

# FESTIVAL IN THE DESERT

JANUARY 6 • 8

BY SUSAN CUMMINGS MARONI • PHOTOS BY BANNING EYRE AND SEAN BARLOW

**T**he Festival in the Desert would appeal nearly as much to readers of *National Geographic* as to the avid music lover who devours *The Beat*. Combine the crystalline beauty of the Sahara with the nomadic Touareg culture, replete with ancestral splendor, and you have an ideal setting for the most exotic music festival ever.

PHOTO BY SEAN BARLOW

But you must be intrepid to attend this one—armchair travelers need not apply.

Essakane is remote: 1,000 kilometers north from Mali's capital, Bamako. The Malian countryside is gorgeous but seriously lacking in infrastructure. A great deal of the journey involves driving by 4x4 or other rugged vehicle over unpaved sand tracks. Our drivers had a remarkable sense of direction. To me, one track marked by a scrub tree looked pretty much like any other.

Our trip from Bamako eventually landed us in Timbuktu, from whence we embarked on the most difficult leg of the trip—65 kilometers through the Sahara to the oasis of Essakane. Since we completed our journey late at night, we experienced the additional adventure of a breakdown at midnight, miles from any villages or other cars. We built a fire for comfort against the bitter Saharan cold, and prepared to sleep in our very cramped vehicle. Fortunately, we were rescued after an hour or so by a lone 4x4. We reached Essakane at about 2 a.m.

The next morning was dazzling—our first true vision of the Sahara. The festival site was spectacular—dunes like vast heaps of raw sugar, dotted with twisted trees and tents of leather or pale fabric, our “housing” for the festival. Care had been taken to honor the forms of the landscape and the culture of our Touareg hosts. The setting for the single performance stage was ideal—a small natural amphitheater cradled by dunes.

Since the attendees were small in number—perhaps 250 Europeans and Americans, a slightly larger number of Malians—the setting had a sparse, peaceful ambience. The early part of our day was devoted to rest, meeting our tent neighbors and trying to adjust to the overwhelming heat and light.

The Touareg people were a constant, friendly presence among

# • ESSAKANE, MALI

## Festival au Désert

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sous le parrainage du Ministère de la Culture

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Ali Farka Touré ( Nianfunké)  
Tartit (Tibou)  
Timariwen (Kidal)  
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Adama YALOMBA ( Macina)  
Bocar Madiou (Goundam)  
Haira ARBY ( Tibou)  
AWZA ( Faguibine)  
Telouat (Kidal)  
Diango ( Bamako)  
Takamba (Gao)  
Fissa Maiga (Gao)  
Baba Salah (Gao)  
Tendé (Tessalit)  
Igbayen (Faguibine)  
Takoumbao (Douchiké)  
Shallo (Tin Aicha)  
Nabi (Diré)

## Groupes de Musique Etrangères

Robert Plant (ex Led Zepline)/UK  
Lo'Jo (France)  
Justin Adams (UK)  
Blackfire (USA)  
Markus James (USA)  
MPS Pilot DJ ( Hollande)  
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Ministère de  
l'Artisanat et  
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us—astride slim, gentle camels (not the big ungainly double-humped dromedaries I had envisioned). Their lavish attire was a source of wonderment and soon of imitation. The men's distinctive headwrap, which covers the neck and often the face as well, turns out to be ideal protection from sun, wind, sand and cold, and looks very elegant too.

The Touareg people call themselves Kel Tamashek, after the name of their language. Although many Tamashek are now settling into communities, they have roamed a territory that extends through northern Mali, Algeria, Mauritania and Niger.

By 3 o'clock the stage was being readied for the official opening of the third annual Festival in the Desert. Malian Minister of Culture Cheikh Oumar Sissoko, a well-known film producer, spoke eloquently of the spectacular beauty and desperate needs of the region. The Tamashek people have been torn by civil war and hobbled by poverty and lack of education. They have also suffered massive agricultural and herd loss from lack of rainfall and the damming of the Niger River.

As the Minister of Culture explained, the Festival aims to be a continuation of traditional celebrations, often held in winter months by the Tamashek people. These gatherings provided opportunities for isolated nomadic tribes to socialize and resolve differences. The event also commemorates the advent of peace, finally achieved three years ago after many years of civil war.

A very special aspect of the festival was the sense that we as Westerners were invited guests at a traditional desert event. Of course, tourism played its substantial part, but we had a feeling of

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