



THE DEVELOPMENT OF ALTERNATIVE TOURISM IN TUNISIA: INNOVATE OR DISAPPEAR?! AN EXAMPLE OF SAHARAN TOURISM

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Abstract

The Tunisian tourist offer has long been standardized and focused on a coastal product. Tourism institutions and actors have shown efforts to diversify this offer, particularly by introducing alternative tourism such as Saharan tourism, where local development's geographical, tourist, and socio-economic opportunities seem obvious. Tourism is one of the world's most important economic activity, having significant economic growth potential for emerging and least developed countries. However, in its current incarnations, it is controlled by foreign operators, and its focus on coastal tourism is unfavorable. In order to attain growth, the nation must develop its travel offerings using a variety of strategies, such as improvement of current solutions, positioning the offer as having value, and surprise the customer. Innovation requires specialized marketing, as it requires defining or redefining the activity, developing or revising the offer, analyzing the competition, and understanding the new customer behavior. However, the results expected from such a policy remained insufficient and concluded that while desert tourism is meant to be a by-product of coastal tourism, coastal tourism still predominates in Tunisia. Saharan tourism is defined as a "desert" product, similar to thalassotherapy and golf. It serves as a way for guests who have travelled to the coast to extend their stay. Saharan tourism remained a complementary product (complementation to the sea through circuits towards the Sahara). This work aims to include how the Sahara and these regions can become fully-fledged tourist destinations.

Keywords

Tourism, Alternative Tourism, Sahara Tourism, Tunisia

The desert sand your soul... The desert is not complacent. It sculpts the soul. It tans the body. The desert is beautiful. It does not lie. It is clean. He is the salt of the earth "

-Theodore Monod

Introduction

After the COVID-19 pandemic, global tourism activity recovered strongly in 2022, welcoming more than 900 million international tourists; This is double the figures recorded in 2021 and generates around 12% of global GDP (gross domestic product), (Prince, 2022; UNWTO). Tourism is one of the world's leading economic activities. Given its comparative advantages in many countries, tourism currently appears to be a promising potential for economic development for developing countries (*developing countries*) and LDCs (*least developed countries*). By its characteristics, the tourism sector thus maintains direct links with the MDGs (*Millennium Development Goals*), to the achievement of which it could make a major contribution. However, in its current forms, dominated by the pre-eminence of international operators and by its massive orientation towards seaside tourism, it is largely unsatisfactory in this respect (Lanquar & Raynouard, 1995).

- Tourism is oriented toward coastal regions, thus neglecting deprived regions and accentuating regional imbalances;
- Tourism investments favoring coastal areas;
- Tourism favoring unskilled, casual, and seasonal employment and the payment of the minimum wage;

- A superficial tourism (Sun, Sea, Sand, and Sex) with little interest in the cultural and social heritage of the countries visited;
- Tourism that cares little about safeguarding and promoting the social and human environment;
- Tourism that does not pay attention to Sustainable Development Goals;
- Tourism is based on ruthless competition between countries and regions, price gouging, and market share piracy, thus exacerbating poverty in the least developed countries and hampering the achievement of the MDGs.

This type of tourism setting characterizes the Tunisian destination. Indeed, the vocation of Tunisian tourism as mass seaside tourism was dictated since the sixties by urgent economic imperatives (Miossec, 1996). Indeed Tourism in Tunisia is one of the most dynamic sectors of the economy of Tunisia and a source of foreign exchange for the country. Tourism has a knock-on effect on other economic sectors, such as air transport, crafts, trade, and construction.

The geographical position of Tunisia in the South of the Mediterranean basin (*fig.1*), with 1,300 kilometers of largely Sandy coastline, a warm Mediterranean climate in summer and mild in winter, a very rich civilizational heritage (eight sites inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List) and especially a low cost of tourist stay, make this country one of the main destinations for European tourists in Africa and the Arab world (fourth most visited country after Egypt, South Africa, and Morocco Tunisia welcomed 6,400,00 visitors in 2022 (TNTO, 2022).

Despite the "profitability" of seaside tourism in Tunisia, the latter has become - given several factors including competition from other receptive - insufficient to meet the needs of tourists on the one hand and for the country's economy, which is largely based on tourism, on the other. Hence the idea of developing alternative tourism such as "the Saharan." The choice to encourage Saharan tourism, initiated in the 90s, had to meet a dual objective. On the one hand, it was intended to diversify Tunisian tourism by making a little-exploited deposit profitable and launching innovative products primarily for the European market. On the other hand, it should enable the Saharan regions to solve their economic problems in tourism while preserving their cultural and natural heritage (Hosni, 2000).

Before going into the details of the Tunisian Sahara, our field of study in the framework of this communication, it is necessary to give an idea of the characteristics of Saharan tourism.

