allowance to cover their basic needs (Kasraoui, 2020). For those who are not officially registered by their companies were invited to register through a dedicated digital platform. The latter benefited as well from another type of financial support measures.

Covid-19 and Moroccan tourism sector: Immobilizing the virus to energize the sector

Aware of the challenges related to the crisis and the necessity of a rapid response, the Moroccan Ministry of Tourism has intensified, in collaboration with the entities under its tutelage, as well as all tourism professionals, efforts to keep promoting and advertising Morocco as a privileged destination at the global level. Professionals were also invited to adopt serious safety guidelines to be able to reopen their businesses.

It is in this sense that the Moroccan Ministry of Tourism launched in May 2020, a study that aims to estimate the impact of Covid-19 on the cashflow, jobs and investment of all categories of tourism businesses in all regions of Morocco.

From the first hours following the airspace closure, a watch and follow-up unit was created where all actors of the tourism sector were represented. The objective is to monitor the tourism activity at the national and international levels and set up daily reports containing all the information related to the coronavirus and its impact on the tourism sector, such as cancellations, bookings, airport traffic, safety guidelines, government decisions. The main outcomes of this unit are seen in the support provided to businesses, the management of the tourists who remained in Morocco and their repatriation, the implementation of the sanitary measures to protect employees, the generalization of the disinfection of accommodation establishments, encouraging tourism businesses to benefit from the financial aid and tools

designed by the CVE¹ such as, the salary allowance for employees supported by the “Covid-19 Fund”, the postponement of deadlines with regard to the payment of bank loans, taxes, and social security contributions...

The Moroccan Ministry of Tourism has also proposed the adoption of the law “30-20” which enables special rights to travel contractors, hotels, travel agencies, and passengers of air industry or any other type of transportation. This law comes to allow tourism businesses to provide customers with replacement vouchers instead of money refund, which used to be the unique legal compensation. Hence, this law adjustments come to find a compromise and a balance between the interest of the customer to benefit from a service already paid and the interest of business operators to keep a positive cashflow so that their company avoid bankruptcy and insolvency.

Regarding the hotel industry and tourism trainings, and to continue providing qualified human resources, a system of distance training has been put in place since the moment Morocco declared the state of health emergency.

Also, in order to better prepare for the resumption of internal tourism activity, the Moroccan Ministry of Tourism has drawn up a document with a series of health guidelines that summarize the main hygiene and safety measures that tourism operators must put in place. The development of this document reconciles health requirements, ease of deployment, economic efficiency, and social dimension. It has also been developed by capitalizing on international best-practices and in line with the recommendations of the World Tourism Organization and thus supports the guides and documents developed by the various Moroccan authorities responsible for health, safety, hygiene and employment.

As such, the Ministry of Tourism is currently developing an in-depth health repository dedicated to tourism businesses. It will sum-up the best-practices and safety measures to be taken by professionals in accordance with the guidelines of the Moroccan health authorities with scheduled training sessions to employees of accommodation establishments.

¹The CVE is the Economic Watch Committee set up by the Moroccan government to anticipate the direct and indirect economic impact of the Covid-19 health crisis on the national economy.

In the same vein, to provide airspace businesses with clear guidelines for their various operations management, a practical guideline book has been published. It comes in the form of a sanitary protocol that needs to be implemented by airport operators, airlines, airport service providers, and any user or traveler. The sanitary guide is subject to updates in accordance with the commendations of the World Civil Aviation Organization and the guidelines of the Ministry of Health and other relevant government authorities and ministries.

On the other hand, for a better preparation of the resumption of the tourism activity, a large list of measures related to tourism promotion is undertaken together with the Moroccan National Tourism Office (ONMT) by putting the focus firstly on the promotion of domestic national tourism. Hence, a communication campaign under the name of "Until we meet again", called in the local language "*ALAMANTLAKAOU*", has been launched at the national and regional levels. The latter campaign aims to bring the "tourism product" closer to the Moroccan customer, encourage him to consume locally and support his surrounding businesses. In this regard, an advertising campaign was launched as a first step during the period of curfew to emphasize Morocco's touristic spots, wealth, and diversity. The communication campaign will continue even after the lifting of the curfew with the aim of encouraging Moroccans to explore their country during this summer season and inviting Moroccans living abroad to enjoy their summer holidays in their homeland country as well and welcoming at the same time international tourists on Moroccan sunny beaches, Saharabivouacs or mountains valleys.

With regard to the distribution of the tourism product, the Ministry of Tourism, through the ONMT (Moroccan National Tourist Office) and in partnership with tourism professionals, has put in place the necessary mechanisms and tools to promote the tourism offer in a suitable way for Moroccans using all available technological and digital means that are available to everyone. Meanwhile, the ONMT is working, through its various delegations and offices abroad, on monitoring the evolution of the most important international tourism markets and studying various economic and tourism behaviors at the global level. It is also important to mention that the Moroccan Ministry of Tourism has also considered the restructuring of the tourism sector as a priority under the Covid-19 crisis. One of the main goals is to ensure as soon as possible a generalization of social and health security coverage for all employees of

the sector. It is in this sense that an exhaustive work is ongoing to socially protect tourist guides who do not have any social or health security.

CONCLUSIONS

With COVID or without COVID, will Morocco remain the tourist Eldorado of the Mediterranean Africa?

Morocco is actively preparing the after Covid-19 era and is looking forward to regaining its leading role in the region as a touristic destination by following an effective strategy designed by the Ministry of Tourism. It has developed an integrated and participatory recovery plan that aims to position the destination of Morocco as a priority in the after-curfew season by implementing the required safety guidelines in all the touristic value chain. The objectives of this recovery plan is mainly to preserve jobs, skills and capabilities of professionals in the sector, and to revitalize the sector. Hence, it is essential to focus firstly on the internal tourism and come up with reinvented and innovative offers to stimulate the local demand. This plan also includes social, fiscal, and banking measures with an on-going negotiation with the Moroccan government. But are all these practical, urgent, and forward-looking actions sufficient to revitalize the tourism sector and defeat the harmful effects of the COVID-19 pandemic in a world of crisis and uncertainty?

Without any doubt, after such an unprecedented curfew, everyone is looking forward to embracing the freedom, the nature and enjoying outdoor activities. Nevertheless, given the strong economic crisis, the numerous job losses, the uncertainties related to the borders, the multiple health risks and the different obstacles to the mobility around the world, it is hard and difficult to easily regain trust and make travelers confident. It will require some time to revitalize the tourism sector.

However, Morocco has shown one more time its ability to adapt to different local or global crises. The synergy between the various national and international actors has helped humanity to avoid the worst at many levels. By being always open to the world, Morocco has proven its resilience and ability to adapt easily by making it competitive and attractive market. Thanks to its cultural diversity, strong attraction in the region, tolerance towards all cultures, legendary hospitality, diverse tourism spots and experiences, authentic culture,

world renown gastronomy, political stability and security, it should definitely be on the menu of travelers around the world. Committed to pursue its battle against all type of risks, Morocco has implemented serious guidelines and is ready to reveal free COVID tourism products and services. We therefore conclude that with COVID-19 or without COVID-19, Morocco will certainly remain the tourist Eldorado of Mediterranean Africa. But it is only a matter of time.

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