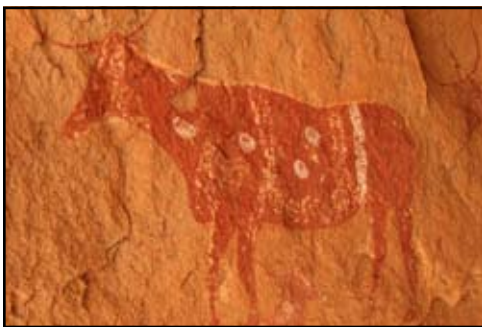


OUR SEARCH FOR ROCK PAINTINGS AND ARTIFACTS IN THE SAHARA

For several years Larry has joined me in Niger to explore the most remote parts of the Sahara. The November 2006 trip was the most ambitious one so far. Rather than going through a local tour company I hired guides, vehicles and drivers and did all of the provisioning for a three week trip. It was a challenging lesson in logistics. My friend Adam from Arlit, with whom I have made several trips, helped me select some of the people. We were joined by a British friend who has crisscrossed the desert for 30 years and a Russian friend I met a couple of years ago in Agadez.



Rock painting of cow found in Sahara

Our objective was explore the far northeast corner of Niger near the borders with Chad and Libya, specifically the Plateau du Tchigai and the Plateau du Mangueni, areas that are usually

off limits to tourists and seldom seen by anyone. To get there we crossed the Tenere, the vast blank spot on the map east of the Air Mountains where there are great waves of sand dunes, flat endless plains the Tuaregs call the nothing of nothing and rock outcroppings. Our three vehicle convoy traveled for days without seeing another human. We had four guides, each with a specific mission. A former commandant in Madama was supposed to deal with the military to get the necessary permission to go to the forbidden areas; another claimed to know every inch of the desert (but didn't); the third was along because he is Toubou and we were nominally in his tribe's area; Adam was the fourth and was along primarily as a driver as he had only made one prior trip to the Tenere. Fortunately we had GPS and good maps as we discovered that none of the guides knew the area nor were they experienced in driving in the tough terrain.

Rock engravings, are relatively common in the desert while rock paintings are rare. In our wanderings up side canyons off of a large dry riverbed we found

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Gravure of Giraffes

some superb paintings in a shallow cave. As far as we know they had not previously been cataloged. As the sand shifts it reveals artifacts from the Neolithic era. Some days we wandered from one site to another examining stone axes, grinding stones and pieces of pottery left behind by the people who lived there when the Sahara was fertile. We could not have known then that within months of our trip the whole area would become inaccessible because of the rebellion.



Looking out from the cave with rock art

INQUIRING MINDS

HADIJA'S NEW GRANDSON

Hadija, Elhadji's step-mother, (see June 2007 newsletter) has a new grandson, Idrissa, who was born in July to her daughter Fatima and son-in-law Jaba. He is the 70th grandchild of the late Mohamed Koumama, the famous silversmith. Fatima and Jaba also have a three year old son. Jaba is one of the most skilled of the artisans and is the creator of an exquisite new bracelet, pendant and earring ensemble that will be added to the website as soon as he makes enough to keep the set in stock.

HOW DO THE SILVERSMITHS LEARN THE ART OF MAKING JEWELRY?

Inadan Tuareg fathers have taught their sons how to make jewelry for centuries. Non-Inadans are never taught the skills. The workshop is the playground for little boys who watch their fathers, older brothers, uncles and cousins work the metal. When boys are about seven they begin to help by polishing the finished pieces, running to the market to buy charcoal, fetching tools etc. Soon after they are given small pieces of bees wax to practice carving the simple cross designs and then casting them. By the time boys are in their teens they have usually mastered all of the basic skills and can create jewelry both by casting and hammering. Boys are expected to learn all of the techniques and the traditional designs. Perhaps later they will specialize in making particular things that especially please them. Some will develop the creative genius to design the unique styles that the

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Koumamas are becoming famous for crafting.

Elhadji's sons Smalie, 11, and Abdul, 8, help out in the workshop after school and during vacations. When Smalie was about 6 he proudly presented his mother with a bracelet he made with a lot of help from his uncles.

If you have an "Inquiring Minds" question that you would like for us to answer in a future newsletter, please send us an email at the address below:

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