

# **Transforming moroccan adobe Kasbahs into a network of sustainable hotels**

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## **Abstract**

*The valleys of Southern Morocco are territorial corridors that are extremely rich in landscape and cultural terms but very fragile socially and economically.*

*The 1000 kasbahs and ksars punctuating the length of the valleys have been the links in the chain providing a structure for these regions over the last three centuries. Their imposing presence means they have come to be seen as inseparable elements of the landscape and symbols of the region's identity.*

*The abandonment and rapid deterioration of these rammed-earth constructions demonstrates the risk that this heritage could be lost right across the region.*

*The proposal is to recover and restore some of these kasbahs to create a network of hotels which would also function as centres for the cultural interpretation of the region.*

*The aim is to give the kasbahs back their role as structural elements for the territory, converting them into change agents for its economy and culture while simultaneously recovering their architectural heritage and landscape value.*

## **Introduction**

The Moroccan Government recently approved its 2020 Tourism Strategy Plan. In contrast with the 2010 Strategy Plan, which gave priority to the development of a small number of enormous tourism complexes along the coastline to attract mass-market sun-and-sand tourism, the new plan favours small developments better distributed throughout the country, fostering sustainable tourism, particularly based in culture and nature.

Within this new strategic plan, ten priority projects were defined, and one of these is the restoration of 10 kasbahs for their conversion into hotels and centres of dissemination for local culture, following the example of the Paradores in Spain.

The project was entrusted to the Spanish consultancy firm specialised in tourism, Tourism & Leisure, which developed an appropriate programme responding qualitatively and quantitatively to the requirements for a target market, an economic-financial feasibility plan, and an architectural approach to the restoration and conversion of the kasbahs, carried out in collaboration with the architect Anna Noguera.

The kasbahs were selected not only for their historical and architectural value but also for their location in the territory, in order to generate tourism routes between the kasbahs that would help tourism to further permeate the territory.



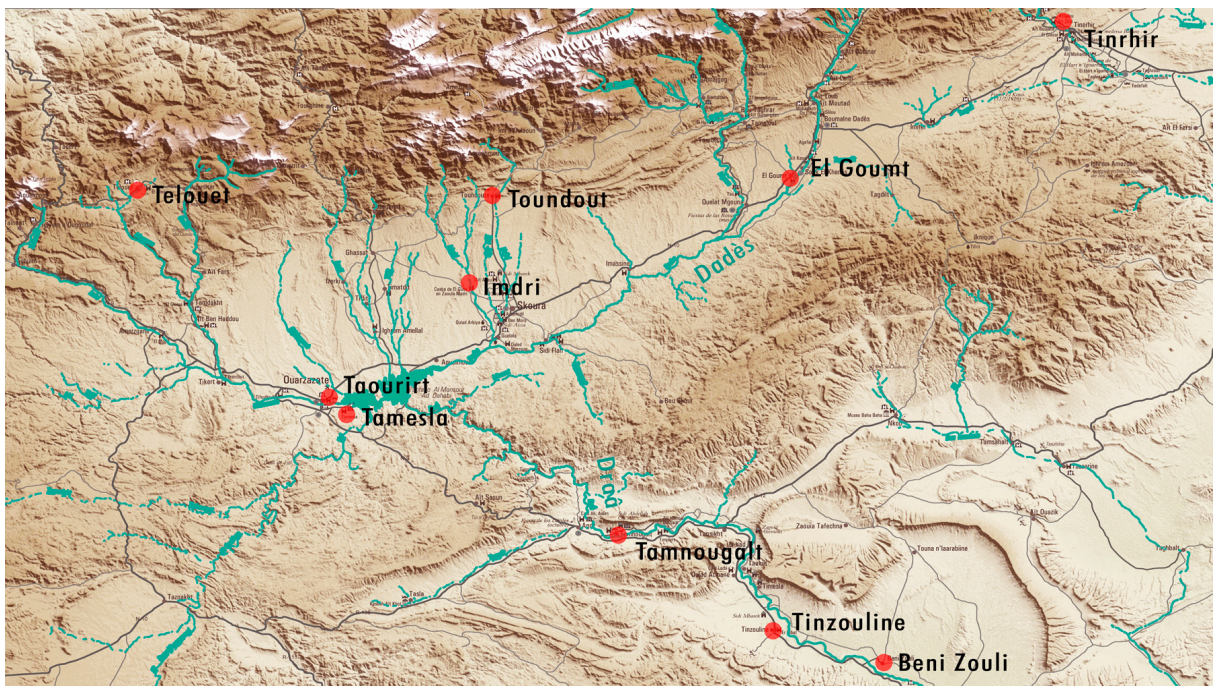
## The Pre-Saharan Valleys

Across the whole area of the Pre-Saharan valleys between the rivers Ziz and Drâa, there are around six hundred ksars and more than four hundred kasbahs, forming what is known as the Route of the Thousand Kasbahs.

