

A truly tribal gathering



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As the sun fades behind a pale gauze of haze and wind-blown dust, campfires flare and little teapots bubble. Veiled men lounge beside workaday hide tents as women chatter and scold restless children. More groups ride in across rippled dunes on insolent-looking camels and nonchalantly strike camp. Not for the first time, I rub my eyes not merely to dispel grit but to make sure this is not some fantastically remote and wayward film set.

The notion of a "Tuareg Glastonbury" might seem far-fetched but, each January since 2001, the desert near Timbuktu has hosted a similar kind of gathering. Mali's Festival in the Desert is a celebration of Tuareg culture and largely Sahelian music that would have been unthinkable 10 or 15 years ago. Mud is simply not an issue, though the region's isolation, some terrible roads and minimal facilities mean the three-day event is, at least for its organisers, something of a triumph of will over logistics.

From the rugged but noble "blue men of the Sahara" label to having a 4x4 model named after them, much of the mystery and romance surrounding the Tuareg stems from France's colonial push into the region through Algeria. Never a unified kingdom but rather a collection of distinct tribal groups spread across modern-day Algeria, Libya, Niger and Mali, the French still met with stiff resistance. By the early 20th century, pacification was complete. In varying degrees, today's Tuareg have been "Arabised", assimilated, marginalised or ignored.

In Mali, growing Tuareg disaffection with the government led to rebellion in the early 1990s. The region saw sporadic skirmishes and kidnappings, and Timbuktu was practically under siege. A 1996 peace agreement, complete with symbolic armaments pyre, seems to have settled both sides and from the seeds of this accord the festival has blossomed.

Today's gathering has a dual pedigree. A traditional form of Tuareg gathering, or *temmakannit* (the likes of which had been disrupted by the rebellion), has fused with a music programme largely inspired by AITMA and Efes, Tuareg cultural organisations, and internationalised by the enthusiasm of French band Lo'Jo.

As the festival becomes more widely known and acclaimed, so the line-up of talent grows. Assorted musicians from Mali (among them Ali Farke Touré) and other countries of the Sahel, together with a few western artists (famously Led Zeppelin's Robert Plant and Blur's Damon Albarn have turned up – and jammed) lend an eclectic touch. Young Tuareg who seem to have ridden out of the 19th century are likely to stand beside hardy tourists cheering the riffs and twangs of lead guitars. For the moderately adventurous traveller, this is an exhilarating take on contemporary Tuareg life.

First, you have to get there. Never mind the almost 1,000km drive from Bamako, Mali's capital, to Timbuktu, a frail-looking town whose streets and houses are scoured daily by wind and grit. The most memorable part is the final 60km to Essakane, a tiny village beyond most maps. Furrowed tracks weave north-west into an apparent emptiness, past overloaded pickups stalled in the sand and the occasional goatherd whose hardy flocks nibble meagrely. Our drivers relished the challenge of small dunes and humpy, stony scrub. Finally, a kind of ceremonial arch crested the horizon and minutes later we passed beneath it. A sign announced water, toilets, showers and an artists' cabin.

At our camp – a little enclave of open goatskin tents on gaunt wooden frames – we had an impromptu demonstration of old-fashioned Tuareg survival skills. They are in a league of their own. Heated by charcoal and deftly sealed, a (slaughtered) sheep's stomach served as a flavoursome oven. Tajila, a damper-like bread, was baked in hot sand. Yet exploring the festival site after lunch, it was clear, too, that these Tuareg are not marooned in some vaguely quaint mythic-warrior past.

Young men sold silver and leather jewellery and cloth for turbans (though sadly not traditional indigo-dyed cotton). Stalls offered everything from biscuits to batteries. There were shack eateries and rudimentary cafés. The 500 or so western tourists could browse at a small crafts market, while the Tuareg had seminars on cultural and development issues. Not all had come by camel (though a few, apparently, covered 350km in seven days) but there were sufficient marvellous beasts to make the 4x4s and clapped-out vans seem vulgar. And, of course, there was an open stage, small and approachable, for the festival does not have – and probably never will – stadium pretensions.

Regular yet shifting tribal gatherings suited the Tuaregs' generally nomadic life; how else to settle disputes, catch

up with friends or family, news and gossip? They often set a de facto stage in bowl-like terrain, with an audience lolling on soft dunes gazing down at whatever spectacle might be on offer. Essakane, according to the festival's director Mohamed Ag Mohamed Aly, is an ideal location. "It's clean and comfortable," he explained to me, sand running playfully through his fingers, "and there's good well water. Also, it really is in the desert but not too far from Timbuktu." This fabled town – in the west virtually a byword for remoteness – is, out here, considered a reasonable hub.

Insufficient funding is perhaps the festival's only issue. There have been various sponsors over the years including the French government, a mobile phone operator, Unesco, the EU and even a big car manufacturer. Yet impoverished Mali will probably never really have the modest funds and as locals do not pay, ticket sales generate relatively little. No surprise, then, to watch an already delayed sound-system truck getting bogged in sand and technicians grappling with gremlins in the amps and speakers.

Yet the impromptu show went on and, veiled to a man (for this is the Tuaregs' single most defining feature) atop camels caparisoned with rugs, leather tassels and saddles with v-shaped pommels, the gleeful barefoot riders galloped and raced with near regal splendour.

In the cradle of faint dunes, Igbayen, a hardy-looking ensemble, regaled a crowd with hypnotic chant-songs full of vigour yet tinged with longing. By turns, mock-heroes capered and leapt to rapturous applause, the charged audience slowly closing in and feeding off a raw intensity distilled from tone and passion as well as words.

At nightfall on centre stage, and backed by guitars, drums and calabashes, the rotund almost motherly Khaïra Arby sang of love and pain, toil and war. Baba Salah, a virtuoso yet utterly serene guitarist, nimbly fingered mellifluous strains and licks that soared into the inky sky, his band framed by a pair of supple dancers who swayed with exquisite grace. Along from Niger came Finatawa, a striking if not bizarre outfit of solemn musicians, women singers and Wodaabé tribesmen quite literally dolled up for the night in cosmetic paint and feathers.

Around midnight Mamar Kasseyy emerged, an extraordinary performer whose flute and ardent posturing recalled Jethro Tull and James Brown. He bantered a bit here and enthralled us there, his lithe dancers briefly slipping away to change and reappear with easy bewitching smiles. We wanted more, and got plenty more, and when his time was up and the night done, I trudged back to camp by a long dune tinged here and there with the flickering light from fires. A man galloped away on a pony, a few couples snuggled up in the sand and Mali had never seemed more seductive.

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