



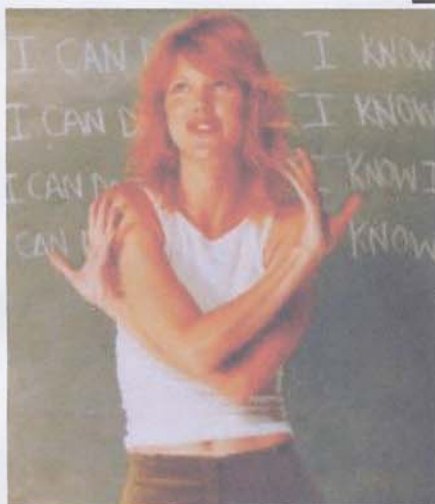
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'In the face of poverty and hunger'

c basinet visits western sahara to highlight the problem facing the Sahawari people

interviewed by jaybee@thisistheloft Oct 2001

Photo courtesy of Walking Magazine

Earlier this year, Cynthia Basinet traveled to the Western Sahara to visit refugee camps of the Sahawari and witness firsthand their plight. Many of the Saharawi moved into a remote region of Algeria decades ago during a civil war, and have been waiting for the opportunity to vote on whether to remain part of Morocco, which now governs their homeland, or become independent. While politicians debate and delay their chance for self-determination, the Sahawari remain in the desert.

Cynthia, whose singing career has blossomed via her involvement in the Internet through sites such as MP3.com, first heard about the Saharawi by receiving an email about the situation. Within months, she was on her way to North Africa. We caught up with Cynthia on the Web, for a chat about her experience.

Reading an email is one thing, but traveling halfway around the world to get involved is quite a commitment.

Why did you decide to go?

I felt it from the get-go. I was interested in meeting people that had been living in self-determination for 26 years. They had been bombed, they had been napalmed, basically the way that



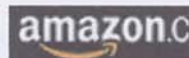
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governments dealt with problems in the 1970s. They were so innocent that they thought running into their tents would protect them. When they first went into the desert, everyone thought they would just perish and the "problem" of these people would just go away.

What were you expecting to find? And what was it like?

I had no preconceived idea, but when I got there I was in shock at both their barren existence against such harsh elements and their ability to find joy and function through such heartache. For a refugee camp, it was run first-rate, with pride. However, their children are stunted; they have no medical care to speak of, and nothing is moving forward.

Their major hospital has nothing - not 1980s outdated equipment, not 1960s outdated equipment. Nada. Still, the leaders of each camp were filled with such pride in their ability to withstand the hardships and function as a society. That is what kept resonating within my mind. You know many of these people were doctors, architects, etc. This is not some uneducated, "victim-y" society.

What stands out in your memory of the trip?

There was a cargo trailer filled with gifts for the children, which had been sent by religious charities and should have arrived before our visit. Each day the camp awaited word on its arrival from the coast, but first it had to be paid, then a "shipping" fee had to be paid for its release, then the truck broke down on its way. It took weeks, what should have been such a simple thing.

I'll never forget one man I met, named Zorgan. He had lost his arm because they were unable to set a break, and instead had to amputate. He was not married but carried the responsibility of the camp's children as if they were his own. They have no "mine" or "yours," they all work together and share responsibility for each other, and they work very hard to keep that bond. They are a very cool people. They have grace and honor.

What's the outlook for them now?

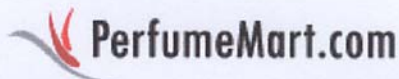
They've had their food cut back, which comes from the World Food Program at the UN. So they need food and water to keep surviving. But they really need a way to continue to be self-empowered, so instead of relying on organizations like the UN and charities, they can reach out to the world, trade for what they need. That's why I think the Internet can be such a powerful tool for them, if they can get computers and what they need to use them. They won't be so isolated.

Most of all, they need to have the referendum they have been promised, which would let them go home. Governments are trying to pressure them to give up their camps and accept a political settlement they don't want. I believe 94 countries have backed the idea of holding a referendum on their future, but Morocco doesn't want it to happen.

What can people do to help, or learn more?

There is a [website](#) that has a lot of information about the Saharawi and their situation. It has links to other sites, including one at the [United Nations](#) about the referendum that was promised 10 years ago now.

Of course, it might help to write to your politicians and tell them to support letting the referendum happen. But I think that people need to start to think about the process of aiding others as an everyday thing. We're all in this together. It takes all facets to make a world a diamond.



How do you want to smell today?

