

Morocco's tough Covid restrictions hammer tourism sector

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Businesses working in Morocco's key tourism sector say the country's tough Covid-19 restrictions, including a full flight ban, are undermining its competitiveness compared to rival destinations.



An aerial view of Nikki Beach Marrakech, Morocco. Reuters/Ilan Rosenberg

Morocco shut its borders in late November and will only reopen them at the end of January. It has also banned new year celebrations and is enforcing its vaccine pass requirements more strictly in response to the Omicron variant of the coronavirus.

"These restrictions are unjustified and they have made Morocco lose tourists to Mediterranean competitors such as Egypt and Turkey," said Lahcen Zelmat, head of Morocco's hotel federation.

Tourism generated \$8bn, or 7% of Morocco's economy, in 2019, but the Central Bank expects it to have made only \$3.6bn this year.

Hotels in Marrakech, the main tourist hub, have only 14% occupancy at what is normally peak season, Zelmat said.

"We fear that by the time borders reopen we will find it hard to sell Morocco due to the sudden border closures," said Emmanuelle Barat, a tour operator.

No customers

"I have received no customers for the last 10 days," said Taher Onsi, a restaurant owner in Marrakech, adding that domestic tourism could not offset the fall in foreign visitors.

The government has approved a 2,000 dirham (\$216) payment to tourism workers registered with social security who have been hit by the crisis.

"This aid does not cover businesses and workers who earn their living indirectly from tourism," Onsi said.

Said Afif, a member of the scientific committee that advises the government on coronavirus, said the curbs would protect lives and the economy by keeping the pandemic under control.

Recorded daily coronavirus cases have gone from around 100 earlier this month to 1,960 last Thursday.

Morocco is Africa's most vaccinated country, having now administered two shots to 23 million people, in a total population of 36 million. Nearly three million have also had booster shots.

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