

# CHAD



## The Gerewol Festival in Sahel – Central Chad.

October 2019



## ...N'Djamena revisit

We arrived on time to N'Djamena and were met by the local tour operator who took 8 people in total who had arrived from different destinations (Casablanca, Cairo and Addis Abeba), and brought us to our hotel – the Radisson Blu. We had the afternoon to ourselves after having been checked in. As I had seen N'Djamena before, I decided to rest up at the Pool and enjoying the afternoon in the sun reading my book. We were then met up for a briefing at 19:30 in the reception. All passports and filled in documents were given as the needed to report us to the local police. This is compulsory when traveling outside of N'Djamena.

N'Djamena formerly known as Fort Lamy, Chad's capital sits on the banks of the Chari River facing Cameroon and is the largest city in the country. Founded by the French at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it has grown from a town with a population of around ten thousand in the 1930s to something approaching a million now. Over the years it has seen its fair share of conflicts, largely destroyed during the civil war of the 80s and stormed by rebel forces in 2008. Its wide boulevards were once flanked with trees, but these were cut down to deprive the attackers of covers, and only in recent years did its dusty streets become paved. Rather devoid of traditional sights, N'Djamena is home to a large sprawling central market which I visited upon my last journey, as well as the national museum with a collection of prehistoric artefacts from surrounding areas.





## Leaving for Durbali region

We checked out in the early morning in a convoy of four 4-wheel drive Landrovers heading south towards **Jebel Nafusa**. We continued to the region of Durbali, through Sahel. In Durbali the main road stopped. From here on it was were simple roads if any at all. We were met by a person from the Wodaabe tribe to guide us to their camp site which was located a couple of hours drive from Durbali in the middle of nowhere. We arrived in the late afternoon to our campsite and had individual tents set-up for us upon our arrival. We also had a larger tent used for taking our meals throughout the day. They had brought a generator so we could charge our batteries for our camera gear, computers and other appliances. We even had a small tent for showering set-up, but had to ration the water as this had to be brought along. It turned the Wodaabe also used our water to fill up their bottles when we weren't checking.







## The Wodaabe Nomads of Chad

The Wodaabe form part of the largest group of semi-nomadic people in Africa, stretching from Senegal to Sudan and following a migratory lifestyle in search of grazing for their cattle. The Wodaabe belong to the Fulani ethnic group (a distinction typically being made between the Wodaabe and the Peul, who tend to live more sedentary lives); in Chad you can often hear them being referred to as the Mbororo but this a slightly derogatory term given to them by outsiders, meaning something like 'dirty shepherds'.

The Wodaabe can be distinguished from the Peul not only by their migratory habits but by the fact that they are still largely animist, while the Peul have become mostly Islamized. The origins of the Wodaabe are shrouded in mystery but it is thought that they first arrived in the region from the north, moving south as the Sahara became drier and offered less grazing for their cattle; ancient rock paintings in parts of the Sahara depict some of their characteristics. Groups of several dozen relatives, typically several brothers with their wives, children and elders, travel on foot, donkey or camel, and stay at each grazing spot for a couple of days.



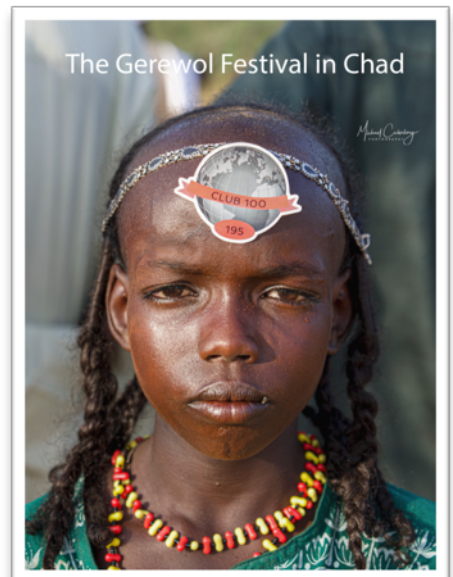




## The Wodaabe Nomads of Chad

The Wodaabe are very traditional; women plait their hair and often wear silver coins or discs in their hair, and often have tattooed faces. The code of behavior of the Wodaabe is called 'pulaku' and emphasizes reserve and modesty (semteende), patience and fortitude (munyal), care and forethought (hakkilo), and loyalty (amana) to their chiefs, as well as the right to dismiss the authority of those who are thought to be undeserving. They also place great emphasis on beauty and charm. Parents are not allowed to talk directly to their two first born children, who will often be cared for by their grandparents. During daylight, husband and wife cannot hold hands or speak in a personal manner with each other.

