



→ FESTIVAL PROFILE

WOMAD NEW ZEALAND

NEW PLYMOUTH/TARANAKI

Seth Jordan profiles WOMAD's most far-flung event, a spirited Pacific-flavoured festival that blends the best of international world music fare with the laid-back sounds of the South Seas

As the world grapples with environmental degradation, faltering economies and 'rogue' nuclear states, one could be forgiven for casting an admiring eye towards New Zealand. Short of Antarctica, it's about as far from the madding crowd as you can get, and with no snakes, venomous insects or other threatening wildlife, its relaxed Pacific vibe and Tolkienesque geography makes Aotearoa (the Maori name for New Zealand) an enticing destination.

The seaside town of New Plymouth lies on the west coast of the North Island, halfway between Auckland and the capital Wellington. Nearby is snow-topped Mount Taranaki (also known as Mount Egmont) – an active but currently slumbering volcano. A local Maori legend tells the story of how the Fuji-like peak once lived further to the east, but after professing his love for the neighbouring female mountain Pihanga, he was challenged for her affections by a rival male mountain Tongariro. After losing the

resulting fight, Taranaki was forced to relocate himself to the coast, where he now stands – defeated but still proud.

With a population of about 70,000, New Plymouth (aka Taranaki) is known for dairy farming, oil wells, surfing, and a thriving arts community. Home to WOMAD NZ since 2003, the festival actually began in urban Auckland in 1997, where two biennial events were presented. While both were artistically successful, they were also financial flops, and suffered from a lack of sponsorship. After a four-year hiatus, during which responsibility was transferred to the charitable Taranaki Arts Festival Trust (TAFT), sufficient new sponsorship was obtained, and, in association with WOMAD UK, the event was reborn.

Becoming an annual festival in 2008, an ongoing programming relationship with Australia's well-established WOMADelaide (which takes place the weekend prior) allows both events to share the bulk of their international line-ups, while adding their own local performers to the bill. Attracting a daily

audience of about 12,000, WOMAD NZ feels like a boutique festival – small enough to retain a sense of community, while big enough to draw a varied, culturally sophisticated crowd.

WOMAD NZ's idyllic setting, Brooklands Park, is adjacent to the larger 52-hectare Pukekura Park and their combined lushness provides a cushioning green backdrop to the festival site. Boasting a natural amphitheatre, the stunning main stage is surrounded by a small lake. While it's visually perfect for the orchestra, opera and pop concerts that grace it throughout the year, in the WOMAD context the beauty of the Bowl stage is also one of the festival's biggest challenges. Beautiful as it looks during the day, the lake creates a physical separation between artists and the audience, and some past performers have complained that the aqua-gap makes it hard to establish a sense of intimacy, especially at night.

"We're aware of the problem," responds WOMAD NZ's new artistic director Drew



Above, left to right: the verdant festival setting of Brooklands Park; Mariem Hassan from Western Sahara who performed this year; the main stage floating on a small lake

James, who was a central figure in the festival's early years in Auckland, but has only recently rejoined the team. "Some artists are able to bridge the distance better than others on that stage, but we know that for some it's been difficult. We're looking at a number of options this year for reducing the impact, and are confident that we can improve that sense of connection with the audience."

A bridging runway or two, bringing the performers at least part-way across the watery divide, would probably do the trick. Thankfully, audience access to the two mid-sized stages – Brooklands and Gables – is excellent, and even cosier musical experiences are available on several smaller stages, which are nestled in little verdant corners of the park.

"I'm not planning any huge changes this year," confides James, "because basically the site and the programming have been working well. But I do want to add a circus zone for both children and adults, and we'll be linking up with Auckland's Pasifika festival which is the week before us, in order to expand our traditional Pacific dance component in 2011."

And the uniqueness of WOMAD NZ can best be summed up in that one word – Pacific. Walking through the festival gates, one is immediately struck by the preponderance of beautiful Oceanic faces. As New Zealand is home to not only its own powerful Maori and *Pākehā* (of white European ancestry) populations, but a potent mix of indigenous peoples from Tonga, Samoa, the Cook Islands and other Polynesian nations as well, it makes for an exciting cross-cultural blend. And the welcoming Pacific spirit is palpable.

"The way we look after people who come to our shores is very important," explains TAFT event manager Emere Wano, who



The extraordinary Canadian Inuit singer Tanya Tagaq

advises WOMAD NZ on their Maori/Pacific cultural programme. "It's key for us to welcome our overseas guests with traditional Maori ceremony and hospitality, and whether they're a performer or an audience member, it starts the moment they step off the plane and lasts until they leave. WOMAD International have always encouraged that unique aspect for this festival and as the local Taranaki hosts, we've embraced what we call *Tāngata whenua*, which means being 'the home people' or 'people of the land,' and made that part of the WOMAD experience."

The formal *pōwhiri* (welcome) for international artists begins the evening before the festival opens, at the impressive *Owae Marae* (meeting house) in nearby Waitara (see Backpage #69). That sense of local

indigenous identity continues throughout the weekend in a special part of the festival known as Paepae, a place where visitors can meet and mix with representatives of the Maori tribes of the Taranaki region and learn something of their unique history. There are also interactive opportunities to experience traditional *mirimiri* (massage), *raranga* (weaving), *tā moko* (body tattooing) and *kapa haka* (dance and song). It's also recommended that you try some of the delicious *hangi* – a traditional meal cooked in an earth oven.

The Oceania attitude infuses the choices of New Zealand and regional acts at WOMAD NZ too. "We've really been trying to build up the Pacific aspect of the festival over the last few years," says Wano. "That involves establishing those relationship channels across the Pacific and creating new cultural interactions that enrich the whole region." ●

At the time of writing, the organisers were putting the finishing touches to the line-up for the 2011 edition. The full roster will be announced on the festival's website on October 27.

An added bonus for early visitors to Taranaki is 'Sounds Aotearoa', a two-day New Zealand music industry expo, that's also organised by the TAFT crew. Running in the lead-up days to WOMAD NZ, with a number of evening showcases open to the public, the expo features both established and emerging NZ/Pacific-based musicians.

DATES Next year's WOMAD NZ runs from March 18-20, 2011

Sounds Aotearoa takes place from March 16-17, 2011

ONLINE For full line-up details

www.womad.co.nz & www.soundsaotearoa.com

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