

CHANGING PLACES

A CASE STUDY OF IMLIL, MOROCCO

OVERVIEW

The theme of 'changing places' is a compulsory element of the post-2016 A level specifications. This article focuses upon the rural changes taking place in the village of Imlil (pronounced 'Im-leel') and its surrounding small villages about 60 kilometres south of Marrakech in the High Atlas Mountains of Morocco.

Tourism, improved road access and communications, together with a growing population have led to agricultural changes and prompted a wider range of service provision and a change in functions in the area. The growth of rural settlements in the area has resulted in a number of social, environmental and economic impacts and it makes an excellent study of the various aspects associated with 'changing places' at A level.

The wider Moroccan context

Tourism is the second largest source of income in Morocco and receipts are rising fast. In 2015 over 10 million tourists visited Morocco. This compares with 3.5 million in 2002 and 9.3 million in 2010. In 2015 it accounted for 12% of Morocco's GDP and 5% employment.

In 2015, most tourists arrived from:

France	845,000	Italy	508,000
USA	775,000	Turkey	362,000
Spain	682,000	Germany	350,000
China	569,000	UK	345,000

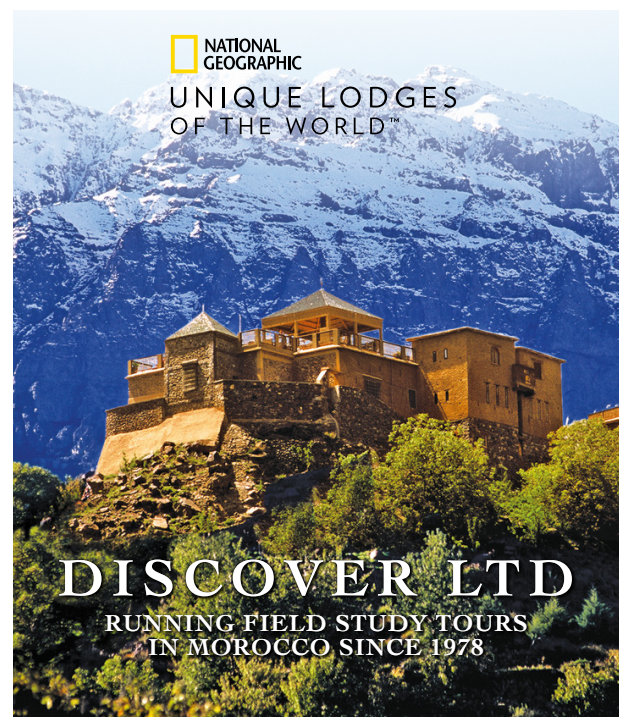
(See **Resource 5**)

Figure 1. Jbel Toubkal and the High Atlas, from Kasbah du Toubkal



The growth of tourism, once largely concentrated in the cities, is now affecting Moroccan life in many parts of the country. The King and the Tourism Ministry are actively encouraging tourism in rural areas such as the High Atlas. Imlil is the gateway to the Toubkal National Park containing the trekking magnet of Jbel Toubkal which, at 4,167 metres, is the highest peak in North Africa (**Figure 1**). Over 2,000 thousand people summit the peak each year and this number is growing.

In common with much of Morocco, Imlil is a colourful, dynamic and purposeful place where people from a variety of backgrounds and different nationalities work and live together in harmony.



Recent changes and developments in Imlil

Imlil is a collection of eleven small villages comprising about 8000 people in total with approx 500 in Imlil itself (**Figure 2**). Most of the villages are expanding with about 2–3 new houses being built in each village each year. Most existing houses have witnessed constructional improvements involving the use of stone rather than the traditional stone and mud. There are very strong family ties, with extended families occupying several houses in the same village. On average there are about 5 people per household.

Figure 2. Imlil and surrounding villages



In the past, out-migration of young males has been an issue. This has slowed in Imlil itself due to increased job opportunities in tourism. Some out-migration continues in the outlying villages, with young men moving to work in Marrakech or further afield in France.

Imlil lies at 1,700 metres in a widening of the valley where three tributaries join the Rehraha River. Being situated in a valley ‘basin’ rather than on the steep valley sides makes it atypical of many Berber villages in that it lies below rather than above the level of irrigation. This is one of the reasons for the extensive damage caused by the flash flood in 1995.

Tourism – both domestic and international – has been a feature of the area since the 1930’s when the Club Alpin Français (CAF) created a number of refuges in the High Atlas. However, social developments in the area have only taken place relatively recently.

