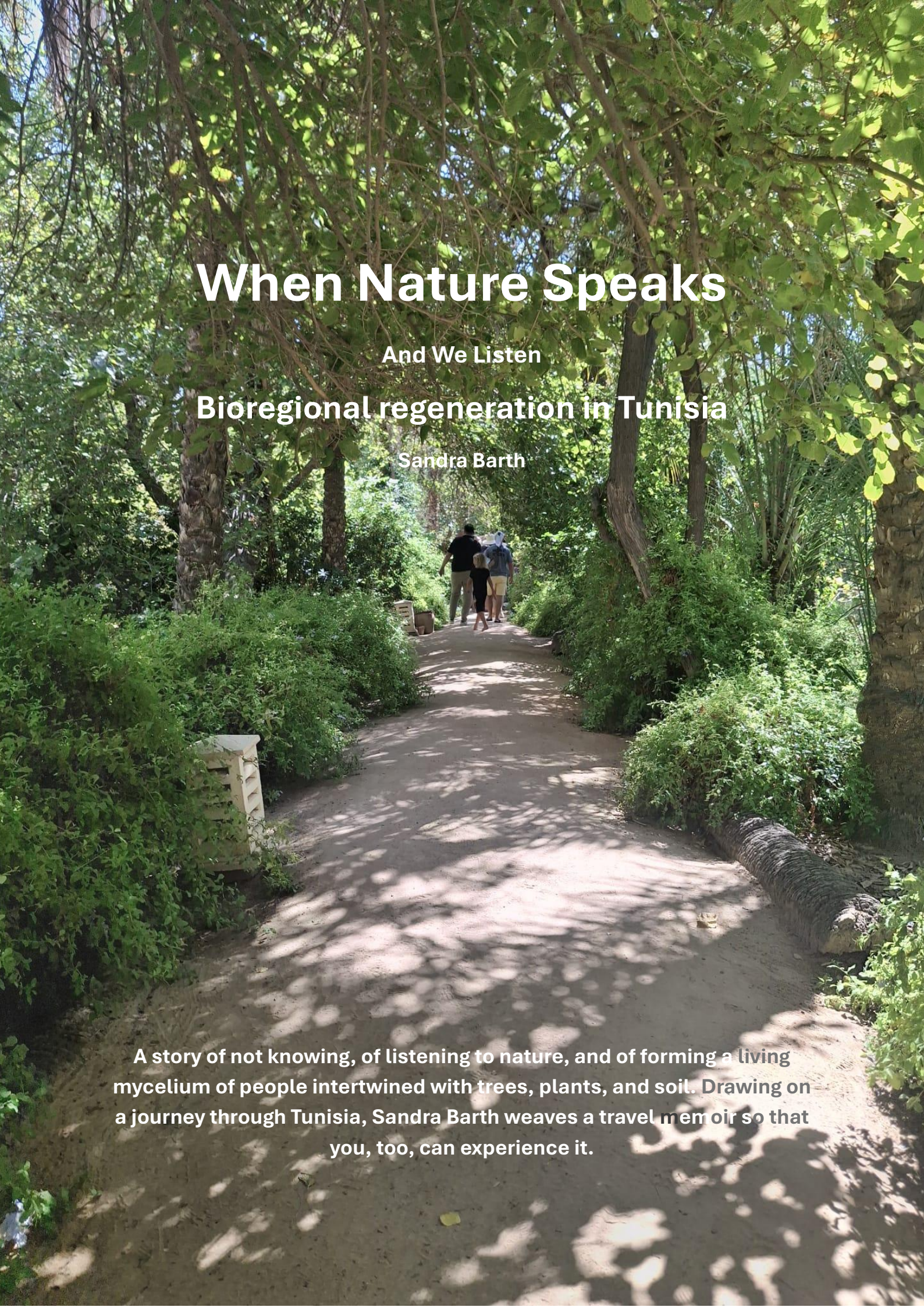


When Nature Speaks

And We Listen

Bioregional regeneration in Tunisia

Sandra Barth

A story of not knowing, of listening to nature, and of forming a living mycelium of people intertwined with trees, plants, and soil. Drawing on a journey through Tunisia, Sandra Barth weaves a travel memoir so that you, too, can experience it.

When Nature Speaks

And We Listen

Bioregional regeneration in Tunisia

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September 2026

Index

Meet the group 4
Start of a trip without a program 6
Learning to Embrace Not Knowing in Tunisia 7
Connecting with the Earth in Tunisia 14
'Mon ami nouveau' in the desert of Tunisia 20
Sand, Salt, and a Race Against Thunder in the Sahara 27
Playing in the sand and healing water 36
Where Water is Sacred 43
Broken Pipes and the Shadow of Phosphate: Journey Through a Scarred Interior 51
The Memory of Water 58
Gathering to birth the Mediterranean Hub 67
Meet the group (II) 68
A Circle Within a Circle 71
More information 79

Meet the group



Joe and Penny (Design School)



Elyes (organiser)



Kareem



Jane



Youssef



Annelieke



Hadi



Davida



Mieke



Melissa



Boulos



Stefan



Denis



Prajjwal



Rawane



Sandra (writer)



Henderieke



Claire



Hassan



Talal (tour guide)



Azziz (bus driver)

Start of a trip without a program

Today, I set off for Tunisia with these three amazing women. We are heading out on an adventure. We know we'll be traveling around for nine days, but we don't know where we're going. Fortunately, **Annelieke Verkerk** has been there before, so we are relying on her experience.
We will be traveling across Tunisia with a group of people from five continents, aiming to learn from one another but, above all, to experience what it is like for a Tunisian to be connected to their country, the sea, and the desert. A so called Immersion, a bioregional journey, organized by **Elyes M.** and **Joe Brewer** of the **Design School for Regenerating Earth**.

We arrived in Tunis today and have already met some of the group. I will be reporting on this trip over the coming days and am curious to see how people here connect with water. As Dutch people, we are so accustomed to an abundance of water—things are certainly different here!



Learning to Embrace Not Knowing in Tunisia

Morning Rituals in Tunis

The day begins to stir at the hostel in Tunis. Two men are on the rooftop terrace doing exercises. A one-centimeter ant crawls across the toilet floor. I shower in a space where the toilet sits right inside the shower stall; I suppose I could have used the toilet while showering. Four of us women shared a room. I am dressed respectfully: covered cleavage, a long-sleeved blouse, and long trousers. Shoes must come off inside the hostel, so I walk around in my (outdoor) slip-on sandals. We still do not know where we are going or by what means of transport. We have to be ready by 9:30 AM.



Encounters and Stories at the Hostel

Then it turns out my watch is still set to Dutch time, giving us an extra hour before departure. Plenty of time to chat with the other guests staying at the hostel. Abdullah, a sports training student, speaks about his roots in his home country, Algeria. Even though Tunisia is similar, the moment his feet touch his own soil, he feels at home. More in control, too, because he knows the customs and feels deeply connected to the land. When he speaks of the beautiful mountains and green valleys, his eyes light up. He loves working with children and wants to equip them with lifelong skills through sports. He

speaks with genuine passion about the mountains and fertile soil in northern Algeria. We joke about how no one lives in the desert because there is no delivery service for water or meals.

I also speak with someone from Budapest living in London, and a traveler from Morocco who has just spent a few days exploring. As a small-town person from Amersfoort, I feel like a total novice among these nomads, even though I am easily thirty years older.



Heading into the Unknown

Gradually, the group begins to gather. Joe and Penny arrive as well, and we do a brief round of introductions before boarding the bus to—well, where exactly? We are told we are heading to an ecological farm. We drive for a couple of hours along the bay and through olive groves. I notice many dried-out cacti serving as fences around fields and orchards. Meanwhile, lively conversations fill the bus, with travelers from Costa Rica, China, India, Colombia, the Netherlands, the US, and Lebanon. Around lunchtime, we reach a gate and drive onto an estate.





The Art of Embracing Not Knowing

We receive a warm welcome from the owner of Samana Balans. We have arrived at an ecological farm. We gather under a gorgeous patio and sit in a circle for introductions. Joe speaks about where we currently stand as a society, noting that this is the first time we can consciously build a new way of living together. He explains that we should scatter as much dandelion fluff as possible; after all, you never know which seeds will take root where—on concrete or fertile ground. We live in complex times, with political and economic systems that no longer function. We must learn how to live in such an era and be prepared for whatever comes. Beyond learning self-sufficiency, learning to handle uncertainty and not knowing is an essential skill. I now realize why our trip leader never gave us an itinerary: it was meant to teach us to handle not knowing. We Dutch, so accustomed to packing lists and detailed schedules, could learn a thing or two from the organic, flow-based approach of the Tunisians.

Tuning into the Energy of the Land

Joe continues: when we open our hearts to the intelligence of the land and its people, we know what to do. He does not mean token civic participation, but genuinely working with what already exists and nurturing wherever the energy naturally flows. Supporting that process.





Returning to Diversity

Following an introductory round where everyone introduces themselves and shares their intention for the journey, it is time for a tour of the grounds.

The owner, Rima Zorgati, guides us around, sharing with great passion how they are reviving the farm, transitioning from monoculture to diverse crops. Alongside olives, they now cultivate pomegranates and almonds.

Tales from a 400-Year-Old Olive Tree

While Rima explains the approach to restoring fertility to this large plot of land, I lean against a 400-year-old olive tree. The ancient tree evokes vivid images, like scenes from an illustrated story flashing through my mind. It conveys how glad it is to be cared for so attentively now, cherishing the love the people on the farm provide. It reminds the tree of earlier times when the region was lush and fertile—when a goat herder and his flock would rest beneath its branches and still listen to its tales.

Then invaders from across the sea swept across the land, destroying everything, including the nearby village. Such is the story of this land: invaded time and again, yet continually rising and rebuilding. Now, both the farm and the olive tree can flourish once more.





A Feast Under the Tunisian Sun

Next comes a lavish lunch of salads, shakshuka, grilled vegetables, olives (naturally), and rice, accompanied by freshly baked bread flecked with anise seeds—delicious.

Nobody was drinking the tap water, so neither did I, but thankfully a gigantic watermelon was soon carved up.

Over lunch, we shared stories and traded experiences.





Arrival at the Cave Dwellings

Afterward, the journey continued south. For three hours, our view consisted of olive groves, homes tucked away in the middle of nowhere with families living their daily lives, and solar-powered irrigation systems.

Dusk gradually settled in until darkness swallowed the landscape completely. When we arrived, a local woman named Sondes guided the four of us Dutch women, along with Youssef, to her home. It was pitch-black; fortunately, we could pick our way over the uneven path using the glow of her phone flashlight. Her home was nearby: several cave rooms carved into the rock around an open courtyard. One served as a bathroom, two as bedrooms, plus a kitchen and a living room. The four of us were hosted in the living room, which featured a cozy little alcove that Annelieke claimed, while the rest of us settled into the main area.



