



→ FESTIVAL PROFILE

# SAKIFO

## LA RÉUNION

Jo Frost samples the many musical – and culinary – delights on offer at a festival celebrating the diversity of the Indian Ocean and beyond

If your criteria for choosing a festival is its beautiful location, then Sakifo will tick the right boxes. A large part of its allure is its exotic setting on the island of La Réunion, off the east coast of Madagascar in the Indian Ocean. There are naturally some drawbacks being based on an idyllic tropical island – a visit from the UK does involve an 11-hour flight from Paris, which hardly makes the festival a contender for a weekend musical jaunt.

However, despite its remoteness, La Réunion is still a part of France – it's what's called a DOM (*département d'outre-mer*); the local currency is the Euro and the official language is French. But don't expect your school-day French will be of use in understanding the Kreol locals as over 80% of the population speak Creole, a mixture of the different languages (French, Malagasy, Portuguese and Tamil) that have all had a part in shaping this island, formerly known as l'île Bourbon.

One rather special USP the island possesses is its very particular, rich percussive music called *maloya* – a genre steeped in the island's slavery history and which crops up in various guises within the festival's eclectic music programme.

The director of Sakifo is the amiable and laidback local Jérôme Galabert. Sakifo has been going for eight years and, alongside the label of the same name, it's proved to be Galabert's most successful venture. "I started three music festivals before and I failed every time – because there was not enough diversity," he says. "I tried one on just world music, but it was too narrow... I realised that we needed to have enough diversity to bring people from various communities and various tastes in music to make a crowd."

"You can find French singers, hip-hop, rock, world music. There's no code – I don't like codes. Although diversity can be a nightmare – you don't want to jump from Boubacar Traoré to Iron Maiden!"

The moniker 'Sakifo' is a clever pun that Galabert and some friends came up with. "It's very pretentious," he laughs, "but it means, *c'est ça qu'il faut* – this is what we need for us, never mind the rest!"

The festival is based in Saint Pierre, a town on the south-west coast – conveniently where all the best beaches are to be found. The site is within a private enclosed park of 4.5 acres, right on the beach, with a capacity of around 17,000 people a day.

The advantage of its relatively modest scale is that unlike other outdoor festivals where you dash between sets just to catch a glimpse of the band strumming their last chord, here there are only four main stages – all in fairly close proximity – and many of the early evening concerts are staggered so, with a bit of careful planning, you won't miss anything. And should you feel like a break from all the music, there's the bonus of being able to get yourself a locally brewed Dodo beer or a rum cocktail (paid for using an ingenious token system which prevents long queues at the bars), treat yourself to some delicious Réunionnais food such as *samoussas* or *bouchons* (dumplings) with *rougail* (chilli sauce) and sit on the beach to do some wave and star-gazing.

For the last three years, the festival has kicked off on the Thursday evening with a free fiesta in the town – *la fiesta de l'Océan Indien*. Last year it coincided with the inaugural Indian Ocean Music Market event (IOMMA, see #80). Five stages dotted along the main seafront host a variety of



## HOW TO GET THERE

- La Réunion (population 800,000) is located 700km to the east of Madagascar in the Indian Ocean.
- It's an 11-hour flight from Paris direct to Saint Denis, the capital of La Réunion. Three airlines offer flights to the island.
- From Saint Denis, it's a stunning drive along the rugged coastline to Saint Pierre, with views of the lush and green interior, belying the fact that the island is home to one of the world's most active volcanoes, le Piton de la Fournaise. [www.reunion.fr](http://www.reunion.fr)



From far left to right: the main festival site is situated on Ravine blanche beach, in Saint Pierre; the free stage at Terre Sainte which hosts daytime concerts and the Risofé on Sunday morning; maloya singers Firmin Viry and Tiloun (below)



bands – all with the common theme of being from the Indian Ocean. For a real taste of the music of La Réunion, you can't beat Firmin Viry – a spritely 75-year-old and the godfather of maloya – he's the Creole musician that all the internationally-known champions of the genre, like Danyèl Waro, hold in such high esteem. Over the course of the four nights, there's a huge variety of maloya on offer: last year's programme featured the electronic style of Ti Fock; the intense, call-and-response maloya from golden voiced Tiloun to the high-energy, crowd pleasing take on the form by Lindigo. Besides all the local acts, there's also a good line-up of big name artists to pull in the crowds, such as Tony Allen, Yuri Buenaventura, Vieux Farka Touré and last year Cape Verde's Cesaria Evora who gave one of her final performances and attracted around 7,000 people to the main stage.

Part of Sakifo's success is that besides the impressive global line-up, there's a real sense of community about the event. Although the island has an abundance of attractions for the foreign visitor, the festival doesn't specifically cater for tourists, but for the locals who make up around 95% of the audience. "We never work on culture and tourism, we're pretty bad at that. If you're so used to your environment, you cannot transform it into an advantage – it's become commonplace," says Galabert.

One of the events which recognises the local musical talent is the annual competition known as Le Prix Alain Peters,

held over the course of two afternoons on a free stage in the Terre Sainte neighbourhood, just to the east of Saint Pierre. Six different local bands perform in front of a crowd and .....

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jury for the prize, named in memory of Alain Peters, a local maloya artist, writer and poet who died in 1995. Its significance is made clear as previous winners such as 2010's Zorro Chang earned himself a spot on one of the main festival stages, and last year's winner, Tyeri Abmon who is performing at Babel Med in Marseille later this month.

The local audience is out in force at the early Sunday morning concert, called Risofé (Creole for 'riz chauffée' which literally means reheated rice). The idea comes from an ancient tradition among agricultural workers, who, before going to the fields, would take the rice from the previous night and fry it with a small piece of cod or sausage, served with rougail. "The mothers do the same for the kids to take to school. It's been lost with modernism and sandwiches, so we thought, it could be fun to start something," says Galabert. "The first time I decided to do it, I called this band and said, listen guys, I want to programme you in the festival, and they

said, 'ah, cool,' then I said 'I want you to do your show at 9am in the morning!'" Since then, it's become a hugely popular part of the festival. Every year a different, not-for-profit association is chosen to provide the riz chauffée which they sell for a small price, keeping any money they earn.

Last year, despite an early morning downpour that looks like it might put a proper dampener on the occasion, local band Baster draws a big, enthusiastic crowd – many of whom have been partying long into Saturday night. As the rain clouds disperse and the disparate mass of music lovers begin to dance, the real soul of Sakifo – its strong sense of pride in its culture and people – becomes loud and clear. **N**

**DATES** This year's edition of Sakifo is June 1-3 2012

**ONLINE** [www.sakifo.com](http://www.sakifo.com)



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Left: the locally brewed Bourbon beer, better known as Dodo, is the ideal accompaniment to the spicy Réunionnais food and music