

GEREWOL FESTIVAL IN CHAD



The Guérewol (var. Guerewol, Gerewol) is an annual [courtship](#) ritual competition among the [Wodaabe Fula people](#) of [Niger](#). Young men dressed in elaborate ornamentation and made up in traditional face painting gather in lines to dance and sing, vying for the attentions of marriageable young women. The Guérewol occurs each year as the traditionally nomadic Wodaabe

cattle herders gather at the southern edge of the [Sahara](#) before dispersing south on their dry season pastures. The most famous gathering point is [In-Gall](#) in northwest Niger, where a large festival, market and series of clan meetings take place for both the Wodaabe and the pastoral [Tuareg people](#). The actual dance event is called the *Yaake*, while other less famous elements—bartering over [dowry](#), competitions or camel races among suitors—make up the week-long Guérewol.^[1] The Guérewol is found wherever Wodaabe gather: from [Niamey](#), to other places the Wodaabe travel in their [transhumance](#) cycle, as far afield as northern [Cameroon](#) and [Nigeria](#).



MUSIC AND DANCE

At the end of the rainy season in September, the Wodaabe travel to [In-Gall](#) to gather salt and participate at the [Cure Salée](#) festival, a meeting of several nomadic groups. Here the young Wodaabe men, with elaborate make-up, feathers and other adornments, perform dances and songs to impress women. The male beauty ideal of the Wodaabe stresses tallness, white eyes and teeth; the men will often roll their eyes and show their teeth to emphasize these characteristics. The Wodaabe clans will then join for their week-long Guérewol

celebration, a contest where the young men's beauty is judged by young women.

ANNUAL GATHERING

The music and line dancing is typical of Fula traditions which have largely disappeared among the vast diaspora of Fula people, many of whom are educated, Muslim, urbanites. This is characterized by group singing, accompanied by clapping, stomping and bells. The Wodaabe Guérewol festival is one of the more famous examples of this style of repeating, hypnotic, and percussive choral traditions, accompanied by a swaying line dancing, where the men interlink arms and rise and fall on their toes. The Guérewol competitions involve the ornamented young men dancing the *Yaake* in a line, facing a young marriageable woman, sometimes repeatedly over a seven-day period, and for hours on end in the desert sun. Suitors come to the encampment of the woman to prove their interest, stamina, and attractiveness.^{[2][3]} The participants often drink a

fermented bark concoction to enable them to dance for long periods, which reputedly has a hallucinogenic effect.

DAYS 3-7 – GEREWOL FESTIVAL

We spend these days immersing ourselves in the culture of the Mbororo and witnessing the rituals and ceremonies of the Gerewol festival. This is one of Africa's most fascinating cultural encounters, unchanged for centuries and with very few traces of modernity. We can expect to see traditional singing and dancing, and perhaps some camel racing.

Young Mbororo men decorate themselves with make up, feathers and traditional jewellery to 'display' to young women – the Gerewol is an elaborate mass courtship ritual and a fascinating spectacle to watch. As well as this we can explore the market of Durbali, one of the most important in the Sahel, and spend time with local people, learning about all aspects of their unique culture.

Overnight camping. (BLD)

Day 8 – N'Djamena

We return back to N'Djamena, where day use rooms are available to freshen up. After heading out to a restaurant for a final farewell dinner, transfer to the airport for your onward flight home. (BL)

Start date : 24th Sept 2017

Included in price:

- Airport transfers
- Accommodation – as listed in the dossier. The nature of the destinations that we operate may sometimes mean that we need to change hotels, but we'll always endeavour to keep the same standards. Please be aware that as we operate in many countries where tourism is in its infancy, hotel standards may not be the same as you're used to elsewhere.
- Guides – In most cases you will be accompanied by one

guide from start to finish. However there may be occasions when this is not practical, for example if your trip covers a number of different countries. In these cases it often makes more sense to include different guides for each place, to take advantage of their specific knowledge of the destination.

- Meals – As listed within the itinerary / dossier (B-Breakfast, L-Lunch, D-Dinner).

Entrance fees – Entrance fees are listed for those sites that we mention within the itinerary. If there are any other sites that you'd like to see, these would be at your own expense.



