

TRAVEL MUSIC

Happy place

No matter where in the world, festivals have the power to unite, writes **Jane Cornwell**.



Left: Abdelkebir Merchane performing on day two of the Gnwaw Festival. Right from top: Omar Hayat on stage. Scenes from day one of the festival. PHOTOS: YASSINE TOUMI, KARIM TIBARI, ZAKARIA LATOURI

On a stadium-sized stage next to the Atlantic Ocean in Essaouira, Morocco, musician Omar Hayat is wielding a guimbri bass lute in front of a crowd of 20, maybe 30,000 people.

It's the annual Gnwaw and World Music Festival, billed as 'the biggest jam session on the planet'—a sprawling, largely free event, which is regarded as one of the top destination music festivals in North Africa and, arguably, the world. Young men, middle-aged women and selfie-taking teenagers chant along, football terrace style, to the music of this Gnwaw *maalem*, or master musician, the roar of their voices rising and falling with the sound of waves crashing against the town's great stone ramparts.

Gnwaw music—bluesy, soulful, hypnotic—is in the air throughout this three-day festival. Concerts take place outside, by the long sweep of shoreline, or up on historic Portuguese-built battlements, or in the large Moulay Hassan square. Late at night they also fill indoor venues whose floors are layered with carpets and privy

to bursts of trance-dancing, the result of repetitive patterns played by Gnwaw brotherhoods (and more recently, the rare sisterhood) on *guimbri*, side-drums and metal castanets called *qaraqab*.

It wasn't long ago that the Gnwaw, the descendants of slaves brought to the Maghreb from West Africa, were treated as pariahs in Morocco. But from Festivals invariably lead to greater levels of positive emotion, boosting feelings of joy, happiness and contentment.

its foundation in 1998 by senator Neila Tazi, the Gnwaw Festival has worked to transform attitudes towards these healer-musicians—who in 2019 were added to UNESCO's list of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. Sets at Essaouira include collaborations with established

side visit to Copacabana Beach is surely a must. In Barcelona for June's legendary indie and electronic music festival Primavera? A stroll to Gaudi's iconic church, Sagrada Família, makes sense.

Still, often it's purely the music that brings in the crowds. While many festivals have folded (and continue to fold) for economic reasons, there are some that—thanks to canny marketing—have become brand names, motivating people to visit largely unremarkable places such as Førde (population: 13,000, a little town straddling a river in Norway's fjord region north of Bergen. Since its foundation in 1990, Førdefestivalen has become Scandinavia's largest annual acoustic folk and world festival, taking place each July in venues including civic halls, churches, car parks and even on a mountain peak.

It's a fact that music heals, connects, uplifts. Look at the joy on the faces of all those crammed together before the Pyramid Stage at Glastonbury Festival in Somerset, with A-list headliners, an eight-kilometre perimeter fence and an eco-tastic Green Future Field. Or sense the freewheeling liberation palpable in 80,000 dancing punters at Burning Man, that Dionysian desert party espousing self-expression and cyber-punkish rebellion in wildest Nevada.

Or enter the big international village that is WOMAD, a festival franchise co-founded in the UK by the musician Peter Gabriel (WOMADelaide is the jewel in its crown), the Famed for its globally diverse program. It is a reminder of the breadth of the planet's music and a model for the inclusive world most of us want to live in.

"Instead of dreaming about a better world, participants seek to create it," writes British academic Davina Cooper in her book *Everyday Utopias*, a phrase which speaks to community building and grassroots change, which for many destination music festivals is a given.

Take the Woodstock Festival in Bethel, New York. Held in 1969, at a pivotal moment in the counter-cultural movement and at the height of the Vietnam War, Woodstock was a DIY Eden in which 400,000 people came together in the name of peace, love and solidarity. It transformed the image of its host destination forever: Woodstock the town (which is 97km away) will forever be the place where Santana and Jimi Hendrix once played.

Hendrix hung out in Essaouira, too. But guitarist Carlos Santana went one further, collaborating with the late Gnwaw *maalem* Mahmoud Gania, a Moroccan icon determined to keep Gnwaw traditions alive. And for 26 years Essaouira's Gnwaw and World Music Festival has done precisely that—so successfully that many of these healer-musicians are now viewed as larger-than-life national heroes.

Will I be back next year? You bet. To stand among the smiling, chanting crowd, watching a Gnwaw master in orange babouss slippers firing lightning bolt riffs from his guimbri bass lute. It's a feeling like no other. **AFR**

The writer was a guest of Gnwaw and World Music Festival.

