



extraordinary performance of the group Parafusos, from the state of Sergipe – whirling ‘dervishes’ who were a marvel to behold. There were other dervishes, notably the compelling and mesmeric Iranian dancer Rana Gorgani and the more humble but moving whirling of some Brazilian practitioners such as Maria Rose Freitas. Whirling was beyond me, though – I bailed out to a local bar and downed a caipirinha.

Naturally, the Brazilian contingent was strong, perhaps the most purely enjoyable being a local *samba de roda* group. They played their old samba style (said to reach back to the 16th century) both at the main venue and the local town square for the locals. This was earthy, authentic, celebratory music – the Brazilians are, of course, specialists in *alegria* (joy).

There were Amazonian shamans from Para and indigenous Gaurani and Bayaroá musicians. Joining in with their dance and ritualised

movements created a bridge to what can sometimes feel like very distant cultures. There was a house band too, directed by master musicians Gabriel Levy and Magda Pucci. The latter has a fascinating band called Mawaca, principally a choral group based in São Paulo who have incorporated different and meticulously researched global singing styles (their videos are well worth investigating on YouTube).

But perhaps the deepest of all the Brazilian cultures that were encountered at the festival were the local Candomblé priestesses who came for the opening ceremony to purify the energy of the place. We were all encouraged to wear white in what was a moving ritual. They live in a beautiful compound, not far from the festival site, so I went one day and had a reading with a wise octogenarian priestess, whose room was full of children’s toys (“the spirits like them”). The shells were rolled, and assorted herbs and powders were prescribed. The last day of the festival was the day of Yemaya, the Goddess of the ocean, and we had to give small contributions – a mirror, soap, perfume, make-up (she is notoriously vain) – that were then loaded in a boat and launched into the ocean, making for a terrific conclusion to the festival. ♦

+ DATES *Dancing for Peace’s tenth International Gathering of Music and Dance* runs from January 25-31 2016 in Imbassai, Bahia, Brazil
+ ONLINE www.dancandopelapaz.com.br/english

Clockwise from main image: dancers from Bahia; Native Indians from the Bayaroá community; Bayaroá musicians with Faouzi Skali from Morocco; dancers from Bahia

Curiously, the three most inspiring festivals I have been to this year all had a connection with one man – Faouzi Skali. He set up the Fes Festival of World Sacred Music, now runs the Fes Sufi Festival and he was also a main guest at Dancing for Peace. Skali gave talks and lead Sufi *zikr* chants. Sufism is not about a specific place but “in the heart,” he says. With other centres of Sufi culture – from Aleppo in Syria to Afghanistan – being tragically decimated, there were signs, he felt, that Brazil

could be a new centre of a more tolerant, perhaps more feminine, Islamic mysticism.

A hit of 2014’s edition of the festival was Said Guissi’s brilliant Aissawa group from Fes. Like the Fes version of Islam, the local Candomblé religion reveres its saints and its nature spirits. One curious and wonderful element for students of global culture was the fact that the festival has highlighted aspects of Islamic culture often buried in Brazil – which often came from slaves from Africa, many of whom were Muslim. One example was the

approach is multicultural and tolerant. She herself is teetotal and there is no alcohol available on site, but she tells me, “I tolerate your drinking.”

The festival is set up as two four-day modules and you can do either or both sections. Next year’s festival, the tenth, will feature some top musicians and dancers from Egypt, Morocco, Greece and Kurdistan as well as a slate of Brazilian artists. The main venue is a huge building, called the Tangara Mirim Cultural Space – converted stables, featuring a stage that opens out to the beautiful grounds. As much as anything, at a festival like this one you are aware how huge and various the culture of Brazil is – a country bigger than Europe, and how little of its diverse culture we get to see in Europe.

“Each person who comes here receives exactly what they need at that time”

Dancing for Peace Festival

Peter Culshaw leaves (most of) his British reserve at home, dusts off his dancing shoes and gets stuck into the workshops and performances at Brazil’s festival of music and dance in the coastal town of Imbassai in Bahia

Plenty of festivals these days have assorted workshops – cooking, percussion, or whatever – to involve the audience. But the world music and dance festival in Imbassai, Dancing for Peace, has a much more inclusive aim, and one slightly terrifying for a reserved English bloke – to get absolutely everyone dancing to the music. Whereas your average festival ends up with you wandering around in a consumerist daze of sampling music, food and drink, this one goes for big-time audience immersion.

It’s fair to say that most Brazilians love to dance so this was no imposition; rather the contrary. The acts chosen were those that had specific learnable dances associated with the music. So there would be four separate hours over a couple of days of learning Gypsy dances

from Hungary with Elsa and Gustáv Balázs or Macedonian folk dance with Snezana Balkanska before an evening performance. Of course it wasn’t actually compulsory to dance, but with everyone else having a whale of a time with their newly learned dances, you felt a bit of a lemon sitting them out.

The festival takes place at Imbassai, a relatively sleepy town an hour or so north of Salvador in the state of Bahia. The name is an old Tupinikim Indian word that means ‘Course of the Water,’ and the river runs parallel to the shore, which has the advantage that cars can’t get onto the magnificent beach, as often happens elsewhere. Bahia is, of course, famously rich in musical culture. It remains more of a boutique festival, and, while expanding

organically, the participant numbers are in the hundreds rather than thousands.

The owner of the site and artistic director of the festival is Glaucia Rodrigues, who worked in healing and spiritual energy for years before discovering this place. “The world is becoming smaller and there are not too many places where people can recharge and renew themselves.” Her aim is to provide a place where “each person who comes here receives exactly what they need at that time.” She talks of other centres like Findhorn and Esalen in California as trying to do something similar, but if this all sounds very New Age she says that “spirituality cannot be separated from everyday life,” as it sometimes seems to be in such places, and in Brazil it is connected to nature, the body and community. Her