In a region that is close to desert, these valleys stand out as authentic oases, thanks to the water they receive from the High Atlas and the Jebel Saghro.

Formerly, life in these valleys was very difficult as the cultivable land was not sufficient to meet the food needs of the population, while armed conflicts between tribes, villages and even between families were frequent, as well as nomadic attacks on settled farmers to steal harvests. For that reason the majority of the population used to live within the walls of the fortified villages, the ksars. It was only from the 18th Century on that the most powerful families began to abandon the ksars to build isolated kasbahs.

Currently, these valleys are still basically rural, dominated by a subsistence economy based on agriculture. Existing tourism is not mass tourism and is relatively undeveloped in spite of the massive scenic and cultural potential of the area.



## The kasbahs, territorial landmarks

The kasbahs were built as fortified castles belonging to the most affluent families.

As with all defensive architecture, they offer an imposing, impregnable appearance. The great majority of the kasbahs are isolated and strategically placed close to settlements and next to the palm groves found in the riverbed oases.

The sheer number of kasbahs, the way they are scattered along the length of the river valleys and their imposing presence in the territory, has made them into landmarks that travellers become familiar with as they pass through the Pre-Saharan Valleys.

Thus, the kasbahs must be considered as elements of a whole and not as isolated structures. They form a group which constitutes a heritage asset for the land and has come to be seen as a symbol of the whole region's identity.



