





that heady festival note

BY SIDDHARTH DASGUPTA

IF YOU LOVE LITERARY GATHERINGS, TALENTED FOLK MUSICIANS AND IMMERSIVE FOOD FESTIVALS, THIS STORY IS YOUR CALENDAR FOR 2016.

FROM CULTURE TO LITERATURE, FROM MELODIES TO RHAPSODIES,
COME TAKE A GUIDED TOUR THROUGH SOME OF THE WORLD'S MOST RIVETING FESTIVAL CELEBRATIONS.

Whirling Dervishes perform during a concert at the Fes Festival of World Sacred Music.

what's your poison?

Is it literature, the sort that stimulates and instigates in equal measure? Is it music bred through melodies too sublime to describe? Is it films, an entrée of indie with a main course of world cinema? Or is it food perhaps, the kind that'll have you saturating your instagram account faster than you can say 'yum'? Whatever your answer is, chances are there's a festival to go with it. Sometimes acclaimed, sometimes maligned, the world of festivals has exploded into the public consciousness and into the larger cultural zeitgeist this past decade. But with great popularity of course comes great responsibility. And some of these global celebrations simply haven't been up to the task—adding their bulkiness to a growing weight of formulaic, hipster-attracting fare. At its best though, a festival is a glorious coming-together of everything that is good and noble in this world: of people living, dancing and singing in riotous harmony, of all the distinctive colours that this world has to offer, of happiness bred through pure communion and the proliferation of the arts. Here are a few distinctive festival celebrations that achieve just that.



Mevlana museum
mosque in Konya.

MEVLANA WHIRLING DERVISHES FESTIVAL a sublime cultural flourish KONYA, TURKEY

Rumi's spiritual potency is commemorated with appropriate passion during this **10-day homage** put together by the **Mevlevi Order of Sufis**. The Order should know a thing or two about creating the perfect remembrance—they've been doing it since 1273. It's your chance to witness the famed **Whirling Dervishes** as they step, dance and sway in ecstasy to the 13th-century poet's poetry and spiritual observations. It's a stunningly singular experience, unlike anything you're likely to have witnessed before.

You'll find yourself surrounded by a predominantly Turkish audience, deep in the heart of Turkey's most conservative major city. As a result, this cultural occasion refuses to spoil you with the customary drinking, dancing and related merriment associated with most global cultural festivals. We're talking fulfillment of a deeper sort, the sort where the tenets of Sufism meet the prolific artistry of a group of devotees. In the midst of the authentic gathering, far removed from Turkey's hedonistic hotspots, you'll find yourself being moved towards a sense of divine realisation. As the Dervishes take to the stage at the **Mevlana Cultural Center**, their white robes and tall hats soon begin to sway in perfect unison, gradually moving onto the trancelike state where they lose themselves to the higher power. You understand then why UNESCO added this ceremony to its collection of 'Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity'.

It's a powerful ode to Rumi and a searing testament to the dominance of faith. And if all the spiritual elevation does seem to get to you, just remember that on the way back home, you could always stop over in Istanbul.

December 10 - 17



Donkey race in Italy.
BELOW: Truffle Bacchanal
and Medieval Fair in Alba.

ALBA INTERNATIONAL WHITE TRUFFLE FAIR food for the soul ALBA, NORTHERN ITALY

Consider this the **Cannes of food festivals**. The fairly odd-looking mushrooms that come with thousand-dollar price tags and fabled aphrodisiacal qualities have their own festival, but naturally. The **Alba White Truffle Fair's** origins go all the way back to 1928, when **Giacomo Morra** chanced upon the idea of a fall harvest festival. Since then, the Fair has grown to become a cultural gourmand's delight. You're spoilt by an intoxicating selection of concerts, wine tastings, and regional cheeses, pastas, and cured meats, each merged with the inescapably pungent attraction of the revered white truffles. Restaurants cosset you with it, the **White Truffle**

Market overloads you with it, and five successive weekends of the delicacy enchant you with it.

