

# **BAREFOOT TO TIMBUKTU**

A Film by  
**Martina Egi**

**86 Minutes, 16:9, Dolby Stereo**

**English, French, German, Sorai, Arabic, with English Subtitles**

**Starting in New York Theaters  
February 5, 2010**

# Synopsis

Araouane, a once prosperous oasis in the middle of the Sahara, chokes beneath encroaching dunes. While traveling with nomads, Ernst Aebi, a New York artist, chances upon a few remaining starving people, former slaves of long departed rulers. Touched by their destitution, he decides to help.

Having become prosperous as one of the early loft converters in SoHo, New York's now fancy artist's district, he stays three years. He spends a large part of his fortune to revive the oasis. A vegetable garden, a school, a small hotel rise from the sand.

Civil war forces Aebi to flee, leaving behind a flourishing community and friends who count the days 'til his return.

Almost twenty years later he manages to find his way back to Araouane despite the region having become a lawless no-man's land. This is a deeply emotional voyage of hope and desire.

BAREFOOT TO TIMBUKTU weaves archival and new material into a fascinating portrait of a sensitive, wild, some would say crazy, globetrotting adventurer.

# Storyline

BAREFOOT TO TIMBUKTU tells the story of Araouane, a historical settlement in the Sahara, and Ernst Aebi a Swiss-American artist, who — destiny or coincidence — stumbles onto the dying oasis.

Born and raised in Switzerland over seventy-years ago, he becomes a successful artist in New York. He makes his fortune by converting many factory lofts in the exploding SoHo real estate market. During that time he also raises four children as a single parent.

In the late eighties, he searches for new challenges and finds them in Mali. Seven days by camel out of Timbuktu, the legendary “End of the World”, he stumbles on Araouane, a formerly prosperous water station for trans-saharan caravans. The now desolate settlement is about to be abandoned by the few remaining, and slowly starving former slaves of the oasis’ erstwhile rulers.

Using personal funds Aebi decides to help. He ends up staying three years. He provides food from Timbuktu while he directs the people who have never seen a fruit or a vegetable in building a garden, a school, even a small hotel. Though it may seem preposterous for a New Yorker to think he can impart to these desert dwellers any new wisdom or strategy for surviving in the Sahara, he does teach them how to grow their own food. Unexpectedly, it turns out to be trickier getting them to eat the completely alien fruits and vegetables.

In the early nineties, war breaks out in Mali, and Aebi is forced out of the country. He leaves behind a flourishing oasis and friends who long for his return.

Twenty years later, and into a Saharan region that has become a dangerous hotbed for heavily armed warring factions and bandits, he manages to return with a military escort and a film crew under the direction of Martina Egi. This culminates in an emotional journey of hope, anticipation, and desire.

BAREFOOT TO TIMBUKTU is a documentary film about a wild — some might say crazy — adventuring globetrotter and his obsession with the Sahara desert. Now over seventy-years old, his children have their own children and Aebi likes to say the only address where he can reliably be reached is via e-mail. However, when he is not in his SoHo loft or his Vermont farm, chances are good he is somewhere on the planet where even access to e-mail is not possible.

# CREW

Autor/Director	Martina Egi
Producer	Beat Hirt
Archives	Bob Marty
Camera	Frank Messmer Bill Rosser
Sound	Florian Flossmann Rolf Büttikofer Gabe von Dettre
Editing	Christian Müller
Soundtrack	Fatima Dunn Nico Contesse
Production Company	Mesch & Ugge AG Zurich, Switzerland

# ERNST AEBI'S BIOGRAPHY

The oldest of three boys, Ernst Aebi was born 1938 in Zurich, Switzerland. His father was a housepainter, his mother a housewife. He graduated from a technical school and passed the Swiss college entrance exams.

Fed up with school and with only forty dollars, he then traveled, mostly by hitchhiking and trekking, through the Middle East, India, South-East Asia, and China to Japan. He earned money primarily by drawing on sidewalks for donations from passers-by. First in Lebanon, then in Japan he started exhibiting and selling his paintings. After two years he returned to Switzerland through Siberia, entered Zurich University and graduated with a Masters in Political Sciences. To finance his studies, he lived mostly in Paris selling his artwork.

In 1966 he moved to the USA where, first in California and then in New York, he became successful as an artist. He married and had four children, After a divorce where he got full custody of his children, then seven, eight, nine and ten-years old, he moved in 1976 into a raw SoHo loft. Together with his friend and fellow artist, Fritz Gross, he converted it to a residential gem, which they then sold with a hefty profit. Aebi discovered a lucrative market and thus ended up converting almost fifty lofts that left him financially secure, to say the least.

