

BEST FESTS

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INTERNATIONAL NOMADS FESTIVAL

M'HAMID EL GHIZLANE, ZAGORA, MOROCCO

Rachel Blech samples the chaos, camaraderie and culture of one of Morocco's lesser-known festivals



Local 'blue men' form a camel guard of honour to welcome the Belgian ambassador on the opening day of the festival

ALL PHOTOS UNLESS STATED: RACHEL BLECH

That jazzman Pat Metheny has a lot to answer for. As I find myself straddling the gearbox of a four-wheel drive, clutching photographs of King Mohammed VI of Morocco and bouncing precariously between two Saharawi nomads ('blue men') in the Drâa valley, the circumstances that led to this latest encounter all come flooding back. I had been sandwiched between these same two robed men in a huge crowd some nine months earlier at a concert given by Mr Metheny during the prestigious Gnawa festival in Essaouira. We had got chatting back then and they had

both urged me to come back the following March to visit a very different festival at the opposite end of the scale. Their International Nomads Festival takes place in M'Hamid El Ghizlane, south-east Morocco – a dusty, desert outpost where both the river and the road trickle to a halt just short of the Algerian border. It's a world very far removed from the glitz of Essaouira and the Moroccan elite.

To my left is Ahmed Hajja, born in the Sahara, raised to the rhythms of the camel caravan but, like many of today's settled nomads, he now relies on tourism for a livelihood. To my right is festival director,

Noureddine Boughrab, who has been at the helm of this event for the past four years. Behind me, the back seats of the four-wheel drive are jammed with more 'blue men' from the village, as we hurtle across the dunes to reach the festival site where the photos of the Moroccan king have to be pinned up before the Belgian ambassador delivers his opening address in half an hour's time. So, why the ambassador of Belgium? Well, it transpires that the Belgians have been funding conservation projects in the beautiful Drâa oasis and aiming to improve the quality of its valuable date harvest for a number of years. It was His Excellence

Patrick Vercauteren Drubbel who accepted Noureddine's invitation to attend, but, disappointingly, no Moroccan dignitaries have made the trip with him.

The region is populated mostly by Berbers and Saharawi nomads – a peaceful co-existence of descendants of Morocco's earliest inhabitants, and the Arabic nomads or blue men – so called because of their indigo-dyed robes offering protection from the sun – who arrived into the Moroccan Sahara with Islam between the seventh and 13th centuries. As the desert environment has become less viable for nomadic pastoral life, so many of the nomads have moved into villages such as M'Hamid over the last 20 years – but their cultural identity and customs lean strongly outwards towards the Sahara, rather than inwards towards Morocco.

This year's festival is entitled 'Sharing our Differences' and aims to celebrate the traditions of both Berbers and blue men as well as bringing together nomads from other countries. The programme of local and international music, talks and traditional customs (such as nomad hockey and a Berber wedding) certainly ticks all the right boxes. The only drawback is that, due to lack of financial support and personnel, it's all a bit hit-and-miss and, with the bizarre decision to stage the festival between two separate sites 17km apart, co-ordination and audience integration is a big problem. But yet, against the odds, Boughrab and his team of volunteers have managed to pull together an event that holds some magical moments.

In a specially constructed bivouac camp for guests and paying visitors – 17kms from the main village across a desert piste – carpets, cushions, candles and low tables are laid out under open-sided decorated tents made of camel wool and we are served a delicious chicken tajine. Oulad Chata, a descendant of the revered female desert poet, Chata, leads a group who have travelled up from Taroudant. They perform in the Hassaniya Arabic dialect which unites all the blue men of Morocco, northern Mali, western Sahara, western Algeria and Mauritania. Accompanied by *darbuka*, *daf* (frame drums) and hand-clapping, the songs tell stories of love, desert life, nature and the animals. They follow a call-and-response pattern, the tempo rising to a crescendo and occasionally embellished with feminine ululations.