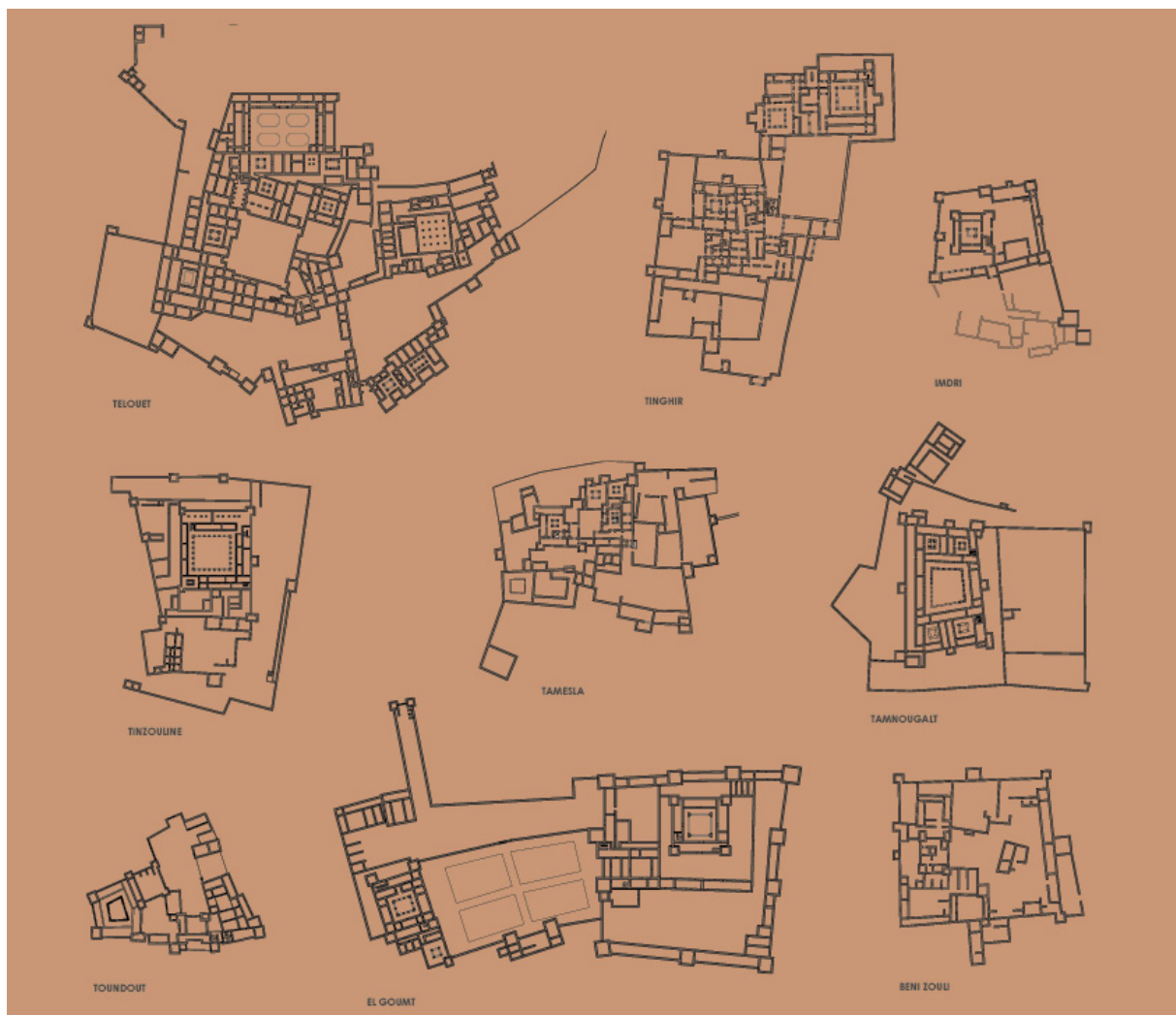
## The architecture of the kasbahs

The Kasbahs are built using a square-shaped plan, with high thick walls and towers at the corners. They enclose a space which is also square. This basic typology is present in multiple forms, as in most cases these complexes are aggregations of several kasbahs, outbuildings and walled areas, forming attractive groupings of superimposed volumes.

All the walls are built from rammed earth. The top part of the wall is usually crowned with geometrical decoration using Berber motifs, made with adobe. The roofs are made of wooden beams, usually from palm trees, and the cross beams from canes and logs. The distance between the walls is very small, because the palm tree has low strength, although it has a high elasticity. This gives rise to the very long and narrow spaces that are characteristic of these constructions.

The oldest kasbahs date from the 18th century, but many are from the 19th or even the start of the 20th century. Thus, although the ancestry of these constructions is clearly Berber, the more recent ones incorporate aspects and details from other cultural influences more related to the Hispano-Arab tradition. One clear example of the flow of different influences over time is Telouet.

Currently, the great majority of these kasbahs are abandoned. The needs they were built to serve no longer exist. With disuse, the decay of these constructions is inevitable. The rapidity at which these constructions deteriorate means that a restoration plan is urgent in order to avoid the disappearance of this important heritage.



## Heritage restoration

The group of kasbahs that characterises the Pre-Saharan Valleys has great tourism-cultural potential which could be developed in the following way:

- *Historical value.*

The kasbahs are key elements in disseminating knowledge of the era and the culture of which they form part, knowledge of the defensive functions they served and of the construction techniques they used

- *Architectural value.*

These buildings are representative of a type of architecture, reflecting different regional styles and trends, both Berber and Andalusian Arabic.

- *Territorial and scenic value.*

Elements which give structure to a territory, are characteristic of its landscape and become its symbols of identity.

Enhancing this heritage is the main objective of the Moroccan Ministry of Tourism which, conscious of this reality, has launched a feasibility study for the creation of a tourism company to conserve Morocco's architectural heritage, with an initial phase focused on a selection of ten kasbah in the southern valleys.



**Taourirt**



**Tinghir**



**Tamesla**



**Toundout**



**Beni Zouli**



**Telouet**



**Tinzouline**



**El Goumt**



**Imdri**



**Tamnouglat**

## **Tourism development with a cultural character through the recovery of the kasbah heritage**

The project is conceived as an action to structure the territory, using tourism to stimulate the area's weak economy. The land is unspoilt and has an extremely valuable but fragile heritage, and the proposal is to boost tourism via a minimalist action which will be sustainable with respect to the natural environment and recover a heritage which is currently decaying.

The only way to recover these very fragile buildings is to provide them with a new function to justify both their restoration and maintenance. For this grouping of kasbahs, a new use is proposed that would go beyond simple sight-seeing. The objective is for visitors not just to come as spectators, but also for them to be offered a unique and authentic experience, a different way of understanding the culture of the location.