1. Diversity and regional particularities of Saharan tourism

According to surveys conducted by tour operators specializing in Saharan tourism, we can consider two categories of tourists visiting the Sahara (*Inspiring Tunisia*).

- The tourist whose objective, from the beginning to the end of his stay, is limited to discovering the Sahara, excluding other tourist products.
- The tourist who, while interested in the Sahara, combines his trip with other products: seaside, archaeological, ecological, or whose tourist circuit provides for a more or less long stopover in the Saharan space.

However, from the perspective of an analysis of Saharan tourism in the countries surrounding the Sahara, it is not always easy to determine precisely the number of tourists staying only in the Sahara compared to other tourists the lack or non-existence of reliable statistical data. Data on total overnight stays or the capacity of Saharan tourist beds are not available in all countries (Battesti, 2009).

The presentation of the specific actions of the States in the promotion of their tourism industry in general and their Saharan tourism, in particular, makes it possible to determine the policy of these States concerning this sector: administrative organization, tax incentives, protection of the environment and heritage. The latter is presented as a tourist attraction factor, especially if it has been chosen as a World Heritage Site by UNESCO (Unesco).

A brief description of some of these sites will make it possible to realize the richness of the Saharan tourism potential. Finally, evoking the advantages and obstacles of Saharan tourism in different countries will make it possible to compare their strategies in this area. The study of these cases involved three sets of countries (UNESCO):

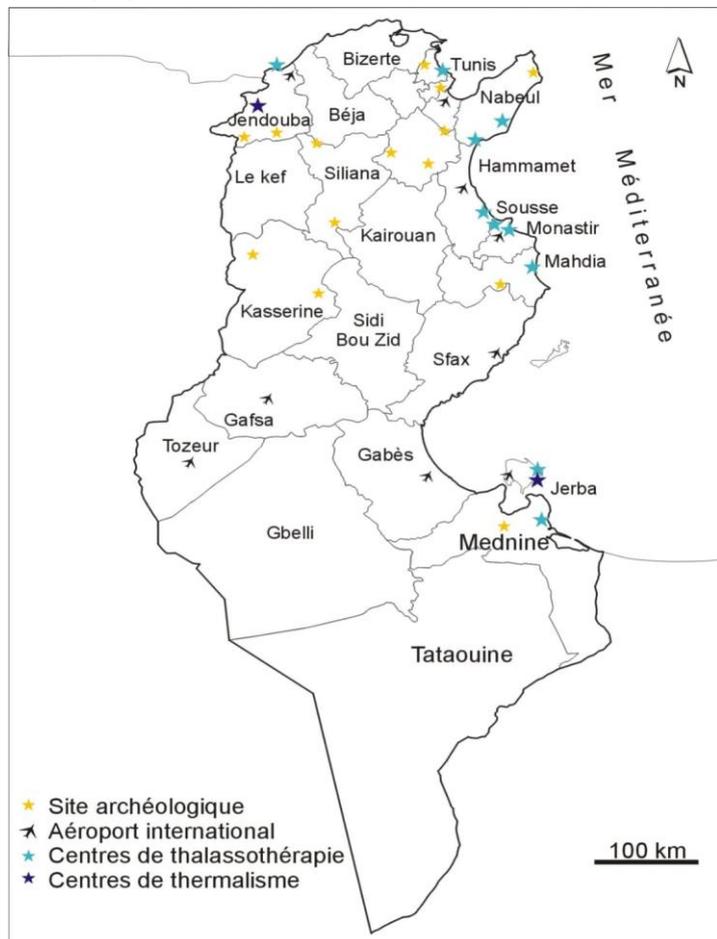
- Three North African countries: Morocco, Tunisia, and Egypt.
- Four countries south of the Sahara: Mali, Chad, Niger, and Mauritania.
- The aspects of Saharan tourism in the remaining countries are presented according to the current context of these countries:

With its enormous Saharan tourism potential, Algeria is a pioneer in this sector, preparing for its "comeback" for the year 2010 thanks to a tourism master plan for the great South. However, Libya, which is

making a remarkable entry into the international tourism scene by organizing its administrative machinery and promoting this sector, is still in its infancy. Finally, despite the war undermining it in the South, Sudan adopted a discreet tourism development strategy.

2. The tourist attractions of the Tunisian Sahara

Saharan tourism is precisely one of the elements of the tourist offer often highlighted for its richness and the attraction it exerts on Westerners (Bisson, 2003). The Tunisian State, aware of this fact, has promoted this sector by encouraging the construction of many hotel units in the country's most famous oases in the South.



Source: TNTO

Fig. 1: Tourist map of Tunisia

Archeological site, international airports, thalassotherapy centers, hydrotherapy centers are indicated in the figure.