Deep Conversations and Warm Hospitality

First, however, we were treated to a wonderful meal. Youssef, who previously worked for an international organisation, shared his thoughts on the SDGs. Much like us, he views them as compromises that still prioritize economic growth, even with “sustainable” tagged in front. He also pointed out how they are framed around what we want to avoid—”zero hunger”—rather than positive aspirations like ensuring everyone has sufficient nourishing food.

We touched on various international issues, exchanging perspectives and insights. Youssef spends part of the year in Tunisia and part in New York, where his wife and daughters reside. His extended family remains in Tunisia, meaning he carries significant family responsibilities here as the eldest son.

The Quiet Stillness of the South

Later, our hostess's husband, Nasser, returns home. He has worked across many countries and now spends most of his time working in Paris. This gives Sondes the independence to run her own herb and spice shop. She mentions that she usually eats simple, modest meals on her own, but whenever her husband is home, she cooks two warm meals a day. Our host tells us how much he cherishes the peace and quiet of his native village—and how genuinely dark the nights are here. We notice it immediately: the persistent hum of highways and city noise so familiar back in the Netherlands is completely absent. A blanket of clouds hides the stars, making the darkness feel even deeper. Fortunately, an outdoor lamp illuminates the courtyard.

One Minute of Connection to Home

There is no Wi-Fi here, and my thoughts drift to family back home; they will certainly want to know how everything is going. I draft all my WhatsApp messages in advance and switch roaming on for just sixty seconds. Pop, pop, pop—a string of checkmarks appears.

Lulled by the Night

Finally, it is time to sleep in our caves. Well, Mieke and Henderieke opted to begin the night sleeping out under the open sky. A persistent cricket serenades us to sleep, while a distant dog keeps the rhythm with a steady bark.

Connecting with the Earth in Tunisia

Morning Prayer and Mountain Buffet

At sunrise, around 4:45 AM, the morning prayer echoes through the village. I roll over and hear that it is raining. Mieke and Henderieke have crept into the cave as well. I sleep in until 7:30 AM, giving me just enough time to dress before breakfast is served. And what a breakfast! The tea is brewed from wild mountain herbs gathered by our host. There are dates, fresh pistachios, dried and preserved figs, freshly baked flatbread, and olive oil for dipping. There is also an almond paste that I suspect contains olives too, given its deep green color.



Rain and Enigmatic Peaks

I pull my poncho over my backpack because of the rain. I welcome the showers; instead of sweltering heat, the air feels pleasantly cool and refreshing. Meanwhile, I take photos of the surrounding mountains and notice an unusual rock formation crowning one of the peaks. Or is it a fortress? It is too high and far away to tell for sure.

Another Lesson in Not Knowing

True to our Dutch punctuality, we arrive at the café precisely at 8:30 AM, where we were supposed to meet. The café is essentially a house where local village men gather to drink coffee. Accompanied by four blonde women, Youssef certainly draws quite a few curious looks. We sit under an awning and share a bottle of water. However, not everyone had received the message about meeting at 8:30 AM, so it takes a while for the whole group to assemble. Another lovely lesson in not knowing. Once complete, a local village guide leads us up the mountain.





AI as a Mirror of Humanity

It is quite a climb. Along the trail, I fall into conversation with Denis, who hails from Russia and now lives in Costa Rica. He is, among other things, an AI specialist and deeply engaged with the Design School for Regenerating Earth movement. The ideal person to ask about developments in AI. Back in the Netherlands, I hear plenty of conflicting views: those who view AI as perilous, fearing it will subjugate humanity, contrasted with voices like Bob de Wit, a professor at Nyenrode Business University whom I spoke with recently, who suggests it might actually be beneficial if AI takes the reins—arguing AI would likely steward the Earth far better than we have. Denis listens thoughtfully and remarks that he views AI as our mirror: whatever we put in is what comes out.

Learning to Connect with the Earth

When we connect with the Earth, the land, and nature, a transformation naturally unfolds within our hearts. That shift will inevitably reflect in AI. Meanwhile, a self-destructive society hurtles toward its own collapse, and that simply is what it is. As I walk on, I turn this over in my mind. It resonates deeply: what we put in comes back out. My takeaway: let us engage with AI as intentionally as possible, feeding it with constructive thoughts, heart-centered connections to nature, and care for one another.






Fresh Wind and Mental Quiet

We walk toward an ancient ruin. It turns out to be an old collective granary where the village once stored its harvests—perched high up, safeguarding grain against flash floods and raiders alike. It is a stunning stone structure with elegant arched windows, left open without frames or glass in the local tradition. Yet this is not our final destination; we continue higher up the mountain. As we ascend, the wind picks up. The absence of Wi-Fi or 5G has cut off the relentless stream of messages pouring in across multiple email accounts, chat apps, and social feeds. The serene stillness, punctuated only by a rooster's crow and birdsong, pulls me out of survival mode, allowing my mind and body to relax. The brisk breeze sweeps through, blowing away lingering thoughts of work issues, thorny dilemmas, and mental knots. My headspace expands, and a deeper sense of ease settles over me.

Fragrant Thyme and Restored Breath

As we push forward, our path becomes clear: we are heading all the way to the rock formation atop the next ridge. Hiking uphill takes effort; having struggled for months with severe breathlessness over the winter, which had left me barely able to work, the ascent is demanding. While my breathing has significantly improved, I still need frequent pauses. Thankfully, I am not alone in taking breathers. The views are magnificent. Faintly in the air, I catch the scent of the herbal tea from this morning. Looking down, I realize the entire mountainside is carpeted with wild thyme. Its aroma accompanies me every step of the way, as though the tiny plants are offering me extra breath as I climb. It brings back memories of giving thyme syrup to my children whenever they had coughs or tight chests. Beyond easing my breath, the fragrant mountain air brings a calming stillness. Reaching the crest, we spot the sea glistening far in the distance. Many scramble up the rock formation itself, but the steep, rugged steps look too precarious for me, so I stay put. I have already pushed past my limits today—and that is plenty.





The Sun Breaks Through

Beginning our descent, the clouds part and the sun breaks through. My arms quickly turn pink under the intense rays, but luckily I packed sunscreen. I put on my sun hat, holding onto the brim so the wind does not whisk it away. Back down at the café, we catch our breath over glasses of water. Before long, we are invited into a village home where two women are grinding oats by hand between traditional stones—their daily craft. Our tour guide causes a moment of chaos when he accidentally kicks over the container, scattering oats across the rug. Yet the demonstration carries on undeterred. Singing rhythmically, the woman turns the millstone while we clap along. Soon others take turns spinning the stone, our gathering drifting from Arabic songs to Russian melodies and diverse rhythms.




The Cacophony of Village Life

Afterward, we catch our breath from the hike and sip mountain thyme tea. Following the demonstration, our hosts lead us to a shaded patio lined with woven mats, where we rest and share lunch. We are treated to a delicious spread of soup, fresh salad, and couscous infused with mountain herbs, lovingly prepared by the women of the village. We are given free time to rest until 5:00 PM. Lying down on my mat inside our cave, two roosters engage in a spirited contest to see who can crow the loudest, egged on by the bleating of a goat and the barking of a dog. Drifting off to that chorus, I fall into a deep slumber.

Deep Sleep and Star Wars Caves

I sleep like a rock—so deeply that my travel companions let me sleep right through the afternoon activity. I end up missing a trek to another peak featuring an even better-preserved granary. I later learn scenes from Star Wars were filmed there, with several of the stone alcoves named after Yoda and Luke Skywalker. The group even participated in a ritual Hawaiian dance. I missed the whole thing, but by the time I wake and darkness has fallen enough to switch on the lights, the guide arrives to collect me. I get a personal ride in the van straight to our dinner spot, where the group is already gathered. While waiting for the meal, I enjoy rich conversations about weaving art into community and social challenges—work I have dedicated myself to over the past two years—as well as the emergence of the Bioregional Learning Center North Sea Delta, and much more. It strikes me that the regenerative movement, and grassroots efforts at large, have grown so deeply interconnected that we are no longer just “bottom-up.” We are here. We are organized. We are aligned. We are co-creating rather than pulling against one another. It is an inspiring thought to close the day with, before we head back to our cave, gently unwinding and reflecting on our journey before falling asleep.





‘Mon ami nouveau’ in the desert of Tunisia

September 20, 2026

When I open my eyes, I see that Mieke and Youssef are already up. The weather is sunny, although the courtyard still lies in shade. Today we are heading into the desert to spend two nights in the Sahara. Annelieke had already let this slip, mentioning she was truly dreading lying in a freezing tent and surviving the heat by day. Over breakfast, which is lavish once again, I hear that we are fortunate. Other guests have neither running water nor breakfast.

Not Knowing

The bus was due to arrive at 9:00 AM, leaving us time to visit the shop owned by Soundoz, our hostess. I remain at the house because we cannot all fit into the car. My fellow travellers return with an assortment of teas and herbs. Before we know it, we are back on the road by coach. While admiring the view, I spend the journey working on the strategy for the Bioregional Learning Centre North Sea Delta. Earlier on, prompted by several participants, Elyes had outlined the itinerary. I told him, however, that it was not necessary. One of the essential skills we need to cultivate is living with uncertainty, just as Joe remarked at the start of this trip. Not knowing what lies ahead is precisely the exercise we need.





Mon ami nouveau

We make a couple of stops, beginning with the shop belonging to Soundoz. Next, we pull over at a scenic viewpoint where local rugs are on sale. Our journey continues, and following a delightful drumming, clapping, and singing performance by our Lebanese friends, we switch to a playlist of Saharan tunes facilitated by DJ Kareem. A delicious lunch awaits us, served once again inside a mountain cave. A little further along stands a dwelling illustrating how people lived before the Arab arrival, which feels quite similar. An elderly woman is grinding grain, much like the women we observed yesterday. While presented as an open museum, people genuinely reside there. The old woman sits down beside me and mentions to Elyes that she admires my scarf. And my teeth. That comes as no surprise, as she has lost all of hers. She explains that she sleeps in one of the

hollows at night. I tell her, “mon ami nouveau,” and her face lights up. We take a photograph together before boarding our comfortable, air-conditioned bus once more. With temperatures climbing past thirty degrees, sun hats are essential. Yesterday I threaded a cord through mine, so the wind no longer carries it off. I took it out of my blouse. As a transition manager ánd traveler, I am used to working with what there is.





Dutch Skies

Gradually we descend from the mountains, the landscape giving way to plains of low scrub and stony earth. To our astonishment, typical Dutch skies appear overhead: a rain shower falls in the distance. Shortly afterwards, we find ourselves driving through the rain. Then we witness an occurrence seen perhaps once every twenty years. Two rivers converge. Normally bone dry, the water now surges and churns as though it has never done otherwise. We are allowed to step outside, and Joe, Denis, Stefan, and Annelieke dash straight into the water without hesitation. It is a splendid sight, taking in both the swirling water and the joy on the faces of people seeking connection with a river that rarely exists. Water is truly sacred here.









