

**BEST FESTS**

Songlines now has over 25 Festival Profiles archived on our site. Check out [www.songlines.co.uk](http://www.songlines.co.uk) for inspiration before your next trip



The view of the old colonial, university town of Guanajuato, taken from the vast monument of El Pipila



Jo Frost reports from Mexico's leading cultural festival - a Latin American equivalent to the Edinburgh International Festival

# INTERNATIONAL CERVANTINO FESTIVAL

**A**lthough the baseball cap seems to have replaced the *sombrero* as the Mexican's choice of headwear, tradition still reigns strong at the Cervantino Festival. Every October for the last 34 years, the city of Guanajuato has hosted this international arts festival.

It seems curious that there should be a huge festival to honour the 16th century Spanish writer Miguel de Cervantes in the middle of Mexico. The tradition dates back to 1953 when Enrique Ruelas, a university drama teacher, got students to re-enact Cervantes plays in the plazas of the city. In 1972 it eventually became known as the International Festival of Cervantino – now the biggest cultural gathering of foreign artists in Latin America.

Four hundred kilometres to the north-west of Mexico City, Guanajuato is an old colonial mining town, which was at the centre of Mexico's fight for independence in 1810. Its historical importance is still very much in evidence, namely because the festival's principal venue, the Alhóndiga de Granaditas – an old granary building – still has bullet holes clearly visible in its walls.

Now a UNESCO world heritage site, the city is situated in a valley, surrounded by hills and overlooked by the huge statue of El Pipila – a local hero of the independence. There's a confusing network of underground roads

above a labyrinth of cobbled streets, beautiful colonial buildings and café-lined plazas.

Guanajuato is very much on the tourist trail throughout the year but during 19 days in October the whole town seems to be bursting with events taking place under the auspices of the festival. Groups of miming clowns seem to spring up on every corner; the feather-clad, chanting singers from the Chiapas region and accordion-led *norteño* groups battle it out with the *mariachi* groups who will – for a small fee – keep you entertained as long as your drink or interest lasts. Or alternatively you can follow a group of *estudiantinos* – the pied pipers of Guanajuato – students dressed in black cloaks playing mandolins, guitars and tambourines, who sing and tell local stories.

On top of all this impromptu street entertainment, there are all the programmed events to get stuck into. Last year there were a total of 181 shows, attracting over 600,000 spectators and despite the unseasonably rainy weather (ten concerts cancelled due to bad weather), nearly 90,000 tourists visited the festival. There were 64 musical concerts, two operas, 12 dance performances and 11 theatre productions to choose from, plus numerous art exhibitions and children's workshops.

Every year the organisers choose a guest-of-honour country as the central focus of the programming and last year it was the UK, meaning there were more than 250 British artists performing at the festival. These ranged from classical musicians such as the BBC Singers, the Philharmonia Orchestra, and baroque ensemble Red Priest, to electronic fusion group Sonik Gurus, Scottish popsters Aberfeldy and contemporary dancer Akram Khan and his group. The British Council was actively involved in the programming and director Clive Bruton said the UK's involvement was “a tribute to the cultural richness and vast diversity of British culture. This is the most ambitious partnership we have embarked on yet to enrich the vibrant artistic tradition of the region and to encourage cultural exchange between the UK and Mexico.”

But I didn't travel over 9,000km to see artists that I could see at home – the programme had plenty of other musical highlights on offer. Topping the bill were Senegalese singer Baaba Maal and flamenco star Cristóbal Reyes with his stunning group of female dancers who looked as if they had just walked off a catwalk (they were in fact all dressed by Giorgio Armani). The homegrown talent included *marimba* ensembles from the guest-of-honour region Chiapas, Mexico's most south-easterly state; Guillermo Velázquez – one of Mexico's greatest living *trovadors* and his group Los Leones de la Sierra de Xichú y Mapeyé. Velázquez

and his group arrived on stage decked out in magnificent *sombreros* and entertained the crowd with their humorous, highly topical and political songs – the presidential elections had just taken place – accompanied by two dancers doing the *zapateado* – more stamping than dancing, but they looked like they were having fun.

The following night the *Bandas de Guanajuato* kept up the tempo with enthusiastic support from the mainly local crowd with their assortment of '*sones, polkas y danzones*' – popular dance music from rural Mexico. They went down a treat with the audience who, cheering and clapping, joined in with the singing. The 60 or so brass and wind players, all in their poncho finery looked typically Mexican but their oompah-pah sound seemed more Bavarian than Mexican.

Expectations for the last night were high, as were fears about the ominous looking storm clouds. But these didn't deter the punters and the Alhóndiga was, as usual, packed. Refreshingly, most of the concerts

**Last year there were a total of 181 shows, attracting over 600,000 spectators**

at the main venue were free to the public, with only a few rows of seats reserved for spectators with paid tickets. However this meant the whole surrounding area turned into a health and safety nightmare with people clambering on every available surface, some crammed up against the walls, as a mass of people tried to move down the neighbouring narrow street to catch a glimpse of the event. A clap of thunder kickstarted the final proceedings but thankfully the evening stayed dry. Peruvian-born but Mexican-adopted singer Tania Libertad appeared onstage looking more like an opera singer in stature and attire, but the diva still has huge crowd appeal. The accompanying *mariachi* band were immaculate in their *charros* – the pinstripe trousers with studs down the sides – and of course, the inevitable *sombreros*. It did feel a little like a giant karaoke session with each song greeted with more and more enthusiasm from the crowd – and the closing fireworks display provided a suitable flamboyant finale to the whole event. Although programming for this year's festival is not finalised, it is certain to be just as varied, with China being the guest of honour country and San Luis Potosí the chosen region. Latin America really has a cultural event to be envied. ●

**This year's festival runs from October 3-21 2007**  
[www.festivalcervantino.gob.mx](http://www.festivalcervantino.gob.mx)



Top to bottom: one of Cristóbal Reyes' flamenco dancers; the *estudiantinos* entertaining the crowds; Mexico's only bagpiping band parading the streets of Guanajuato; the finale at the Alhóndiga