This policy was especially asserted at the end of the eighties thanks to the tax advantages granted to private developers. However, Saharan tourism is slow to settle in the oases as a real activity of stay and also slow to assert its autonomy compared to seaside tourism. Even more worrying, the annual occupancy rate of high-end hotels in Tunisian oases is struggling to reach satisfactory levels (Hosni, 2000). Are the causes of this situation internal to the region, or are they more complex? Is there a match between demand and the Saharan tourism product?

However, the Tunisian Saharan regions have an undeniable wealth from the cultural and natural heritage perspective but are bathed in a fragile universe. Four Saharan tourist regions exist (H, 1995). (fig.1 & 2):

2.1 The region of Gafsa and Jérid

With the oases of *Tozeur*, *Nefta*, and the mountain oases (*Chebika*, *Mides*, and *Tamerza*), This region is the best equipped in hotel infrastructure and is home to the largest oases in Tunisia.

2.2 The Nefzaoua region

The two oases, Kébili and Douz, are located southeast of Chott el-Jérid. Douz is the starting point for many meharées to the great South.

2.3 The region of the troglodyte dwellings of Matmata and the Berber villages

surrounding it: Beni Zelten, Tamezret, Zrawa, and more in the North of Toujane, on the road to *Medenine*.

The region of Tataouine and the sixty-five ksours that surround it. Tataouine is the starting point to discovering the Sahara desert. Indeed, Saharan tourism (**Douz and Tozeur** attracting more than 250,000 tourists each year throughout the year) is in strong development reaping the dividends of a sustained investment effort, the most spectacular of the Saharan countries (ONNT-TourMag, 2008).

Despite the enormous assets of the Saharan region and the various actions to promote it, it must be recognized that the Saharan tourism product still has poor results due to problems we will develop.