No Man's Land

The driver calls us back to the vehicle, making us feel like school children summoned by a firm headmaster. Thankfully, we heed his call and carry on. The terrain shifts once again. The ground turns sandier, leaving the stones behind. I notice boundaries woven from palm fronds, drifted so heavily with sand that only the tips remain visible. We journey onwards through no man's land, and I anticipate arriving at complete emptiness where camels await us. Instead, we enter a town. It is Zaafrane.

Miles of Date Palms

Past the town, we enter an expanse of monoculture. While the regions around the ecological farm with its olives and Zammour were once self-sufficient, the government in the 1950s opted for widespread monoculture, focusing here on dates. Miles upon miles of date palms stretch into the distance. It is an extraordinary sight, as I had never seen a date palm before. At the same time, I recognise the vulnerabilities and the local population's reliance on external food supplies. Turning onto a sandy track, we arrive at Camping Les Insolites, surrounded by desert sand. We are welcomed with tea, whereupon a change of plans comes to light.





Glamping

We were prepared to stay the night in the desert, but due to unexpected administrative errors, we ended up in a beautiful camping resort called Les Insolites. The group is left bewildered and full of questions in a café in the resort. Elyes handles the situation gracefully, remarking, "It is as much an exercise in not knowing for me as it is for you." Venturing deep into the desert is therefore off limits. Yet we are already sitting right in the middle of it. We now have a comfortable cabin with four proper beds rather than mattresses on the sand, alongside campsite-style shower facilities instead of latrines. It suits us rather well, functioning as a sort of glamping experience, even if we miss out on an authentic Bedouin night.



Caravan into the Sunset

Having sprained my ankle, I can barely walk, yet I still climb onto a camel. Feeling unsteady because of the injury, I dismount as soon as the photograph is taken. The caravan heads off into the desert to watch the sun sink into the sand. Several travellers roll joyfully down the dunes into the sand below.

Upon their return, live music begins. As the first notes ring out, everyone hurries into the courtyard, gathering around the fire. The performance features two drums, a flute, and one of the drummers sings. The trio guides the audience outside where an equestrian display gets underway. Horsemen ride back and forth to cheers from the crowd. The procession then returns to the courtyard for a bread-making demonstration. Meanwhile, Mieke, Hendrieke, Claire and I unwind alongside Elyes and Youssef, resting on mattresses on the terrace beside the courtyard.





Arabic Prayer

A wonderful dinner is served. Before we eat, I ask if anyone would appreciate a moment of quiet reflection. Hasan stands up and agrees. He asks me to call the group to silence, which I do. He leads us in prayer, and we repeat his words in Arabic. It turns out he does this before every meal, though previously in silence. The spread includes a deep-fried pastry parcel filled with potato and vegetables, rice, salad, and a frittata. While it likely carries a different Arabic name, that is how it translates to European eyes. A dish of potatoes, meat, and tomatoes in a rich sauce follows. Everything tastes wonderful, finished off with sweet melon for dessert.

Birds of Prey and a Stream

I spend the rest of the evening on the terrace chatting with Annelieke, while an adjacent group enjoys a hookah pipe. We discuss local birdlife with Prajjwal, an ornithologist from India, who gives me a fascinating lesson on raptors and predators. Francine also shares her experience of trying magic mushrooms beside a stream. It proved to be a profound moment where she felt genuinely connected to the flowing water, engaging in a conversation with it. Ever since, she has felt an exceptionally deep bond with that stream.



Closing a Day of Not Knowing

We sample several local soft drinks, with Boga and pineapple-coconut becoming my favourites. Despite the sugar rush keeping me wide awake, we decide to turn in. My roommates have already shifted their beds outside because of the heat inside the tent. With Annelieke also choosing to sleep under the open sky, I find myself with an enormous boudoir entirely to myself.

Sand, Salt, and a Race Against Thunder in the Sahara

September 21, 2026

Morning Comfort and Salty Lips

The day begins with unexpected luxury: a shower with plenty of water pressure, hot water, and flushing toilets with proper seats. But the moment I step outside, I notice my lips instantly taste salty. It feels just like being by the sea; the desert here is completely steeped in salt. After a nourishing breakfast buffet with freshly cooked eggs, we get ready for a walk to the date palm grove.





Barefoot Through the Grove

Along the way, Prajjwal simply leaves his shoes on the roadside verge. In the end, we are all walking barefoot through the soft, loose sand anyway. He tells me that as an ornithologist (bird expert), he often sets things down while out hiking. They are always still there when he returns. It is just that he occasionally forgets to pick them up again and has to walk all the way back, he adds with a laugh. Everything here is sand: the road, the verge, and the cultivated fields. It is purely thanks to irrigation that anything can grow at all; black irrigation hoses wind everywhere across the plots. I wonder aloud whether there is still a natural oasis around here, but our guide explains that it dried up long ago. Between the palms, we see a surprising variety of crops: maize acting as a windbreak and sand barrier, fields brimming with watermelons, peppers, and fig bushes. The guide also points out a plant from which substances are traditionally extracted to treat heart ailments.





Goatskin Bags and Sweet Water

The landowner proudly shows us the traditional goatskin water bag: a vessel crafted from goat hide that keeps drinking water remarkably cool. He chuckles and jokes that he combs both his goat and his own hair, before pulling off his cap to reveal a completely bald head; his booming laughter rings out across the sand. He explains that the dates gathered from the ancient trees are from last year's harvest; a rich syrup is brewed from the less sweet varieties. The commercial trees, by contrast, are harvested annually. A little further along, we encounter a sorrowful sight: a grove of palms slowly dying off. The soil has become far too waterlogged, causing the roots to rot, and the saline groundwater does the rest. After all, date palms require sweet, fresh water to truly thrive.







The Solitary Sentinel and the Language of Rootedness

A little later, I stand with my back resting against an ancient palm. Where the olive tree had earlier offered me a lively, almost cheerful narrative, connecting with this tree feels entirely different: heavy, quiet, and drenched in a profound sorrow. I see a sheer, barren

mountainside carved with eroded layers, as though everything soft and nourishing has been scoured away over centuries until only bare stone remains. Drifting through that vision is a caravan of camels and travellers walking across the sand, an echo of a bygone era. Our guide, Sami, tells us that this palm has stood here for hundreds of years, originally brought over from Algeria as a sapling by the landowner's ancestors, and that it has survived here for generations without anyone ever watering it. Though encircled by tidy rows of monoculture, this uprooted migrant stands utterly isolated amid the crowd. It shows me how lonely survival can be when the bond with the wider whole is severed, yet it simultaneously embodies the raw strength of the land: you do not need to be cared for to remain standing, provided you are rooted deeply enough in who you are.



Sliding Down from the Palm

Moments later, the guide's nephew provides some lighthearted entertainment. Nimble as can be, he scurries high up into a palm tree and glides smoothly down along the branches as if it were a playground slide. He shares that he longs to move to Germany; he has already been diligently practising his German, and we strike up a conversation in a blend of broken German and French. We walk on past grazing sheep and goats, tended to by the women of the community.





Ancient Date Palms and Water Deliveries by Quad

Eventually, we reach the oldest date palm groves. Over the decades, these trees have been buried so deeply beneath drifting dunes that their crowns barely poke out above the sand. "At least that makes harvesting easy," I remark. The guide nods in agreement. The dates from these venerable giants are exquisite, with a firmer, tougher skin. Meanwhile, the sun has grown fierce overhead. I wrap my scarf around myself and make sure my hat and scarf keep me well protected. Because several members of our group have run out of water, the nephew zips back and forth on a quad bike delivering fresh bottles. On the way back, seven-year-old Stefan finds a lovely branch to tap out a rhythm. He insists that his mother, Jane, join in. She begins to sing with her magnificent voice, carrying a melody that guides us under the blazing sun all the way back to the base camp. Back at the roadside verge, Prajjwal retrieves his abandoned shoes, and once at the camp, we seek shade beneath a canvas awning and quench our thirst, gulping down litres of water.

The Severed Mycelium

As we recover in the shade, I catch snippets of a conversation about mycelium: the underground fungal network that typically allows trees and plants to communicate and share vital nutrients. Suddenly, the puzzle pieces fall into place regarding the lonely palm from this morning. It is not merely metaphorically uprooted, but literally so. In a

balanced ecosystem, it would be intimately linked to its surroundings through that fungal web. But here, enclosed by intensive monoculture where the soil structure has been degraded, those subterranean lifelines have been cut. The palm stands surrounded by hundreds of trees, yet it must drill its roots deep down into the depths in solitary isolation just to reach moisture.

Tunisian Hospitality Before Departure

Soon another mouthwatering lunch awaits us: tender chicken drumsticks, fragrant couscous, crispy briks (stuffed egg pastries), and fresh salads. On the table sits the familiar small dish of spicy harissa, tuna, and olive oil for dipping warm bread. After the meal, the group prepares to set off. Most of the party will walk alongside the camels, but we Dutch women are offered a ride in the vehicle; a two-hour trek through loose sand in 35-degree heat is not something we relish. As it turns out, things unfold quite differently.

A Rollercoaster Through the Dunes

We climb into an all-terrain vehicle perched so high on its wheels that getting in feels like an ascent. Our guide, Tallel, bravely perches atop the luggage in the open truck bed. Mieke hands him her sun hat. The driver, who lives right in the desert, steers the 4×4 across the dune ridges with natural ease. We are tossed about in every direction. When I comment in French that the road must look different every single day, he grins broadly: “Oui, les dunes!” The truck plunges steeply downhill and charges straight up the banks, following the tyre tracks of previous adventurers. Just as I catch myself wondering who on earth left all this clutter behind in the desert, I realise it is our own camping gear, hauled out in an earlier run.



Racing Against the Storm

Upon arriving at our overnight spot, Tallel stays behind to watch over us. Leaving four women alone in the desert is entirely out of the question for him. As soon as the cook arrives on a quad, Tallel hops on the back to head home. In the meantime, the sky darkens with alarming speed, and we hear thunder rumbling ominously in the distance. Pitching in alongside the cook, we Dutch camping women leap into action to erect the massive Bedouin tent. With lightning flashing ever closer, it turns into a frantic race against the clock. A Bedouin tent, however, demands a completely unfamiliar technique; sure enough, we assemble the poles the wrong way around. After a quick correction, we manage to haul the structure upright and feverishly shovel sand onto the bottom flaps to anchor the canvas, as tent pegs simply do not exist out here. Just as the first heavy raindrops begin to fall, we haul all the bags and sleeping mats inside, and the tempest breaks loose. Out of breath, the cook and I share a triumphant high five; we have become fast friends without understanding a single word of each other's language.