**The Wodaabe are split into several different clans** – perhaps eight or nine exist in Chad and two of the most significant are the **Sudosukai** and the **Njapto**. We spent most time with the Sudosukai during our time here but the Njapto were close by and we had opportunity to visit and meet them as well. Of the two, the Njapto are slightly more traditional – their faces and bodies are more heavily tattooed and women are often bare-breasted, whereas the Sudosukai women cover themselves. Both have different styles of dress which are particularly pronounced among the dancers of the Gerewol.







## The Gerewol Festival (I)

For a full week we stayed amongst a Wodaabe community and witnessed the rituals and ceremonies of their annual Gerewol festival. Due to our guides' excellent relations with the local Wodaabe sultan we were welcomed as guests amongst these incredibly friendly people, and had the opportunity to see one of Africa's most fascinating cultural encounters, unchanged for centuries and with very few traces of modernity. We encountered traditional singing and dancing, and some horse racing. Young Wodaabe men daub themselves with extravagant and colorful make up, feathers and traditional jewelry to 'display' to young women – the Gerewol is an elaborate mass courtship ritual and truly one of the most fascinating ceremonies I have seen in all of Africa. Dances generally took place during the morning and evenings, and often lasted well into the night, with people coming from far and wide to take part and watch.

Unlike the festival in Niger this has maintained its traditions largely intact, and makes no concessions to the outside world. We also had time to visit the various camps dotted around the landscape and learned about Wodaabe culture – the Wodaabe are an open and curious people and we were made welcome and very much at home in a completely authentic community. This is a 'non-stop' festival. In the morning of Day 7 we took leave of the Wodaabe and made our way back towards N'Djamena.







## The Gerewol Festival (II)

The Gerewol festival takes place at the end of each rainy season, and the specific place is chosen according to where local elders deem there to be the best grazing for their cattle. The Gerewol takes place at the same time as the 'cure salee', when cattle are brought to grazing grounds that are rich in salt and minerals; the minerals help to strengthen the cattle and rid them of parasites. The Gerewol itself is an opportunity for scattered groups of Wodaabe to meet once a year, exchanging news and embarking on a series of dances. **The purpose of these is for the young Wodaabe men to show off their beauty, with the intention of finding partners** – the men usually range from about 17 to 25 in age, although 'noble' men, those who have the potential to become chiefs or sultans, do not take part.

The Wodaabe place an emphasis on male beauty and the dancers will spend hours applying make-up, which differs greatly from clan to clan – **the Sudosukai** typically paint their faces red and orange while **the Njapto** decorate themselves with white dots and patterns. The morning dances are generally a sort of rehearsal, with the main event taking place in the evening and often going on quite late. At some point during the dance young girls – typically 14-16 years old – approached one of the dancers to signify their choice by very slowly walking up to him and touching him, before returning to the crowd. We saw this on a number of occasions. This can signify either a desire for marriage or for something more brief encounter; the Wodaabe are polygamous and only the very first marriage is fixed by the family according to tradition, while during the Gerewol festivals men and women can embark upon casual affairs – to which no stigma is attached - or develop stable relationships.







## The Gerewol Festival (III)

The dances themselves involve the men standing in a line, singing traditional rhythmic songs and chants while doing their best to show the whites of their eyes and baring their teeth, two symbols of male beauty. Every so often a dancer will step forward, almost as if in a trance, with jerky movements which imitate the courtship dances of local birds. These songs and dances can last for a long time, seemingly without stop, during which time some of the dancers seem to almost enter into a different consciousness, trembling as they continue with their rituals.

The clothing of the dancers is highly decorative – the Sudosukai wear beautiful tall hats and turbans while the Njapto decorate their turbans with ostrich feathers. There is also the Jajaye tribe. The Gerewol is an astounding celebration and something that few people will ever witness up close, and our group had plenty of time to absorb the different facets of the celebration. I particularly enjoyed the early mornings when the women started the day by milking their cows. There was a Women with twin babies. One of the two was not taking her breast, and apparently quite sick. The group decided to help out, with what little means we had by sending off a person to purchase food and medicine to her and her family. We also helped another man who had very serious injuries from a fire where his wife and two kids also perished. We decided to gather enough money and send him off the clinic / hospital in Durbali for treatment. These were very bad third-degree burns.

I had also brought along three old iPhone 5s a couple of Samsung smart cameras, flashlights and other small things to distribute. There world spread soon between the Woodaabe people and some of the men looked me up also wanting gifts. On the other hand, this also opened up doors for me to be invited to take part in their private gatherings.

