

Desert

Man and desert

The desert peoples

Despite the desert being so inhospitable, there are ethnic groups living in these places; they are groups of people that have to keep moving in caravans in search of places with water and food, defying the greatest risks: sandstorms, silted up wells and loss of bearings due to the lack of points of references. Some of these peoples are the Berbers of North Africa, that include the Kabilis and the Tuaregs, the Bedouins of the Arabic deserts, the Bejas in Namibia, the Sans in the Kalahari desert and the Australian Aborigines.

The Tuaregs

The epitome of life in the desert are the Tuaregs, who for centuries have spent their lives riding their dromedaries along the Saharan tracks. Also called the "blue men" for the typical veils they wear to protect themselves from the sand and the heat, these people live in camps of tents built of dozens of goatskins painted in red ochre and skilfully sown together by their women to guard all the items and tools of everyday life.

The Tuaregs mainly live on products derived from their animals. Their foods are curdled milk, fermented butter, dates and cereals (millet in particular) from which they make flour. They rarely eat meat, but when they have guests they just have to honour them so they kill a goat according to Muslim traditions. Water is carried in scooped-out and sun-dried pumpkins, whose decorated surfaces hint at the groups who produced them.

Originally, the Tuaregs were a nomadic people, but later on many conflicts and French colonisation pushed many of them to lead a sedentary life and the few nomadic ones that have been left live on the products of their animals and other foodstuffs they obtain through trade and breed horses and dromedaries. They produce handicrafts, for instance engraved silverware, they tan hides, make mats and produce rugs and textiles out of dromedary wool. Farming as well as high-level handicrafts are produced by lower castes, who live sedentarily in the oases. Today, some Tuaregs have found employment in the service sector, especially tourism: since they know the desert so well, they work as tour guides.

The Bejas

If the Tuaregs can be regarded as the "undisputed masters of the Sahara", the Bejas have always inhabited the large expanses of the Nubian desert. Most Bejas (approximately 1.5 million overall) live in the north-east of Sudan. They are called "Fuzzy-Wuzzies" because of their frizzy hair. For over 4,000 years, the Bejas have been running through this hot country and the bleak hills of the Red Sea in search of pastures for their camels, cattle, sheep and goats. They were feared for the quick raids they made into the rich towns along the Nile. After sacking the town, they hid in the desert of which they knew every nook and cranny and the wells where they could find water, even the most secluded ones. They are valiant and strong people, so much so that they did not only resist the pressures of the Egyptians, Greeks and Romans, but in the 19th century they even won a battle against the British army, which were much better equipped and trained. Their only weapons have always been: silver-inlaid swords, bent knives, elephant-skin round shields and a very old weapon, the "throw stick", which had already been used by the Egyptians for hunting at the time of the Pharaohs.

Farming in the oases

In desert areas farming develops in oases. In the beginning there may be one palm only, planted in a dug-out area and surrounded by dead branches to protect it from the sand. Large crops develop over time, but the water needed for the vegetation to grow does not flow out freely. A tiring and rigorous work must be carried out by man to take water from underground. With time, man has built underwater tanks to collect water and long channels to carry it. They need constant maintenance to remove the sand or stones that could settle there and obstruct them. Every oasis has its typical irrigation system: for instance in Ghardaya (in the Mozab valley), in the Sahara, water flows underneath the dry bed of an old river. Over one million date palms are irrigated by a sophisticated system that controls the underground flow. It is a widespread system made up of dams, weirs and wells, that channel, select and dispense water, so that all gardens

receive the right amount of it.

In other oases, such as those of the Souf region, where the water table is very close to the surface, the farmers have found out another clever method to water the palm groves: instead of irrigating the surface with wells and channels, they dig out real craters for the palms, so the palms can reach the water with their roots: a clever trick that avoids waste due to evaporation and offers the plantations effective protection against the wind and sand.

The gold of the desert

The economic importance of the desert is also related to the exploitation of its mining resources, an activity which dates back to the antiquity. In Egypt, for instance, during the Roman rule, red porphyry was quarried to decorate great public buildings and the emperor's houses. The importance of red porphyry was probably not only related to its beauty, but also to the fact that the colour purple was chosen as the royal or imperial colour: its name, "*porphyrites*", actually comes from "*porphyra*", purple. Purple quarries were located in the Eastern Egyptian desert, on a mountain 1,660 metres asl, named after the colour of the rocks: "*Mons Porphyrites*" or "*Mons Igneus*", i.e. mountain of fire, and were completely deserted by the first half of the 5th century.

In some deserts, there are gold and granite fields, also exploited from time immemorial.

The main economic resource of the deserts is in any case oil, with the richest fields being located in the Persian Gulf (Saudi Arabia, Iraq, United Arab Emirates, Kuwait and Iran). This rather small area contains 65% of the world's oil resources; Saudi Arabia alone contains 25% and is therefore the country possessing the largest amounts of crude oil.

Diamonds in the desert

Another human settlement in this hostile ecosystem has to do with its mineral resources: from gold to diamonds, from oil to many minerals.

As early as the Ptolemaic era in ancient Egypt, the slaves toiled all through their lives to extract gold from quartz using primitive stone tools. Even now, a large part of the Namibian and South-African desert is exploited for its diamonds. Evidence of this activity is the old mining village of Kolmanskop, now a real ghost town neighbouring on this forbidden town. It was founded around 1920 after finding diamonds in the area, it quickly expanded into a local work and residential centre and was completely deserted by 1956. Today the sand has invaded some of the houses, getting in through the windows, blocking the doors and making the roofs cave in, and only a few houses are in a good state of repair and perfectly furnished, to tell how man lived there.

South-Africa is the most important diamond producer in Africa. In this area, diamonds are mainly contained in igneous rocks, such as **kimberlite** vents, which were first discovered in 1869. The biggest diamond ever found, the Cullinan (3,106 carats), and many other extremely valuable gems are from South-Africa. For more information on oil, see the specific secti

The desert for the tourists

Another economic resource of the desert concerns tourism: it's hard to resist its charms. Many people are attracted by the silence and width of these picturesque, unique places. This is why camps have been fitted out to accommodate tourists from all over the world all through the year and as a basis for guided tours. Another tourist attraction that has to do with the desert is the "Paris-Dakar" car and bike race along a 10,000 km track from France to Senegal, through Spain, Morocco, Mauritania, Mali. The real race is amidst the dunes and the deserts, which are one of the attractions of this race with the myriad dangers it hides.