Camels in the Evening Glow

Once the storm rolls past, the sky clears. On the horizon, I see the caravan of our walking companions approaching, soaked to the bone but triumphant after braving the weather.



A flurry of cheerful chaos ensues: everyone rummages for dry clothes while the remaining tents are put up, during which the poles for the other two Bedouin tents turn

out not to fit. Eventually, everyone settles into a place to sleep. The sun dips below the horizon, casting the graceful silhouettes of the camels in sharp relief against a radiant, golden-orange sky.









Survivors of the Sand: R’tem and Arta

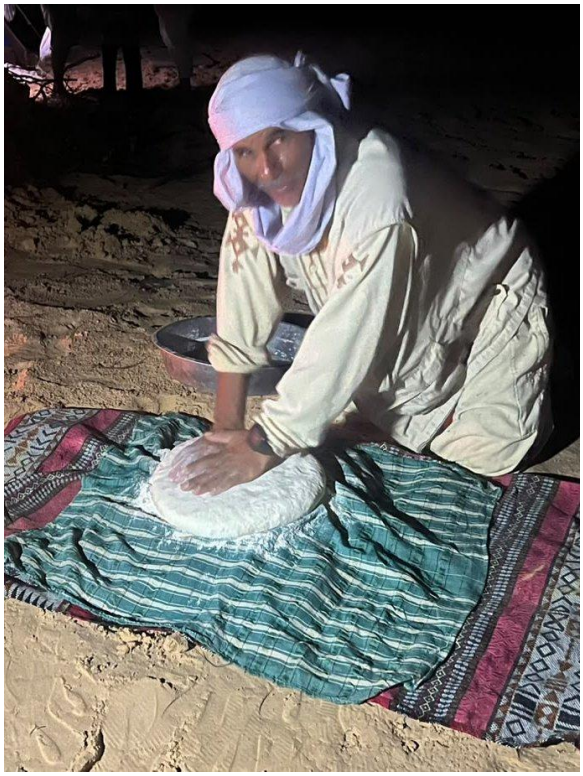
In the seemingly boundless emptiness surrounding our campsite, two hardy shrubs stand out, braving the blowing sand grains. They are Retama raetam (the white desert broom, or R’tem) and Calligonum comosum (Arta). The slender, broom-like twigs of the R’tem are remarkably adept at catching and anchoring shifting sand, and although toxic to ingest, infusions made from it are traditionally applied to treat wounds and skin ailments. The Arta, with its green, jointed stems, serves as nutritious fodder for camels and is used as a herbal remedy for stomach complaints. In the evening, both reveal their

greatest practical gift: their dense, dry wood provides prime fuel for campfires, burning steadily with glowing embers and virtually no smoke. It also proves ideal for hanging damp clothes to dry.

Sand Bread and Drums Beneath the Stars

Because several blankets and mats were caught in the rain, we stretch them out around the crackling fire to dry. Kareem, our DJ, puts on upbeat music, and the younger crowd merrily dances while flapping the blankets dry in the breeze. The cook simmers a steaming pot of macaroni with meat and a rich, spiced tomato sauce, while a wise elder kneads dough and places the artfully rolled loaf directly between the glowing embers of gathered brushwood. The result is pure culinary magic: delightfully crusty sand bread.





Around 9:00 PM, we sit down to enjoy the feast, after which I retreat, pleasantly drowsy, to lie on my mat inside our expertly assembled tent. Outside, the celebrations continue well into the night with drums, flutes, and the soulful singing of the men. Someone even brings sweet slices of fresh watermelon right to our tent door. Resting on my mat, I find sand everywhere: in my ears, between my teeth, and woven into every seam of my clothes. Tomorrow, I truly hope for a warm shower before boarding the bus, but for tonight, the quiet, grounding power of the desert gently lulls me to sleep.

Playing in the sand and healing water

September 22, 2026

Morning Glow and the Art of Play

When I wake up, my tentmates are already awake. The camp still rests in complete silence. Quietly, I stand up; in the distance, I see my three companions walking in different directions toward the horizon. It is already glowing a soft orange: the promise of a new sunrise.



While the camp crew are already bustling about, the other travellers emerge from their tents one by one. Together, we take in the morning light and wait for the fresh bread baking in the hot sand. To pass the time, Hadi crafts fleeting artworks in the sand, while Joe builds a stunningly beautiful sand bridge complete with a tunnel beneath it. When I ask Joe about the intention behind his creation, he replies disarmingly: *“I wanted to play with sand.”*





Wonder Through a Child's Eyes

It sounds simple at first, but there is a deeper layer underneath. I remark that many adults forget how to play, how to stay open and curious, and simply how to enjoy life. Joe then shares a vulnerable moment from his past: a dark period of depression brought on by *collapse awareness*. It was only when his daughter was born, and he began seeing the world afresh through her wondering eyes, that he learned to play again and perceive beauty. "*As a grandmother, you get to experience that all over again*," I laugh, "*only with all the joy and none of the burdens!*" Smiling, we walk over to the elder who is handing out the steaming sand bread.





Mud Puddles in the Sahara

After breakfast, we pack our things together. The campsite is left spotless: everything is packed out, and three bags of plastic and beverage cartons are burned on site. During a playful wrestle with seven-year-old Stefan, Hasan hurt his ankle. Fortunately, Davida, who is a manual therapist, treated his foot expertly, but as a precaution he is given a seat on a camel.

As the caravan disappears behind the sand dunes, we four women climb into the waiting off-road vehicles. The drive back is surreal. Yesterday's rare downpours have left behind massive, deep pools of water. The driver navigates through them deftly, sending muddy water splashing high into the air, well over the bonnet. People usually travel south to escape the rain while camping, yet here we are meeting torrential downpours in the Sahara—a tangible reminder of a disrupted climate.

Back at the base camp, Camp Les Insolites, a wonderful shower washes away the desert sand. While we unwind in the café, Hadi suddenly strolls in. He walked ahead of the entire group: a brisk trek in the full desert sun, which earned him just enough time to jump under the shower as well.



The Forgotten Phone and the Palm Grove

Once everyone has assembled, we board the coach to depart. At least, that is the plan. Just as we pull out of the driveway, a sudden wave of mild panic breaks out: Youssef has lost his phone. Bags are turned inside out, seats are inspected, and the camp is scoured from top to bottom. Stefan seizes the opportunity to escape sitting still and happily vanishes among the date palms to pick fresh fruit.

Eventually, Youssef climbs back onto the coach with a broad grin: the phone was simply lying in the shower block. He had mentioned earlier with a laugh that his family teasingly calls him 'Youssef Forgetful,' and it turns out not without good reason. Relieved, the coach doors shut, and we set off. Suddenly, a little blond, curly head comes sprinting out from the palms toward the road: we forgot Stefan! Stefan does not mind in the least. He hops aboard nimbly and proudly hands out his freshly picked dates to the passengers.



Green Dreams and Letting Go in Douz

En route and during lunch in the oasis town of Douz, we share our reflections on the desert. I ask Denis whether his question—of whether the Sahara wants to become green again—has been answered. He nods wholeheartedly. He envisions the dry river systems

descending from the southern Atlas Mountains being replenished, once again flowing into Chott el Djerid, the colossal dry basin in central Tunisia. Historically, his intuition aligns with geological reality: tens of thousands of years ago, during the *Green Sahara* periods, this basin was not a parched salt flat, but a gargantuan prehistoric freshwater lake (the Megalake Chad or Lake Megachad/Lake Fezzan systems and the ancient Lake Tritonis), fed by mighty rivers from the mountain ridges.

Denis explains that he was pondering this regenerative future while gazing out the coach window. When he looked up, he saw a roadside sign that simply read: 'You can do it.' In an Arabic- and French-speaking country, that English message struck him right in the heart. "*Well*," I joke, "*sounds like you will have to move again soon, this time to Tunisia!*"

Leaving Pain in the Sahara

Something profound surfaces for Ellis as well. Denis had asked her this morning about her dreams. At first, she kept it to herself, but the raw stillness of the Sahara turned out to be a mirror reflecting the emotional pain of recent months. As the memories well up and a fellow traveller comfortingly holds her hands, the tears flow freely. The weight can stay right here, absorbed by the sand. Relieved and noticeably lighter, she dries her tears; she can now continue her journey with newfound space within.

Salt Crystals on Chott el Djerid

After lunch, the coach heads toward Chott el Djerid, the vast, shimmering salt flat. On one side of the raised causeway lie salt extraction pans; on the other, we follow a path down to patches where a shallow layer of water still rests. We wade into it with our bare feet. "Salt water is healing!" Hasan calls out enthusiastically, prompting me to ask with a smile whether his sprained ankle has now miraculously recovered. Bursts of laughter ring out from across the water: Hadi and Boulos took a running leap and cleared the stream in a single bound.

Denis gazes across the boundless plain toward the barren, stony hills in the distance. The shadows of drifting clouds cast dark patches across the slopes, looking precisely as though lush forests were growing on the mountainsides. Back on the coach, Jane displays her treasures: a bag full of enormous, glistening salt crystals, of which we all receive a handful as a keepsake.





From Sand to the Pool

We drive into the oasis city of Tozeur and arrive at a haven of comfort: a charming hotel featuring generous rooms, a lush garden, and a clear blue swimming pool. While many dive straight into the refreshing water, I settle into a chair with a stable Wi-Fi connection to weave the past few days into stories.



Around half past seven, the group gathers on the upper terrace overlooking the pool. In the balmy evening air, we reflect on our journey before sitting down to a feast of a dinner buffet brimming with fresh salads, fish, braised meats, couscous, and a vibrant array of pastries and sweet watermelon.

The contrast with the night before could hardly be greater: a soft bed, air conditioning, and an en-suite bathroom in place of a thin mat laid out on shifting sands. A day that began with playing in the sand and drew to a close beside the water; a journey that continually reminds us of the power of wonder, the necessity of letting go, and the indispensable gift of water for all life.

Where Water is Sacred

September 23, 2026

Fresh Awakening and the Call of Ancient Rivers

The alarm goes off at half past six. A quick shower: wonderfully warm, great water pressure, and large, soft white hotel towels. The last traces of Sahara sand are washed from my hair; I feel completely ready for a new day. The breakfast buffet is just as lavish as yesterday's dinner. There are various kinds of fig jam, a rich nut spread, eggs, fresh rolls, pancakes, salad, olives, and even yoghurt with granola. Since time is short and I am never a big eater in the morning, I keep it modest: a pancake with fig jam and an egg. I quickly grab a juicy slice of watermelon, and we head outside where a convoy of 4x4s is already waiting with engines running.

