

MAKING

WAVES

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Five-time Moroccan surf champion Maryam El Gardoum talks about the rise of women's surfing and why her native Taghazout, Morocco is the place to be for a girls' holiday with a difference.

On the shores of Morocco, the sleepy village of Taghazout has undergone a radical transformation in recent years. Each morning, a shoal of brightly coloured boards descends on the waters of the Atlantic, each topped by a wetsuit-clad surfer. Come sunset, calls to prayer intermingle with the oms of meditation mantras, as yoga sessions begin in earnest.



Drawing scores of surfers, yogis and beach bums from around the world each year, Taghazout is steadily gaining an international reputation as a surfing paradise – especially amongst women.

'We have surf spots for all levels, from beginner to advanced,' says Maryam El Gardoum, local surf star. 'There's a great vibe – but it's the waves that make Taghazout famous.'

The cheery twenty-something athlete is well known along the coastline. Not only has she achieved dazzling success as a five-time Moroccan surf champion, she has also launched Taghazout's first ever women-led surf school, inspiring countless girls to get into the sport – both at home, and beyond.

'I've loved the ocean since I was a baby,' says Maryam, who learned to surf with her brothers at Devil's Rock, a famous spot near Taghazout Bay. 'We didn't have much money; I picked up manoeuvres by watching YouTube videos in internet cafés.'

Undaunted by her lack of schooling or equipment, Maryam practised till she became good enough to start competing aged just 12. Back then, she was an unusual sight in the water.

'I was the only girl surfing with the boys,' she explains. 'I surfed all the time, even in winter. When I won my first competition, I realised that I wanted to be a champion.' Maryam's path to glory wasn't easy: 'Back in 2007 or 2008, there was just fishing and farming around here. Locals didn't like surfing. They thought it could be a bad influence.' She

pauses. 'And people didn't see surfing as a girl's sport.'

Gradually, as more surf schools started to open, a new wave of visitors started coming to Taghazout, drawn by its sunny clime and dramatic swell. Attitudes started to mellow, with many locals taking up surfboards themselves.

'Now, it's fishing, farming – and surfing!' says Maryam. 'Most families living here work in surf camps, have started their own, or are connected to surfing in some way. Surfing gives locals more opportunities to work.'

Though surfing is often regarded as a male-dominated sport, women taking to the waves is nothing new. However, its popularity has risen among new demographics in recent years, especially since making its Olympic debut at Tokyo 2020, propelling athletes such as Sky Brown and Carissa Moore to global fame. But, in Morocco, perspectives have been slower to change.

'I was lucky that my parents allowed me to compete,' admits Maryam. 'By winning competitions, it helped to change people's minds. I try to show that surfing isn't disrespectful to our culture. It's an extreme sport that requires education and discipline. Now, more and more girls are being allowed to surf here. It makes me so happy.'

In 2018, Maryam established Dihya Surf School, though it wasn't until 2022, when an injury led her to press pause on competing, that she focused on her business in earnest. She named it after an ancient Algerian warrior queen synonymous with strength and bravery.

'Before Dihya became a warrior, people didn't accept women as fighters, but she followed her dream. It was the same thing I experienced when I discovered surfing.'

A spate of female-only retreats has popped up along Taghazout's shores. Many programmes also offer a wellness dimension with yoga sessions. 'When you come back exhausted and sore from surfing, yoga helps you relax,' says

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'Surfing teaches you about life. With each wave, you struggle, but you improve'

Maryam. 'The next day, your body is recovered and ready to surf again. Yoga makes a huge difference.'

Most days, Maryam can be found at one of Taghazout's sandy bays, teaching a clutch of excited students how to perfect their techniques. Whether travellers want to take on the gentle white waters breaking close to shore, or the wilder green peaks further out, top Taghazout surf spots include Killer Point, La Source and Banana Beach – and Devil's Rock, where Maryam first fell in love with the sport.

While her fanbase waits to see if she makes a return to the competitive side of surfing, she has other plans for the future. 'My dream now is to build a surf camp just for women, especially solo travellers. Surfing teaches you about life. With each wave, you struggle, but you improve. You learn how to be patient – and never, never give up.'

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MANZILI MAROC

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