1997	Electricity
1999	Telephone
2001	Mobile Phone
2002–3	Tarmac road constructed between Imlil and Asni (regional centre, on the main road to Marrakech)
2003	Piped water available in all houses
2007	Tracks bulldozed to all villages giving them road access
2017	New road developments including traffic calming measures in Imlil itself, raised pavements and the construction of a car park on the edge of the village
2018	Street lighting
2018	4G mobile signal available in the area

Imlil’s agricultural base

Imlil’s traditional economy is based on subsistence agriculture. Whilst this has declined in recent years as tourism has grown, it still exists to some extent particularly in the outlying villages.

Farming involves the herding of sheep (including the endangered Barbary sheep) and goats. Many farmers follow the traditional practice of transhumance whereby animals are temporarily moved to higher pastures during the summer before returning to the valley floor in winter.

Intricate systems of water management in the valley irrigate tiny hillslope terraces and small walled gardens on the floodplain where maize and vegetables are grown and grass pastures established for grazing (**Figure 3**).

Figure 3. Irrigated fields fed by diverted river water



Figure 4. Walnut trees in the outskirts of Imlil



Walnut trees grow profusely in the area (**Figure 4**). They provide firewood, timber for building and walnuts themselves, an important source of income. The walnuts are harvested in October – a dangerous activity as men from the local villages climb into the trees to collect the walnuts – bagged, and then transported to Asni for storage. They are subsequently transported to markets in Marrakech. Increasingly, much of the harvest is sold ‘on the tree’. Walnut trees are protected by the government and there is a programme of replanting in the valley.

In recent years, the cultivation of staple food crops such as wheat and maize in the valley bottom has been replaced by tree fruit such as apples, cherries, quince and apricots (**Figure 5**). The fertile, well-watered valley floor together with the sunny and warm summer weather provide ideal growing conditions for what has become a reasonably lucrative enterprise. Once picked, the fruit is stored in cold warehouses in Asni before being transported to the major cities such as Marrakech.

Figure 5. Fruit trees in blossom



The use of mechanisation is limited partly for economic reasons but mostly due to the steep relief and the small scale of most plots of land either in the form of terraces or floodplain gardens. Irrigation is of critical importance during high summer. There is a network of concrete channels (**Figure 6**) supplying fresh water to the terraces whereas on the floodplain, an intricate system of small dams and rock-edged canals form a braided pattern of rivers enabling water to be transferred to the numerous small gardens on the valley floor.

Figure 6. Small concrete irrigation channel supplying orchards with fresh water



The growth of tourism

Several thousand people now visit Imlil each year and numbers are growing. International tourists – primarily Europeans, but increasingly Americans and Asians – visit throughout the year with Moroccans swelling the summer population as they escape the intense heat of cities such as Marrakech and Casablanca. Most tourists are drawn to the area to take part in adventurous activities such as trekking and mountain biking. Others seek peaceful retreat activities such as yoga, enjoying the spectacular mountain backdrop and the clean, fresh air.

Today about 80% of Imlil’s population derive some of their income from tourism (**Figure 7**). This might involve working in hotels and restaurants, retailing (both formal through shops and informal through street selling), construction and maintenance, guiding and mule transport (the most effective means of transporting people and goods in the area). There are over 60 registered guides – recognised as a high

status occupation – and in summer up to 150 mules working the valley (**Figure 8**).

Figure 7. Thriving retail outlets and cafes in Imlil



Figure 8. Mules, the traditional form of transport in the High Atlas



Most tourists arrive on organised tours or are walkers heading for Toubkal. The majority stay for just 2/3 days, long enough to enjoy a couple of treks into the mountains and to soak up the unique atmosphere of the place. Amongst the many hotels are two luxury properties, Kasbah Tamadot owned by Richard Branson just outside the village and in Imlil itself the spectacular multi award-winning Kasbah du Toubkal, a restored hill fort, which has been voted one of the top five places to stay in the world. About 8,000 people visit Kasbah du Toubkal each year.

The impacts of tourism

Life in Imlil and the surrounding villages is changing fast as the economy transforms from one largely dependent on subsistence agriculture to one reflecting the advantages and disadvantages associated with the rapid growth of tourism.

Advantages

Tourism has increased the wealth of the area and many people have benefited. Improvements to the social infrastructure have both resulted from this growth and contributed to it – such as recent improvements in roads, the provision of pavements and street lighting. There is no doubt that road improvements have been a major stimulus for growth in visitor numbers in recent years. Asked about the impacts of tourism, most local people see only advantages as incomes and lifestyles improve.

