

FESTIVAL AU DESERT IN MALI



The Festival au désert ("Festival in the Desert") is an annual concert in Mali, showcasing traditional Tuareg music as well as music from around the world. The first Festival took place in Tin Essako in 2001 and then it moved in 2002 to Tessalit in the Kidal region of North-Eastern Mali. From 2003 until 2009 the festival was held in Essakane, 65km from Timbuktu, but because of security issues, from 2010 the festival was held on the outskirts of Timbuktu.^{[1][2]}

The Tuareg band Tinariwen first garnered international attention with their performance at the 2001 Festival.

A French-language documentary entitled *Le Festival au Désert* was filmed at the 2003 festival. Performers include Tartit, Oumou Sangaré, Lo'Jo, Tinariwen, Robert Plant with Justin Adams, Blackfire, Khaira Arby and her band, Django, and Ali Farka Touré.^[3] The DVD contains English subtitles, and an audio CD of the concert, *Festival in the Desert*, was also released.

The documentary *Dambé: The Mali Project* tells the story of a cross-cultural musical adventure over 3000 miles by two Irish musicians, that features performances from the *Festival au désert*.^[4]

Shortly after the January 2012 festival, the Northern Mali conflict began, resulting in the postponement of the 2013 festival.^[5] In July and August 2013, Tartit, Imharhan, and Mamadou Kelly toured throughout North America as the Festival au Desert - Caravan for Peace.^{[5][6][7]} An audio recording of the 2012 edition *Festival au Desert Live from Timbuktu* was released in 2013 featuring performances by 18 artists with supplemental digital bonus performances.

The Festival has continued to be postponed due to security concerns in the region.

Several documentary films have been made about the Festival including *The Last Song Before the*

War and Woodstock in Timbuktu. Other documentary films are in production.

Afriscene is a Training Project for technicians of the spectacle and the audiovisual in Mali and Africa. It is based on a partnership with recognized training structures in Belgium and France but also on a large network of West African partners.



Tourism V. Terrorism: Le Festival au Desert, Tuareg Culture and the Malian State

Since 2001, the world has been invited to attend *Le Festival au Desert* in a setting just outside the ancient city of Timbuktu. Inspired by local festivals, this international gathering has had the explicit goal of sharing Tuareg culture with the world, with hopes of generating economic development through tourism as

well. Ironically, the festival was opened to foreign tourists just a few short years after an armed rebellion between Tuareg separatists and the Malian state was suppressed in 1996. Although some of its original creators actually fought in the 1990 rebellion (ex. members of Tinariwen), over the years, it had become an important symbol of peace and reconciliation as tourists and Malians spent three days dancing together to music by local and international artists.

As Issa Dicko, a former festival organizer, stated: the rebellion was one way to bring attention to the “drastic situation of the Tuaregs in Mali... now thanks to the festival, Tuareg culture is being promoted across the world” (1). My research has focused on the diverse, and often political, purposes the Festival has served for Tuareg in the region of Timbuktu. Though I do not think the Festival is unique for serving political purposes (2), I agree with Stronza (3) that few studies have focused on what motivates locals to promote their culture through tourism, as Tuareg have done through the Festival.

Although travel warnings have plagued it from its inception, it drew hundreds of tourists from around the world every year. When I attended the festival in 2011 most locals (and tourists) with whom I spoke felt that the international travel warnings were highly

exaggerated. According to the current festival director, northern Mali was unduly targeted by governments lacking awareness of the safety of travel in Mali. In 2011, President Amadou Toumani Toure traveled to the festival for the first time to demonstrate his support as well as to show the international community that Timbuktu was indeed safe. Even the 2012 Festival went off without a hitch (with a surprise visit from Bono) just a few short days before the current rebellion was initiated. But with the institution of Shari'a law in the city of Timbuktu, the Festival is now in exile. In hopes of mobilizing their message of peace and liberation, Festival organizers are working on an international festival in an alternate location, but logistical problems have postponed it at every turn.



Festival Au Desert in Mali

The Festival in the Desert (*le Festival au Désert*) is a celebration of Tuareg culture, featuring traditional Tuareg music and world music.

