

## 20. Tamentit and Sid Ahmed Timmi Oases – Algeria

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Tamentit and Sid Ahmed Timmi are the largest of a complex of oases, located 12 km north of the main town of Adrar's province. On the south, they are bordered by the Oasis of Bouffardi. They constitute a unique habitat for several plant and animal species, some of which are endemic and survive under extreme conditions. Some of these species have developed exceptional mechanisms in order to adapt to their unique environment. The site supports a wide variety of wildlife, such as amphibians, dragonflies, gazelles, hedgehogs, fennecs, sand-cats, lizards and migratory birds.

The region has been an important centre of West Africa, with intensive trading with caravans from Egypt and Timbuktu. Traditional architecture is based on the use of local materials. The palm groves are located further down the slope. The Tamentit Oasis is very old and was probably inhabited at the time of the Pharaohs.

Subterranean water comes from the infiltration of surface water from springs, from deep aquifers and condensation during the night hours. Locals have developed an irrigation system, the *foggara* (of Persian origin). Although the *foggara* system is considered property of the co-owners, the entire population of each village has free access to water for domestic use, but has to contribute to the maintenance of the system. The social organisation of each village depends, in fact, on the details of the water distribution and preservation of its quality, as in these societies land ownership is of minimal significance in contrast to water rights attached to land.

The dominant cultivation of the area is date-palms, supplemented by a large number of other plant species. In addition, locals manufacture artefacts, which are very popular among tourists. There is also a traditional medical treatment for rheumatism that is practised, the *erredim* where the patient is buried in the sand.

Currently, the site's status is threatened by several factors, the most serious being modern agriculture, entailing the use of high-volume pumps that decrease the aquifer. As a result, the flow of the *foggaras* is also decreased, leading to the danger of eventual extinction of the entire oases system unless serious measures are taken soon. Locals are constantly beleaguered, attempting to protect and keep the *foggara* channels clear of the pervasive sand. There is also the problem of the *ergs*, sand dunes that move with the wind and that can literally bury an oasis. This is handled by stabilizing the dunes with dry palms, a technique requiring intensive labour.

People of the Tamentit Oasis perform periodically an important religious ritual, the *ziarettes*. They visit the mausoleums where the marabouts, important spiritual leaders, are buried. The residents of the oases and of other neighbouring regions meet there in pilgrimage.