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Morocco's Resilience: Intrepid Travel Helps Tourism Rebound After Earthquake



[Dawit Habtemariam](#)

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Skift Take

Intrepid Travel used its resources to bring tourism back to the High Atlas communities devastated by the September 8 earthquake.

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Summarize this story

How does Intrepid Travel's community-based tourism approach benefit rural areas in Morocco?

How has tourism contributed to Morocco's economy in recent years?

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Intrepid Travel has been driving tourism back to Moroccan villages impacted by the September earthquake.

It's been over six months since a 6.8-magnitude earthquake struck Marrakech and communities in the Atlas Mountains region. The natural disaster left over 2,900 dead, 5,500 injured and many homes, roads and buildings destroyed.

Since the earthquake, Intrepid has been doing its part to help these communities fully recover. After the earthquake struck, Intrepid Travel's philanthropic arm, the Intrepid Foundation, quickly raised \$550,000, plus \$100,000 from its own funds.

"It was the biggest appeal we've ever had in 35 years of history," said Zina Bencheikh, managing director of the Middle East, Europe, and Africa for Intrepid Travel.

Intrepid worked with two partners to provide emergency services to get the communities back on their feet. Education for All built boarding house schools for girls who lost theirs to the earthquake. Its other partner, the High Atlas Foundation, brought shelter, food, and aid to the survivors.

"When the earthquake hit Morocco, really for our business, we were hit in the middle of our core, where we operate," said Bencheikh. "In fact, rural areas are really the core of our operations in Morocco. Specifically, all our tours go to rural areas."

Intrepid Travel's Deep Roots in Morocco

Intrepid, which recently hosted Skift in Morocco at its annual company retreat, takes travelers off the beaten path with a community-based approach to tourism. To ensure this, the global organization partners with small, independent businesses to make sure income reaches the grassroots level of a destination, said Intrepid Travel CEO James Thornton at the Skift Global Forum in September.

Over 90% of Intrepid's guides directly come from Morocco's rural areas.

In Morocco, Intrepid takes travelers out of touristy areas. It partners with families, locals, and small businesses to give travelers authentic Moroccan experiences, said Mohamed El Bahri, an Intrepid tour guide.

A Moroccan couple demonstrating breadmaking in the Agafay Desert

On some tours, tourists watch and partake in breadmaking, stay in guest houses, hike the Agafay desert and Atlas Mountains, and have dinner with locals.

"To know Moroccans, you have to go to their heart. What is their heart? It's their house," said El Bahri.

Tourism: a Vital Sector for Morocco

During the week of the September 8 earthquake, flight bookings for Morocco dropped 35%, according to ForwardKeys. Bookings remained 22% down for the three weeks after the earthquake.

Tourism has become a major industry of Morocco's economy, having taken up a bigger share of employment, said Siham Fettouhi, Morocco Tourism Office Director for USA and Canada, in October.

Tourism was 16% of Morocco's total exports in 2022, according to [UN Tourism](#). As a share of just service exports, it made up 45%.

Sending a Recovery Message

To help its communities, Intrepid leveraged its brand name, size and resources to convey that Morocco is still open to tourism.

One of the dangers of a natural disaster for a destination is that tourists can mistakenly assume the whole destination has been hit – that they should not visit out of respect for the impacted communities or because certain attractions are closed.

Intrepid did a PR campaign on behalf of Morocco.

Intrepid restarted tours to some of the impacted areas once their roads were open again. On December 1, Intrepid returned to the village of Imlil, which had been disconnected due to damaged roads.

“It was quite fast because we really needed to send a strong message and make sure that our communities don’t get a double impact from this devastating earthquake,” said Bencheikh.

The fact that Marrakech’s major international events continued as scheduled also sent a strong message. In October, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund held their annual meeting in Marrakech. Over 14,000 attendees attended the meeting.

In the first 11 months of 2023, Morocco welcomed 13.2 million tourists, beating its 2019 level of 12.9 million, reported [Morocco World News](#).

Atlas Communities Continue to Rebuild

While tourism continues to flow back to many of the impacted villages, many survivors are still healing. Not wanting to leave their communities, some are staying in tents waiting for their new homes to be built.

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Photo Credit: A view of the Atlas Mountains from the village of View from the village of Imlil in Morocco in February 2024. Photo by Sean O'Neill. Source: Skift. Skift / Sean O'Neill

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