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FESTIVAL MED

LOULÉ, PORTUGAL

Jo Frost gets caught up in the party spirit of the Algarve's leading world music festival

The festival entrance into the heart of the old town looks magical, with twinkling lights draped high above the narrow, cobbled streets. Our first encounter with Loulé hospitality comes by way of dodging the waiter darting out of a small café, brandishing a flaming *chouriço*. This near-miss with a burning, spicy sausage serves to whet the appetite, so we decide to have a tapas and beer stop, sit at one of the many tressled tables lining the streets and survey our surroundings to try and get our bearings. Armed with the festival map and programme, we eventually find ourselves in Matriz square, the focal point of the festival and site of the main stage. People are crammed into every available space: in doorways, on the rooftops, craning out of bar windows. The young, and for this particular concert, heavily Spanish crowd – the border is

only 40 minutes away – have come to see the highly popular flamenco-*mestizo* band Ojos de Brujo, one of Festival Med's headliners.

The next morning as we retrace our footsteps back into the old quarter, it almost feels like a dream. Apart from the stages, there's no sign of the previous night's festivities. The whole town still seems to be asleep, so we decide to head for the market – a bustling, local Saturday morning attraction – pick up some tasty regional offerings and then make our way to the coast. It's only a short bus journey, but culturally it feels a million miles away, with its huge hotels, restaurant-lined seafront and bucket-and-spade toting tourists.

In contrast Loulé is a small, historic market town in the Algarve with a population of around 20,000. It's a prime spot for a festival, being close to the airport of Faro, numerous

popular beach resorts, plus the added bonus of almost guaranteed sunshine (something that is usually absent from other UK festivals occurring at the same time, namely Glastonbury).

The idea for the festival first came about in 2004 when Portugal hosted the European soccer championships and all the host cities were invited to propose different cultural events. The name Festival Med is a bit of a misnomer – last year's programme featured Bajofondo Tango Club from Argentina, Orquesta Buena Vista Social Club, Mali's Rokia Traoré, Justin Adams and Juldeh Camara. "Initially in the first edition, this was a purely Mediterranean festival, with only music from Mediterranean countries," explains Vasco Sacramento, one of the artistic directors. "Now it's a bit different; I didn't understand why we couldn't bring some artists just because they were not from Algeria, France or Italy. The people in this region want to see artists from different countries, from Africa or Asia, or wherever, and this is their chance, so it makes no sense just to have a strictly Mediterranean festival."

Now in its seventh year, it attracts about 25,000 festival-goers over the five nights – a mixture of locals, ex-pats and holiday-makers. Joaquim Guerreiro, the festival director, explains the philosophy behind the programming: "The DNA of the festival is world music, because when it started six years ago, there weren't many world music festivals in Portugal."

Locals and tourists mingle in the streets during the five-day festival, enjoying the impromptu street entertainment



ARQUIVO CAMARA MUNICIPAL DE LOULÉ. JO. FROST, ROSS WESTON

FEET TAPPING?

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Verde's Lura and *fado* superstar Camané play. The Gothic bell tower of the Matriz church, which also hosts early evening concerts, doubles up and provides a wall onto which video projections from the Matriz stage are shown. And if the hustle and bustle of the main square all starts getting too much, the municipal gardens of Jardim dos Amuados – aka the 'zona chill out' – provide a tranquil, beautifully landscaped haven where you can lounge on cushions, listen to more relaxed musical offerings and re-energise yourself while sipping on a cocktail.

By the last evening, we finally master the labyrinthine alleyways, and manage to work our way from the Cerca stage – formerly the courtyard of a monastery – where Rokia Traoré wows the crowd with her rock-chick leg kicks and funky bass-driven songs. Then we head back to the Matriz stage where former Police star Stewart Copeland looks like he's having a ball with his adoptive Italian Orchestra La Notte della Taranta – a tambourine-filled frenzy of *pizzica* and *taranta* music. The closing concert of the festival is Kimmo Pohjonen, Finland's



From top to bottom: the peaceful oasis of the Amuados gardens; Bajofondo in full flight; Ojos de Brujo's singer Marina Abad; accordionist Kimmo Pohjonen; the festival entrance; early evening festival-goers in one of Loulé's picturesque squares



Much of Loulé was destroyed by an earthquake in 1755, but thankfully the Moorish walls and towers of the castle remain intact and provide a perfect natural, atmospheric enclosure for the event. The town centre is closed off each evening and the 5,000 tickets (a bargain at €12 a day or €40 for the entire festival) sell out practically every night. "This is a festival where it's not the city that adapts to the festival, it's the festival that has to adapt to the city," explains Sacramento. Loulé's residents certainly seem to have embraced this annual musical fiesta. Sangria is served from people's doorways; kids sell homemade cakes and food from their windows; professional and part-time artisans alike set up shop along the narrow streets – the whole town centre is car-free at night – but even walking can become a problem with bottlenecks of people around the main stages. Fortunately there are plenty of refuelling opportunities, where you can watch the crowds go by and just enjoy the impromptu street entertainment.

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maverick accordion player, performing together with a string quartet. It seems slightly incongruous ending a Mediterranean festival with a Finnish act, but the ensuing aural and visual assault delights the enthusiastic local crowd, who are transfixed with the sheer energy of his playing. Perhaps this particular Finn has Mediterranean roots – he could certainly become an honorary Loulé resident with this sort of acclaim. ●

DATES This year's festival runs from June 23-27 2010

ONLINE www.festivalmed.com.pt