Need to know

Book Gnwaw and World Music Festival, Essaouira, Morocco, June 25-27 2026

Get there Essaouira is a 2h 30m drive from Marrakech. It has no airport or train station.

Five of the best destination music festivals

Suma Flamenco Festival

Tromsø World Music Festival, Tromsø, Norway | October 30-November 1, 2025
Held in northern Norway on the edge of the Arctic Circle, under the strobing Northern Lights, Tromsø World is a small indoor music festival that celebrates global diversity via a program of acts from Africa to Latin America. Lauded Danish Macedonian trio Efterklang headline in 2025, and Norwegian space-disco-krautrock outfit Drongo are bringing the vibes.

EFG London Jazz Festival, London, England | November 13-23, 2025
Whatever your bag—be-hop, swing, hip-hop, spiritual jazz, avant-garde

marsh-ups—hit up this 10-day, 60-venue celebration in one of the world's great jazz capitals. Japanese piano virtuoso Hiromi features this year, and iconic Brazilian experimentalist Hermeto Pascoal. A raft of singing stars grace the Royal Festival Hall for opening gala, Jazz Voice.

Suma Flamenco Festival, Madrid, Spain | October 14-November 2, 2025
One of Spain's premiere celebrations of flamenco dance and *cante jondo* deep song, this mighty festival stomps and claps its way around 10 districts of Madrid. This year's theme, Tradition and Avant-Garde, embraces some 46 gales including 17 world premieres. Photographic exhibitions and round table chats add further flavour.



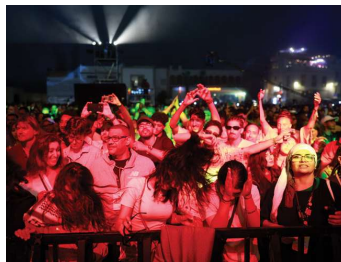
Ultra Music Festival, Miami.

Ultra Music Festival, Miami, Florida, US | March 27-29, 2026
Love doof-doof music? Ultra is a large-scale three-day electronic music festival held at Bayfront Park in downtown Miami, Florida. The 2026 line-up is yet to be announced, but the likes of DJs David Guetta and Martin Garrix have previously wowed 165,000-strong crowds, on bespoke stages with bespoke designs and psychedelic light shows.

Salzburg Festival, Salzburg, Austria | July and August annually
Salzburg was the home of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart for the first 25 years of his brief 35-year-life, and classical music and opera thrums in the DNA of this picturesque Austrian city. The Salzburg

Festival has lifted spirits for over a century: highlights among this year's program of 174 operas, dramas and concerts include Peter Sellars' take on Mahler's *Der Abschied* and celebrations marking the centenary of French composer Pierre Boulez.

Sziget Festival, Budapest, Hungary | August annually
Held over six days each August on Óbuda, a 180-hectare island on the Danube River, Sziget is a mini-city of 450,000 festival goers with 50 stages hosting more than 1000 indie, rock and dance acts. This year's headlines include Chappell Roan and Charli XCX. Sziget (island in Hungarian) offers free camping and even has its own DJ-dotted party train, the Sziget Express, transporting punters from across Europe.



TRAVEL GREECE

Home and away

If a five-star suite just doesn't cut it, why not check in to a private residence by a luxury hotel, writes **Jill Duplex**.



Dinner is ready. I'm wandering barefoot across the deep green lawn, glass of assytiko in hand, to watch the sun lower itself into the Aegean Sea when I hear George, my butler, gently calling. He has set up champagne and snacks on a long marble table by the pool and wants to pop the cork. Inside, across the broad sweep of the lounge, I can see the chef in the kitchen, grilling fish for the first course.

Unbelievably, this is my private home, within the One&Only Aesthesis estate on the Athenian Riviera. I have always wanted to visit this magical stretch of land, the southernmost point of the Attica Peninsula, just a half-hour drive from the centre of Athens. If I had a wrist, its pulse would still be racing from the heady glamour of the 1960s, when wealthy Greek families would moor their yachts and stay the weekend, Maria Callas would sing for Ari Onassis, and Nureyev would dance by the pool. And now I live here—if only for one night.

One&Only Aesthesis, one of the leading lights of Sol Kerzner's One&Only global brand, opened with a splash in June 2024. I'm here to preview the private residences, which hit the rental pool in April and will soon be available to buy.

