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The Boston Globe

Travel

MOROCCO

# On a wave and a prayer in Taghazout

By Douglas Starr | GLOBE STAFF FEBRUARY 26, 2012



DOUGLAS STARR FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

**Tribes-people come down from the hills to make a few dollars posing with surfers on the Atlantic Ocean beaches near Taghazout, Morocco.**

TAGHAZOUT - I was paddling into position to catch my next wave when the call to prayer sounded from the village across the beach. It was a low, mesmerizing moan. "Allah Akhbar!" ("God is great.") A reminder of our humility. On a barren hillside in the distance someone had arranged enormous white-painted rocks to spell in Arabic:

“God. Nation. King.”

Dude, I thought, you are a long way from Cape Cod.

I had come to Morocco to visit my oldest son, who was spending a junior semester learning Arabic. But as I was planning the trip my surfing buddies in New England told me I would be crazy to pass up Morocco’s world-class waves.

Like most Americans, I had never associated surfing and Morocco. Yet once I read about the country’s consistent, well-formed, and uncrowded waves I had to try them. I also was curious to see how two seemingly contrasting cultures - surfing and Islam - got along. So after two weeks of traveling the country with my family, I got on a bus in Marrakesh and set off for the coastal village of Taghazout.

A word about Taghazout: Don’t go there if you don’t plan to surf, because there’s literally nothing else to do. It is a block-long, dusty, nondescript village. The few cafes offer decent basic food, but they are not a destination. I would not even recommend the beaches, which, although clean, lack even the most basic facilities. (Going to the restroom means ducking behind a bush.) The barren landscape provides no shade, and the water is too rough for casual swimming.

But the surf! Morocco occupies the northwestern bulge of Africa, which puts it in position to bear the full brunt of waves from the broadest reach of the Atlantic. The entire coastline is a series of scalloped beaches, with point breaks at the edges and shore breaks in the middle. The area around Taghazout, called Agadir Bay, is surrounded by mountains that protect it from errant winds. All this makes Taghazout the epicenter of North Africa’s most consistent and beautiful waves.

The best places to stay in the area are the few surfing hostels that offer bed, breakfast, equipment rental, and transport to whatever beach is “firing” that day. I started at a guest house called Dfrost Almugar Surf House, jointly owned by two surf enthusiasts, Jordy Robers from the Netherlands and his local partner, Mohammed Zokay. They opened their business in 2009.

Robers, a barrel-chested man whose upper body is amply decorated with tattoos, said the town has changed dramatically over the years. Originally little more than a place where the Berber tribes-people stored their fishing boats, it became a stop on the hippy trail in the 1960s. Jimi Hendrix famously visited Essouira, a few hours up the coast, and was inspired to write “Castles Made of Sand.” Later, small numbers of

adventure-surfers would come through, rent rooms, or camp in their VW vans. Many beaches bear names reminiscent of that era - such as “Hash Point,” a nearby surf spot so named because surfers who were stoned could not bother to travel to a more distant beach. In the early 2000s, King Mohammed VI, a water sports enthusiast, decided that surfing could boost tourism, so the tourist board advertised heavily in Europe.

The routine at surf hostels like Dfrost is to come downstairs for a communal breakfast and sign up for various jeep trips according to your ability. Not being familiar with local conditions, I joined the beginners’ trip to a spot south of town. After a couple of hours surfing gentle waves, Jordy came by and asked if some of us would like to try something challenging. We drove about 20 minutes north until we got to Killer Point, named for the killer whales that occasionally linger offshore.

From the red cliffs we saw a classic Moroccan point break - stately lines marching in from the horizon. We picked our way down the rocky path and paddled out. But the waves that seemed stately became menacing at sea level, barreling in, breaking almost vertically. Each time I jumped to my feet a crashing wall of water would hurl me straight down, holding me under while one wave after another fell on top of me. (The term for such an experience is “getting worked.”) Jordy, an experienced and powerful surfer, caught a couple of short rides, but one crunching wave smacked him so hard that his safety leash snapped and his board went careening to the base of the cliffs. I paddled closer to shore to catch something smaller.