During your time at the festival, make sure you drop in for the traditional **Donkey Palio**—where nine donkeys representing the region's nine boroughs are the star attractions in the fight for the 'Palio', or silken cloth. The event is a humorous rejoinder to Asti's conquest of Alba, which burnt its vineyards and then held a horse race to commemorate the victory. The **Piazza Osvaldo Cagnasso** becomes a cauldron of costumed participants—soldiers, knights, noblemen and peasants—each playing their part in this playful piece of revisionist history. Another cultural celebration during the fair is the **Truffle Bacchanal and Medieval Fair**. Again, costumed performers narrate Alba's history in the presence of hundreds of burning torches and beautiful architecture.

But you're here for the food, and Alba doesn't disappoint. Whether you're tucking into a dish of pasta with shards of white truffle cresting the top, setting off into the woods



on a truffle hunt, or savouring the regional **Barbaresco and Barolo wines**, 'delizioso' will be the word on your lips. And while you aren't invited to the festival's closing live auction (unless you're somehow related to Brangelina), you're certainly welcome to hour-long wine tasting experiences at the **Hall of Taste**—where expert sommeliers leave you with just the aroma with which to bid Alba goodbye. fieradeltartufo.org | 10 October - 15 November



FES FESTIVAL OF WORLD SACRED MUSIC

melodic overtures through africa

A weeklong confluence of the melodic, the sacred, and the spiritual, the **Fes Festival of World Sacred Music (Fès des Musiques Sacrées)** is a rare experience. Played out against the backdrop of a beautiful century-old city,

the Festival has something for the music aficionado, the truth-seeker, the adventurer, and the global wanderluster in you—how's that for a journey? Long before you've touched the festival, you'll be enchanted by Fes itself—gorgeously appointed riads, redolent old marketplaces, historic medina, and the simple charms of getting lost within thousands of interconnected by-lanes included.

All the world's religions seem to be present here. Naturally, the two decade-old global musical soiree lays

on a treat of musical collaborations, cultural dialogues, bohemian escapades, and inimitable melodic journeys. The spirit of the ancient caravanserais is at play here, of strangers and travellers intersecting at a crossroads and coming away enriched by their encounter with one another. Your chosen address for each evening needs to be the **14th-century Bab Makina's palace courtyard**, where the legendary **Ravi Shankar** once enthralled audiences. The Festival's mission of commemorating '**Cultural Curiosity**' is embodied in its eclectic lineup—from Rajasthani folk troubadours and South African tribal dancers to pop superstars, medieval choirs and everything in between.

As you flit between intimate concerts and parties at the **Musee Batha** and its centuries-old cedar-infused garden, as you soak in the splendour of **Sufi Nights post-11pm at Dar Tazi**, and as you take in **world cinema at the Fes Forum's Film Festival**, you begin to realise the true beauty of a multicultural existence... and you begin to savour the essence of what it means to be at a legendary Festival.

fesfestival.com | May 2016



The two decade-old global musical soiree lays on a treat of musical collaborations. **LEFT:** The Erg Chigaga dunes. **OPPOSITE:** Morocco, Fes, Tokyo drummers at the Fes International Festival of Sacred Music.

KUMBH MELA NASHIK, HARIDWAR, UJJAIN, ALLAHABAD—INDIA

religion at its resplendent best

Some call it the most sublime spectacle on earth, others call it a gloriously riotous celebration of Hinduism without parallel, while a few fall back on the rather factual description of calling it the single largest gathering of humanity. We just call it the **Kumbh**. You're likely to be a single, insignificant drop in an ocean of nearly **100 million** pilgrims. The Kumbh Mela isn't simply about religion though: it packs in myth,

mystique, curiosity, and cultural showmanship in equal measure.

This celestially ordained pilgrimage of taking a dip in the holy Ganges is homage to the mythical battle between the Hindu Gods and demons over a kumbh (pitcher) filled with the nectar of immortality. This nectar was purportedly bestowed onto the cities of **Ujjain, Haridwar, Nashik and Allahabad**—the Kumbh Mela's focal points. Rockstar sadhus, fervent devotees, agog foreign gazes, ganja-smoking holy savants, spiritual groupies, the rabidly religious, and the perpetually curious are the usual suspects at any given Kumbh, and in the sea of humanity lies a life-affirming view of just what makes the world such a special place—different

religions, different nations, different motivations, swirling about in one cosmic cauldron.

