

Rebuilding Algeria's tourism

By NICK LYNE

SENIOR STAFF WRITER, FIRST

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Within a few hours flight from most European capitals, Algeria is Africa's largest nation, boasting 1,200 kilometres of largely unspoiled Mediterranean coastline, with a fascinating hinterland that includes the Atlas mountains and a vast Saharan interior. Its rich and diverse cultural heritage includes spectacular Roman ruins, Islamic and colonial architecture, French foreign legion forts, rarely-visited villages and towns in spectacular settings, seven UNESCO World Heritage Sites, as well as the many attractions of bustling cosmopolitan port cities such as Algiers and Oran: in short, more than enough to create a sustainable, year-round tourism industry able to generate significant employment while making a contribution to diversifying the country's economy away from overdependence on the hydrocarbon sector.

And over the last six years, that is the goal Algeria's government has been pursuing, via a strategy aimed at rebuilding the country's tourism sector, which was badly hit by the unrest of the 1990s, but that has seen a more than 60 per cent increase in visitor numbers over the last five years, according to the Tourism Ministry.

Driving this project is the National Tourism Development Plan (SDAT, to use its French acronym) which was launched in 2008 with the target of increasing the number of visitors to around two million by 2025, based on five lines of attack: promoting Algeria internationally as a premier tourist destination; developing upscale tourist centres; introducing quality controls; encouraging public-private partnerships; and attracting foreign investment.

Algeria's government decided a decade ago that it would stop playing a direct role in the tourism industry and instead leave development and management to the private sector, taking on the role of facilitator. This has shown itself in initiatives such as the Ministry of Tourism's arrangement with the banking sector to make it easier for investors and operators in Algerian tourism to access funding. Reduced interest rates are available on loans for tourism-related projects, coupled with greater flexibility on the duration of payment of credits.

Along with tax breaks available through the national development agency, conditions have been eased on government-owned land, significant reductions are available on rental fees for tourist-related properties.

At the same time, the government has also set aside some US\$1 billion to renovate state-owned hotels and has also announced the construction of 750 hotels in 48 locations throughout the country at an additional cost of US\$5 billion. The ministry's target is to increase the number of beds in the country by 86,000 by 2015, taking the total to more than 175,000.

The expansion of government support to the tourism industry has attracted attention from abroad, and international hotel chains such as Rezidor Marriott, Accor, and Best Western are among the growing numbers that are establishing a presence throughout the country.

To further facilitate hotel development, the government has set up some 250 investment zones (zones d'expansion touristique – ZET), dedicated solely to tourism-related projects in designated areas of outstanding natural and cultural interest and where there is disposable labour and conditions are suitable for infrastructure development.

The arrival of international hotel brands will have an impact not just on the quality of infrastructure but also on services delivered in the hospitality sector, which currently suffers from a lack of qualified personnel. Investors will have to provide regular in-house training sessions and the transfer of know-how in hotel management.

Simultaneously, the government is expanding its network of hospitality training institutes, where students are instructed in how to provide international-standard services to visitors. There are currently three such public institutes located around the country, with a total of just under 900 places for students. Seven new training centres are under development, to be distributed throughout Algeria.

In terms of attracting new visitors, the Algerian diaspora remains the key consumer group for inbound travel and tourism. Members of the Algerian diaspora and the many Algerians living and working abroad comprised the bulk of inbound arrivals to the country in 2013. These expatriate Algerian citizens take frequent trips home, although they do not spend as much as international tourists do, as they do not require travel accommodation or travel retail services for example. The majority of these expatriates travel to Algeria from Tunisia, France, and Saudi Arabia. So-called halal tourism — visitors from other Muslim

nations around the world — also provides a market worth exploring, say officials at the Tourism Ministry.

Meanwhile, flag carrier Air Algérie is expanding through the addition of more long-haul destinations. As inbound and outbound tourism have increased in recent years, and more international airlines are travelling to Algeria, Air Algérie is fighting back by purchasing more aircraft, enabling the company to fly to long-haul destinations as well.

Sustainable tourism model

Algeria has never been a sun, sea, and sand holiday spot, unlike its neighbour Tunisia, and the government says it intends to develop the sector sustainably as a year-round destination, looking to attract high-end visitors interested in the country's culture and heritage as much as getting a tan. This will involve developing niche sectors that can have a big impact on local economies.

This approach has seen the government take steps to tap into Algeria's potential as a destination for ecotourism in the interior. The magnificent limestone plateau in Saharan Algeria known as the M'zab valley, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, is home to Ghardaïa, capital of an enclave comprising seven desert towns whose inhabitants belong to a strict Muslim sect and dress entirely in white.

One of the most popular locations for ecotourism has long been the Tassili n'Ajjer National Park, located in southeast Algeria, and which includes a large section of the Tassili n' Ajjer mountain range. The sandstone composition of the mountains has created spectacular rock arches as well as contributing to the growth of woodlands in the park. The National Park has been designated as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Further south, where Algeria rubs up against sub-Saharan Africa, lies Tamanrasset, a well-known entry point for the mystical Hoggar Mountains, and long popular with back-packers and campers, with facilities for budget travelers who enjoy sleeping under the stars, as well as for visitors more accustomed to star-rated hotels.

At the same time, Algeria is also looking to develop its impressive Mediterranean coastline through some beach tourism, and the government has put money and resources into building and improving hotels close to Oran, an area that offers a wide range of coastlines, from wide, flat beaches to rocky promontories.

Visitors to Algeria's coast will find one of the few unspoiled areas of the Mediterranean. Typical among the many communities are places like the sleepy seaside town of Tigzirt, on the northeast coast, nestling among rugged hills rising up from the seashore. A little more lively is Tipasa, 60km west of Algiers. Fast becoming popular for day trips from the capital, it was founded by the Phoenicians and transformed into a military colony by the Romans, the remains of which lie among the

forests in three hills that ring the Bay of Tipasa.

The country's hinterland also offers the visitor the chance to get to know the country. Constantine, Algeria's third city, is tucked away 100 kilometres inland from the coast. The road sneaks up on the city, snaking up the mountains, weaving through craggy passes and tunnels blasted in the rock, past forests mirrored in wide lakes. The city is connected by numerous picturesque bridges spanning impressive gorges. It is just one of hundreds of cities and towns in Algeria that date back to the Romans, many of which are still astonishingly well preserved.

Aware that a large part of the appeal of Algeria to overseas visitors are the country's well-preserved cultural and archeological heritage, unspoiled beaches, its pristine forests and desert, as well as the warm welcome only a population still largely unaccustomed to the impact of mass tourism can offer, Algeria's Tourism Ministry is currently working on a legal framework that will further ensure the protection of its cultural and archaeological heritage, as well as conservation of its coastline.

Moves to strengthen the sustainability of niche sectors, coupled with expansion of the tourism sector's capacity, suggest that Algeria is on the right track to accommodate the growing numbers of tourists it aims to attract. That will prevent it from suffering from the seasonal drops and economic slowdowns in its source markets as it lays the foundations for a sector with a long-term future.

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