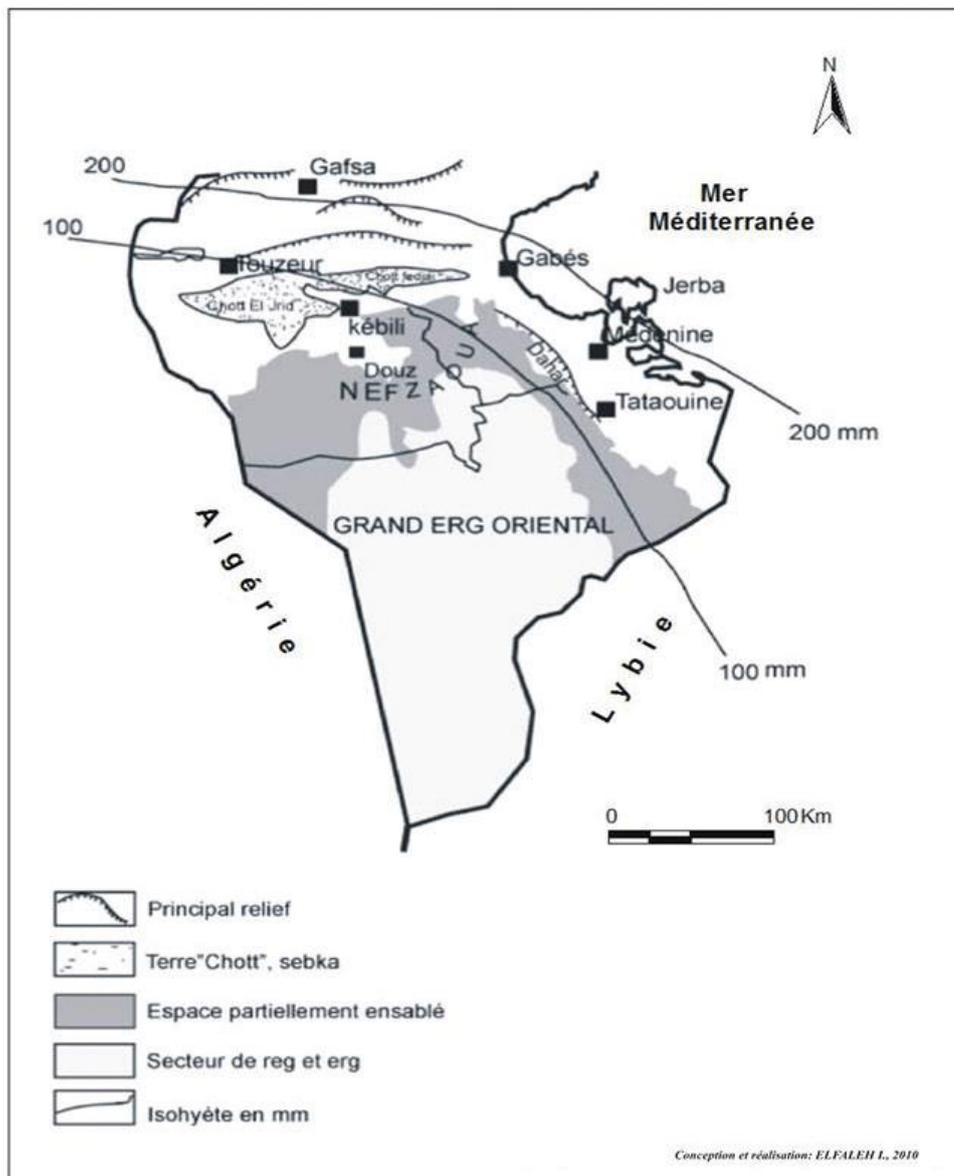


Fig. 2 : Saharan tourist regions

Figure 2. *partially assembled space, principal relief, Earth “terra, sector of reg and erg, isohyets in mm are indicated in the saharan tourist region in tunisia.*

3. Tunisian Saharan tourism: the problem of complex regional development

In developing countries like Africa, foreign capital often finances such investments. They are then carried out to promote general economic development and not only tourism. Indeed, the major problem of developing countries is the vulnerability of their economies, often based on one or two products intended for export, whose prices are subject to the fluctuations and interests of the industrialized purchasing countries (Cazes, 1992)

Diversification is therefore essential to limit the dependence of these countries; a very effective element to break this vulnerability is undoubtedly tourism if integrated into a general development policy. This activity is becoming particularly important in the countries of the South, which have made it an essential component of their development strategies, Tunisia in particular. Beyond the strictly economic aspects of these countries, this tourist activity has social, identity, and environmental repercussions, which lead us to question its compatibility with sustainable development (Jean-Marie Collombon, 2004).

Like most other Mediterranean countries, Tunisia was historically characterized by resource development adapted to the fragility of natural environments. Tourism has often led to greenfield urbanization and a more resource-intensive lifestyle, which sometimes generates a feeling of luxury and waste concerning the level of development of destinations (H, 1995). It is responsible for a significant part of the construction of housing (hotels and second homes) and equipment by the sea (marinas, recreational parks ...).

Tunisia has 1300 km of coastline with only 20% of rocky coastline (Morocco has only 512 km of coastline on its Mediterranean coast, the Egyptian Mediterranean coast, some 950km long). Although the protection of natural areas receives significant attention in the country (national parks, biosphere reserves, scientific reserves), only 14 km of coastline are protected. More than 70% of the population is settled in coastal regions (Bleu, 2003).

In summary, researchers working on tourism in Tunisia, geographers, and economists questioned the sustainability of this type of tourism. Indeed, Tunisia, a region of "mass tourism" par excellence, also makes it possible to study the conditions for developing more sustainable tourism, which would not be limited to the seaside.

The international literature stresses that at a global level, we would move from "mass" tourism, standardized, to alternative forms of tourism, marked by the orientation of demand towards a more "authentic" and more "meaningful" consumption (Delisle & Jolin, 2007). Even if this proposal may be debated, particularly given the continuous emergence of new mass seaside tourism destinations, it is supported by the strong development of tourism in sensitive areas that have hitherto remained relatively protected "any space can become touristic". (Isabelle Sacareau, 2002). However, the large-scale marketing of this new commercial niche by the entire tourism sector is mainly based on short-term economic profitability considerations, which raises critical questions about the overall sustainability of such trajectories of commercial "development" of environmental or "heritage" tourist amenities (Dewailly & Flament, 1993) Etc.

This question is particularly necessary in the case of the development of Saharan tourism. Indeed, by its characteristics of cultural, economic, identity, and social distance between tourists and natives, Saharan tourism appears particularly representative of the risks induced by this tourism of geographical meridians *as* opposed to tourism of parallels (Sidi Boumedine & Veirier, 2003). Beyond the Saharan spaces, and in order to better understand the dynamics in progress, an environmental, economic, socio-cultural, and geopolitical approach will make it possible to integrate - in the work of researchers in this field - the knowledge acquired in the more general analysis of the tourism of fragile, sensitive or protected areas, arid or not, in the Tunisian Sahara. It is, therefore, on the questions raised by the tourism of these two sets: Saharan areas on the one hand and fragile, sensitive, or protected areas. On the other hand, this work will have to focus.

