

THE FESTIVAL OF A THOUSAND STARS

ARBA MINCH, ETHIOPIA

Julia Emery travels deep into the Ethiopian hinterland for three days of musical celebration

As an ex-Girl Guide, I like to be prepared. Mosquito repellent? Check. Factor 50? Yep. Anti-diarrhoea tablets? Of course. But squashed inside a sweltering bamboo hut, with five statuesque men in short skirts and clay-painted legs, I'm not sure that I've really thought this through.

It takes a day's bumpy drive south from Addis Ababa to get to this spot in the Ethiopian Rift Valley. And after an early start this morning, courtesy of the 5am loudspeaker call to prayer, I join the crowd heading along the broad, muddy track. Locals shake my hand; children call out "You! You! You!" – all smiles. This is clearly a special day.

Now in its fifth year, the three-day Festival of a Thousand Stars celebrates – and thereby aims to preserve – the cultural diversity of southern Ethiopia. Financed by The Christensen Fund, it's organised by the Global Music Exchange (GME) in conjunction with GUGHE, a local cultural association. Performers from different communities and multifarious ethnic groups have travelled here (a week's bus ride for some) to present their traditional songs and dances to one another and to the wider world.

The football stadium at Arba Minch is no Old Trafford. Normally it's a dusty, scruffy pitch, scattered with stones and prickly underfoot, but now, as if for cup final day, it is breathtaking – surrounded by mountains, birds circle overhead and gold, pink and red silk flags flap against the cloudless blue sky. Beside the pitch stands the stage, handcrafted from bamboo and eucalyptus by Andi Main from GME, alongside stalls selling jewellery, leather shoes and colourful hats.

Already the battered concrete terraces are crammed with 15,000 eager spectators; the early birds have bagged the few shady patches



beneath the acacia trees – it's going to be a long afternoon.

Suddenly, thumping drums signal that we're off. The Bonké horsemen thunder in, swathed in scarlet and yellow, brandishing spears, and at such a speed that they almost topple the speaker towers. The spectators leap to their feet, cheering and clapping.

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Hundreds of school children follow wearing vibrant festival T-shirts, grinning and giggling, waving the yellow paper stars they have made. After practising their songs for weeks, they can't wait to get started.

Everyone else streams in behind, drumming and chanting. The Wolyta, the Konso, the Hamar with their clay-caked hair, all are welcomed and applauded by the crowd. The parade takes an hour to pass, as there are 38 different tribal groups and

almost a thousand performers – hence the festival's name. The jumble of languages, costumes and weaponry is dazzling, and the participants are excited too – most are from such remote areas they never even see their neighbours, so this display is eye-popping.

Finally the performances begin. First up are the Hadiya ladies, beaming in their black and white stripes, pounding their drums as the men dance off into the delighted crowd.

They are followed by local favourites the D'Irashe, dressed in white tunics and shorts topped off with forage caps. They play their pipes, hopping from foot to foot, but when they stamp their feet, the terraces erupt with yelling and laughter. When they finish, everyone pleads for more – "re, re, re!" – but the smiling announcer, mindful of the ten minute slots allowed, firmly ushers the D'Irashe off stage.

Next are the Alaba in their tall hats, green shorts and waistcoats, resembling a troop of Alpine scouts. The Sheka have journeyed 1,000km to get here, the men eye-catching in skirts of false banana leaf, their glossy black manes (in fact it's goat hair) reaching to mid-shoulder blade.

And so, through the blazing afternoon, the stadium pulsates with dances and songs symbolising universal life events – marriages, funerals, a successful crop. These songs are recorded, and the royalties from the resulting CD go back to the ethnic communities, rewarding them financially but also – critically – demonstrating that their traditions are valued and are therefore worth safeguarding.

Off stage, some performers seem reserved, especially the Mursi with their distinctive lip plates, but others revel in the attention, cheerfully insisting on being photographed. Through an interpreter, I



compliment a young Arbore man on his dancing. In response he takes my notebook, writes "My name is Lele", and hands it back, smiling proudly at my surprise.

It is astonishing to see so many diverse groups in one place – as Dan Harper of the VSO says, "it would take months of travelling to see half of these amazing people." And they are willing participants, so any unease about potential intrusion is dispelled.

I ask Abebe, from the Bench Maji area, why he is here. "We were chosen by our community," he tells me. "They believe we are the best performers, we will make them proud. When we get home, there will be a celebration, and we will tell them what we have seen."

"The biggest thrill," says Su Hart of GME "is to see the interaction. The backstage area buzzes with people exchanging songs, copying dances, learning from each other. It truly shows how music and dance can communicate." Importantly, it also allows those from similar geographical regions to exchange, through interpreters, agricultural know-how and experience. It is easy to believe Hart's observation that this would never happen elsewhere. Clearly this festival is more than just a party.

HOW TO GET THERE

FLIGHTS

British Airways (www.ba.com) and Ethiopian Airlines (www.ethiopianairlines.com) operate daily between London Heathrow and Addis Ababa. Flights in December cost around £530 return.

Ethiopian Airlines operate internal flights between Addis Ababa and Arba Minch (Tues, Wed, Sat, Sun), for around £140 return. Travel to Arba Minch by road takes 8-10 hours – vehicles with drivers can be hired in Addis Ababa for around \$100 per day (try Tsehaye Mengistu, tel: +251 11 550 5162).

ACCOMMODATION

The new Tourist Hotel (tel: +251 46 881 2171) is modern, friendly and best placed for the festival, although it doesn't have the spectacular views offered by the Swaynes Hotel (www.swayneshotel.com, tel: +251 46 881 1895) and the Bekele Molla Hotel (tel: +251 11 662 0920), both of which are a 15-minute taxi ride from the festival site.



In the bamboo hut is a young Hamar man, his chest smeared with clay paste specially brought from his village. "At home we fight with the Dasnach about land," he says. "Here we sleep in the same building, and show each other our dancing and music. We don't speak the same language, and we didn't expect to make friends with them, but we are very happy." And when he returns home? "I have a duty to try and change things. And if I don't, there will be a price to pay when I come next year!"

As twilight falls over the closing ceremony, there is no doubt that this experience has changed both spectators and performers. It's feeling cooler, but the temperature on stage is rising to boiling point. Everybody – audience and kids too – swarms in to join the finale, and as the dancing becomes wilder and more frenzied, in the light of the foot-high flames, I can see that everyone is laughing. ●

The CD of the 2005 festival was reviewed in issue #43 and is available from www.1000starsfest.com. The sixth Festival of a Thousand Stars is held in Arba Minch from December 15-17 2007. Entry is free

Above: The Gamo tribe from the mountain range between lake Abaya and Chamo.
Below: The Mursi tribe

BEST FESTS

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From left to right: the Baskets from west of the Omo Valley; a group from the Bench Maji and the Hamar people, famous for their cattle leaping. Above: the Wolyta group



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