



Photos by Simon Broughton



The converted old steelworks of Dolní Vítkovice offers a spectacular and strangely beautiful location for this festival, giving it a post-industrial vibe

Colours of Ostrava, Czech Republic

The striking industrial setting of this Czech festival is just one of its surprising highlights, as Simon Broughton finds out

Before we talk about the music or the vibe at Colours, you've got to know that the most striking thing about the festival is its location. It's like a post-industrial fantasy with winding steel tubes, looming furnaces, gantries and vast warehouses – particularly effective at night when it's dramatically lit. The site, Dolní Vítkovice, is an old steelworks that has been magnificently repurposed, but still keeps its essential character. The rusting iron has taken on a rich palette of colours, making these monstrous relics of heavy industry strangely beautiful. An old gasometer has been spectacularly converted into a 1,500 seat semi-circular indoor venue called the Gong Stage, which last

year hosted Pakistani *qawwali* singer Faiz Ali Faiz, Israeli bassist Avishai Cohen and Tunisian musician Imed Alibi.

With 150 artists over four days, Colours of Ostrava is one of the largest festivals in the Czech Republic, attracting an audience of 40,000. Over the years performers have included Robert Plant, Sinéad O'Connor, Sigur Rós, Salif Keita, Mariza and many more. The array of music is wide. Last year it ranged from Björk and Kasabian to local bands, buskers and films. For director Zlata Holušová, world music is a crucial part of the mix: "People might be attracted by the big-name stars, but then get caught up by other concerts and get entranced by them.

World music is very important here. It's a hidden current going through the festival."

Last year on the main stages they had Warsaw Village Band, Kasai Allstars, South African band Abavuki and Rodrigo y Gabriela. Elsewhere Israel's Alae Family, Italy's Canzoniere Grecanico Salentino and Poland's Janusz Prusinowski Trio were on smaller stages dotted around the extraordinary site. Artists already announced for this year include Songhoy Blues, Mbongwana Star, Mariachi El Bronx and The Unthanks.

"I'm looking for music of the soul, something that will touch people inside. And I think the people who come to Colours are seeking something similar," adds Holušová.



"It brings a special atmosphere to this festival. We can put intimate performers on the main stage and people understand it."

The Moravian city of Ostrava is like the Sheffield of the Czech Republic, a town that grew up in the 19th century in the centre of a large coalfield. It became the steel capital of Silesia, an industrial region (that includes Poland and Germany) in the heart of Europe. The last coal was mined in the city in 1994 and since then it's undergone a transformation. It's a surprisingly green and attractive place, founded in the 13th century although most of the interesting buildings are more recent, including the modernist town hall, built in 1930. Many of the bands at Colours also play in the city. Like Sheffield, there is quick and easy access to the surrounding countryside, which is beautiful in the summer.

Colours of Ostrava has its 15th edition this year. It started in the city itself, but moved to the Dolní Vítkovice steelworks in 2012. One of the highlights of the site, literally, is the Bolt Tower, where a café and walkway has been built on top of the former blast furnace, which was in operation until 1998. A lift takes you most of the way up and then there are steps to a viewing

platform at the top, a slightly nerve-wracking 78 metres off the ground. That was where I heard the beginning of Kasai Allstars' set – powerful Congolese music floating over this surreal industrial landscape. You can walk all the way down and look inside the blast furnace on the way. One of the guides tells me it's the only blast furnace in the world you can enter!

Near the foot of the Bolt Tower is the Czech Stage, sponsored by Radegast, one of the Czech beers from the Silesian region. Most of the groups are indie rock bands or singer-songwriters, although Tomáš Kočka & Orchestra and the Slovak duo Longital are more *Songlines* territory. My favourite Czech group was Clarinet Factory, four guys all playing clarinets, including an impressive bass clarinet. That's hardly a conventional ensemble and their music is equally genre-defying. They supported the ultra hip Hidden Orchestra (who are fans) in London last November.

Much more traditional Czech music can be heard at the *vinarna* (wine bar) at Colours. It's



in a long concrete bunker, presumably once a storage area, and it's one of the most surreal wine bars I've seen. Wine is grown, of course, in south Moravia and there's a good selection of Moravian and other wines, but it's the traditional Moravian music that brings it to life. On a small stage various local *cimbalom* bands perform – lead fiddle, a cimbalom with hammers flying, perhaps a clarinet and a double bass. The distressed concrete location takes away that slightly kitsch feel this music can have. It's well worth enjoying half an hour of wine and *cimbalová muzika*.

As Cross Cultures now does in Warsaw, Colours is preceded by a showcase of Czech, Slovak and some Polish Silesian bands. The standout artists were Slovakia's Banda, a slightly Balkan tinged six-piece and Czech Republic's Tara Fuki, a female duo both playing cello and singing (in Polish). Surprising and very talented.

Needless to say the Czech Republic has great beer and there are plenty of places to enjoy it at the festival and a wonderful array of eating opportunities. By Western European standards it's extremely cheap. There's a campsite alongside the site, but Dolní Vítkovice is just on the edge of town and it's a tram ride into the centre where there's plenty of accommodation.

The vast majority of people at Colours are Czech. But when it gets discovered by the outside world, I can imagine foreigners coming in their droves – as they do to the Sziget Festival in Budapest where they outnumber the locals. A great location, every sort of music and reasonably priced food and drink. What's not to like? ♦

+ DATES This year's festival will be July 14-17
+ ONLINE www.colours.cz