



# Desert Survival

For centuries the nomadic Tuareg people have learned to live in the forbidding Sahara Desert, surviving in an unforgiving landscape. But with modern influences and natural disasters threatening their traditional way of life, the future looks bright for at least one small section of the community - artisans who make exquisite hand-made jewellery that has found its way onto the luxury markets of Europe. BY TODD PITOCK

PHOTOGRAPH: TODD PITOCK

# People materialise in the most unlikely places, and with implausible suddenness in the harsh sands of the **Ténéré**, the expanse of dunes that roll off the Sahara from North Africa into Niger's northeastern flank.

Near the town of Iferouane in Niger, a Tuareg tribesman called Tonka appears in a billowing black robe and *tagelmoust* laden in silver bangles, talismans, hoops and loops. He clangs and jingles when he walks, and tells us how this makes him recognisable when he's in France and Germany.

"In Europe? In those clothes?" I ask. "Of course!" he says. "They love it." He sings. He dances. He sells. *Veni, vidi, vinci*. Tonka's salesmanship is magic; he sells jewellery. He is an *inadan*, a Tuareg smith, and one of a tiny group of artisans who can trace their roots back hundreds of years. He is a sign of survival for the *inadan*; under threat from the demands of budget buyers that merely wanted cheap silver - not craftsmanship in the traditional Tuareg style.

### Hard History

I am on a near 1,000-kilometre loop through the Air Massif, a mountain range in the Sahara Desert, to witness how Frenchman Jean-Yves Brizot has helped these artisans safeguard their ancient craft, while at the same time adapt to the modern world.

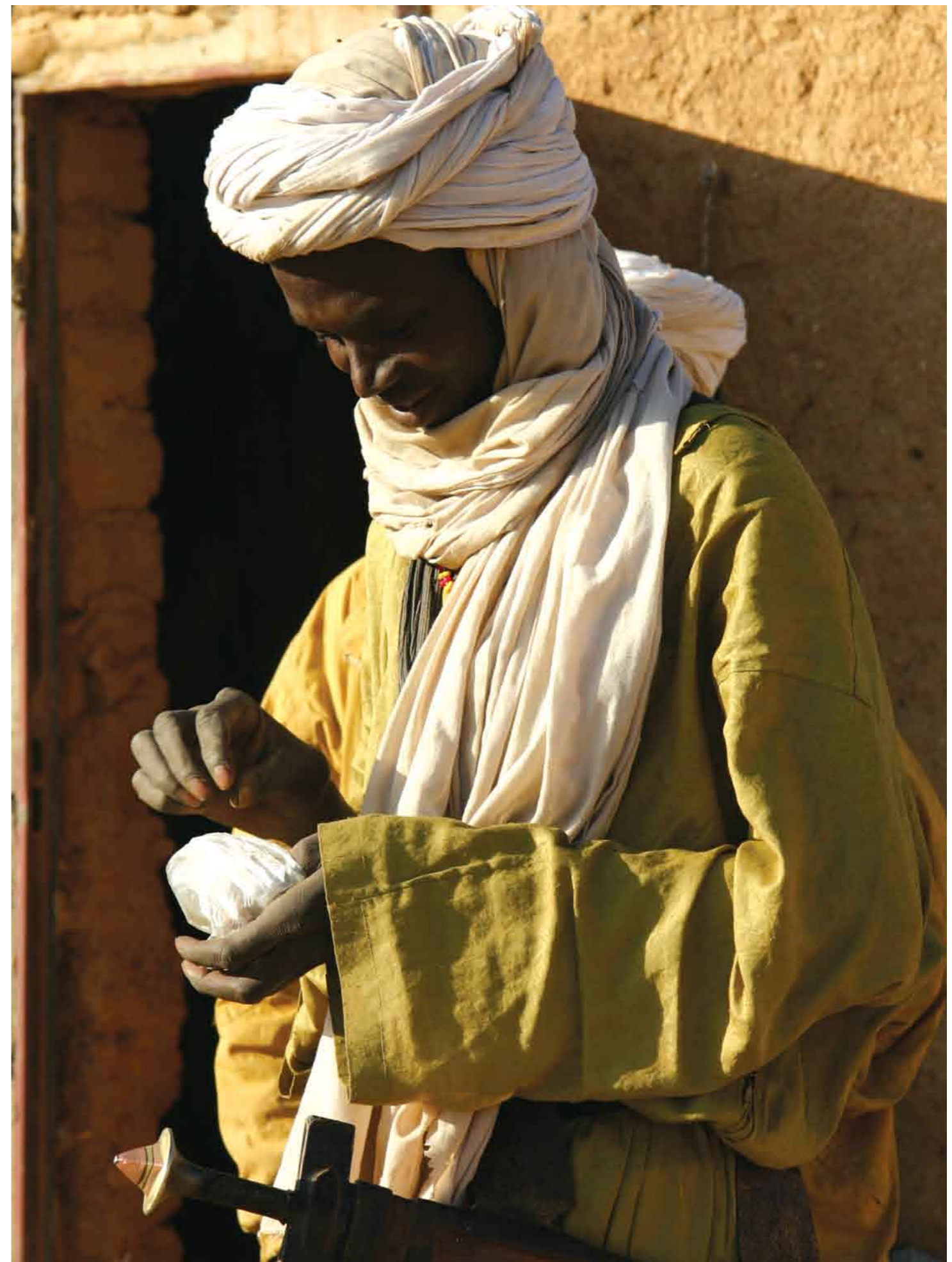
As an adventure guide in the Sahara in the early 1990s, Brizot came across Tuareg communities struggling to make a living on the desert fringes. Tuareg society was in crisis. Modernisation was creeping like sand into desert cities. These ferociously self-reliant people, known for their shimmering indigo veils and long swords, were under pressure. Devastating droughts in the 1960s and 1970s, and increasing outside influences meant making a living was becoming very hard.