4. Issues and avenues of work

4.1. Issues

RANDONNÉE DANS LE GRAND ERG ORIENTAL (Tunisie 2008)

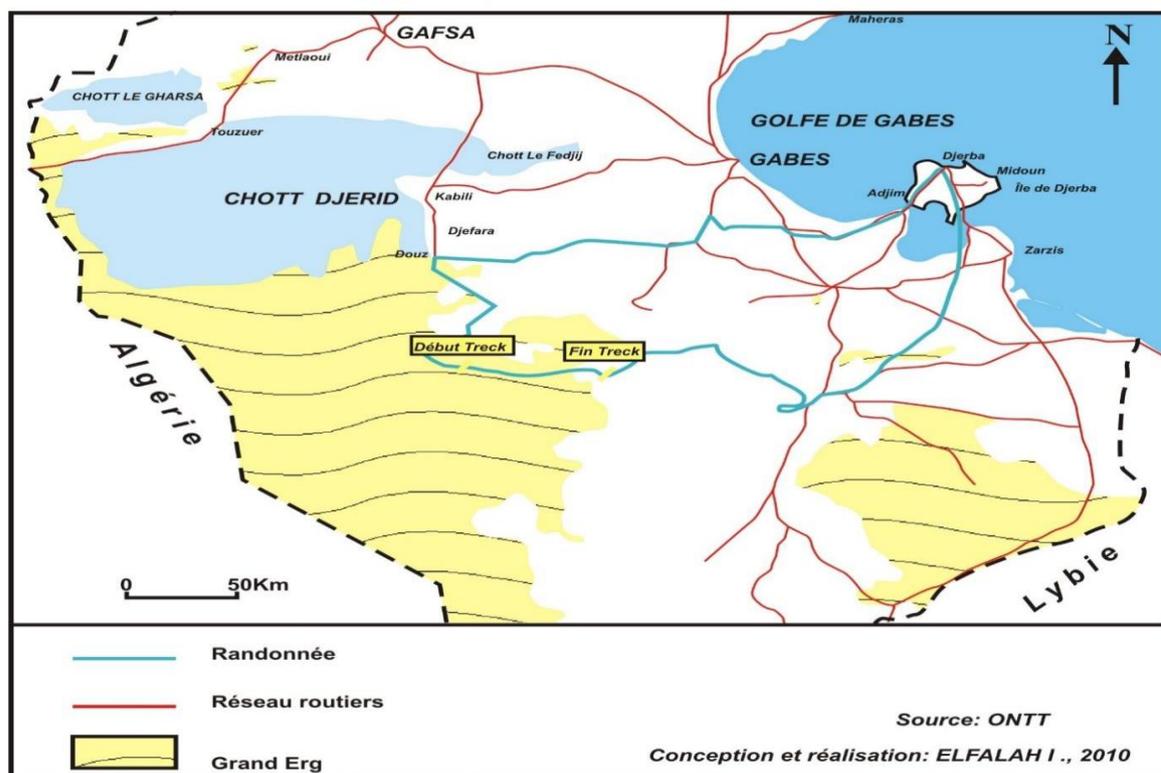


Fig 3. Hiking in the great eastern erg (2008)

Hikes, Road networks and great erg are indicated in the figure.

Our problem arises in the context of the tourism of Tunisian Saharan spaces and fragile, sensitive, or protected areas, studied with an environmental, economic, socio-cultural, and geopolitical approach. This approach should allow us to identify the usefulness of enhancing the tourism offer in the Sahara. However, some lines of thought can be put forward that mainly concern this research theme on this type of alternative tourism in Tunisia.

First, there is the question of the specificity of tourism in the areas concerned. Regarding the Sahara, it could be declined in the form of "Tourism in the Sahara" or "Saharan Tourism." (Hosni, 2000). In Tunisia, tourism in the Sahara is mainly based on generic services identical to the seaside model: large air-conditioned hotels with swimming pools and, newly in Tozeur, golf, recreational activities (quad biking, horse riding), 4x4 excursions and camels. At the same time, niche products are developing, mainly due to small tour operators that are more targeted towards "adventure" ("raids" in 4x4, quad, or camels), sport (hiking, cycling, or horseback riding), resourcing or business inventiveness (discovertunisia.com) (fig.3).

These alternative forms of tourism can only be, in essence, limited since the specific assets on which they are based can be quite quickly endangered by an increase in the number of tourists beyond the carrying capacity associated with this type of tourism.

4.2. The environmental approach

From an environmental point of view, tourism can have both negative and positive effects (Escourrou, 1993). Concerning water management, for example, we know that the oases of southern Tunisia, in addition to groundwater, also use the fossil aquifers of the SASS (Northern Sahara Aquifer System) (Hosni, 2000). From a theoretical point of view, this remedy alone would prohibit talking about sustainable development insofar as the latter do not constitute renewable resources. Their use, therefore, constitutes a net levy and obliterates the ability of future generations to meet a vital need.