The vehicles take us to a spectacular viewpoint. Officially we only stop for a quick photo, but we cross the road anyway. On the other side, an impressive landscape unfolds of deep erosion gullies and dry riverbeds that once flowed here. "*Sometimes they still come alive,*" Elyes tells us, "*when the rain pours down in buckets.*"







The Ghost Village of Tamaghza

A little later, we stop high above the valley and look out over the tranquil ruins of the ancient mountain village of Tamaghza. It was once a vibrant community, until an unprecedented natural disaster struck in 1969: it rained for twenty-two days without pause. In a desert region where the parched earth barely absorbs water, this triggered apocalyptic mudflows and relentless flash floods. The traditional earthen houses of the centuries-old village literally dissolved in the deluge or collapsed with a thunderous roar.



Yet the history of this place reaches back many millennia. The Berbers (Amazigh) originally settled here because of the permanent presence of clear spring water in an otherwise unforgiving landscape. In Roman times, the settlement was expanded into a strategic frontier post: Ad Turres (the towers), part of the renowned Limes Tripolitanus, which guarded the Roman Empire against nomadic tribes from the desert. For centuries, Berber families lived here against the rock faces in dwellings of clay, stone, and palm branches, subsisting on terrace farming in the oasis.

The Hidden Gorge and a Cleansing Bath

Our journey takes us deeper into the rugged Atlas Mountains, close to the Algerian border. Tamaghza is the largest mountain oasis in Tunisia, and the scenery is breathtakingly wild: deep canyons carved out by water, with jagged cliff faces in warm shades of ochre and gold. Because Mieke has an injured, painful toe and cannot wade through the water, I happily keep her company. While the rest of the group ventures deeper into the canyon, we browse around a local souvenir stall.

Down in the depths of the gorge, a green miracle reveals itself: clear mountain water cascades between boulders clinging steadfastly to the sheer cliffs. Hasan and Joe seize

the opportunity and take a refreshing dip right beneath the waterfall, returning to us cleansed both inside and out.









The Green Wonder of Chebika

From Tamaghza, we drive on to Chebika, poetically known as Qasr el-Shams (the Castle of the Sun). This ancient, abandoned stone village clings to the flank of a steep mountain ridge. Where the canyon splits open, a crystal-clear spring emerges, winding like a lush green lifeline through a ribbon of date palms. The contrast is almost surreal: on one side, the ruthless, sun-drenched void of a dried-up prehistoric sea and bare rocky peaks; on the other, the gentle murmur of rippling mountain water and the deep, vibrant green of the oasis.

The oasis thrives as a rich food forest full of fig trees, apricots, and date palms bearing yet another unique date variety. Between the trees, after the scorching summer period, fresh vegetables are actively planted; while in the Netherlands the vegetable gardening season is drawing to a close, here it is only just beginning.

Commons avant la lettre

The ground is carpeted with fresh green grass, which instantly makes me feel at home as a Dutch woman. The water flows ingeniously through specially carved stone channels;

by simply moving a stone, the stream is redirected to another plot. After the arid sand plains of the Sahara, you physically sense what water brings forth: honoring water and embracing diversity allows the landscape to flourish abundantly.






Joe shares that wandering nomads used to tend to these oases in turns—a kind of commons avant la lettre. In this way, the oases flourished, and any group spending a few days there could harvest what they needed. There is also an ancient customary right that allows anyone travelling through to gather whatever fruit or sustenance they need in that moment. I find that a deeply beautiful tradition.

Pomegranate Juice, Silver, and a Grounded Message

We walk up to the village atop the mountain, located near the source of the river. While most of the group wanders through the old alleys along the upper trail toward the spring, Annelieke and I sit down for a glass of freshly squeezed pomegranate juice. What an exquisite, deep-red explosion of flavor; it refreshes me instantly! Once Mieke and Penny join us, we take a leisurely walk along the lower path toward the spring.

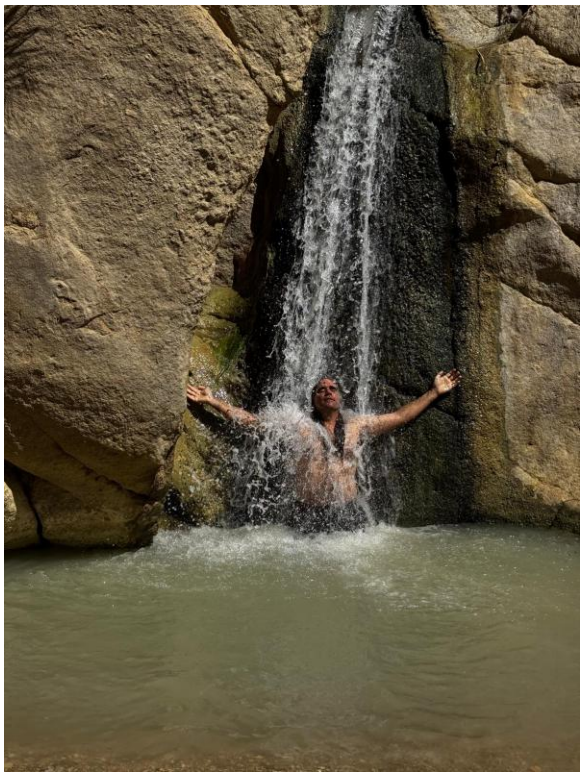




Water is available for purchase at the café.

A young man from a souvenir stall steps in to guide us. He takes pictures of and with us, but his intentions soon become crystal clear: he not only wants to sell his jewelry, but dreams above all of me taking him along to the Netherlands. Grounded in reality, I gently point out that we have a housing crisis and that a golden future is by no means guaranteed. To keep the atmosphere light, I ask about his connection to the water, and whether this spring is sacred to him. He looks at me with a puzzled expression and replies dryly: "*There is water at the café*." His neighbor chimes in, asking with genuine concern where my husband is. When I tell them he is simply back home in the Netherlands, they look at me in utter bewilderment. Fortunately, the rest of the group arrives just in time, and we walk together to the café, where our tour leader Tallel treats us to steaming, crispy Tunisian tuna pizza. A true feast.





Free Camels on the Salt Flat

On the way back, we cross the infinite expanse of Chott el Djerid once again. Amid the shimmering salt crusts, groups of camels catch the eye, seemingly roaming wild. It is explained to me that these animals work hard in the desert for six months of the year, after which they are allowed six months of rest and free grazing here. Indeed, they wear no tethers around their legs. Along the tarmac, a road sign warns of crossing camels—a warning sign I only know back home with silhouettes of cows, deer, or reindeer.







Oasis Hospitality and Floral Splendor at Eden Palm

We arrive at Eden Palm, a stunning estate and knowledge center dedicated to the date palm and the subtle ecological balance of the oasis.

During the tour of the verdant garden, we are enveloped by fragrant trees and vibrant blooms. Among the lush greenery, the fiery red trumpet blossoms of flowering

pomegranate trees (*Punica granatum*) stand out, alongside magnificent fuchsia arches of Bougainvillea, cheerful clusters of shifting lantana flowers (*Lantana camara*), and light pink blooms of the Chinese rose (*Hibiscus rosa-sinensis*). A lush palette of colors contrasting sharply with the dry soil.

Afterwards, a lunch awaits us celebrating regional flavors, accompanied by a range of local date delicacies and a rich assortment of date jams. I discover a surprising new favorite: a savory, aromatic tomato sauce infused with generous amounts of garlic. Beneath the cool leafy canopy, all the impressions of this journey fall into place: the resilience of the culture, the ingenious oasis system, and the soothing rhythm of the desert.

We conclude with a demonstration in the artisanal workshop, where they showcase how every single part of the palm is used, crafting natural soaps and skincare products infused with date seed oil. Unfortunately, having eagerly spent all my cash on keepsakes at the previous two mountain stops, I have to let the fragrant date soap pass this time.





Paddling and the Power of the Circle

Back at the hotel, we have free time until half past five. Henderieke is already in the refreshing water when Annelieke and I reach the pool. Stefan dives nimbly to the bottom with his swimming goggles, frolicking around Karim, who peacefully swims his laps. Having forgotten my swimsuit, I settle for dipping my feet from the pool edge, which feels delightfully cooling after such a dusty day.

At five-thirty, we gather in a circle. Where we began on the very first day by voicing our intentions, we now share the harvest of our experiences. We open the gathering by singing the Sanskrit mantra '*Gaiama*' together: a simple, pure way to connect our hearts with one another and with the Earth. It is a moving moment. Everyone brings their own unique perspective, shaped by their personal journeys and the social realities of their homelands.

The golden thread running through every reflection is gratitude and a profound sense of belonging—the awareness of being rooted in place and community. I sense that as a group, we have formed a fertile human mycelium, a finely woven network in which the transition toward bioregional living and working can tangibly take root and sprout.

Sadly, Davida and Melissa have to leave us early; everyday life is calling them back. We say our goodbyes, promising to meet again during the online gatherings of the Design School for Regenerating Earth, which brought us all together here.





Dreaming of Weaving Threads and Roots

We round off the evening at the generous dinner buffet and retire, contented, to the cool calm of our hotel rooms. After posting my blog online, I drift off to sleep embraced by the comforting feeling of being part of a worldwide family.

In my sleep, I dream of roots and subterranean mycelial threads. Living strands that connect us across continents, nourishing us and lending us resilience. And I feel our shared calling so clearly: to provide that same foundation and rootedness for the landscape, the trees, and the plants around us, so that they too have a true place to belong. Creating oases wherever we are in the world, where flora and fauna feel at home, find rest, heal, and flourish.

Broken Pipes and the Shadow of Phosphate: Journey Through a Scarred Interior

September 24, 2026

Singing Through the Mudflows

Following an unhurried breakfast buffet, we gather our belongings at a relaxed pace. At ten o'clock, the coach engine rumbles to life. I settle into my familiar seat just in front of the spirited youth from Lebanon, who immediately set the tone with rhythmic drumming and joyful singing.







The main motorway is impassable, submerged beneath recent floodwaters, so we divert onto a secondary route that has fared no better. Slabs of tarmac have been torn away, and thick layers of mud cling to the road surface. Before long, we encounter an immense flooded expanse blocking our passage. Assis, our coach driver, does not flinch. With remarkable calm and masterly precision behind the wheel, he navigates our heavy vehicle straight through the deluge.

A Feast Prepared by a Proud Mother

Around lunchtime, we are warmly welcomed by Ali's family. What appears on the table is an absolute culinary indulgence: torn pancakes dusted with desiccated coconut and flaked almonds, a rich bundt ring of bread pudding drizzled with chocolate sauce, a steaming, aromatic bean and chickpea stew in a spiced tomato broth, and delicate thin crêpes filled with nutty hummus. Every dish has been prepared with tender care by Ali's mother. When we invite her outside to join us, she accepts our thunderous applause with a radiant, slightly bashful smile.






The Oasis and Stefan's Sabre

Ali proudly guides us through his family estate. The ground is carpeted with a generous mulch of shredded palm fronds, amidst which olive trees, pomegranate shrubs, and fig trees flourish vigorously. An affectionate white cat makes a point of demanding a gentle stroke from every single traveller. The garden is cleverly divided into sunken beds bounded by low earthen berms, allowing irrigation water to flow through stone-lined channels across the plots and soak deeply into the soil. The result is a striking lawn of vibrant green grass.