The project consists of the creation of a network of hotels initially through the restoration and conversion of ten kasbahs, with new buildings to be added subsequently.

These hotels are conceived to be more than just simple hotel companies: they are to be symbols of the location where they stand, interpretation centres for their history and culture, change agents in the sustainable development of the local economy, places where the local gastronomy can be enjoyed, and spaces for peacefulness and rest.

The proposal has a special emphasis on sustainability in the social sphere, involving local people in both the restoration of the buildings and the operation of the hotel company. For this purpose, training centres will be set up, in the hospitality industry as well as workshop-schools specialised in traditional construction techniques. This will contribute to the survival of not only rammed earth building methods but also other woodworking techniques.

In addition to their tourism use, it is envisaged that the kasbahs will become a place of reference for the most important celebrations that take place in the area, both privately and at institutional level. The aim is for the people of the areas surrounding the kasbahs to think of them as their own and not just as places restored exclusively for tourists



## Criteria for the architectural work

The restoration of these kasbahs for their conversion into hotels is a both a delicate matter and an exciting one. The proposal is for a restoration respecting what already exists and its history, but which also provides a new vision based on a contemporary outlook.

The study of the ten kasbahs proposed for this project has made it possible to identify characteristics that are common to them all and to adopt general criteria for their restoration and conversion for tourism use.

The main difficulty comes from the fact that there is almost no documentation on the original state of these Kasbahs, so all we know about them is deduced from their current state. Some of the kasbahs include large areas that are in ruins where it is difficult to recognise their original structure. Reconstruction seems natural and appropriate for the parts in reasonable condition, and for the elements that are most emblematic or representative. However, for parts that are in very poor state, we believe that reconstruction should be rejected, because it runs the risk of being pure invention, and lacking any authenticity.

The architecture of the kasbah involves very few different materials, clay for the walls and timber for the beams. The small amount of decoration found, uses simple geometries, also based on clay. It is an austere, minimalist and monochromatic architecture, but it possesses great aesthetic power. The knowledge of the structures used in the kasbahs will make it possible to rebuild them capturing the essential elements that define them. The proposal is for the restoration to maintain the sober and austere character that defines the style, steering well away from any quaintness



The restoration of these kasbahs is a good opportunity to recover the traditional technique of rammed earth construction. The rammed earth construction method is not only a characteristic of the kasbahs but of all construction in the region. Currently, this type of construction is still used in some rural areas although it is in clear decline. The clay, extracted from the very location where the construction is carried out, is perfectly integrated into its environment and offers excellent protection from heat and cold due to its thermal inertia, well adapted to this climate where temperature oscillations are very pronounced.

Having moved beyond its defensive character, the Kasbah can be opened up to the outside. The introduction of new openings and grand viewpoints allows us to enjoy the palm-grove landscape, which is usually spectacular. The gardens are formally laid out as though they were simply another element in the oasis, with palm trees and water being their essential elements.



The courtyard is the most characteristic element, not only of the Kasbahs, but also of the vernacular architecture of the region. The alterations and new construction will use the courtyards as the element that provides structure, with the different spaces laid out around them.

Simple geometric forms of Berber origin decorate both walls and fabrics. A re-interpretation of these geometries is proposed to define new details and elements, such as awnings and meshes that filter the light entering courtyards, porches and windows.





Towers, walls and courtyards are laid out, based on the basic figure of the square or the nearly-square rectangle. The geometry is simple, the volumes are pure. The square is a source of inspiration for the geometric definition of this Kasbah restoration process.

Just as the passing of different ages has left its mark on the Kasbahs, our contemporary intervention will also make an imprint, inevitably. It is not a question of creating contrast with the new elements; rather, the idea is to integrate the new, and create a dialogue with the old architecture. The challenge of the design is to find the delicate balance between the new uses and the old spaces. The challenge is to recover the spirit of these old constructions; imposing, reserved, and mysterious.



### **Tourism development through zero-impact urban development action.**

We are used to a situation where any tourism development involves urban development and makes an impact on the landscape which takes away part of its attractiveness. This project is conceived from a diametrically-opposed perspective. It is a territorial development action without urban development, which rather than taking away from the attractiveness of the landscape, reinforces it, through the conservation of its most characteristic elements, the kasbahs. It is a sustainable operation, which respects local history, culture, heritage and the local people. And it aims to invigorate the region at all levels: economic, sociological and cultural.

## **Acknowledgements**

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