According to projections made by hydrogeologists, even if remaining in traditional oasis production systems (date palms and fruit and vegetable "understory" crops, arboriculture, livestock, etc.), the exploitation of fossil aquifers at the current rate will not allow the maintenance of activity beyond the middle of the century (Mamou, 1994). The development of mass tourism that consumes much water (hotel areas of Douz or Tozeur, for example) with facilities not always adapted to the environment (swimming pools, golf courses) is likely to accelerate this process (Abdelkafi, 2004). From 1990 to 2006, the hotel capacity of the oases of southern Tunisia tripled, from 3,300 to 10,300 beds, mainly in the oases of Tozeur, Nefta, and Douz, according to statistics from the TNTO. Conversely, developing natural and heritage tourism can give them a new "market" value, biodiversity protection, traditional production systems, and the quality of landscapes (Abdelkafi, 2004). Oases, in particular, are real genetic reservoirs insofar as the species cultivated there often come from specific, ancient, and adapted strains that have evolved without external influences, and where they constitute animal reserves and stages for migratory birds (Hosni, 2000).

The enhancement by tourism of these specificities could have beneficial effects on preserving this heritage. If some landscapes can be protected or even enhanced (better management of household waste, for example), the introduction of tourism can also lead to significant degradation accentuated by the commercial constraint of a "comfortable" consumption of the Sahara, which leads to overexploit areas near four- or five-star hotels (Abdelkafi, 2004). The result is sometimes worrying. In Douz, for example, the "large" dune of Ofra, located near the tourist area, over trampled, is no more than a nipple of sand hardened by the daily passage of pedestrians, camels, 4x4s, motorcycles, and quads. The dunes of Laariguët, about twenty km North of Nefta (Dewailly & Flament, 1993), known for having been the filming location of the movie Starwars, are no more than a plowed field, overcrowded with vehicles at certain times the day. Further south, the small oasis of Ksar Ghilane was doomed to trivialization in 2007 with the opening of a newly paved road, desired by some tour operators to spare their vehicles and increase mass tourist attendance, which will destroy what made it the specificity and originality. Apart from where it takes place, this tourism in the Sahara is nothing like what one could imagine as real Saharan tourism (Kassah, 1997).

4.3. The economic approach

On the economic front, climate change and the scarcity of resources (water in particular), combined with pressures on agricultural activities (imperatives of adequacy to the evolution of market outlets), lead to a weakening of traditional oasis economic systems, an increase in poverty and vulnerability and population movements (L'Economiste, 2005) faced with these difficulties, tourism development could appear as an appropriate response. It may, however, take such differentiated forms that a single assessment cannot be made.

Mass tourism, likely to generate the most added value, monopolizes scarce resources to the detriment of other activities (Miossec, 1997) and is, therefore, not necessarily the best contribution to local development. Moreover, experience shows that only a very small part of the value thus created benefits local populations. Indeed, in southern Tunisia, we note that the largest hotels belong to coastal promoters or companies with strong banking and foreign participation and that their supply is mainly from Tunis and the major coastal cities (Kassah, 1996): Sfax, Sousse, and Gabes.

Regarding the direct jobs created, the impact is at first glance positive: the tourist area of Douz alone, for example, employs 400 camel drivers and 800 people in the hotel business (TNTO). However, such numbers should not be misleading. Indeed, the structuring of sector and power relations that operate is such that the intermediaries capture most of the added value. Thus, whether camel drivers or carriage drivers, field research shows that, on average, 70% of the service cost is taken by intermediaries, thus preventing these local operators from providing a quality of service corresponding to the money paid by tourists.

Although variable, these levies are found in all tourism-related activities: craft stores, restaurants, cafes, etc (Miossec, 1997). As for the salaried jobs created, they are most often precarious, seasonal, and poorly paid. Therefore, the real economic impact at the local level is considerably lower than that which could be estimated from tourist spending. This raises the question of integrating tourist activities into local activity systems and the relationships between the actors of these territories involved in tourist activity with the tourist sectors at the national and international levels.

4.4 The socio-cultural approach: *Understanding why we continue to live in the desert...!*

On the cultural and social level, nothing lends itself more to mystification than the Saharan space. Selling the dream is indeed the surest way to attract the crowds. However, isn't it better to understand why men have mastered the desert environment and developed treasures of adaptation? Is it not better today to try to understand why we continue to live in the desert? In this sense, is there room in the Sahara for authentic cultural tourism? The populations in the Saharan zones, particularly in the oases, have built specific anthropic systems. Established in a "hostile" environment, these systems are good examples of sustainable development built in harmony with an extremely constraining nature (Sidi Boumedine & Veirier, 2003).

This construction is based on strong cultures, identities, and social relations, established over the centuries (Michel, 1998). These elements constitute "heritage amenities" linked to environmental amenities to form the basis of tourist attraction. Saharan tourism is therefore interested in them, but in different ways depending on its modus operandi. For the mass of excursionists (day-trippers from large coastal resorts), profitability leads to rapid and superficial cultural consumption. There is a great risk of dollarization of local cultures in commercial representations that often go astray (Kassah, 1996). Some tour operators offer more personalized contacts with local people in villages or camps for tourists seeking authenticity. Despite a declared desire for ethics and good practice, it seems necessary to investigate the real impact of this repeated introduction of consumers from the North with considerable purchasing power and a dominant culture within fragile communities (Cazes, 1992).