Other international artists who have come to be part of the festival strike up tunes during dinner including Dito Inácio, a charismatic Brazilian guitarist who has a remarkable talent for Mongolian throat-singing. Then there's a duo from the Camargue called Calle Flamenca who spontaneously team up with Yassir Rami, a Moroccan *oud* player from Meknès, to give an impromptu rendition of Khaled's hit 'Ya-Rayi' and of course there are the local nomads themselves gathering in groups to

HOW TO GET THERE

FLIGHTS

- Airlines operating to Marrakech from the UK include Ryanair, EasyJet, Atlas-Blue and Royal Air Maroc. From Marrakech, pick-ups will be organised for festival visitors who have booked in advance. Journey (by road) takes a minimum of eight hours over the High Atlas mountains via Ouarzazate and Zagora. It's stunning scenery so best to depart in the morning.

GETTING AROUND

- Private 4x4 with driver: Zbar Travel (six passengers), www.zbartravel.com or email: zbartravel@hotmail.com
- Bus: CTM, tel: +212 (0)24 78 47 64, www.ctm.co.ma
- Grand Taxi: Shared taxis available from outside Bab Doukkala bus station in Marrakech (five passengers)
- Private self-drive car hire

The festival is partly sited in desert dunes and requires a 4x4 and driver to get you there from the village. *Songlines* readers are advised to make bookings via festival website (www.nomadsfestival.com)

sing and dance as much for each other as for any audience gathered here.

As night falls, the hundred or so people at the bivouac gather round the campfire for grilled lamb and more songs, before heading to their tents for the night. I'm left puzzled, looking at the printed festival brochure and thinking "But what happened to the Berber fiddle player? Or Groupe Al Wahda? And where are all the local people?" So at midnight I leave the camp discreetly and am driven back to the village to find that it's here that the real event of the night is taking place. Hundreds of people from M'Hamid and nearby towns are gathered in front of a make-shift stage. Distorted Arabic pop CDs blasting out over an erratic PA system get unceremoniously pulled back

The musical finale brought together everything from flamenco *rumba*, manouche jazz and Breton folk, to Turkish *tanbur*, *ney* and desert songs

to introduce the main acts of the evening – Hamou Agourane, a Berber from the high Atlas mountains who sings about modern social issues in the Amazigh language carving his accompaniment from a spiked violin held vertically like a cello, then, around 1am, the audience erupts as Khadija Bent Souiah (pictured right) of the Groupe Al Wahda takes the stage. She is a rising star evidently – a Hassani singer from Laayoune, way down at the western Sahara border. Reminiscent of the great Mauritanian singers Malouma or Dimi Mint Abba, her subtle aching



Top: A Saharawi musician plays *darbuka* and sings about nomad life. Above: Festival-goers arrive in the village on the final day, accompanied by Gnawa musicians

incantations thrill the crowd.

I'm possibly the only European visitor who made it to the 'people's' stage that first night and things remained disjointed and confused for the next two days. Events were wrapped up on the final day when the entire group of festival-goers from the bivouac in the dunes were brought by camel caravan into the village and paraded down the street to the accompaniment of a colourful Gnawa troupe from Zagora. After some early-evening camel races and a long delay, the musical finale kicked off around 9pm. It brought together everything from flamenco *rumba*, manouche jazz and Breton folk, to Turkish *tanbur*, *ney* (flutes) and more desert songs, winding up around 3am.

If you are looking for a top-notch world music festival with slick production values, then this is not the place for you (not yet at least). But in M'Hamid you'll be welcomed straight into the heart of a vibrant community – a mix of chaos, camaraderie and culture if you like. I wouldn't describe it as one of Morocco's 'best kept secrets' but I do certainly hope that a few more people will venture to the end of the road to take notice of the rich culture and social history that Moroccan Saharawi nomads are offering to share. ●



The Fifth International Nomads Festival in M'Hamid will take place March 20-23 2008.
www.nomadsfestival.com