Good friends helped him raise the four children. Now all have college degrees while the oldest, Tania, became famous for being the youngest person to sail single-handed around the globe.

After the children were old enough to fend for themselves he could again leave the bounds of arm-chair-adventuring and dive into the real thing. He started by wreck diving in New York harbor. He walked to the North Pole from Siberia, lived for a while off the land in the Canadian Arctic, and another time with reindeer herders in Siberia. He went up the Rio Negro, crossed the Amazon jungle in a dugout on the Casiciaras to the Orinocco. He raced across the Sahara in the Paris-Dakar rally, crossed the Atlantic four times in small sailboats, once with his children, once single-handed and twice with his second wife, Emilie. He and Emilie crossed the Himalayas, entering illegally into western Tibet where they became prisoners of the Chinese Peoples Liberation Army (described in the book *A SHORT STINT IN TIBET* by Ernst Aebi, 2005). They tried to defy the Burmese junta by getting overland from Burma to India. He drove all over Central and South America and the Australian Outback, started rock climbing on vertical slivers in the Alps, went up Aconcagua and made it to the top of Mont Blanc.

The ultimate adventure came with his discovery of Araoane in the Sahara. That is the main subject of the film *BAREFOOT TO TIMBUKTU*. It is also extensively described in the book *SEASONS OF SAND* by Ernst Aebi, Simon & Schuster 1993.

Aebi, the ultimate optimist, somehow succeeds in just about everything he attempts, and, even though past seventy now, he still attempts plenty.

# MARTINA EGI

## THE FILM DIRECTOR ABOUT THE FILM

“ Attracted by its cover, an image of a village drowning in sand, I picked up SEASONS OF SAND (by Ernst Aebi, Simon & Schuster 1993), in a Greenwich Village second hand bookstore. While reading it, and with my old fascination for the Sahara, it became almost an obsession trying to bring the story to film.

I contacted the author, Ernst Aebi, in New York and already from that first conversation on it seemed filming his story would be made easy by his attitude. “Can’t be done” is missing from his vocabulary. Among many other things, he also told me how in the early nineties an American film company, MPI, had filmed extensive footage about his Sahara project. Apparently that footage had never been used.

Beat Hirt, my boss at Mesch & Ugge AG, the film production company I work for in Zurich, Switzerland, liked the idea of creating BAREFOOT TO TIMBUKTU.

For the filming we went twice to New York City, once to his farm in Vermont, once to Curacao in the Netherlands Antilles to film him and his daughter Tania on her sailboat, to Timbuktu and (with a military escort) to Araouane in Mali, and then several times we filmed in Switzerland, in Zurich and in the mountains of Appenzell. Bob Marty generously let us use his footage from Araouane, filmed 20 years ago.

The footage has never been used before.”

# **BIO MARTINA EGI, DIRECTOR**

Martina Egi was born 1969 in Switzerland, graduated with a commercial sciences degree then spent a year in England. After returning to Switzerland she worked as a commercial artist, then becomes a production assistant in Swiss Television, working on documentary film production.

In 1999 she joined the independent film production company Mesch & Ugge AG. In 2006 Martina worked on a documentary TV film about the pope's Swiss Guard and in 2007 O MEIN PAPA, a documentary about the Swiss composer Paul Burkhard, who wrote the US-Nr. 1-Hit for Eddie Fisher in 1953. In 2006 she co-directed YEHUDI MENUHIN - THE SWISS YEARS.

BAREFOOT TO TIMBUKTU is Martina's first full length film. She skillfully overcame difficult logistical and physical filming obstacles while organizing and directing the shooting in Mali.

Martina lives with her life partner, a print and radio journalist, in Zurich, Switzerland. They have a one-year old son.

Martina Egi can be contacted at: [\*\*m.egi@meschuggefilm.ch\*\*](mailto:m.egi@meschuggefilm.ch)

Further Information: [\*\*www.meschuggefilm.ch\*\*](http://www.meschuggefilm.ch)

**Official movie websites:**

<http://www.barefoot2timbuktu.com/> (english)

<http://www.barfussnachtimbuktu.ch/> (german)

**Production Company:**

<http://www.meschuggefilm.ch/>

**Youtube Channel:**

<http://www.youtube.com/user/MeschUggeFilme>

**Facebook Fan-Page:**

<http://www.facebook.com/pages/Barfuss-nach-Timbuktu/112812767531>

**High-resolution press images:**

[http://www.barefoot2timbuktu.com/barefoot2timbuktu\\_media\\_images.zip](http://www.barefoot2timbuktu.com/barefoot2timbuktu_media_images.zip)