Amongst the trees, seven-year-old Stefan discovers a colossal, fallen palm frond bearing an uncanny resemblance to a mammoth tusk. Following a spirited sword duel with his father Denis, he declares the giant tusk his ultimate prize; he hauls it all the way to the coach, where it is awarded pride of place in the luggage hold.





The Toxic Artery in the Railway Track

Ali then leads us up the mountain to confront the unvarnished reality of the region. Once again, water has left its violent mark: a section of the road has completely collapsed, forcing our coach to ford a surging river tributary. Guided by shouted signals from Ali and a group of local men guarding the pass, Assis steers us mere inches clear of hazardous boulders. When the tyres finally grip dry ground once more, a collective cheer erupts through the coach.




We wind up the hillside towards an abandoned railway line. No trains run here any longer; the tracks lie half-buried under deposits of washed-out silt. We trace the railway line on foot through two pitch-black tunnels. Having missed the explanation of our destination, I have little idea how long the trek will take, yet with water in my rucksack, sturdy walking boots on my feet, and my sun hat firmly in place, I stride forward undeterred. Sleeper by sleeper, I step into the art of not knowing.



Stealth killer in the soil

Beyond the tunnels, we peer down into a cavernous ravine. Far below rests a heavy water main, severed clean in two by the recent flash floods. Ali points out the underlying tragedy: just upstream from this fracture, a phosphate processing plant discharges its toxic industrial effluent directly into the dry riverbed. Because the pipe has burst, this severely contaminated water now pours straight into the irrigation feed supplying the oasis downstream. The canyon walls are far too precipitous to climb down and effect repairs. A knot tightens in my stomach as I picture the paradisiacal food forest we left only hours ago. The trees and crops appear robust and full of vitality today, yet the silent poison is already seeping into the living soil. A short distance away lie the shattered concrete pillars of an old bridge. A small black-and-white bird—a white-crowned wheatear—flits onto a bare limestone ledge above us, perching inquisitively, a silent witness to human short-sightedness.



Raw Brick and Neglected Acacias

Back aboard the coach, we steer our course towards the coast. As we pass through regional market towns, the shadow side of the interior becomes impossible to ignore: row upon row of unfinished, unrendered breeze-block houses. Yet life bustles vibrantly through every street; children play on dusty street corners, laundry flutters from protruding iron reinforcement bars, and sun-bleached cars line the pavements. Throughout it all, litter lies accumulated in disheartening quantities.

Along the roadsides stand municipal plantations of warped, sprawling acacia shrubs. Originally introduced under French colonial administration as an expedient greening measure, ecologically they belong nowhere in this landscape. They produce virtually no usable firewood and offer little fodder, taking root as functional orphans. Nobody tends to them; the branches serve primarily as mournful catchment nets for windblown plastic bags.





Desolate Plains and Deep Disparities

For hours on end, we cross vast, desolate plains hemmed in by serrated mountain ridges. These are ancient geological basins—sprawling freshwater lakes millennia ago during the Green Sahara periods, now reduced to parched salt and clay pans.

We stop at a place that looks like the Sahara to rest for a while. It is beautiful there, with lots of flowers.





What strikes me as we re-enter the endless monoculture olive groves is the utter absence of visible prosperity: nowhere do you see stately homesteads or comfortable farm villas. The stark socio-economic divide of Tunisia is laid bare here. Whilst the wealthy elite retreat to cosmopolitan coastal enclaves and the revenues from phosphate mining and olive oil exports drain away to the capital, the rural interior is left economically stripped.





Beacon in the night

Towards evening, we halt at a humble roadside café where only men are permitted access to the washrooms. Fortunately, I have no need of them. We resume our journey over a ribbon of tarmac so pocked with potholes and subsidence that it resembles a rutted cart track; the desert sands of the Sahara offered a far smoother ride. Outside, twilight settles gently over the land. Against the violet evening sky, an almost full moon glows bright—a beacon in the dark that will reach its peak during our final gathering.

Exhausted, we finally reach our coastal hotel, where an exceptionally lavish dinner awaits us. In swift succession, course after course arrives: soup, fresh salad, crisp brik, a fiery harissa and pepper relish, pasta with tuna, fried fish with chips, and a fresh fruit bowl. Overtaken by fatigue and the late hour, we manage only a fraction of this feast. At last, we retire to our cosy hotel room, resting in a snug double bed overlooking the open sea. I drift off to sleep dreaming of shared ventures and the emergence of something entirely new. What that will be will gently reveal itself in its own time.

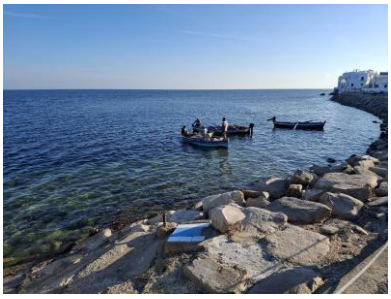
The Memory of Water

September 25, 2026

Sea Views and a Lavish Breakfast

The sun is already high in the sky by seven o'clock when I open my eyes. From her bed, Annelieke has already watched the morning light rise directly out of the sea. It is a splendid hotel room—tiny, yet blessed with a view that invites you to linger far longer. Regrettably, our journey resumes immediately after breakfast. Fortunately, there is still just enough time for a shared morning stroll along the promenade. In the brisk morning air, local fishermen are readying their wooden vessels for departure; they wave warmly, greeting us in a melodic blend of Arabic and French. Atop a rolled-up mound of trawling nets, a mother cat has settled her nest of downy kittens. Cats, in any case, roam here in astonishing numbers.





Economic Growth or Human Well-Being

We return punctually for breakfast, which this morning comprises 'only' five courses: fresh crusty baguette with fig conserve, creamy halva, hazelnut spread, a fried egg nestled on a spiced tomato and pepper relish, a pain au chocolat, an immense sugared doughnut, and finally a delicate crêpe, cheerfully decorated with chocolate sauce and colourful sweets. At the reception desk, I fall into conversation with Elyes, an economics student working at the hotel. We wander into a philosophical reflection on economic growth. He speaks with quiet passion about how his country has endured decades of systematic exploitation to serve purely commercial interests. In contrast, authentic progress ought to revolve around the well-being of human communities. He is visibly exasperated by the deluge of cheap knick-knacks flooding local souks: manufactured clutter that nobody genuinely needs. As our dialogue deepens, the bus's horn sounds outside, summoning us to depart.






A Living Ecosystem Against the Neighbour's Tractor

We travel to the ancestral land cultivated for generations by the forebears of our guide, Elyes. Elyes shares his vision for this plot: he intends to break the grip of monoculture by cultivating active biodiversity, pairing innovative rainwater harvesting with time-honoured surface irrigation. He explains that land here is not transacted by the square metre, but by the olive tree. Because the earth is strewn with coarse river gravel, he has painstakingly laid out comfortable footpaths of compacted sand and fieldstones, bordered by stone channels designed for equitable water distribution.

Upon the land stands a modest single-room stone dwelling. Sunken before the threshold lies an underground cistern catching every precious drop of rain. Around the perimeter of the plot, he has raised a stout dry-stone wall. When Mieke inquires whether the barrier is meant to keep wild animals at bay, Elyes answers with a wry grin: "*No, that wall stands entirely to keep the neighbour and his tractor out!*" Only by walling off his haven can his vulnerable young saplings remain shielded from ruthless, indiscriminate ploughing.





The Meditative Farmer's Walk

His garden is an oasis of diversity in the making: thriving amidst traditional olive trees are fleshy Aloe vera, spiky wild asparagus, neat rows of prickly pear (*Opuntia*), slender young pomegranate trees, silver-leaved desert wormwood (*chih*), a juvenile acacia, and a distinctive cylindrical cactus. Bordering the plots are compost heaps layered with shredded olive prunings and nutrient-rich mulch of beached kelp. In the corner, a large holding tank acts as a distributor for the stone gravity channels, whilst just beyond the enclosure sits a natural overflow pond beneath a broad canopy tree. Frogs croak merrily amongst water plants, and small fish snap at mosquito larvae; with good fortune, dragonflies will soon make their home here as well.

Beside the cistern, Elyes lifts two heavy galvanised buckets and demonstrates the '*meditative farmer's walk*': a rhythmic, repeated stride that not only irrigates the beds but conditions the muscles and calms the wandering mind. Stefan and Prajjwal take up the gauntlet immediately, pacing carefully through the garden with brimming pails of water balanced at their sides. Joe adds that constructing the ecological cottage was made possible through a generous grant from a Californian friend of Penny's. Now that the physical and financial foundations are laid, the work turns wholly towards community weaving and initiating regenerative demonstration projects.





Solitary Sentinels on a Barren Field

Walking back towards the bus across the neighbour's adjacent acreage, the contrast becomes painfully stark. Local farmers here plough their soil mechanically every three months to obliterate every single blade of 'weed'. The olive trees stand in rigid military gridlock, spaced at least fifteen metres apart. Because monoculture trees are exceptionally fragile and prone to blight, growers attempt to prevent cross-infection simply by maximising isolation.

It instantly recalls the bark beetle infestations that devastated the monotonous spruce plantations of Germany's Harz mountains. It is the tragic, upside-down rationality of industrial agriculture: create an artificial desert monoculture, and when the weakened living system proves vulnerable, condemn the trees to solitary confinement to suppress epidemics. These olives feel hollowed out, solitary, and numb. Severed from a thriving mycelial commons beneath the soil, they cannot whisper to a single neighbour. Not a bird sings; not a solitary cricket chirps. Not a blade of grass pierces the dust; there is only barren, sun-scourged flint.

The Manifold Faces of Water

Aboard the swaying bus, I return to the overarching inquiry I brought with me on this journey: what does water truly mean to our diverse fellowship across our varied cultures? Is it sacred, utilitarian, or restorative? I think of Youssef, who washes himself regularly with deep, quiet reverence, an ablution breathing spiritual purification, yet in the sweltering desert heat also an elemental reset for clarity of mind. I picture Joe and Hasan standing serene beneath the rushing waterfall like carved river stones, and Denis, drawn into the Sahara to coax ancient mountain streams back into their riverbeds to resurrect the prehistoric lakes of Central Tunisia.



Merging with the Landscape

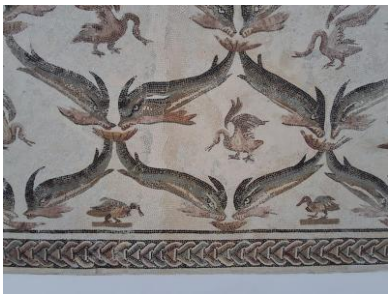
Following a light lunch of crisp, aromatic salads at Dar Ammar, I continue talking with Claire and Mieke. Claire shares luminous childhood memories of a crystalline alpine lake where she once camped with her parents, penning a postcard to her grandparents from the shore. To this day, she canoes across mirror-flat waters each year. The unbroken stillness of the deep and the silent ring of forested crags consistently evoke in her a sensation of dissolving entirely into the landscape; a recent photograph holding that selfsame childhood postcard united past and present in one suspended moment.

