



**MAIN IMAGE** Festival musicians performing in vibrant costumes  
**BELOW (left to right)** Musicians beating a rhythm in Essaouira; fishing boats in Essaouira harbour beside the ramparts of the medina

## 4 MORE WORLD MUSIC FESTIVALS TO RIVAL WOMAD

**FESTIVAL IN THE DESERT, MALI** Three days of Malian music, Touareg culture and sounds from around the world. This remote, hip and sandy concert takes place in Essakane each January.

**RAJASTHAN INTERNATIONAL FOLK MUSIC FESTIVAL, INDIA** This colourful celebration of regional roots music, dance and the performing arts is held every October at Jodphur's spectacular Meherangarh Fort.

**RAINFOREST WORLD MUSIC FESTIVAL, SARAWAK, BORNEO** Venues don't get more exotic than this. At this festival in the heart of Borneo, local artists perform surrounded by verdant jungle and exotic flowers, alongside internationally recognized names.

**FESTIVAL OF WORLD SACRED MUSIC, MOROCCO** Held amid the palaces and courtyards of the ancient city of Fez in June each year, this Sufi-oriented festival celebrates spiritual values, pluralism and cultural diversity.



# ESSAOUIRA VS WOMAD

*Essaouira's Gnawa and World Music Festival will immerse you in the music of an ancient African culture, while WOMAD just skims the surface*

## NEED TO KNOW

**LOCATION** Essaouira is situated on the Atlantic Coast of Morocco, 113 km (70 miles) from Agadir and 170 km (106 miles) west of Marrakech

**WHEN** The festival takes place each year over four days at the end of June.

**VISITORS PER YEAR** 450,000



The pentatonic (five-note) sounds of Gnawa music underpinning the festival in Essaouira have been adopted by many Western rock, blues and jazz musicians, including Jimi Hendrix and Cat Stevens who both stayed in the town in the 1960s. According to the Gnawa's *Maalem* elders, their music cannot survive without stretching its boundaries, so each year international musicians are invited to jam with them. The mix doesn't always work, but at what's been dubbed "the biggest jam session on the planet" the element of risk is all part of the excitement.

A typical jam might see Gnawa superstar *Maalem* Mahmoud Guinea strutting the stage in cowrie-shell-bedecked robes and wielding chords on his *gumbri* bass. Behind him a line of male musicians in colourful leather slippers dance like Cossacks and clack huge metal castanets shaped like egg poachers. A packed crowd – young men with girlfriends on their shoulders, children and parents, the odd tourist – cheer them on. The riffs loop over each other, echoing the singers' repeated chants to Allah in Arabic and the occasional word in West African Bambara.

Since 1998, the music of Africa's funkier, most mystical religious brotherhoods has been celebrated at the Gnawa and World Music Festival. Unlike Britain's WOMAD festival, where the range of music can seem overwhelming, this progressive event champions just one culture. Morocco's Gnawa people are descendants of sub-Saharan slaves who celebrate spirit possession through ritual music and dance. Today, the Gnawa are fêted by many for their spectacular religious performances that mix Islamic Sufism with African traditions.



**ABOVE** Crowds in the main square at the Gnawa Festival

Essaouira's neat size means that the nine festival stages are within easy walking distance of each other. Crowds of around 450,000 pack out the town's indoor acoustic concert venues and swarm around its large outdoor stages. Mainly Moroccan youths convulse to its late-night *lila* rituals – healing ceremonies in which spirits are invoked and trances entered into.

The Gnawa *Maalems* say that music frees the soul. And nowhere is that better exemplified than in Essaouira each June.

## FORGET WOMAD?

**THE BUILD-UP** Pioneered by the musician Peter Gabriel and various others back in 1982, the UK's annual WOMAD Festival has become a byword for quality live music from all corners of the planet. World Music's mainstream acceptance is largely due to this family-friendly festival, treasured by many as an institution on the alternative festival scene and held in July at Wiltshire's Charlton Park.

**THE LETDOWN** WOMAD's wide-ranging programme can mean the choice of who to see is overwhelming. The feeling that you might be missing the next big thing is palpable; the phrase "you should have been there" widespread.

**GOING ANYWAY?** Don't just stand there watching, join in: WOMAD has an extensive programme of dance and percussion workshops that get you closer to the cultures concerned. Then unwind: there are yoga sessions, cookery classes and even a WOMAD spa. Can't put up a tent? There are tipis, yurts and people to do it for you.



**ABOVE** Festival-goers milling around among fluttering silk flags at WOMAD

## PRACTICAL INFORMATION

### Getting There and Around

Royal Air Maroc and various low-cost budget airlines fly into Marrakech. Transfer to Essaouira by bus takes about 3 hours; a taxi will take about 2 hours. Essaouira's walled medina is compact enough to be explored by foot.

### Where to Eat

Numerous restaurants serve great Moroccan and international cuisine, but the highlight of Essaouira's food scene is to sample grilled fish and seafood straight off the boats. Try one of the many stalls in the harbour or Chez Sam, Au Fond du Port (tel. +212 24 47 62 38 or 61 15 74 85).

### Where to Stay

There are numerous good hotels in the medina, but it is essential to book ahead for the festival. Try the serene La Maison du Vent, 25 rue Mourabidine (tel. +212 24 47 38 19) or the atmospheric Dar Ness, 1 Rue Khalid ben Walid (tel. +212 24 47 68 04).

### Population

70,000

### Average Temperature

19°C (67°F) in June

### Budget per Day for Two

£110 for accommodation, food and travel.

### Website

www.festival-gnaoua.net