The Festival in the Desert is a unique event modeled on traditional gatherings and celebrations of the nomadic Tuareg people, the "Blue Men of the Desert", when families and clans come together and celebrate with traditional songs, dances, and demonstrations of manly prowess and female beauty.

The most remote festival in the world, Mali's *Festival au Désert* was held for the first time in 2001. In 2003 and for several subsequent years, the Festival was held in the



Tuareg hamlet Essakane. For security reasons and to accommodate the ever-growing crowds, especially in the year of Mali's 50th independance, in 2010 it was moved to Timbuktu. Today the Festival is a showcase of Tuareg culture, and an oppourtunity to promote world peace.

Some 30 musical groups from around the world are invited each year to perform during the three-day

festival.

This is an opportunity to meet the Tuareg people hosting and attending the festival. The day-time festivities include traditional Tuareg music, singing, dancing, poetry, ritual swordplay, camel races and artisans' exhibits. The on-stage world-music concerts are held at night, with the lights and sound system powered by electrical generators.



So what is the future of the Festival or tourism in Mali?

Sadly, the current crisis only further proves the tenuousness of using tourism for anything sustainable, as it seems to be more susceptible to the whims of social, cultural, and economic upheaval. In the end, the recent rebellion—especially with its connection with Al

Qaeda—will probably be more successful in bringing attention to Tuareg in Mali. Thus, the image of the Tuareg as Islamic extremists will most likely outweigh any positive images created by the Festival. It will take time to rebuild the infrastructure in northern Mali, as well as the public trust necessary for tourism to flourish there.

Long ago, one of my college history professors hammered home a durable truth: "If you love art," she said, "you should hate war." Because some art is always among war's victims.

A case in point is a music celebration called Festival au Desert — held near Timbuktu, Mali, since 2001 — which I will Anglicize as Festival in the Desert. In January 2012, right after the last festival ended, a nationalist uprising began in the north of Mali, which was soon taken over by hardline Islamic fundamentalists. The 2013 Festival was canceled, and even a caravan-style mobile concert was deemed too dangerous. After intervention by the French and others, the conflict has cooled down, to the point where the Festival in the Desert may return next year. In the meantime, as a special souvenir of what was celebrated in Mali, we have a new record of the 2012 shows, titled *Live From Festival au Desert Timbuktu*. Although it was inspired by traditional festivals held by the Touareg people, the Festival in the Desert is a

distinctly international symbol of modern Africa. Popular music has become a reliable export from many African countries, increasingly recognized as a force to bring diverse people together. Frequent guests appear from outside the continent. As is often noted, rock veterans like Bono and Robert Plant have attended and performed at earlier Festivals.

That said, the folk elements of the music are a bit straight-up and unfiltered in the middle of *Live From Festival au Desert Timbuktu*. Pure voice-and-percussion works tend to leave me cold and make language barriers harder to cross; a track called "Traditional Chant" is one I skip every time through, though that's not more serious than walking away from a stage toward one you like better. Indeed, the voice-heavy "Odwa" is pretty crazed and, at less than three minutes, a song I would never skip. Elsewhere, swirling beats from full bands and strong singing voices erase all hesitation about exploring unfamiliar performers, though participating guitarist Habib Koite and the Touareg group Tinariwen have certainly found an audience in the West. Other songs here feature sentiments and themes with innate appeal and special resonance in the context of the Festival in the Desert — and its absence this year. One track simply praises "Democratie," while singer

Khaira Arby goes for the most fundamental of all in "La Liberte."

With luck, healing and progress toward resolving conflicts in Mali, there's hope for the future of the region. Certainly one landmark would be the return of the Festival in the Desert and its loud affirmation of peace and unity.

FESTIVAL AU DESERT GALLERY





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Festival Au Desert in Mali



Mali's entry requirements:

1. Mali visa
2. Yellow Fever immunization

Malaria prophylaxis is recommended; consult your physician.

NB: Five-day entry visas are available upon arrival at Bamako airport; these must be extended to standard 30-day visas, in Mopti or in Timbuktu. Saga Tours does not handle entry visas or visa extensions.

See our [Travel Tips](#) page for Mali Embassy contact information, to apply for your Mali visa prior to travel.

***We recommend obtaining visas prior to travel whenever possible, to avoid possibly being denied flight boarding by the airline, on the flight to Bamako.



THANK YOU