



Since June 2016, Morocco exempted Chinese nationals from visa requirements to enter Moroccan territory the number of Chinese tourists to Morocco has increased substantially [Photo/IC]

SINO-MOROCCAN BILATERAL RELATIONS: TAPPING INTO CHINA'S EMERGING TOURIST MARKET

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The ties between China and Morocco run deep. In fact, Morocco's strategic location props it up for China's engagement with the Middle East, Africa and the Mediterranean regions - a core component of the BRI agenda. At the same time, Morocco's priorities in industrialization, infrastructure development and increased foreign direct investment intersect with the BRI's aim of promoting connectivity and economic development in policy coordination, infrastructure connectivity, increased trade, financial integration and people-to-people exchanges

China's relations with Morocco date back more than 60 years. After France and Spain, China is Morocco's third-largest trade partner, with bilateral trade totaling \$3.8 billion in 2017.

China's plan is to elevate Morocco as one of the top 20 global tourist destinations by 2020.

The agreement signed in September by the Moroccan National Tourist Office and Chinese travel agency Ctrip to promote the Moroccan market in China was widely welcomed because it offers opportunities to boost the flow of Chinese tourists to Morocco.

China's other interests in Morocco include investments in the Kenitra Atlantic Free Zone, Casablanca Finance City and the Tanger Med Port Complex.

In addition, China's Communications Construction Co and China Road and Bridge Corp have signed a memorandum of understanding with Morocco's BMCE Bank to construct the Mohammed VI Tangier Tech City, which is expected to include several industrial zones. In addition, Chinese auto manufacturing companies have signed agreements with the Moroccan government to build various manufacturing plants.

More than six decades ago, Morocco was among the first African countries to recognize the People's Republic of China. In 2017, Morocco was the first of North Africa's Maghreb states - which also include Libya, Algeria, Mauritania and Tunisia - to sign a memorandum for the promotion of the China-proposed Belt and Road Initiative.

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Under the BRI, China has committed to encourage its industrial enterprises to invest in Morocco in the automotive, textile, electrical goods, aviation, mining and renewable energy sectors.

In line with the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation's recommendation on people-to-people exchanges, China and Morocco are actively exploring tourism cooperation. FOCAC is a platform for exchange and cooperation between China and African countries, under which China has committed to expand China-Africa tourism cooperation and two-way tourism exchanges.

Morocco is invited to participate in tourism exhibitions and festival celebrations held in China. Local governments and tourism companies in China and Morocco are encouraged to carry out more cooperation and expand mutual investment.

China has become the largest market for tourists in the world with the expansion of its middle and upper classes.

The per capita income of Chinese citizens has increased considerably as the country's economy has become the second largest in the world.

According to the China Tourism Academy, it is estimated that spending by Chinese tourists abroad will total about \$429 billion annually by 2021. Morocco's relative political stability, its top ranking in North Africa on Trading Economics' 2019 Ease of Doing Business index, and its easier visa requirements in relation to Chinese nationals have served to increase the flow of tourists from China to Morocco.

At the China-Morocco Tourism Forum in Casablanca in February, Moroccan Tourism Minister Mohammed Sajid announced that

Morocco has a target of 500,000 tourists per year by 2020. It is toward this goal that in 2016, Morocco introduced a visa exemption policy for Chinese tourists that saw an increase in tourists from 20,000 to about 118,000.

Through people-to-people exchanges, China and Morocco are able to showcase their respective lands to each other's citizens, and increase cultural understanding and economic opportunities between the two countries. China has an ongoing five-year tourism program aimed at advancing exchange and cooperation with Africa in areas such as culture, tourism and trade.

A 2018 report titled "Sovereigns - Africa, Closer Trade and Investment Ties with China", by the

rating agency Moody's, counted Morocco among 10 African countries most likely to benefit from the increasing number of tourists from China.

Morocco's offerings include Atlantic and Mediterranean coastlines, deserts, snowcapped mountains and ancient cities. The increase in Chinese tourists has increased employment opportunities in the tourism industry.

The deep ties between China and Morocco and the growth of bilateral relations between the two countries magnify the significance of the tourism cooperation memorandum.

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