



# Taragalte Festival, Morocco

**Sarah Hickson** makes the journey to the edge of the Sahara in Morocco, where an annual festival takes place celebrating life in the desert

There's a mural in the southern Moroccan oasis town of M'Hamid El Ghizlane depicting a caravan of camels and the words "Tombouctou 50 Jours" (Timbuktu 50 Days) above an arrow pointing south. For hundreds of years the Casbah Sidi Khalil was the meeting place for trans-Saharan caravans, bringing nomadic traders, families and communities together from across the Sahara and Sahel region. Although the last of these caravans made the journey between M'Hamid and northern Mali in the 1930s, M'Hamid's nomadic heritage and history of cultural exchange continue to resonate, not least through the Taragalte Festival, founded by brothers Ibrahim and Halim Sbai in 2009.

"The aim of the festival is to maintain a nomadic spirit – that's to say a sense of sharing, an openness. We also want to raise awareness of the natural desert environment, which is both fragile, yet incredibly rich in culture and natural resources," explains Ibrahim. "Our vision is to make a sustainable impact in the region," Halim tells me.

The festival presents internationally renowned musicians, but for the directors, it is equally important to give a platform to younger, local musicians. "At the heart of the festival's identity is a special focus on young people from the local region and also on traditional artists," says Halim. He describes Taragalte as a 'concept': a showcase for projects he and Ibrahim develop throughout the year. In addition to concerts, there are artistic residencies, environmental and educational programmes, creative projects led by the women of M'Hamid to reinvigorate ancient craft and design, as well as talks that range from ecology to politics, education to desertification, preservation of tradition to contemporary culture. Combatting desertification is one of the key issues for the region, and the festival supports a long-term tree-planting programme, in partnership with the Sahara Roots Foundation.

There's no quick way to reach M'Hamid from Europe, but getting there is certainly part of the experience! It's an 11-hour bus journey

from Marrakech over the Atlas Mountains, on to Ouarzazate, across the plains of the Drâa Valley and through the towns of Agdz, Zagora and Tamegroute. M'Hamid is the end of the road. Alternatively, there are flights to Ouarzazate via Casablanca.

Taragalte is a relaxed, friendly gathering, based on a strong ethos of collaboration and community. The audience is an international mix of artists, music lovers, tourists, journalists, NGOs, volunteers, alongside a local audience from M'Hamid and the surrounding villages. The Petit Prince Bivouac, a traditional Berber camp, becomes the emotional heart of the festival. Artists and festival-goers hang out here during the day, and gather round the fire at night. The form and colours of the bivouac blend effortlessly into the landscape, mirroring the hues and contours of the desert. Thick mud walls lined with fabric and rugs keep the temperature surprisingly consistent. Watching the sunrise across the pristine dunes, the cool sand beneath your bare feet, is one of the many simple pleasures of being at the festival.



Sarah Hickson



Taragalte Festival celebrates traditional desert culture including performances by artists such as homegrown Oum (top left) and Mali's Khaira Arby (above)



The festival's opening ceremony evokes the atmosphere of the Moussem festival, which traditionally marked the culmination of the date harvest. Musicians in white robes, beat out hypnotic rhythms on hand-held drums and *qaraqabs* (large metal castanets), interspersed with call-and-response chants. Young women adorned with colourful beaded headbands apply lipstick and kohl eyeliner before joining the men to dance and sing. A Touareg standing on the back of a camel dances with bird-like movements, his arms stretched out behind him like wings, and his blue and white robes billowing in the wind. Nearby, the line of camels and their riders, silhouetted against the open sky, begin to race across the sand, scattering the crowds to either side.

The evening concerts take place on a specially built stage nestled in the dunes. They are free for those who live in the region, and each night there's a large and enthusiastic crowd of local people from nearby villages to swell the audience of festival delegates who

have come from further afield. There is great excitement around the presence of Tinariwen, the renowned Touareg collective from northern Mali. Tinariwen recorded their album, *Elwan* (Elephants), in the desert, a few kilometres from M'Hamid, and their highly anticipated performance at the festival is a prelude to the album release and international tour. Tinariwen's mesmerising set of electric desert blues doesn't disappoint.

The Moroccan singer Oum drew inspiration for her latest album *Zarabi* (Carpets) from the hand-woven rugs made by the women of M'Hamid, and her passionate songs reflect this vibrant craft, with a subtle interweaving of traditional musical styles – from Gnawa to Sufi, layered with Latin and jazz inflections.

The poetry of Moroccan singer Aziz Sahmaoui speaks of the beauty of the desert, nature, and love. Imarhan N'Tinezraf from Algeria takes the first night of the festival by storm with punchy guitar riffs infused with the energy of Algerian *rai* music. Khaira

Arby's huge voice commands authority; the acknowledged 'Queen of the Desert Blues' who featured in the documentary *They Will Have to Kill Us First: Malian Music in Exile*, speaks out in support of women's rights. Génération Taragalte are a local band that formed the same year as the festival started in 2009.

Self-taught, and largely inspired by Tinariwen, they are steadily building a loyal following.

Two other initiatives are at the core of the Taragalte Festival directors' vision: La Caravane Culturelle Pour la Paix (Cultural Peace Caravan), a collaboration with the Festival au Désert and the Festival of the Niger in Ségou, which carries a powerful message to promote cultural diversity, tolerance and social cohesion; and Joudour Sahara, a new music school, launched in partnership with the American foundation Playing for Change.

"We want people to really experience the desert, to celebrate it in all its simplicity," said Ibrahim. "People imagine that the desert is a vast empty space, but it's full of energy, it's a very spiritual space. What brings people back year after year is that authenticity, and the quality of the experience." ♦

+ **DATES** This year's Taragalte Festival will be held in M'Hamid from October 27-29  
+ **ONLINE** [www.taragalte.org](http://www.taragalte.org)