In both cases, the risks resulting from bringing different cultures into contact through relationships that must be considered fundamentally commercial and unbalanced, whatever their form, remain. For example in Douz, the capital of Sahara tourism in Nefzaoua (Fig.2), *"The cultural and civilizational shock is all the greater as, until recently, the Merazig¹ were bound to the values and myths of a semi-solitary nomad"* (Kassah, 1996). From this point of view, the introduction of tourism cannot be neutral, and the question arises as to how these cultures and identities, which represent the true Saharan human heritage, can survive without falling into the trap of acculturation, subjugation, or dollarization, *« It is undeniable that certain forms of tourist activities intended to entertain a clientele concerned with exoticism and a change of scenery risk reducing a cultural heritage to folklore and transforming a society once full of life and creativity into a spectacle »* (Kassah, 1996). Moreover, introducing new activities can disrupt economic and social hierarchies, for example, by diverting the workforce to services rendered to tourist activities to the detriment of traditional activities necessary to maintain the oasis environment. This would lead to the ultimate paradox of oases declining due to lack of maintenance and thus losing much of their attractiveness. Finally, in urban and village centers, the "typical" staging of places likely to meet the expectations of tourists also presents the risk of slipping into a junk authenticity, as is already widely found in the supply of crafts (Battesti, 2009). These considerations show that tourism in the Sahara raises research questions that have been addressed in other configurations.

- The risk of a form of "tragedy of the commons" tourism activity relies on a certain number of environmental or heritage commons, which has notably led to the definition of "tourism commons" (Michel, 1998). However, this risk can be reinforced by the very nature of tourism-related activities. The question of the forms of ownership and access to these "tourism commons" is crucial from the point of view of managing this risk.
- The forms of qualification of the oasis territories linked to the tourist activity as (Sidi Boumedine & Veirier, 2003): the tourist activities contribute, jointly with other activities, to the production of a "characteristic of territorial quality" insofar as the tourist goods and services will be integrated into a "basket of goods," which

¹ The merazig is a tribal society founded around a holy man: Sidi Merzoug, they are former semi-nomadic pastors whose beginning of the accelerated sedentarization of the city of Douz dates back to barely the 1950s. (Refer to further this subject on the origin of the tribe to BISSON. V (1998), Douz the city of Mérazig, with the assistance of the city of Douz, 119 p.)

will also include a certain number of common goods and other private goods, such for example agro alimentary products of the soil, which will take part in this qualification process. This characteristic constitutes a specific asset that can benefit all the activities concerned. However, the contribution of this quality characteristic to generating income for local actors depends largely on the structuring of tourist activities and the forms of the constitution of the basket (the basket itself or the bundle composed by the tour operators) (Violier, 2008)

- These considerations lead to a question about the impact of the income generated by tourist activities that enhance the value of environmental or heritage assets in the areas concerned: are they comparable to those obtained by activities, possibly also tourist activities, that contribute to the destruction of these assets? This debate has already been raised in the context of the management transfer to local populations in protected areas and could be extended to the case of oases.
- This leads us to consider the role of Saharan tourism in the local development of the areas concerned and to raise the question of the relationship between local development and national development strategy.

These theoretical questions should structure research projects on the contribution of oasis tourism and the comparative dimension with other cases of fragile areas.

4.5. The geopolitical approach: "If you risk nothing, you risk even more!" (Erica Jong) (Jong).

From a geopolitical point of view, tourism is a source of risk because of the different tourist consumption; the activities in which tourists engage or their destinations are a source of danger and accidents. This is true for transport, whatever the mode used (land, rail, air, sea, or river). Accommodation consumption is also a source of insecurity and accidents. As well as the risks related to the economy of a country and its cultural heritage. Tourist destinations can be dangerous because of insecurity due to wars, rebellions, terrorist or criminal activities, competition, etc (Denécé & Meyer, 2006). Even if these factors are external to the destination countries, they have an indispensable influence.

Nevertheless, it should be noted that the least stable countries are the least visited by tourists (Caron-Malenfant, 2002). Moreover, even if it is considered a stable country, Tunisia is not exempt from some risks such as security, socio-cultural, environmental, and especially economic. Researchers and writers have recently addressed the notion of risk in tourism, especially after September 11, 2001, and based on the theme of terrorism (Spindler & Durand, 2003). However, after the birth of Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan in 2001, it spread to the Middle East, and it was very recently, in 2007, a branch of Al-Qaeda appeared in the Maghreb with other groups. Since then, these groups have been multiplying their actions throughout the Maghreb region, particularly in Mauritania and Algeria, threatening tourist activity (Masson, 2011). Indeed, the Sahara is not spared by these terrorist acts, despite the fact that we have not noted such acts in the Tunisian Sahara so far. However, the latter is an open and vast space that can be a refuge for these groups anytime.