Aside from the Ganges, dip wholeheartedly into the medley of transcendent discourses, theatrical performances and spiritual epiphanies that the Kumbh throws up. Drop into one of the **guru camps** or settle down in one of the increasingly popular **luxury tents** on offer. In this sacred collage of saffron and marigold, in this wildly surreal depiction of karma, moksha and nirvana, perhaps you'll come away with the feeling that liberation from the eternal cycle of rebirth might not be such a fanciful concept after all.

A 3-year rotating cycle across the four cities

A Naga sadhu gets ready for the Mahashivratri procession along with a foreign follower. RIGHT: Crowd at the Kumbh Fair in Nashik.



FROM LEFT: DHEERAJ PAUL; DINDIA PHOTOS/ALAMY. OPPOSITE FROM TOP LEFT: COURTESY OF DIFF.CO.IN; LUCAS VALLECILLOS / VWPICS / ALAMY; TRAVELIB/ALAMY



Guests at the Dharamshala International Film Festival.

DHARAMSHALA INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL cinema in the lap of nirvana MCLEODGANJ

As you wade into passionate discussions on film with a collage of travellers, filmmakers and bohemian poets, as you step into the fragrant Himachali *dham*, with its wild bonfires, as you settle into a fabled north Indian winter for a film festival in a town that actually has not a single cinema screen to its name, you understand a couple of things: you could only be in Mcleodganj, you could only be at DIFF. In three eventful years, the **Dharamshala International Film Festival** has carved out a niche for itself on the global circuit. Charm and passion might have something to do with it.

His Holiness the Dalai Lama calls Mcleodganj home, and the festival has taken some of his principles to heart in crafting a unique ethic: you'll find a sense of simplicity and a sense of innocence coursing through here as you flit between its two venues—the **Tibetan Institute of Performing Arts (TIPA)** and the **Club House**. It's about “bringing independent cinema to the mountains”—as propagated by the Festival's Founders/Directors—Ritu Sarin and Tenzing Sonam.

Instead of the pretentious vibe that flows through many of the larger festivals, DIFF is characterised by the curious elements of joy and celebration.

The passionate group of organisers and a tireless army of volunteers pour their hearts into ensuring that things go off on time, go off well... and in harmony. Before you know it, you're swept up in the heady vibe of world cinema, Indian indie, animated shorts, documentaries, and Tibetan fare. Leaving you with just enough time to explore the verdant valleys, the hearty pancake breakfasts, the large bowls of *thukpa*, and the impossibly narrow bylanes of your host hill-station. Make no mistake about it: film festivals may come richer, glitzier and sexier, but when it comes to charm, no one's got a march on Dharamshala. diff.co.in | November 5–8



Inscriptions on prayer carved stones in Mcleodganj.

IRRAWADDY LITERARY FESTIVAL MANDALAY AND YANGON, MYANMAR between the pages



Myanmar Mandalay Royal Palace.

How is it that a tiny festival lacking the global buzz factor of a Jaipur, the big funds of a Hay, or the massive presence of a Berlin has managed to capture the literary world's consciousness in just three years? Perhaps it's the lack of exactly those things. Or perhaps it's the sense of purpose and passion that drives Jane Heyn, founder of the **Irrawaddy Literary Festival**, and her small team. Held under the patronage of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, the ILF has quite unexpectedly taken on many avatars since 2013: as that of becoming a cultural window to the previously exiled charms of Myanmar; of becoming a showcase for many of Myanmar's oft-denied poets and writers; of becoming a slow if powerful vehicle towards freedom of speech and a harbinger of change in a country still treading perilously on the path to democracy.

Jane and her husband Andrew (the former British Ambassador to Myanmar) are at the heart of everything: fighting for funds, engaging international authors, procuring a suitable venue, and, at times, even sorting out water supply issues. The festival's success can be gauged by the fact that authors such as **Vikram Seth**, **Anne Enright**, **Louis de Bernieres**, and **Thant Myint U** have graced its sessions.

But perhaps its real success, as you'll find when you arrive at Mandalay, is the sense of camaraderie that pervades the air at ILF. There are a tiny number of international authors, so they have no choice but to get along! The atmosphere is however genuine, leading to a special bond amongst authors, audiences, and organisers alike. No frills, no fuss, just the good stuff could well be ILF's unwritten motto, and long may it continue to tread that path. irrawaddyilfest.com | Usually end March +