



## Gathering of the tribes

Burning Man is so last decade. These days, Bay Area adventurers are off to Mali.

Todd Ruggiero, a 36-year-old San Francisco attorney, wants to “pull the rip cord” from his high-stress job by lighting out for the **Festival in the Desert**, held each January deep in the Sahara north of Timbuktu. “I imagine this is what Burning Man was like in the early years,” he says. He’s not alone. Increasing numbers of Bay Area leery of Burning Man’s boho-Disney image are decamping to the multiday, music-filled desert party that offers a freewheeling mix of music, community, and art with nary a glowstick in sight. Now in its eighth year, the festival has a distinctly local flavor—most of the audience arrives by camel—but it also attracts world-music cognoscenti like Jimmy Buffett and ex-Led Zep front man Robert Plant.

In essence, Ruggiero is joining a family reunion hosted by the Tuaregs, the nomadic, turbaned Saharan tribesmen who ride days from villages scattered across the dunes to attend the gathering. By day, he’ll mingle with the locals and explore the desert, and when the sun starts to drop, he’ll groove to the best in West African music, from desert blues guitarists like Vieux Farka Touré (think John Lee Hooker in the sand) to Tinariwen, a group of Tuareg ex-rebels who traded their AK-47s for electric guitars. The bands play late into the night, and, as in Black Rock City, initiates describe the experience in mystical terms. “You’re in the desert with these people, in their home,” says Jim Welte, a San Francisco journalist who made the trek in 2005. “You’re in their living room, under the stars. There’s something sacred about that.” ■ CHRIS SMITH

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