Forbidden to Play in the Stream

A little later, I sit down beside Prajjwal. He shares openly that he feels no spiritual or religious affinity with water whatsoever; he identifies staunchly as secular. His youth in India was blanketed by deep superstition: every childhood scrape or setback was chalked up by his anxious mother to celestial displeasure. As he recounts this, he strikes his palm with his fist to underscore his point: "*No, Mother, my knee is bleeding because I took a nasty tumble off my bicycle!*" That uncompromising clarity of cause and effect propelled him into empirical natural science. Until the age of twenty, his mother strictly

forbade him from swimming for fear of misfortune; carefree childhood paddling was something he never experienced.

Yet he grasps the bioregional vision championed by Joe Brewer and the Design School with pristine lucidity. It is precisely his scientific and ecological grounding that breeds impatience with hollow ritual: how can one proclaim a river like the Ganges sacred and offer daily ceremonies on its banks, whilst simultaneously discharging tonnes of untreated chemical sludge and plastic into its current? Authentic reverence for a living artery reveals itself not through liturgical phrases, but in safeguarding and respecting the living web upon which all life hinges.





Goddess Africa and the Vanished Forests

We arrive at the archaeological museum of El Djem. Laid bare before us is a magnificent Roman provincial city, crowned by an expansive villa adorned with breathtaking mosaic pavements that have outlived empires. The level of craftsmanship is extraordinary; thousands of miniature coloured stone tesserae coalesce into scenes of vivid, lifelike precision.

Elyes leads us to the famed mosaic of the goddess Africa. He explains that Roman outsiders originally bestowed the name *Africa* upon this northern province alone, a colonial label subsequently stamped across the entire continent. For his own part, he identifies primarily as Mediterranean, his lineage woven into the inland sea. It mirrors the bioregional premise that Joe and Penny advocate when they refer to North America as Turtle Island: political frontiers are transient human fictions that disregard natural hydrological catchments.

Alongside Prajjwal, who brings his ornithologist's eye, I examine the animal mosaics. We pick out hares, stags, purple herons, lions, ducks, and leopards. A quiet melancholy settles over us: around 300 AD, this land was a verdant mosaic of dense oak and pine woods, fertile scrubland, and open savannahs threaded by perennial streams.

From Imperial Granary to Arid Steppe

North Africa served as the breadbasket of imperial Rome. Yet the subsequent desertification and the extinction of large mammals were no stroke of climatic fate; they

were the direct consequence of centuries of human extraction. Unsparing logging for naval timber and smelting, wholesale clearing of ancient forests for cereal monocultures, overgrazing by herds, and the industrial capture of apex predators for gladiatorial spectacle in the amphitheatres stripped the land bare. What was once a resilient, living forest was degraded by human design into a parched steppe.



Gladiators and Dromedaries at the Amphitheatre

Presently, Tellel appears, signalling for us to gather. We return to the coach for the short hop to our next destination: the colossal amphitheatre of El Djem, an imperial colosseum rising almost completely intact above the modern town. Stefan carries his wooden swords, dutifully brought along by his parents. Once inside the sandy arena, his intentions become plain: he challenges his father, Denis, to an impassioned duel.

Whilst we sip cold drinks nearby, a dromedary saunters casually into the street from around a corner. Directly behind it putters an elderly man astride a worn moped, nudging the beast forward at a leisurely crawl. The camel ambles unhurriedly over the paving stones, wholly unfazed by the bustle. The scene is delightfully comical: a man taking his dromedary for an afternoon walk through the town centre! Does local by-law require him to clear up the droppings as we must in the Netherlands, I wonder aloud?

And what dimensions would such waste bags take—pedal-bin liners wielded alongside a coal shovel? The picture strikes one as utterly surreal, until one remembers that across European historic centres we routinely parade horse-drawn carriages through traffic. In truth, the distance between us is negligible.

Around the piazza, we browse artisan stalls displaying hand-cut mosaics. Henderieke purchases a stone plaque inlaid with an exquisite tree, whilst Prajjwal distributes freshly baked local bread among our company. We relish the cool shade beneath a trailing magenta bougainvillaea until the coach calls us once more.



The River Flowing Through Us

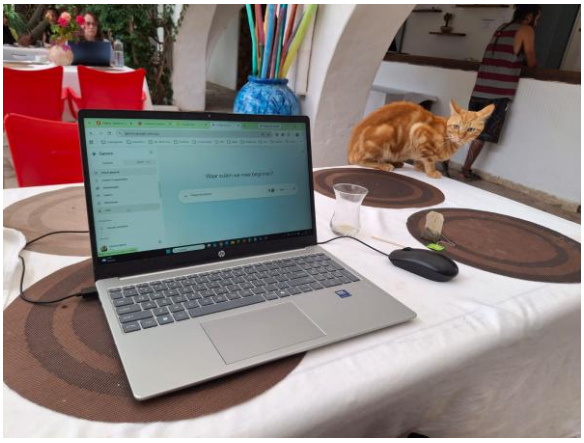
As the sun dips below the horizon and paints the sky in shades of ochre and burnt orange, I ponder my own roots in water. As a girl, I took to the water with my parents aboard our small boat, plunging into the lakes the moment the engine fell silent. As a toddler, I was already skimming across frozen Dutch canals to the neighbouring village on ice skates, bursting with pride. My father dreamed of embarking on sweeping cross-country winter skate tours as he had in his youth, yet in our rapidly warming climate, those vast sheets of ice never returned for us. And whenever I cycled off to swimming lessons, my grandmother was always there on her balcony, waving encouragement.

Is water sacred to me? Perhaps not in an orthodox, liturgical sense, but certainly in an existential, embodied one. For twenty years, I have walked every single morning with my dog along the banks of the Laak, the stream winding behind our home. I watch its currents swell into torrents after cloudbursts and lie glassy and still beneath summer willowdown; I watch ducklings fledge, and in winter I witness swans, mallards, and coots gathering in a single unfrozen lead of dark water. Through the river, I read the turning of the seasons and gauge the vitality of the landscape.

Ancient, Deep Knowing

This journey through Tunisia has drawn that thread tighter. As a species, we must surrender the hollow illusion that we can bend the living world to our will. The trees, the bedrock, and the subterranean waters hold an ancient, deep literacy that modern culture has discarded. Our primary task is simply to quiet ourselves and remember how to listen.

Outside, the moon hangs nearly full and brilliant in the night sky. Tomorrow brings a welcome day of rest before our three-day gathering commences and new voices join the circle. It feels fitting that the lunar cycle will begin to wane thereafter: an inward turning, an invitation to share lived experiences, and to weave the newcomers gently into our collective fabric of soil, canopy, and living water.





After the long day, I write my blog, and after dinner Jane sings a few songs. Prajjwal contributes with his dancing skills, and before we know it, the whole group is dancing with the crew of the location. A wonderful way to blow off some steam before the gathering.

27, 28 en 29 September 2026

Tunisia

Gathering to birth the Mediterranean Hub

Meet the group (II)



Joe



Penny



Prajjwal



Ralph



Henderieke



Rawane



Denis



Boulos



Jane



Annelieke



Hadi



Zied


Elyes

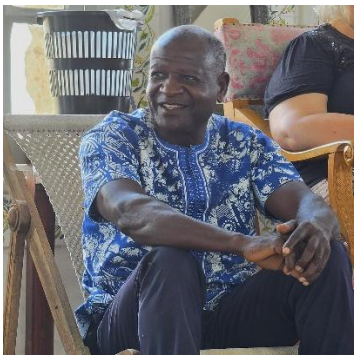

Kareem


Heide Maria


Youssef


Katja


Arafet


Konkankoh

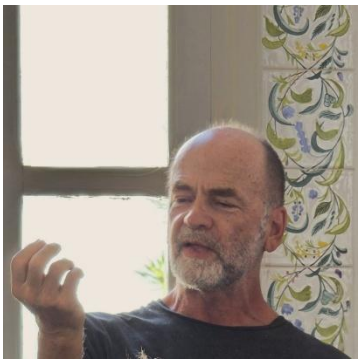

Nita


Igor


Mieke


Sandra


Mariana



Walt



Safouan



Bree



Claire



Hassan



Stefan



Talal (tour guide)



Azziz (bus driver)

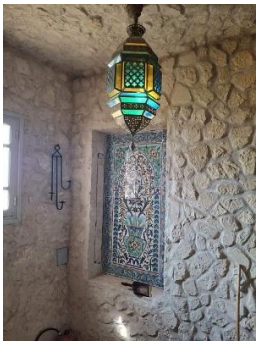
A Circle Within a Circle



From Colonial Scars to Living Water

When the engine of our bus finally falls silent beside a seaside castle, after days of rutted sand tracks and waterlogged roads, the transition feels almost violent. Outside, the Mediterranean Sea laps gently against the shore where flamingos wade on slender legs. Inside, we are met by the exquisite interior of a renowned weaving family and a circle of travellers with weary eyes and dust in their hair, joined now by participants arriving from Portugal, Montenegro, Tunisia, and Canada.







The True Origins of Extraction

Joe Brewer leads the gathering over the coming three days. We start with a circle to get acquainted with our newly arrived extended family. Annelieke facilitates this with cards for life, laid in a beautiful spiral in the circle.

Joe holds up a historical mirror that suddenly renders the weight in the room undeniable. The Mediterranean Basin is not a neutral backdrop; it is the cradle of global extraction. While the Americas bear five centuries of colonial legacy, this landlocked sea carries millennia of conquests, empires, and mercantile routes within its tides. In fourteenth-century Venice, double-entry bookkeeping was codified, followed swiftly by the earliest chartered joint-stock companies, cementing the foundations of modern capital that severed financial return from the living soil.





The Lingering Grip of Dependence

A tightness rises in my throat as I look across at our local hosts. Formal French colonial administration may have ended on paper, yet its apparatus remains woven deep into the fabric of the nation. Foreign corporations continue to dominate vital sectors, particularly the olive and date industries, while raw commodities flow north and the hinterlands remain depleted. Decades of structural exploitation have not merely drained the land; they have fractured the inner sovereignty of the people. When generations grow up knowing their home is treated as a concession, instinctive ownership begins to erode.

The Question of Complicity

In the Netherlands, one often hears the careless opinion that communities across the Arab world fail to claim agency and remain fixed in grievance. Yet having witnessed the depth of this dislocation, I am struck by a sharp shame at my own European privilege. The Netherlands contributed heavily to the same imperial machinery, if not here in Tunisia, then across Indonesia, Suriname, and the Caribbean. Simultaneously, my Dutch disposition looks for practical openings: how can this cycle be dismantled? How can local people reclaim ownership, regenerate the desert fringes, and break free from remote conglomerates that dictate market prices at the end of the supply chain? I recognise how comfortable that detached problem-solving can be. Healing demands time, and a wounded landscape heals no faster than the souls of the people who belong to it.





