

→ FESTIVAL PROFILE

SZIGET FESTIVAL

HUNGARY

One of Europe's biggest cultural festivals offers an abundance of music and, much to Simon Broughton's delight, there's plenty to tantalise the taste buds too



Glastonbury without the mud: Budapest's Sziget Festival on an island in the Danube

Sziget Festival is Glastonbury on the Danube – without the mud. Last summer, standing in the dustbowl in front of the main stage you could hear The Specials, Madness, Iron Maiden and Kasabian. But for *Songlines* readers, the excellent World Music stage, the Roma Tent and the local Hungarian music make it even more interesting than Glastonbury – with better food and wine as well.

'Sziget' in Hungarian, means 'island' and the festival takes place on an island in the Danube, just north of Budapest. You can camp on the island or stay in the city and go to the festival on the HÉV railway, running up the west side of the river, or by boat from a couple of piers in the city centre. That means you can combine the festival with a visit to Budapest which has many attractions of its own. Sziget, like Glastonbury, is like a city and everybody's festival can be different: there are 13 stages, smaller music tents, areas devoted to gay culture and street theatre, plus adrenalin boosts like zip wires and bungee jumps at midnight.

Sziget started in 1993 as a sort of alternative student festival and it's grown and grown since then – some people think too much. There were 11,000 people working on site last year. And I've never been to any other festival that has so many overseas visitors – last year 50% were from outside Hungary, although most Hungarians think it's rather more. Walking around the site you hear English, Dutch, German and French as much as Hungarian. *Time Out* Budapest publishes a 76-page guide to the festival in English. Over its five days it attracts 380,000 visitors. And it's re-entered the Hungarian language: 'Sziget érzés' (a 'Sziget feeling') is

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now an expression meaning 'doing what you want in a convivial way'.

The question is, with the bewildering array that is on offer, where do you start? Actually there's not much choice. You start by walking over an iron-girder bridge festooned with banners in a range of languages welcoming you to the island. It's then that you have to make choices.

I spent my days at Sziget basically oscillating between the World Music Stage and the Roma Tent, plus the excellent Hungaricum Village – a celebration of Hungarian musical and culinary life.

The World Music Stage, on its own, has a line-up as good as many world music

festivals in Europe. Last year I saw top Hungarian bands, like Csík Zenekar, a folk ensemble whose USP is, alongside the trad repertoire, doing well-known Hungarian rock songs in traditional style, the Balkan-style outfit Besh o droM, and Söndörgő with Ferus Mustafov. And then international stars like Shantel, Tony Allen, Oi Va Voi and Omara Portuondo – who attracted thousands upon thousands.

So it was a pleasant relief to go to the more intimate environment of the Roma Tent. Obviously Hungary has a large Roma population of its own and the wider East European region many more, so the Roma Sator at Sziget is probably the leading showcase of Roma (Gypsy) music in Europe. And they push the envelope too, so that last year there was Sephardic music from Yasmin Levy (who was hugely enthusiastic about the whole Sziget experience), alongside great sets from Cimbaliband, with fab *cimbalom* player Balázs Unger, the wonderful fiddler Tcha Limberger with the Buda Folk Band and Čači Vorba, from Poland (who had a Top of the World disc in #73). Each evening was preceded by a colourful demonstration of dancing and acrobatics by Hamid Khan's Kawa Musical Circus from Rajasthan giving the whole thing a feel of something improvised at a huge *mela*. The interaction of artists backstage at the Roma tent was livelier than anywhere else, with artists from Eastern Europe and Asia discovering they had words in common through the Romani language. There is a problem with noise, though. On the Roma stage where the music isn't pumped out at the volume it is elsewhere, bands sometimes fight to be heard against the booming background. One musician in the Buda Folk Band said it was "like trying to blow bubbles in a storm."

The Hungaricum Village is a development that only started in 2009 when there was a feeling that people should be able to experience more of Hungarian culture. There are cut-out peasant houses, which are a bit kitsch, but there are stalls selling fantastic regional produce – wine, brandy, breads,



Sziget revellers making their way into the festival and being welcomed by banners in a range of languages

salami, jam – and then from 11pm a nightly *táncház* (dancehouse). Real village bands are brought from across the region to play for the dancing and the music is wonderful. The nights I was there, I heard Szalona, a band with a great *primás* fiddler from Ukraine and a Moldavian band from Romania. What's interesting is that the *táncház* evenings attract a lot of Westerners who presumably have no knowledge of Hungarian music and dance. But there's a dance teacher on hand, Bela Onodi, who even has drunken Brits dancing with some sort of coherence. Given the headline, head-banging reputation of Sziget, it's interesting that Hungaricum Village, with unknown bands and folk dancing, is voted the fifth most popular stage at the festival.

Conveniently close to Hungaricum Village is an array of Hungarian wine and food stalls. The wines from Szekszárd –

rosé and red – are brilliant and the food at Sziget puts every music festival I've been to in the UK to shame. The burgers and nuggets are there, of course, but there are real Transylvanian grills, spit-roasted pork, the Hungarian equivalent of Spanish *jamón*, Indian, Thai, Chinese and other specialities. Although the conditions for good music making aren't ideal, the other attractions are considerable.

This summer artists on the World Music Stage include *Songlines Music Awards* winners AfroCubism and Goran Bregović, Ojos de Brujo and Muzsikás; the Roma tent includes Parno Graszt, Tekameli and Esmá Redžepova and on the main stage, Amy Winehouse, Dizzee Rascal and the Manic Street Preachers. ●

DATES August 8-15, 2011

ONLINE www.sziget.hu/festival_english



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A FEAST OF MUSIC

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Left to right: Bridgette Amofah of Oi Va Voi on the World Music stage; Balázs Unger of Cimbaliband, who can play cimbalom blindfolded; táncház (dancehouse) instruction; dancer in the Kawa Musical Circus