These are avenues of research that can be addressed to show how we can have sustainable Saharan tourism developed, secure, and enhanced by its heritage.

Results And Discussions

The study area is home to cultural, Saharan, rural, mountain, sports, natural, expatriate, and ecotourism resources and legacy assets that can promote and develop alternative tourism. But, are these assets sufficient to attract customers and therefore welcome a large number of tourists?

However, given current diversification, our research revealed that coastal tourism still dominates in Tunisia and that the country's tourism is characterised by a focus on the coastline. The fact that Desert tourism is intended to be a by-product (circuit and excursion) of coastal tourist is its main shortcoming, circuit and excursion is a function demonstrated by a relatively brief duration of stay, approximately one day when it is around seven on the coast. The primary tourist region in the Sahara, Gafsa-Tozeur, was not taken into consideration. The main source of tourists for upmarket hotels in this area is an excursion or tour package offered by seaside hotels. Saharan tourism is categorised under the "desert" product, which resembles sports like golf and thalassotherapy. It is therefore just a means of allowing visitors who have come to the seaside, which we can now define as the core of tourism, to extend their stay.

The Gafsa-Tozeur region has been incorporated into the tourist industry through developing tourism reliant on coastal travel. As a result, the coastline that the colonial system left behind serves as the hub for coastal tourism. Hence, it emphasises the "centre-periphery" notion. The notion of center is observed through:

- ✧ Notion of tourism in the Sahara. During their stays, guests at the hotels along the seaside can take advantage of a by-product provided by the Saharan circuits, which use Douz as a stopover town.
- ✧ The influence of coast actors. They focus their investments along the coast (fig 1). Also, the bulk of luxury hotels, as well as those of medium and high standing, are either international or part of tourism chains with

headquarters in coastal cities like Tunis, Sousse, Gabes, etc. These hotels include those in the tourist district of Douz. As a result, significant coastal cities or other countries receive a portion of the hotel industry's income.

- ✧ Supplied in the large coastal cities by the prestigious hotels. Tunis (groceries, capital goods, etc.), Sfax (textiles and millstones), and Gabes (fish, and fresh vegetables, etc.) are three coastal cities that stand out. Contrarily, Douz has its own wholesale markets, these vendors provide them with facilities like facilitated payments, recovery of unconsumed goods and much more.

Tourism thus appears as an activity directed by non-local promoters who weigh more and more in the decision-making process at regional level. It thus presents itself as a factor of financial dependence.

The influence of the coastal cities on craftsmanship is also evident. Many artisan and gift businesses can be found in Douz, and the majority of their products are imported. Let's use the example of carpets, which merchants in other governorates (such as Gabes, Sfax, or Matmata) purchased due to their lower cost. Many abilities are being lost in Douz as a result of this competition (making baskets, clothes). In order to accomplish the aforementioned goals, the nation must develop its travel offerings using a wide range of strategies. Innovation can be done in a variety of ways. The improvement of current solutions can constitute innovation for the established and well-known tourist market. The new offering is built on an understanding of the competition and positioning the offer as having value in the eyes of tourists. The second type is innovation that comes from a supplier's initiative and aims to surprise the customer. This innovation necessitates specialised marketing since it is the real market disruption: it requires defining or redefining the activity, developing or revising the offer, analysing the competition, and understanding the new customer behaviour. *According to Line Bergery, "innovation gives organisations a different sense and dynamic, a different sense to relationships between them and with regard to the purpose of the company, and a different value and dynamic to human relationships with his work and his enterprise» (Bergery, 2001)*

Conclusion

Despite a major promotional campaign aimed at the main export markets and various specific measures to promote Saharan tourism, such as the creation of the festival of the oases of Tozeur and Douz in recent years, it is still unable to take off and achieve the desired objectives. For years, Saharan tourism has been marketed and promoted as a simple "product" of the sector, in addition to the main sector, namely beach tourism. Even if the high season of Saharan tourism begins in autumn and ends in spring, which allows it to spread this period and to have overnight stays during the winter, the season in which Tunisian tourism is down.

It is true that Tunisia, by its geographical position, is a region of "mass tourism" par excellence, but it also allows to study of the conditions of development of alternative tourism, more sustainable, which would not be limited to the seaside, such as Saharan tourism. However, this type of tourism development appears to be particularly representative of the risks and challenges induced by its environmental, economic, socio-cultural, and geopolitical characteristics. Indeed, this geographical space can be highlighted as a destination apart from its assets, but it also represents a sensitive, fragile area!

Data Availability Statement

All the data that support the findings of this study are available within the manuscript. Any additional data can be shared upon request from the author.

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