SEMI-NOMADIC WODAABE

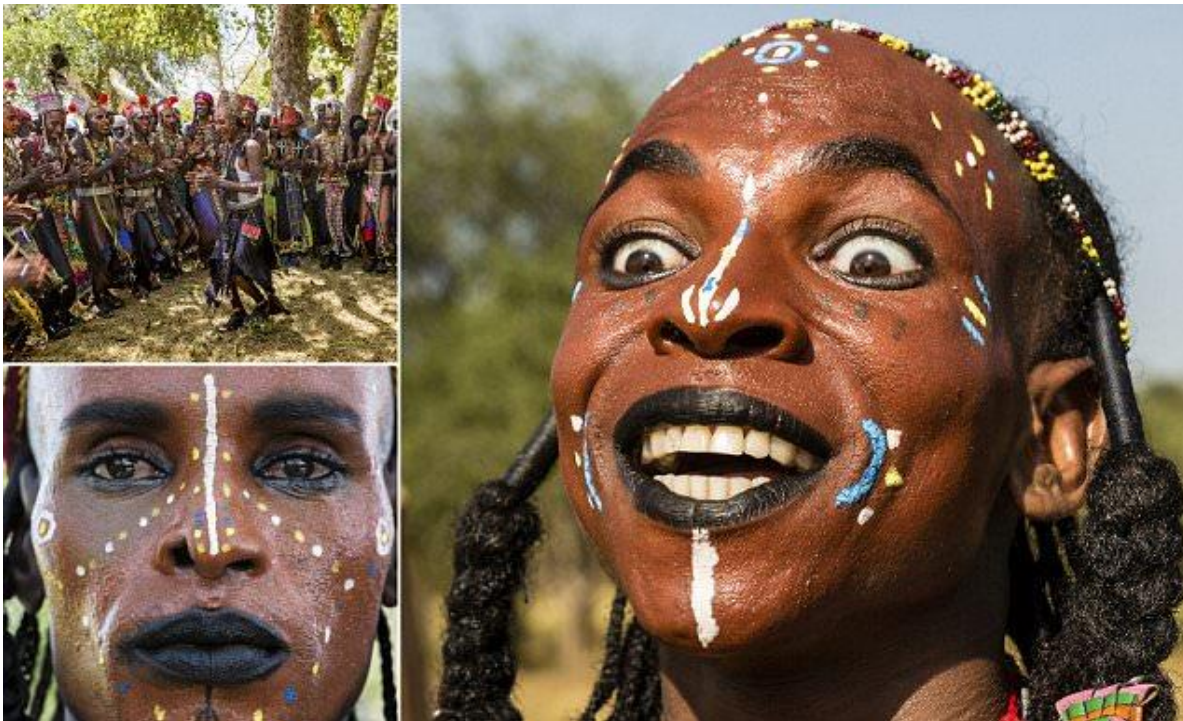
One of our most pioneering Chad holidays. Each year the semi-nomadic Wodaabe people gather for a week of

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incredible celebrations known as the Gerewol, a colourful festival that is one of Africa's most spectacular. Few westerners are privileged to see this, but over the years we have built up excellent local contacts, allowing us to travel to a remote part of Chad to stay with these intensely traditional people, joining them as they congregate for feasting, racing, dancing and finding lovers. The Gerewol is renowned for the way in which young Wodaabe men decorate themselves, donning make up and jewellery and 'displaying' to young women in search of a partner – either for life, or something less 'permanent'...! Camping in the Sahel, we stay with the Wodaabe for several days, gaining more than just a fleeting glimpse of their lives but immersing ourselves in a culture that lives very much outside of mainstream society. The Wodaabe adhere to a complex set of traditions that stretch back centuries and across borders, but are in danger of becoming lost in the future; this is a unique opportunity to meet these unique people for a celebration of their culture that will simply take your breath away. Of all our Chad holidays, this is the most exciting for those who are fascinated in the varied ethnography of Africa, and an absolute delight for

photographers – as this is essentially an elaborate and archaic beauty contest, the Wodaabe are keen to show themselves off to visitors! Whereas many people have heard of the Gerewol Festival of Niger, immortalised by Michael Palin in his 'Sahara' series, almost no tourists venture this far into Chad and we can expect to have a very intimate experience.

Africa is known for its festivals, but few – if any – can rival the Gerewol.





THERE ARE THRONGS OF WOMEN and children riding cows with horns the size of giant tusks, all piled high with calabashes, mats and painted poles; goat herds whirl past in miniature dust storms; men ride on horseback like cowboys; an old woman trots by on a donkey, a multitude of enormous gold hoops in her ears.

I'm in Chad for the Gerewol festival, more famously held in neighbouring Niger, where it has largely become a show for Westerners. Yet Gerewols are found wherever the [Wodaabe](#) (a tribe of nomadic cattle herders) wander.

