

On MOROCCO

Essaouira: An adrenaline junkie paradise with pop culture kudos

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Photos:

Essaouira has become a hot destination for tourists and travelers in search of adventure with creature comforts and a taste of the exotic never far from reach.

1 of 11

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(CNN) — When life gives you lemons, make lemonade.

Tourist numbers dipped in Morocco [last year](#), with one report suggesting unrest and attacks across North Africa were to blame, [according to the AFP](#).

If that was the trend for the nation, someone forget to tell Essaouira. The coastal city, now serviced by a direct flight from the UK, has bucked the downturn and is attracting new visitors in droves.

Essaouira, known as a destination for surfers of all denominations, whether kite, wind or wave, is branching out and branding itself as a place for the wider adrenaline junkie community.

Among the most established watersports operators is [Explora Morocco](#). It offers surfing, windsurfing and kitesurfing lessons, equipment hire for the more advanced, and week long packages including accommodation and stopovers in Marrakech. It's also one of the few places through which you can pursue wakeboarding and stand up paddling (SUP), an activity you're more likely to see on the beaches of Hawaii.

While aquatic types busy themselves off the coast, on *terra firma* [Palma Quad](#) operates quadbike tours, taking in dunes, forests and surrounding villages all within three hours of the city.

For those after a more carbon-friendly approach, there's horse riding treks by [Equi Evasion](#). Running for up to six days, either circling Essaouira, skirting the Atlantic coast or following Berber trails from inland, you'll ride through day and spend nights camping out under pristine skies.



Essaouira's tourism boom 03:02

But if this all sounds like hard work, there are other options.

Yoga classes, laidback souks and stellar seafood in Essaouira make for an appetizing locale -- especially if you're after an adventure holiday replete with creature comforts.

"[Essaouira has] a really good balance," says Sara Jolly, co-owner of Explora Morocco. "You could be kiting and surfing, and then also experience real Morocco when you go into the Medina."

You can relax the pace and let a guide tell you about the city's long and complex history.

Essaouira has been occupied since before recorded history; visited by Carthaginian sailors, part of the Roman empire, and seized by the Portuguese in the 16th century. But there's also plenty of pop culture crossover to both keep the tradition of storytelling alive and intrigue the ears of visitors.

Locals are keen to capitalize on Jimi Hendrix's visit in the 1960s (for how long depends on who you ask) and you'll find his likeness scattered around the city. Visitors can even stay at the [Jimi Hendrix Hotel](#) or dine at [Cafe Restaurant Jimi](#) -- only the former fares well with reviewers, however.



A kitesurfer catches some air off the coast of Essaouira.

More recently the city was transformed into the port town of Astapor, where (spoiler alert!) Daenerys Targaryen acquired her army of "unsullied" in HBO's "Game of Thrones". The crew shot scenes in the fortified Medina, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, easily accessible and part of [Zicasso's](#) tailored 10-day Game of Thrones tour of Spain and Morocco.



Daenerys Targaryen (Emilia Clarke) in Astapor, filmed in Essaouira's fort.

For the last 18 months a three-hour direct flight from Luton, north of London, to Essaouira has run [twice a week](#) via budget carrier EasyJet.



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It's flown 40,000 passengers so far, 60% of whom are British according to EasyJet's commercial manager Neil Slaven. There's a clear correlation to be found: Jolly reports 20% more business from Brits in the last year.

This is music to the ears of the [Ministry of Tourism](#).

"Tourism is one of the main economic sectors in Morocco," explains Nada Roudies, general secretary of the ministry. "We're employing half a million people; we are bringing 10 million tourists a year approximately [to

Morocco] and \$6 billion in foreign receipts."

Roudies says the key to tourism success is nurturing both natural and cultural assets, "developing economic activities so that you can generate revenues for locals."

By that description, the rest of Morocco will be following in the footsteps of this once-sleepy coastal city.

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