The resort itself is a potent cocktail of sunshine, sandy beaches, lazy breakfasts and sundowners. With poolside dining, a kids' club and Guerlain Spa—the first to open in Greece—there's more than enough for anybody at One&Only Aesthesis, one would think. But no.

"Around 2015, we noticed our most discerning guests were seeking more space, privacy and personalisation," says Dubai-based Australian Jonathan Tomlinson, global head of residential at Kerzner International. "They weren't looking for larger hotel accommodation, they wanted authentic residential experiences that felt like home, yet with all the privileges of a world-class resort."

But why not just book out the top floor or a whole wing of a luxury hotel and be done with it?

"The controlled environment of a private home, with dedicated staff and limited outside contact, offers peace of mind that even the most exclusive hotel suite cannot match," says Tomlinson.

"The homes are conceived and built as residences from the ground up, with proper kitchens designed for family gatherings and private chef experiences, and outdoor living areas for genuine relaxation. Ultimately, a hotel will always be a temporary accommodation, while a private residence becomes your home."

My villa has a lovely garden, swimming pool lined with sun-loungers, built-in jacuzzi and even a small private beach



Above: All One&Only Aesthesis residences have private pools.

Left: Aesthesis estate on the Athenian Riviera. Below: Food by Ettore Botrini at Ora.

with a jetty. Huge glass doors slide open to blur the boundaries between indoors and outdoors, and light-toned, natural wood softens the edges of all that marble.

The kitchen has an espresso machine and a few dozen temperature-controlled wines. More doors open to a shady outdoor area, in case I burn the breakfast toast. The sense of space and privacy is so beguiling, it takes me hours to discover there is a second ensuite bedroom as well, with its own courtyard.

On the night of our private dinner, George brings course after course as the sun throws the full Pantone colour spectrum at the sky on its way out. Executive chef Moreno Miotto's tailor-made menu is a clever combination of the luxurious and the everyday. Tiny tarts filled with furls of crudo are speckled with mauve flowers, and a deeply sea-sweet scallop topped with caviar rests on wilted greens.

Eva Vergouli, the resort's head sommelier, pops by in her electric golf buggy to pour the next pairing, like a nosy neighbour who keeps coming back (she's very welcome). Her choices are opinionated, clear and bright. A crisp assytiko from Estate Argiros on Santorini; an aromatic gavi La Scolca from Piedmont; the La Tour Mouton's tailor-made menu is a clever combination of the luxurious and the everyday. Tiny tarts filled with furls of crudo are speckled with mauve flowers, and a deeply sea-sweet scallop topped with caviar rests on wilted greens.

The next day, the director of private home rentals, Andre Ferreira, gives me a tour, swishing silently in a golf buggy along the narrow, paved roads of the estate, set in 21 hectares of protected forest reserve. Everyone who drives by in the opposite direction acknowledges us by placing their hand on their heart: a lovely gesture. But the unfolding landscape has my full attention—it's almost wild, with trees gnarled by the wind, and red soil that still gives up the treasures of the ancient past in a series of archaeological digs.

The private homes are set into the hillside, some just steps from the ocean. The average length of stay, says Ferreira, is seven nights. "We had one guest who loved it so much he just kept extending, until he was here for 35 nights," he says. No wonder. This isn't just a home away from home, it comes with massive side benefits. Apart from those hotel touches of daily housekeeping and turn-down service, your personal host can customise all activities and amenities and arrange in-villa dining, cookery classes, private museum tours or diving adventures off Kea Island, a 40-minute boat ride away.

"We can organise an outdoor cinema at the villa or send a chef to do a seafood barbecue," says Ferreira. "Some guests invite friends and family for dinner while their children play in the pool." Others rent the villa next door for their extended family and keep the adjoining gate open. The first of these exclusive villas will be on the market this month, with a suggested asking price of €10 million (\$18 million). "The owners see these properties as precious pieces of jewellery," says Ferreira. "You cannot find anything like this so close to the sea anywhere on the European coast."

The best answer can live in the villa full- or part-time or allow One&Only to manage it as a private home rental. "We would still maintain it on the owner's behalf," says Ferreira, "to protect their investment."

Just when I'm feeling right at home, it's time to leave, and the (only) downside hits me. My own home, as much I love it, does not come with a private butler, private chef and private swimming pool. I am going to have to make my own negroni and cook my own dinner. The struggle is real. **AFR**

The writer was a guest of One&Only.