Chad sprawls between its uneasy neighbours, a mammoth, landlocked country where the isolation created by years of conflict in the region has helped

keep its rich tribal traditions intact. The Gerewols here are genuine affairs, glorious beauty pageants in which men rather than women dress up, apply make-up and perform to attract a mate, find love, marriage or - truth be told - a single night of passion.

This country is no pushover - it is hot and harsh, especially during the dry season. Water and pasture are scarce so the Wodaabe move constantly, covering huge distances - often every few days - in isolated family bands. The Gerewol is the only time they all gather together during the year, although it is by no means a certainty: if the rainy season has been bad, it doesn't happen at all. It's a miracle - when we hear this one is going ahead - that we find the spot, hidden in a vast expanse of bush without any gesture of civilisation for miles. When we arrive the festival is in the process of relocating after the chief has told everyone to move on. There isn't enough water. When we finally reach the new location it's late afternoon and the last rays of sunlight are fading to buttercup. Everywhere, concealed among the thorny bushes and acacias, are little camps

or *wuros*: Wodaabe homes resembling hand-carved wooden bunk beds painted in strong geometric patterns. More and more camps pop up like primary coloured artworks piled high with vivaciously decorated baskets.

As night falls, groups of singers gather around campfires; men sit on mats and brew tea over hot embers; others dance, bodies etched against the flames. The singing is hypnotic as they slowly spiral around, the white of their turbans shining under a bright moon.

The next day we wake early, but the Wodaabe are already up and armed with pocket mirrors, coating their faces with red ochre, daubing on white dots in floral formations, applying black lipstick. The preening lasts for hours. A small battered suitcase lies open, spewing sequins. One man helps another tie bright leather rectangles into his hair with safety pins. There's a warrior dressed in a long pink floral robe, another wears gold-glitter sunglasses

and carries a handbag fashioned from cigarette lighters.



But beneath the decorative attire, these men are tough. Women sit under a tree giggling as they begin to dance in a long line, arms interlinked, eyes wide open in mock surprise. 'Va va va va va,' they chant, baring their extra-white teeth in chattering smiles like Batman's Joker on acid. There's menace in the air, an undeniable tension. The sound the men make is disturbing, almost unhuman. Their mouths appear as

if they're speaking, but who to? With a gentle bounce and a bend of their knees, they sway their heads, moving backwards and forward like crazy, long-legged birds.

Suddenly an old lady races towards them, jeering and waving a cloth, whipping up the fervour. She's loving it; they're loving it. The men stamp their feet and charge forward in a twinkle of rainbow-bright sequins. Everyone is going wild. The audience shines torches on particularly expressive performers. Suddenly an incredible face is illuminated, framed by towering ostrich plumes rising from a sparkly crown, gilded by the fire's glow.

The women watch in huddles of graceful poises, a swarm of black clothes contrasting with the men's affront of colour. They gossip and drape arms around each other, their fringes sculpted into horn-shaped quiffs.

The frantic dancing continues through each night with the help of a specially fermented tree-bark concoction, but the mornings are calm. In the soft-peach dawn light, women sit quietly milking cows, or

rhythmically sloshing warm milk in huge calabashes. The scent of wood smoke fills the air. A man lies with his head on a woman's lap as she plaits his hair. Others walk by wearing smudged, morning-after make-up, taking their cows off to graze.

One day I come across a group of women dancing. They collapse laughing when I join them, plying me with necklaces and bracelets to wear. They stamp and clap in a circle, lifting their arms like evangelicals. One woman brings her children to meet me. 'They have never seen a white person,' she says.

On the final night of the festival, three winners are chosen by three marriageable women, after observing the men - swaggering like peacocks - for the past few days. The Sudokae, one of the many Wodaabe clans, have been the hosts of this Gerewol. They have invited guests from other clans, as well as other tribes, such as the turbaned Arabs who rock up on motorbikes, to mix the bloodlines.

The three young women walk slowly along the line of dancers, displaying no emotion. Wodaabe follow a set of rules known *aspulaaku*, and one of the most

important is not to show any feelings. The air is thick with suspense. Then each quickly taps their favourite man. Everyone races in to congratulate the winners. To be selected is a huge honour. The women will now go back to their camps and wait. If the chosen men like the girls, they will follow.

The next day everyone piles all their worldly possessions onto cows and scatters like seeds into the savannah. One girl is eyeing up some empty film canisters. I hand them over and she beams. I'm certain they will soon be brimming with beads and glitter.

GEREWOL FESTIVAL GALLERY

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