

# PASIFIKA FESTIVAL

Norman Miller discovers how Auckland's festival is helping to strengthen local ocean cultures



Photos by Norman Miller



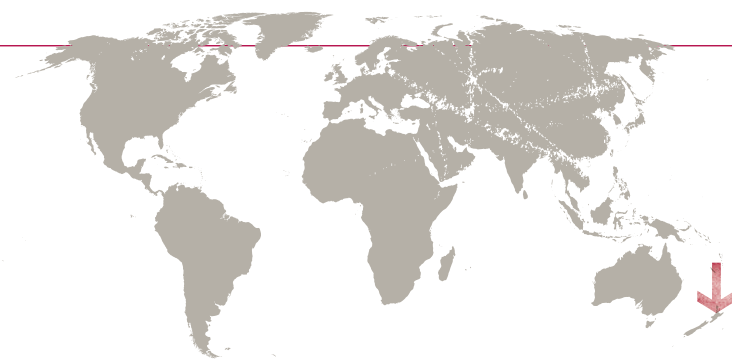
"PASIFIKA PROVIDES AN UMBRELLA for the whole Pacific. Even though each island has a different culture, they all know Auckland is the only place in the world where all the Pacific Island nations come together," says Taha Fasi, who plays a key role in gathering a rainbow coalition of tiny ocean nations each year for the world's largest celebration of Pacific Island culture.

Pasifika is the Glastonbury of the South Seas, drawing a record 80,000 people to Auckland's Western Springs Park. Yet this two-day, free festival in March remains under the radar of many visitors to New Zealand, whose experience of Pacific Island culture too often seems to amount to nothing more than a staged *haka* performance in a Rotorua lodge. Pasifika covers the bases, celebrating not just

music and dance but also the traditional crafts and food of the widely-scattered Pacific Island communities – Cook Islands, Fiji, Kiribati, Niue, Samoa, Tahiti, Tonga, Tokelau, Tuvalu. Other performers, from places like Hawaii, make impromptu appearances, keen to join this unique celebration of the ocean diaspora.

Celebrating its 21st edition this year, Pasifika started small. "Ten years ago it was still community-based – we tended to have each island nation wanting to do their own thing," says Fasi, a native of tiny Niue. "It would have been a huge effort to mobilise different Pacific Island communities to do something like this." But whole-hearted support from the Auckland city council – logistically and financially – has seen the festival develop and strengthen.

Pasifika's head honcho is Stan Wolfgramm, whose recent focus has been on bringing the festival back to its roots after signs of drift. "Many events that start off with cultural beginnings get commercial. We started to get fish and chip stands and people selling stuff made in China," he explains. "But now it's about people re-engaging with their culture and languages." A sense of engagement certainly runs through Pasifika, including commendable stalls promoting campaigns for key Pacific Island health and social issues. Barriers between participants and audience are broken down everywhere. I chat to performers by various stages and get the low-down from the Pacific craft-makers, ranging from *tapa* (bark cloth covered in animal and geometric motifs) to bone jewellery and



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and 20-somethings who brighten the Sunday afternoon with spine-tingling crescendos of brass augmented by choir. Musicologists say Tonga took a shine to brass courtesy of English missionary influences mixing with local love of island woodwind such as conch-shell *shawms* – and it's a cultural union to cherish.

Perhaps my favourite moment comes courtesy of Tuvalu (one of the world's smallest nations, larger only than Vatican City). The stage slowly fills until about 50 people stand before a pretty woven backdrop – men and women, old and young, some in bright costumes, others in simple T-shirts. Then the singing and slow swaying begins, traditional forms known as *fakaseasea* and *fatele*. The hairs on my neck rise as high harmonies fill the hot Auckland air, each song (either a story or repeated short poem) picking up pace then stopping in a heartbeat, leaving behind a shimmering acoustic memory. This is music that touches the soul, and I make a note to seek out the renowned 60s Tuvalu recordings made by Gerd Koch.

gorgeously decorated instruments. "I am a master in wood, I can carve anything," says Samoan carver Faavae Lepule with pride, proffering evidence that he might be right.

I also get to try food from places I can only dream of visiting. Hovering around hot plates and boiling pots, I ask about almost everything on each menu – *faiiai eleni* (fish cooked in coconut cream), *fai* (Samoan octopus), *lovo* (Fijian fish and meat cooked in the ground) and *tunu puaka* (roast pig). Even a late afternoon pick-me-up doughnut seems special when it's a Tuvalu version.

Saturday features the more intense action, while Sunday is quieter as a handful of islands pull out of performance due to religious beliefs that this is a day of rest – though absent 'villages' are often replaced by Pan Pacific stages offering a mash-up of performers.

I'm hooked within minutes of my Saturday arrival, charmed by a giant Fijian bloke cradling a tiny ukulele as he strums sweet toe-tapping melodies, followed by a fabulous Tahitian string band. I curse myself for missing a ukulele orchestra from the Cook Islands, thanks to a wrong turn on a park trail and a *laissez-faire* gap between stated start times and actual start times. But hey, this festival runs on 'island time.'

But there are still plenty of highlights, from Fijian war dancers to an enthralling Tongan brass band of smartly-dressed teens



But Pasifika is about more than just entertainment, as Cook Islander Bernard Tairea explains the next day as we perch on a low tree branch near his nation's stage. "In our history, people learned to dance before they can walk, and sing before they can talk," he says, before highlighting Pasifika's role in cultural education for young performers as well as the audience. "Opportunities are being lost as elders are dying, and we have to grab new opportunities," argues Tairea, who cites language as a key battleground. "You don't need to be able to speak the language to sing the songs," he says. "Festivals like this help to strengthen what we have left in our culture. Our language is preserved through music."

"It's so important here that you have a melting pot, and Pacific Island culture is very strong," he continues. "In my country we only have 15,000 people – but there are 75,000 Cook Islanders living in New Zealand. So a festival like Pasifika is important for us to keep our identity alive." And that's not something you'll ever hear about Glastonbury. ♦

+ **DATES** Next year's Pasifika Festival will take place March 8-9 2014 in Auckland  
+ **ONLINE** [www.aucklandnz.com/pasifika](http://www.aucklandnz.com/pasifika)