



Sahara-Roots and the 4th Taragalte Festival.

Upon entering M'hamid we pulled over for a short stop at "Cherg Expeditions Restaurant" on the left hand side of the street just as you enter M'hamid El Ghizlane. Here we were greeted by Halim Sbaï, one of the organizers of the 4th edition of the Taragalte Festival. After receiving our welcome tea as well as the program and our badges we continued by 4WD, passing the fields of the oasis as well as some of the small villages in the area. After a 6 hour journey from Ouarzazate we had finally reached our destination: the Bivouac "Le Petit Prince" which would be our home for the next 4 nights during the festival.

Two girlfriends, Hanneke Bodlaender of "UitjeKunst" (teambuilding by painting creative concepts on big canvases) and our photographer, and Ima Bakal of "Noor Translations" specialized in translating from Arabic in various languages, had travelled with me and they would also be participating in the different projects that Sahara-Roots would be involved in during the festival.

Upon arriving, what first caught my eye was the green haze which was now surrounding the camp site. These were our trees that had survived the tough summer months. A year earlier we had decided to continue with planting trees around the camp. In this way there would always be someone to watch over to the fragile new life, to water them, and to shovel the sand away when needed.

As many people would be arriving for the festival, two small separate tented areas had been setup in the vicinity of the main camp so as to accommodate everyone. Many of the musicians, arriving from Mali, Mauritania, Morocco and France, would be staying in the main camp, which would provide an opportunity for intercultural exchange between musicians, journalists and visitors. Enjoying the peace and tranquillity of our surroundings we sat on our suitcases waiting until the "guys" in camp made up our tents. After a wonderful buffet dinner we all enjoyed the first night of desert music and dancing in the circle of the bivouac.

1st Festival day

It was magical watching the sunrise over the sand dunes the next morning as the rain fell in the distance, such a special treat to see rainfall in the desert. After breakfast we walked over to the official Taragalte Festival site to prepare for the opening which would be held in the afternoon. At the "*Nomad camp*" we were warmly greeted by the women who were



busy preparing lunch. Children were running up and down the sand dunes, happy to have so much sand in their playground. Before long we were invited to join the women for a cup of tea. Having Ima with us to translate for all of us, made it truly an intercultural exchange and the women were very impressed when they heard that Ima was from Iraq! After enjoying the hospitality of the women, we went over to the main Taragalte site where we set up the Sahara-Roots information tent.

Later in the afternoon Governor of Zagora arrived to open the Festival together with many other Moroccan officials, plus Halim and Ibrahim Sbaï, the organizers of the Taragalte Festival, as well as representatives from the Timbuktu Festival: (www.festival-au-desert.org) and the Festival on the Niger (Mali) (www.festivalsegou.org). As they visited the many different tents of the different organizations, local musicians played in the background including the internationally renowned great Moroccan singer Oum. The theme of this 4th Taragalte Festival was devoted to "*The Woman of the Desert*"

Towards the evening many other musicians entertained the crowd now present, playing their music from a stage which was set up romantically between the palm trees in this beautiful but fragile desert environment.

2nd Festival day

During the morning of the 2nd day, *Ecology Day*, we took the time to prepare the Sahara-Roots presentation for the tent conference on "*Tourism and Sustainable Development in desert environments*". Meanwhile many of the visitors enjoyed a guided tour either by riding camels or walking through the date palms and to hear about the traditional way of life still existing today in the villages of the Draa valley oasis. There was also the possibility to visit the workshop and art exhibition "*We make Carpets*" www.wemakecarpets.nl. The carpets were made from non-biodegradable objects, such as plastic bottles recovered in the desert.

The restaurant tent was prepared as a conference tent so the different presentations could be made to the journalists, visitors and local people present. We presented the different projects of Sahara-Roots such as 1) our tree planting project, which we do together with local children as well as with tourists, 2) our educational project with the help of our booklet "Me and my Sahara" and 3) the "Nettoyage" (cleaning projects). Many thanks to Ima who did a great job of translating for us.

During an interview with reporters of 2M (Moroccan TV) in which I explained how we work with the local children by using our booklet "Me and my Sahara", we were asked to read together with some of the local children present at the festival. We walked over to the main site in the late afternoon as the sun hung low in the sky which gave a beautiful light.



As we came closer we saw that many "Carpets of Life" (www.carpetoflife.com) were now displayed among the sand dunes. *Butterfly Works*, a Dutch organization, (www.butterflyworks.org) had started a new project with the women of the Taragalte Concept, in which the women from the M'hamid area make carpets with materials supplied by clients. As we came closer, I discovered my own Carpet of Life, an artistic work of art, which included my wedding dress. (Many thanks to the women of the Taragalte Concept and Butterfly Works for making this possible).