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**The Taghazout fishing fleet on the beach of Agadir Bay.**

Aside from the waves (when they are not overpowering), the most pleasing thing about surfing Morocco is the atmosphere. In the village, men in djellabas, the traditional hooded garment, mingle amiably with surfers in wet suits, and extend

characteristic Muslim hospitality. At one cafe the owner refused payment when I ordered mint tea. I had bought a simple fish dinner there the night before, so according to him that made me his guest.

The amiability extends to the water. With enough room for everyone, there is no “locals vs. outsiders” vibe. The hostels employ local surfers as instructors, and inform casual visitors to leave certain prize surfing areas to locals and experts. The women I met at the hostel felt especially comfortable surfing in Morocco with its traditional but tolerant culture. They knew not to wear bikinis in town - shorts and T-shirts suffice for local modesty. What pleased them most was the absence of alcohol, which lowers the general testosterone levels. “There are no bars here so it’s a very chilled out place,” said Aysha Tolland, an English ex-pat who works at Dfrost.

A couple of days later a few surfers and I traveled with a local guide named Youness Arbhi, who had been surfing these waves since adolescence. He worked out of the second hostel where I stayed called Surf Maroc, run by English ex-pats. Arbhi, 33, had graduated college and worked as an accountant. But after two months in a business suit, he shed his corporate identity and became a full-time surf guide.

The waves near the village were small, so Arbhi drove us about 45 minutes north to Tamri beach, which more directly faces the open ocean. From a barren hillside we looked out over a mile-long, crescent-shaped beach, assaulted by an unending series of waves. Several other groups of surfers had arrived, and in their eagerness had paddled right in. But the waves were disorganized and wild. Surfboards went flying as the less experienced surfers struggled against the whitewater.

Arbhi told us that the waves at Tamri break best at high tide and that if we waited an hour they would clean up. Here is where a local guide can be essential, for he knows the underwater topography and behavior of each break. When the timing felt right I followed Arbhi’s instructions, paddling out with the rip current for a couple of hundred yards and then letting the cross-current pull me into the best waves.

There they were - rolling in from the northwest and feathering across the top. It is almost impossible to describe the excitement one feels in the presence of such waves, whose energy originates from halfway across the ocean. A big wave approached. I paddled shoreward to keep pace; then, as the wave lifted me I dropped down the face and made a swooping right turn. Time and sense of self became meaningless, as they often do when you fly across a wave. It brought to mind the cry of the muezzin - about

the greatness of creation and our own insignificance. When the wave lost its power and deposited me in the whitewater I immediately turned and paddled back out.

### ***If you go...***

#### **Where to stay**

Most surf houses offer room, board, equipment rental, and transport to and from the Agadir airport or bus station (sometimes for a surcharge). It is important to stay only at surf houses certified by the Moroccan Surf Association, which ensures certain levels of health and safety and a commitment to employ local people. Check websites for up-to-date prices.

Dfrost Almugar Surf House

Taghazout

[www.dfrostsurfmorocco.nl](http://www.dfrostsurfmorocco.nl) Bed-and-breakfast accommodations, gear rental, surf lessons, and guided trips to nearby surf breaks. Rooms from \$35; from \$62 with gear rental and surf safari. Ocean-view rooms \$51-\$87. Daily yoga classes.

Surf Maroc

Taghazout

[surfmaroc.co.uk](http://surfmaroc.co.uk) Dorm rooms \$28 for basic B&B, \$72 including gear and surf safari. Daily yoga classes.

#### **Where to eat**

Aside from the communal meals at the surf hostels, you can find good food in town, especially local Moroccan dishes and fresh fish. Taghazout is a dry town, although you can buy alcohol in the city of Agadir, about a half-hour away. A few favorites:

Flouka is an open-air restaurant on the main drag. Moroccan specialties and fish, \$4-\$8. Le New Porte, also on the main drag, with Moroccan specialties and pasta, \$4-\$8. Auberge, one block off the main drag. Western food, including wraps, pizzas, and burgers, \$5-\$10.

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