The *inadan* (it means artists, or smiths in the local Tamasheq language), had a particular challenge. They had no way of selling their products to a wider or wealthier market. Quick-buck merchants wanted them to knock out cheap pieces for quick sales to tourists; a real comedown as their jewellery is both beautiful and unique. Created by a special hand-rubbed technique, every piece is different and cannot be replicated, and incorporates a record of Tuareg values, beliefs and culture in the largely non-literate society.

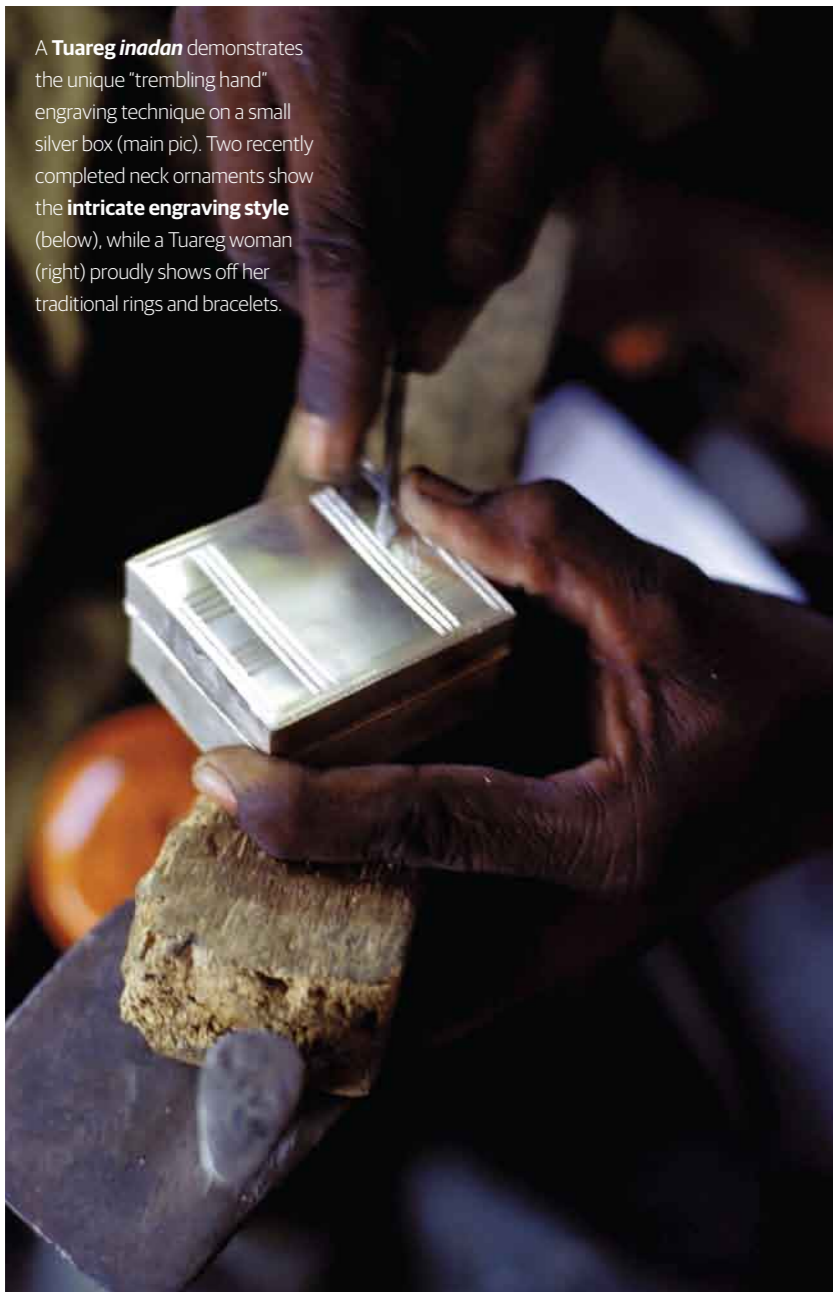
The silver comes mainly from Nigeria, and is very pure. It is priced by the "thâler" of Marie-Thérèse of Austria. A thâler is an ancient European coin, replicas of which still circulate, and which are still used by silver dealers as a mark of value.

