

Whycocomagh to Timbuktu: How a Nova Scotia girl ended up in Timbuktu married to a village chief, *The Nova Scotian*, Sunday Herald, 6 November 2005.

The sun, a flaming red ball, is sinking rapidly into the sand dunes to the West when we arrive at the home of Mohamed Lamine Ould Najim, better known simply as Shindouk in his native Timbuktu. The violent heat of the day on the southern edge of the Sahara Desert is dissipating, giving way to the blessedly — *relatively* — cool air of the early evening. On the other side of the straw mats that enclose Shindouk's sandy compound and his home of carved desert stone, nearly naked children kick at a deflated soccer ball, goats bleat and the women prepare the warm drinks for breaking the day's fast during this Islamic holy month of Ramadan.

Shindouk is a Tuareg chief, the Tuareg being desert nomads in West Africa whose name Volkswagen appropriated for its latest SUV. He works as a guide in Timbuktu, owns a caravan of camels that bring salt from mines 800 km to the north, and he frequently leads expeditions into the Sahara Desert. This evening, he has invited myself and a Malian journalist friend to his home to share a meal with a few members of his extended family, a niece and an adopted son who live with him, and his wife. As soon as the sun has disappeared, these people who have observed the Muslim fast, endured fourteen hours without food or a drop of water in this parched town, will slake their thirsts with ginger juice and local herbal teas.

Shindouk welcomes us, then leads us through sand that is warm and silky underfoot towards the corner of the compound that serves as the kitchen. It consists of the straw tent, a small wooden table set in the sand and covered with pots and pans, and a metal cookstove where a delicious-smelling sauce is boiling. There we find his wife wielding a large wooden pestle to grind spices in a wooden mortar. She is wearing a hand-dyed green robe of damask that reaches her knees with trousers to match, and as we approach, she smiles and rises to greet us. She is clearly not African by birth, but she handles the pestle as skilfully as if she were. She has the serenity and calm assurance of someone who is perfectly at home here.

She extends her hand, tells me her name is Miranda Dodd and then when I ask, she says she hails from Whycocomagh, Cape Breton. "Well, not really Whycocomagh," she adds with a small smile. "Out the Roseburn Road, about fourteen kilometres from Whycocomagh."

I glance to the east, over the low straw mat that separates us from neighbours in their straw tents, and watch with awe as a caravan of camels — their haughty heads held high as they stride over the sand dunes towards the centre of Timbuktu, then turn to Miranda. "How many woman from Cape Breton have a view of camels passing from their kitchens?" I ask her. She laughs. "Um, about one?" she replies.

There is no time now for questions, not now that the sun has set and it is time to go upstairs and partake of the teas, rice and meat sauce that Miranda has prepared for the family as they break their fast. We sit cross-legged on large carpets spread on the flat roof of their home, drinking, eating as the moon and stars emerge in the deep blue of the desert sky.

"We are happy you have come," says Shindouk with a wide smile. "It's not a five-star hotel or restaurant; up here we have a thousand stars." This is also where they sleep, Miranda says, because it is cooler than in the bedroom inside the house.

Later, after all have eaten and drunk their fill, I finally have a chance to ask Miranda how she landed in Timbuktu, married to a Tuareg chief.

She laughs and says it's a long story. And as she starts to recount her childhood, moving between Cape Breton, the home of her father and his ancestors, highland and lowland Scots who were among the first settlers in Nova Scotia, and Oregon in the United States from where her mother comes, it is obvious that this poised young woman is not unused to moving about and adapting to new places and people. Born with dual nationality, Canadian and American, she grew up moving back and forth like a nomad.

She tells me that she is twenty-seven and that her father is a woodworker who only recently got a telephone in his hand-hewn log cabin "out the Roseburn Road" in Cape Breton. She grew up without electricity — the cabin was illuminated with an argon bulb that her father rigged up to an antique telephone that he cranked to light it. She and her two sisters collected water from springs on their property. It wasn't a typical North American upbringing, but she says "I don't think I'm the worse off for that."

After high school at Whyocamagh Consolidated, Miranda headed to university in Oregon where she did an Honours degree in Geology, before joining the American Peace Corps in 2000, which brought her to Africa. For four years, she lived in the tiny village of Djeol on the Senegal River in Mauritania, where she ran a project to promote community health, water and sanitation. She mastered the local language Pulaar so well that she wrote a book in it, a collection of stories with illustrations that offer valuable information to rural people in developing countries on basic health.

It was in December 2003 that she first met Shindouk on a trip to Timbuktu. He takes up the tale. "I was in the marketplace in Timbuktu and I saw this woman sitting there calmly writing something. She was wearing a headscarf in respect of our traditions here, and I could see she was not just another tourist. I was attracted by her knowledge, her respect for our customs — she even fasts with us even though she is not a Muslim — and her beauty." They were married in a religious ceremony in April 2004 and then in a civil ceremony in Timbuktu in August last year. "I have the most beautiful wife in the world," Shindouk proclaims with pride.

Miranda's father has been to visit her in Timbuktu and her parents have wished her well in her marriage. But she chuckles as she recalls how some of her friends in North America responded when she told them she was marrying a Tuareg. "But isn't that a car? How can you marry a car?"

A talented artist, photographer and writer, Miranda says she is now working on putting all her letters home and her journal entries into book form for publication one day. Although she sews her own clothes and cooks everything from scratch, she says she is not a "natural housewife" and one day she would like to go back to work in development. But for now, she says she and her husband manage fine with what they have. They have water brought to the house, she charges her laptop using a few solar panels on the roof, and they live fine without electricity. "We always seem to have what we need when we need it," she says.

Both Shindouk and Miranda are looking forward to a huge party they will throw here in January to celebrate their marriage, which will bring together a wonderful mix of Tuareg nomads from the desert and as many of Miranda's relatives and friends who can afford the long trip from Cape Breton to her new home in Timbuktu.