

FEET TAPPING?

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MAMA ARSHIZMAN, ROCKPHOTO

→ FESTIVAL PROFILE

ROSKILDE FESTIVAL

ROSKILDE, DENMARK

Niels Pedersen appraises a curious rock supermarket which celebrates its 40th edition this year with an array of global goods on offer

Above: a birds-eye view of the festival site;
Right: Malian duo Amadou & Mariam who were programmed alongside acts such as Elbow and Lily Allen



JENS SAGE, ROCKPHOTO

If you really want to grasp the scale of the Roskilde Festival, climb the makeshift bridge that connects the two gigantic camping areas south of the main festival ground. As you reach the top of the stairs, you'll be struck by the vision of tens of thousands of tents and flags. There are people everywhere – walking, talking, breathing music, relaxing, drinking, kissing, playing basketball, queuing up for the tent cinema or waiting to have their mobiles recharged.

It is a sprawling, nomadic city that for one week every summer is erected on these Danish fields, as 75,000 festival-goers, 25,000 volunteers and 5,000 media folk turn the otherwise quiet university town of Roskilde, just 40km west of Copenhagen, into a living, rocking musical beast.

Going to Roskilde is not just about the music; it's a celebration of hedonism and, for many teenagers, it's like a rite of passage. It can also turn out to be like a tough survival course, especially if the weather is bad. The Danish summer can be unforgiving and has, on several occasions, turned tents and fields into mud streams, deep pools and soaked everything and everybody.

But the Roskilde diehards tend to forget the bad years, because the good years are marvellous. Nothing beats sitting on the grass with beer and friends, listening to music – which at Roskilde is diverse and plentiful.

Roskilde is fundamentally a rock festival, but one with a broad view on the world, with

the added spice of music from Asia, Africa and South America. The festival began back in 1971 with artists such as Ravi Shankar and Tania Maria playing alongside Procul Harum, Status Quo and Canned Heat. Many older festival fans still rave about Bob Marley's show in 1978, and in the 80s King Sunny Ade, Osibisa and Youssou N'Dour all played on the huge Orange stage.

Later on, world and roots music acts were all programmed on a special stage called the Ballroom, which dished out four full days of global sounds as a supplement to the general rocking and rolling. But for the last few years, Roskilde has gone back to programming world music on the same stages as the rock acts.

Last year's Saturday night line-up in the 18,000 capacity Arena tent showcased West African superstars Amadou & Mariam alongside Elbow and Lily Allen. This open-minded policy also placed Malian Rokia Traoré between the punky Friendly Fires and hard rocking Norwegians Skambankt. The Roskilde die-hards are resolute music lovers and despite sometimes stumbling into an almost empty tent to hear non-Anglo Saxon music, bands like the traditional overtone singing of Hanggai, Kassav', El Hijo de la Cumbia and Major Lazer attracted many new fans. With a music budget of more than €4.5 million, the festival has a lot of clout which means it's able to present bands from all over the world, including groups such as Tinariwen, Taraf de Haïdouks and Orishas who have all played here long before attracting the attention of the rest of the rock world.

A major factor in the festival's long-running success is its solid not-for-profit philosophy. At a time when most big festivals are run on a strictly commercial basis, it's refreshing that Roskilde is based upon a charitable foundation, who collect money for humanitarian and cultural work. All profits earned from Roskilde Festival are donated to charity – to local youth associations and sports clubs, as well as international NGOs. This is made possible largely due to its unpaid workforce of more than 25,000 volunteers who do everything from guarding the fences to cooking and taking care of the enormous amounts of garbage.

When you transform a field into a large city – with a population density larger than cities such as Hong Kong and Shanghai – the amount of waste created is huge. Roskilde was one of the first advocates of green thinking. There's a deposit on every cup you buy, and the use of alternative energy is becoming more widespread. There's a huge Ferris wheel powered by people on bicycles – you have to take a 30-minute spin before



People power – the huge Ferris wheel is just one of the green initiatives at Roskilde



Rokia Traoré (far left) won the first Roskilde Festival World Music Award in 2009; the Congolese Kasai Allstars (left) were one of the many world music highlights last year

getting a view of the festival from above.

But Roskilde has had its share of bad times too. In 2000 a concert of American rockers Pearl Jam was marred by the deaths of nine young men. The images of bodies being lifted from the front of the stage and the sight of distressed singer Eddie Vedder still haunts the

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festival, and, as recently as last winter, the last lawsuit brought against the festival by the family of one of the dead was dismissed by the Danish courts. Several police inquests revealed that a number of unforeseen circumstances were at the root of the accident – including bad communication, cold weather and low volume of music that caused the huge crowd to surge forward. Just left of the giant Orange canopy stage are nine trees formed in a circle,



where people still meet and share memories of 2000. The festival responded by tightening security in front of all stages and prior to every concert, the audience is urged to take care of each other – and keep the great Roskilde spirit alive.

This spirit is now visible in several other projects. The

Roskilde Foundation is the prime mover in making Copenhagen the host of WOMEX for three successive years. Last year they created the €30,000 Roskilde Festival World Music Award. The first winner was the Passarelle Foundation, founded by Malian singer Rokia Traoré who was one of the highlights of the 2009 festival.

At the time of writing, confirmed headline acts include Gorillaz, Serbian superstars Boban and Marko Marković, Balkan beats from DJ Shantel and the Bucovina Orkestar, the gentle Brazilian voice of CéU and the weird and wonderful sounds of Orchestre Poly-Rythmo de Cotonou and Staff Benda Bilili. ●

DATES This year's festival runs from July 1-July 4 2010

ONLINE www.roskilde-festival.dk