An Ancient Presence on the Hill

On the second day of the gathering, we travel to visit a 2,500-year-old olive tree. Remembering my encounter with an ancient tree earlier on this journey, I approach with quiet anticipation. The sheer scale of its endurance defies imagination: this tree stood when Rome razed Carthage, it was alive during the lifetime of Christ, and it weathered the arrival of colonial armies from France. When I step beneath its canopy, I immediately notice natural hollows among the massive, twisted roots that offer welcoming seats. Sitting against the trunk with my palms resting upon the bark, I close my eyes.



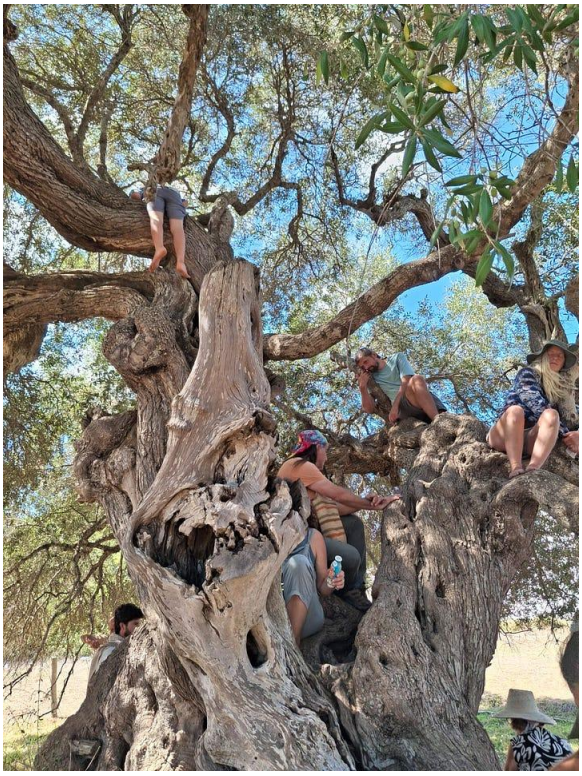
Echoes Across the Millennia

A sequence of images moves through my awareness like frames of archive footage: an ancient skirmish where a heavy branch is hacked away; merchant vessels coming and going across the nearby sea, which the hillside overlooks; and an elegant Roman villa

surrounding the grove, paved with stone mosaics. Then comes the roar of a monstrous wall of seawater. The villa is smashed, later replaced by a much simpler stone dwelling, which eventually crumbles in turn, until recent hands plant a hedge of colourful lantana around the clearing.

Rooted Custody

Sinking deeper with the tree, I sense its roots reaching far into the subsoil while spreading broadly through the topsoil. Seeing no other ancient olives beside it, I wonder whether it feels isolated, yet the impression returned is one of immense wholeness and peace. It holds a protective posture towards the shrubs, wild weeds, and small plants thriving around its base. Perhaps this is the quiet task asked of us: to stand so deeply rooted in our home ground that we instinctively protect the life encircling us. This tree has persisted because twenty-five centuries of human hands chose to tend it. Though scorched by lightning and pruned by axes over the ages, it stands patient, whole, and wise.





The Wave of 365 AD

Historical records later confirm the physical reality behind those impressions. When the earth buckled in July of 365 AD and a catastrophic tsunami tore along the North African coast, this olive tree, sheltered on its rise thirty metres above the sea, escaped direct saltwater poisoning. Yet the human catastrophe was absolute. Down along the shore, the quays, storehouses, and curing tanks of Neapolis were swallowed by the ocean, halting the vital olive oil and grain convoys to Rome overnight. The country villa lost its economic lifeline as the imperial export model was washed out to sea. The imperial presence did not vanish in an instant, yet the catastrophe marked the beginning of their end. Within a century, the Vandals took control, followed by the Byzantines, and eventually the Islamic dynasties. While officials, governors, and legions departed, the

local farmers remained on the terraces. Dynasties shifted and languages changed, yet the tree remained rooted, sustained by generations who simply needed its oil to live.

Charged Cloths of Intention

Beside the ancient trunk, we take part in an old communal ritual. Each of us receives a square of simple cotton cloth. Resting the fabric against the bark, we hold our personal prayer silently in our thoughts, charging the material with intention. Then, interlacing our fingers with the cloth folded inside our clasped palms, we circle the trunk in silence. Within my piece of cloth rests a twig and a small flake of bark gathered from the ground. It feels humbling to step into an act of reverence enacted on this soil across countless generations. Here we stand, individuals from five corners of the globe who might easily view one another through lenses of division, moving as one company around a common centre.





Silence on the Road Home

Just before we leave, I want to give the tree a gift in return. I have a rose quartz, and I put it in a hole in the tree. It feels fitting to give the tree a stone of love and spirituality. We board the bus and travel back towards the castle in complete quiet. Each person carries a private gift received beneath the branches, whether a resolve, a fresh perspective, or a lingering question. Yet following the midday meal, the work of shaping the Mediterranean Hub resumes.



Finding Common Ground

I offer my apologies for being European but also share the feeling that I have. “Let us anchor ourselves in what unites us rather than what tears us apart. We saw in Rawan’s film how one can experience the fierce beauty of the living world even beneath surveillance drones, and how our group of people from disparate lands can form a family. That living awareness is the real seed for this

Mediterranean network. Regimes collapse, and political borders dissolve, yet the living Earth and our kinship endure."

The Witness of the Four Directions
We separate into four groups talking about what the different countries need and want to add to the Mediterranean Hub. The Eastern Mediterranean speaks through Lebanon. Rowan describes cultivating community gardens and recording the natural world while military aircraft circle overhead. In her home ground, tending the soil is an act of spiritual survival against annihilation. She introduces the reality of the displaced grower: how does one tend the soil when ancestral fields lie behind military cordons or under unexploded ordnance? When the physical ground is denied, custody retreats to the inner life, to saving heirloom seeds in clay jars, and to grounding children in ecological literacy so that memory outlasts war.





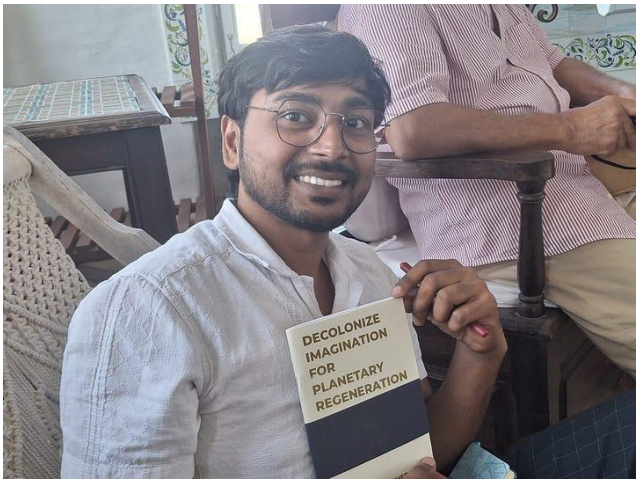
The Reality of Modern Monocultures
From the West, our Portuguese colleagues dismantle the idyllic pastoral myth of the southern European countryside. Over seventy percent of regional olive production in the Alentejo has been overtaken by massive foreign agricultural corporations, which employ intensive irrigation, heavy mechanisation, and deep boreholes that rapidly exhaust the groundwater to generate cheap cooking oil. Smallholders attempting regenerative practices find themselves operating in a legal grey zone simply because they rely on unpermitted wells.

From the Northern rim, participants from Montenegro and the Balkans bring memories of recent civil wars, understanding the long road required to heal communal fractures, while proposing sailing vessels to move seeds, practical knowledge, and people across the water without running into prohibitive consular visas. In the South, our Tunisian hosts describe the fragility of their urban supply systems, where intense heatwaves recently caused municipal drinking water supplies to dry up entirely.
We continue until darkness falls. Even someone holds a light so Youssef can read his notes. After sharing the experiences from the four directions, we have (again) a delicious dinner in the garden.





Rumi and the Sea
By the final morning, the room has settled into an easy, grounded stillness. A voice shares a passage from Rumi: We have walked the ocean's edge for too long, holding up our robes to keep our hems dry; it is time to dive naked, a thousand times deeper.
This quote sets the tone for clear, workable agreements: establishing technical groups to document water systems, learning together about mapping, starting a working group about education and events, agreeing on regular monthly virtual assemblies, and committing to preserve one another's narratives.





A Book of Plant and Paper
Elyes presents each bioregional group with an exquisite, hand-bound volume by his hand. Its cover feels rough, fibrous, and alive beneath my fingers. An artist formed the paper by hand, combining fibres from fallen palm fronds with shredded bureaucratic forms from local state departments. It serves as a quiet, poetic reclaiming: the rigid language of institutional management mulched into fertile ground for living literature.

Crossing the Pool
There is also Prajjwal, the Indian field ornithologist who reliably pointed out every passing bird throughout our journey. In the quiet of the group, he revealed how his overprotective mother had forbidden him from entering water throughout his childhood. On this final morning, drawing on the patient instruction Annelieke offered him earlier in the journey, he swam unaided from one side of the hotel pool to the other. To witness a grown man conquer a lifelong dread of the water strikes me more deeply than any declaration or strategy.





The Meaning of a Circle Within a Circle

Loading our bags and parting from companions who arrived as strangers and depart as kin, the refrain sung by the Lebanese youths on the road continues to echo softly in my thoughts: we are a circle within a circle, with no beginning and never ending. The image clarifies with sudden force. The Mediterranean Sea is no aquatic barrier dividing three continents. It is a vast cradle, a shared basin of blue water encircled by scarred, proud lands. Europe, North Africa, and the Levant, despite their centuries of warfare, imperial scars, and parched valleys, share one atmospheric system, one climate, and one water table.

My hope for the decades ahead is that these shores will learn to reach across the blue water in authentic partnership, just as we linked hands around the ancient olive. Not driven by compliance frameworks or institutional grants but sustained by an honest recognition of our mutual fragility.

It is life itself in all its unvarnished wholeness. It is the hum of military drones in the summer haze and the wheatear singing unbothered from an arid crag. It is the chemical runoff staining an isolated ravine and the fragrant dinner prepared by a mother welcoming foreign guests. It is the grief for what empire has broken, and the relentless endurance of roots reaching into the deep dark earth, stubbornly finding water.

All of these things. And more.




More information

The Netherlands:

Bioregional Learning Centre North Sea Delta

Tunisia:

Dar Emmima (Permaculture & Demonstration Farm, Chebba)

International:

Design School for Regenerating Earth

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