



Clockwise from left: Udaipur City Palace on Lake Pichola; Koçani Orkestar at Jagdish Temple; Vardan Hovanissian and Emre Gültekin on Jag Mandir; Sufi singer Kailash Kher



# Udaipur World Music Festival

**Simon Broughton** travels to one of the most popular destinations in Rajasthan for a festival that is showcasing international and local music

Sunlight sparkles on the still water at 9am in the morning. A small ferry glides across the water to deposit us on Jag Mandir, a palace built on a small island with a garden in Lake Pichola where the morning concerts take place. They begin with Indian performers – Vedic chanting and Karnatic singing – followed by international artists. It's a gorgeous place to hear the Armenian *duduk* and Turkish *saz* duo Vardan Hovanissian and Emre Gültekin performing beneath a metallic banyan tree hanging with garlands. It's a quiet, magical time before the sun gets too hot. The music hovers like a haze over the lake as you gaze at the pastel yellows and pinks of the City Palace to the right and the commanding Sajjangarh (Monsoon Palace) on a mountain top to the left. It's a meditational start to the day.

Of course it's the tranquillity of the lake and its vistas that make Udaipur one of Rajasthan's most popular destinations. The turrets, canopies and crenellations on the buildings around the lake are like an architectural fantasy, and the city is full of tasty restaurants and sunset beer bars so you have views from the lake looking up and views from the rooftops looking down. At the heart of the city is the glistening white marble Jagdish Temple, dedicated to Vishnu with intricate carvings of elephants, horses, camels, dancers and musicians over the exterior. It's always a hive of activity – particularly the first day I'm there when women are singing in the temple for 24 hours from 5am. The next day Macedonia's Koçani Orkestar are in front of the temple trumpeting

beneath the elephants that flank the entrance. In India, different festivals often collide into each other in profusion.

The Udaipur World Music Festival has three concerts each day: the morning one on Jag Mandir island, an afternoon one beside Fateh Sagar Lake outside the city and a big evening one at Gandhi Ground, a sports pitch and venue for city celebrations. The stage set features exotic pavilions and cupolas, presumably inspired by the extravagant architectural fantasies of the city itself.

Founder and director Sanjeev Bhargava explains that he's keen to have international artists that haven't been seen in India before, and local artists appearing in Udaipur for the first time. "In Udaipur we've got music that hasn't been heard in Delhi, Kolkata and Mumbai," said the chief minister of Rajasthan at the evening concert. "I'm looking forward to this making a mark on the calendar of people who travel to India."

At the afternoon venue a *Songlines* subscriber comes up to me to say that they had seen an ad for the festival in the magazine and stayed a few days longer in the city specially to catch it – so it seems to be working. Again, the afternoon concerts juxtapose Indian and international acts attracting several hundred people. Kabir Café perform, in a rather Raghu Dixit style, lyrics of the 15th-century poet and saint Kabir. Advaita



are an indie rock band featuring some quite spectacular percussive *bols* singing. The international artists are Cuban singer and violinist Yilian Cañizares and the excellent Constantinople from Canada with *kora* player Ablaye Cissoko – sublime music for a sunny afternoon by the lake. The international programming is done by Gérard Kurdjian, who has many years of experience with the Fes Festival of Sacred Music in Morocco.

For the 2017 edition the biggest draw by far is Sufi singer Kailash Kher. He is a small man with a big personality – and tens of thousands of fans at Gandhi Ground. I'd been unimpressed seeing him at the Royal Festival Hall in London a few years ago, but it is hugely enjoyable to see him in India. His music sounds good too, with a mandolin adding some delicacy to the band. He sings both Islamic and

Hindu songs – for a song about Shiva he adopts the sculptural Nataraja pose of dancing Shiva with his arms up and leg stretched out. Finally he invites girls up on stage for selfies and asks them to post them on social media with the hashtag #KailashKher! For him Sufism and self-promotion go hand in hand.

It is the Indian artists that draw the biggest crowds, but I am knocked out by the excellent five-piece South African band Hot Water, with some nifty playing on a Castrol GTX guitar by Donovan Copley. And bringing the festival to a rousing conclusion is the London Community Gospel Choir. "It's their first time in India," yells the MC. "Give it up! This festival is dedicated to the people of Udaipur. The London Community Gospel Choir are not in Delhi, not in Mumbai, not in Bangalore, but right here in Udaipur..."

Obviously, there are other music festivals in Rajasthan, notably the Rajasthan International Folk Festival (RIFF) in Jodhpur about 250km away. It's good to see there's clearly room for both as they're doing very different things. Jodhpur RIFF primarily showcases and supports Rajasthani folk musicians and other traditional Indian performers alongside international artists, while Udaipur is programming a variety of Indian artists alongside an eclectic range of artists from around the world. And they're four months apart so it really depends where you want to be and when. Next year's artists include the colourful Flavia Coelho from Brazil and the Trio López-Petrakis-Chemirani.

Unlike many cities in India, Udaipur is a place where you can relax – it's partly the calming effect of the lakes and the variety of cafés, restaurants and places to chill. The magnificent City Palace is what draws the crowds, but a lot of the decor is very ostentatious and there are paintings of dubious entertainments organised for the *maharanas* – elephant fights and setting tigers on boars. Today's musical entertainments seem much more civilised. ♦

+ **DATES** *The next Udaipur World Music Festival takes place February 9-11*  
+ **ONLINE** [www.udaipurworldmusicfestival.com](http://www.udaipurworldmusicfestival.com)