It was an inspirational moment as we read "Me and my Sahara", together with some of the local children, with my carpet hanging in the background, while 2M once again filmed and interviewed us, in between the camel racing and the setting of the sun. The beautiful scarves and shawls hanging in the *Taragalte Boutique*, flapped gently in the wind and it was so good to see so many women also present in contrast to the earlier Taragalte festivals.

In the evening we joined the Nomad women and listened to the spiritual music played by the Oum (www.oum.ma Morocco), Tartit, (www.myspace.com/Tartit Timbuktu) and Noura Mint Seymali (www.myspace.com/nouramintseymali Mauritania). Truly an event for and by the women of the desert. As we listened to the magical flute, we gazed at the stars present in a clear and magical night.

3rd Festival Day

The 3rd day of the festival would be the "tree planting" and the "children's paint workshop" day, a very special day for us. Many children had arrived in the Bivouac Le Petit Prince, to participate in our grand event. In order to help the children to understand the importance of taking care of your own environment, we first read with them from the booklet. Ima was wonderful in acting out the story for them and helping to explain the essence of the story, in Arabic, while our photographer, Hanneke, was once again busy taking photo's. Many visitors, local inhabitants, musicians and journalists were present as we listened to the children reading to us.

With the explaining done, we moved to the area where the tamarisk grafts were ready to be planted in the Groasis Waterboxx's (www.groasis.com) which had been donated by visitors of the festival. The Groasis Waterboxx is an effective way to help fight against desertification. We first explained how this new technique works, before Adii and Abdulrazak (our tree caretakers) helped us with the planting. Two grafts were planted per "waterboxx" while musicians, children and visitors were singing to help give the grafts a good start in life.



During the “*Ceremony of the Moussem*”, which was held in a large tent set up in the dunes close to the main festival site, the nomad women had been busy preparing food. Lunch was served in a very traditional way as large platters of couscous, vegetables and meat were placed on the ground. Luckily they provided us with spoons!

Slowly children started to arrive as they knew that we would be starting the “*painting workshop*” that was to be given by Hanneke. Earlier in the day during the reading session, we had asked them to think about what their “*Dream Desert*” would look like. Even though the wind had picked up and sand was flying through the air, we all were excited to start with Hanneke’s project. Hanneke had provided a long canvas, paint brushes and paints and we had cut empty water bottles to use as containers for the paints, water and for mixing the colours if needed. It was wonderful to see the painting “grow” as the girls seriously painted the sky area and the boys the ground area, each taking care to remain in their own section. This was something they were used to doing while eating couscous in the traditional way; when eating, you only take from “your” section. Hanneke guided them throughout the painting process while Ima translated, as a crowd gathered around to see what was happening. Local musicians played in the background. How proud we all were when the painting was finally finished, with lush green covering the sand dunes: the children’s “*Dream Desert*”.

Tree plant inspection on our last day

The following morning we woke up to the sound of Oum singing on top of the sand dunes close to our tent, as the sun was just starting to rise. Such a spiritual moment, which we enjoyed immensely. This would be our last morning.....

Before leaving, we took the time to check on all our trees. We have now been planting in 3 different areas: Sidi Khalil, Zaouia and around Bivouac Le Petit Prince. We travelled by camel to the different areas, impressed by what we saw. We have been planting around the vicinity of Sidi Khalil since 2008 and many of the tamarisk that have survived were standing proud, wide and tall (some 5mtrs tall and 4mtrs wide!) even after the harsh summers with temperatures rising up to 50 degrees Celsius.

Clambering over the last sand dunes in front of the Zaouia site, we were excited to see the first green tufts of some of the tamarisk in the distance. But also the newly planted palm trees had done really well, it was a miracle to see the green “hearts” between the dry palm leaves. With the proper caretaking done by Abdelrazak and the presence of a water well and pump in this area, most of the newly planted trees have survived.

The “green haze” that appeared around Bivouac Le Petit Prince, were our trees that had survived the tough summer months. A year earlier we had decided to continue with the



planting of trees both in the traditional way as well as in the new way (the Groasis Waterboxx system). We were able to compare both systems while teaching those who work together with us on this project, how this great new technique works. They are now happy with the results. There would always be someone to watch over the fragile new life, to water them, and shovel the sand away when needed.

A big THANK YOU!!!

During the festival we had enjoyed the music of so many talented musicians. We participated in various activities. We made wonderful new friends as well as rekindling old friendships, and experienced the heart-warming hospitality of the desert people. We are so grateful to have been able to join the 4th Taragalte Festival and we would like to thank Halim and Ibrahim Sbaï, Marika Barthelemy, L'Association Zaila of M'hamid, all the musicians and artists, all the partners of the *Taragalte Concept*, the caterer of all the wonderful food as well as the local people, who worked so hard during the festival to make it possible to experience this wonderful event.

We look forward to the 5th Taragalte Festival!

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