There have been a number of social improvements resulting from the growth of tourism including:

- The Imlil Village Association, founded in 1997 and largely funded by a 5% levy imposed on tourists by Kasbah du Toubkal seeks to monitor tourism and support projects that upgrade rural life without destroying its character
- In 1999, an Ambulance was brought to Imlil by Discover Ltd who own and run Kasbah du Toubkal which has reduced journey times from Imlil to the nearest doctor at Asni 21 km away
- A dispensary has been built, next to the enlarged primary school (secondary education is in Asni). A nurse is available to support the local community and a doctor visits nearby Asni
- In 2004 a public hammam (traditional steam bath) was constructed to help improve personal hygiene in the village

- In 2011 the Village Association purchased a JCB for construction work, which has been used widely particularly in maintaining road communications following flooding or landslips

Disadvantages

Whilst most local people see the growth in tourism as a good development, bringing with it increased job opportunities, higher incomes and social and infrastructural improvements, there are some issues.

- Some international tourists fail to embrace the local Muslim culture particularly regarding the dress code for women. The exposure of bare flesh is counter to Muslim beliefs and can cause offense and embarrassment. It can also lead to family conflicts when young girls wish to dress in a similar way to western tourists.
- Traffic congestion is an issue in the high summer season when both international tourists and local Moroccans visit the area
- Sanitation provision is patchy across the area, particularly in the more remote settlements
- Waste and rubbish disposal has become a major issue. Litter bins do exist in the villages – though their use is not universal – and they are emptied periodically by a rubbish truck. Whilst some waste is transported to Marrakech, most is dumped unsorted in the river bed just below the village where it is burned.



Service provision in Imlil

The table below exemplifies the recent growth of tourism, with significant increases in the number of tourist shops, cafés/restaurants and hostels/hotels/gites between 2004 and 2018. Specialist adventure tourism outlets offering tours, clothing and equipment now feature strongly in the village. Whilst there has been a small increase in some general services the number of incinerators has dropped to zero, exacerbating the problem of waste disposal in the area.

Imlil service provision (1989–2018)

Service	1989	2004	2018
Shops (general, food)	16	41	55
Tourist shops	3	6	19
Café/restaurants	5	6	30
Trekking hostels, hotels, gites	1	18	60
Doctor	-	1	1*
Dispensary/pharmacy	-	1	2

Service	1989	2004	2018
Ambulance	-	1	1
Incinerators	-	2	-
Hamman	-	1	1
Specialist outdoor (trekking, cycling)	-	-	14
Police	-	-	1
School	?	?	1
Administrative building	-	-	1
Informal street traders	-	-	5

*doctor one day a week in Asni (nurse available at the dispensary)

(This survey reflects those premises operating at the time of survey (3-4pm in early April 2018) and does not include outlying villages. Several premises were not operating at the time of survey, some of which may operate at other times of the day/year. It is not known exactly when the surveys for 1989 and 2004 were conducted. Some general shops will provide goods for tourists as well as locals.)

Can sustainable tourism be achieved?

In common with many places, Imlil faces significant challenges in the future. Unregulated and explosive growth in tourism can destroy the very attractiveness of a place as it becomes congested, polluted and transformed. Without careful management, Imlil's unique sense of place – its pristine mountain hiking trails, traditional buildings, characterful streets and warm welcoming people – risk being subsumed by mass tourism.

The construction of a car park on the edge of the village can be seen as a sensible development though this may need to be expanded in the future (**Figure 9**). Whilst the tarmac road to Asni is a welcome development, along with other road developments it does increase ease of access to tourists. Clearly this has both advantages and disadvantages.

Figure 9. Newly constructed car park and road improvements in Imlil



One of the most pressing issues to be addressed is waste disposal. The current system is environmentally dysfunctional. There is a general absence of sorting or recycling, with mixed waste (metals, plastics, food, paper and cardboard) being dumped in the river bed and then burned. As a result, toxic waste is released into the air and into the river. The waste is visually unpleasant and incongruous in an area of such staggering beauty (**Figure 10**).

Figure 10. Waste disposal – a major issue associated with the growth of tourism in Imlil



In conclusion

Imlil and its surrounding villages have undergone a significant level of change in recent years. This once isolated and largely subsistence-based rural community now enjoys good road access, modern service provision and even 4G coverage. Employment opportunities and incomes have increased and peoples' standard of life has improved.



The vast majority of people have benefited from the growth of tourism and in almost all respects tourism is seen as a good thing and something to be encouraged. Many of the developments respect and protect the valley's unique attractions and, despite the challenges that lie ahead, there is every chance



that, through careful management and community-led initiatives (together with government support), a high level of sustainable tourism will be achieved in the future.

Simon Ross, April 2018



Photos: Simon Ross

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