The smiths make a range of traditional pieces including Tuareg crosses - cruciform shapes but not crucifixes - that among other things

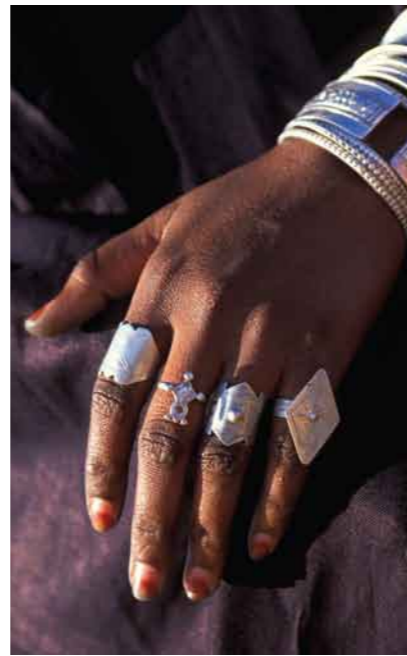
The remains of ancient petrified forests lie scattered on the fringes of the desert, just a few hours drive from **Agadez**. The distant sands of the **Ténéré** lie beyond a tiny collection of buildings (below) that marks the last Muslim holy site before the sands begin. A **Tubu** noble outside his home in the Ténéré wears a traditional sword that helps mark his status (right).



PHOTOGRAPHS : TODD PITOCK MAP ILLUSTRATION: EMILY COOPER



A Tuareg *inadan* demonstrates the unique "trembling hand" engraving technique on a small silver box (main pic). Two recently completed neck ornaments show the intricate engraving style (below), while a Tuareg woman (right) proudly shows off her traditional rings and bracelets.



identify the wearer's place of origin. *Tcherots* (tee-routs), another traditional form, contain verses of the Koran inscribed by special clerics. The inscription is geometric, compositions of lines arranged to give the pieces movement, but in a totally individual way on every piece.

Tuareg Islam incorporates animist beliefs and mysticism. The sky, they say, is the domain of God, Earth belongs to man. And the ground below is inhabited by *djinns* (supernatural beings) and spirits, so the smiths' work with metals pollutes them even as it imbues them with mystery. The smiths encourage this mystique. One man, I'm told, lifts molten objects with his bare hands but is never burned.

"They are alchemists," says Brizot. "For the smiths, the objects (they make) represent a process of personal and of spiritual transformation."

#### Market Forces

Brizot was impressed by the traditional *inadan* skills and keen to see them survive. So he approached Hermes, a French fashion retailer, to see if it was interested in quality Tuareg jewellery. It was. Brizot returned to the Sahara and estab-



A Tuareg *inadan* proudly shows off his hand-made sword and scabbard at the **Timia** oasis (above). A group of Tuareg (right) leads a small caravan of camels across the open desert, on the journey to **Agadez**, in exactly the same way they have for thousands of years.

lished an *inadan* guild so that the smiths could practice their craft at a high level, maintain their traditions and culture and sell the results to Hermes and other European retailers. He invited me to come and see them working.

I arrived on a balmy January evening in Agadez, an ancient town in central Niger, hundreds of kilometres south of Iferouane. Niger is as big as Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam combined, and the staging towns such as Agadez have been crucial posts on the trans-Saharan trade route for salt, silver, and gold caravans for hundreds of years. Its mud architecture gives the entire city a reddish hue that, when the sun slants, gives off a radiant orange glow against the intense blue sky. With little electricity, at night, unlit chambers fade into a dark oblivion.

At Brizot's guild, which supplies Hermes with its Tuareg Collection, 18 *inadan* sit on the ground beating, cutting, scratching and polishing silver smelted across the compound.

PHOTOGRAPHS (CLOCKWISE): REY JEAN-CHARLES; LINEAIR/DAS FOTOGARCHIV; TODD PITOCK

PHOTOGRAPHS: TODD PITOCK

## Proud History

**Tuareg oral histories** trace their ancestry to a region that covers parts of western Libya and eastern Algeria. The Tuareg were written about as far back as the 10th century by Arabic writers including Ibn Hawkal. Leo Africanus also mentioned the Tuareg in the 16th century after encountering them on caravan routes.

In the 1800s and 1900s, European explorers hired them as guides but the French (nominally in control through their Foreign Legion) never completely eradicated Tuareg resistance and uprisings. That fierce independence continues now, with Tuareg uprisings in Mali over autonomy and in Niger over self-control and a share of profits from the country's vast uranium mines.

Being spread over an area encompassing parts of Mali, Burkino Faso, Algeria and Libya in addition to Niger, makes gauging Tuareg numbers an inexact science, with estimates ranging from just over one million to three million. Traditionally nomads and salt caravan masters, they also raise goats, camels and cattle, and establish small farms. Although many Tuareg now live in towns and in Agadez, a Niger regional capital, many still live in mud houses. This can be a problem, as although the eight-to-nine month dry season is almost completely dry, the rainy season (June to September) can see 15-20 centimetres of rain a month. And a heavy storm can turn a mud house to ... mud.





The technique they use is called “trembling hand” engraving - a way of etching with the artist subtly shaking his hand as he manipulates the etching instrument across the surface of the metal. Because it’s based on feel, this has to be done by hand and can’t be replicated by a machine.

I watch as an *inadan* turns a flat piece of silver into a work of art. Symbols for wells, wind, mountains all appear using a shared language whose meaning is drawn from the features and metaphors of the desert, a language any master *inadan* can read and understand. This symbolic, artistic language makes the jewellery beautiful to look at, as

well as providing a written record of beliefs and experience for the Tuareg, who have a predominantly non-literate culture.

In recent years, the *inadan* have expanded into working with gold, a mineral traditionally believed to have negative powers - as well as being more expensive for the smiths to buy. Although silver is the traditional form, its price and quality became volatile while gold was more stable and accessible. Plus there was a predictable and more lucrative market for gold jewellery.

#### Emotional Rescue

So now the *inadan*, with a much broader and wealthier market to

A camel caravan near **Fachi** (top, left) carries food supplies for the inhabitants of the oasis. Salt from mines, such as those at **Taoudenni**, is then carried to Agadez (bottom, left) - a journey of more than 500 kilometres across the open desert that can take three weeks. The salt is then sold to farmers who give it to their cattle in the sahel and savanna areas.

PHOTOGRAPH: MICHAEL S. LEWIS/CORBIS; GETTYIMAGES

PHOTOGRAPH: YANN ARTHUS-BERTRAND/CORBIS

Camel caravans can survive in the **harsh and shifting conditions** of the deep desert in ways mechanised transport never can. A large caravan (above) tracks the shifting sand dunes of the **Air Massif**, northern Niger.

sell to, are earning a good living and keeping their traditions alive. “But for the *inadan*, the underlying purpose is still aesthetic,” says Atobeul N’gataw, a guild smith.

“We need to think about what a piece is meant to represent and express. When you give a piece of jewellery to someone, it should represent an emotion.”

Abda Ahmoudou, the quality control manager at the guild, takes out some of his own pieces to show me.

“One symbolises a natural force, the other a feeling,” he says. “They are related to each other. As wind moves, so does memory.”

Against that a thicker line symbolises a home, a defence against

natural forces, but the place of love. It’s not merely random, but a discipline that comes from long-established language and meanings, the language of the smiths’ hands.

Before I leave Agadez, Abda gives me a great heavy swatch of silver, whose etched mountains and wells refer to the desert journey I have made. A ladder symbolises the sadness of my impending departure.

It dawns on me then that people connect not only through journeys and shared experience but also through objects and shared meaning. I see this piece for what it is, a poem set in silver. An ancient poem still being celebrated in the deep and unforgiving sands of the Sahara. ■