



f FESTIVAL PROFILE

WOODFORD FOLK FESTIVAL

This rural oasis of an Australian festival rings in the New Year with great music from hundreds of bands. Martin Buzacott finds out how it almost became too successful

For 51 weeks of the year, Woodfordia, the 500-acre site an hour north of Brisbane managed by the Queensland Folk Federation, is an idyllic hidden valley where kangaroos and wallabies graze, just as they did for millennia under the watch of the land's traditional Jinibara Nation owners. But on Christmas Day, cars full of early-bird campers pour into the grounds, heralding the beginning, two days later, of the largest annual gathering of musicians and artists anywhere Down Under.

With around 120,000 annual attendees, the Woodford Folk Festival is Australia's

largest outdoor festival staged in a single location. For the six days leading up to the New Year, the former grazing country comes as close as this largely agnostic nation ever gets to a site of pilgrimage.

It's a massive music festival, with 2,400 performers on 21 different stages, but Woodford also embraces a plethora of talks, workshops, street theatre and spontaneous outbursts of creativity. While the rest of Australia is stampeding department stores in search of post-Christmas plunder or cramming onto nearby beaches, Woodfordians are meditating on hilltops or hugging total strangers, as Tibetan monks,

yoga workshop instructors and most of all, world musicians, provide an eclectic soundtrack. It's part Glastonbury, part Burning Man, but with a distinctively Australian irreverence.

Over its 27-year existence the midsummer event has sometimes experienced dramatic weather, most recently in 2011 when critical infrastructure was washed away in the Queensland floods. But, like the land itself, the Woodford Folk Festival has a capacity for rejuvenation after disaster, and its patrons love it so much that they pay for the privilege of planting trees on the site at

a special weekend every May. Bill Hauritz, the festival director since its inception, found Woodfordia after the originally small-scale celebration of folk music and cultures became so popular that it outgrew its first location in Maleny, to the north.

"We'd given up looking at real estate," says the much-respected 60-year-old Hauritz, whose own self-deprecating humour has long been regarded as the spirit of the festival in microcosm. With no suitable land available to host the festival, Hauritz reluctantly recommended that the event be terminated after eight years, a victim of its own success. But then, the very next morning, an estate agent insisted on driving him to Woodford, where a cleared swathe of cattle country with no vehicle access had been discovered. And it just so happened that it was on the market.

"When we walked onto the land, I couldn't stop my heart from thumping," confesses Hauritz, a former cricketer and musician blessed with legendary resourcefulness. "It was perfect, but I had to play it really cool with the agent so as not to push the price up!" The next day, destiny took its course, and the site was purchased. With it came the indigenous Jinibara Nation's relationship with 'country' dating back millennia, and ever since, Hauritz's team, consisting of 16 permanent staff, 100 casual contractors and 2,600 volunteers, have taken pains to maintain engagement with the land's traditional owners. Little surprise, then, that when you enter the regenerated bushland site, the earth beneath your feet seems to have a strange power about it, a kind of indestructible life force

that reaches out to you. People come away changed by the very feel of the place, and then they return, year after year.

"It's because the Woodford organisers have been so respectful towards the Jinibara people, and we show the same thing back," explains Jinibara elder Kenny Murphy. "The spirits we involve make it like this." Indigenous activist Sam Watson puts it this way: "The songlines are so strong in this area that the magic of the aboriginal dreaming reaches out and draws people into them. I don't believe that people of good heart can actually come to this place and not take away with them a part of that aboriginal dreaming story."

One of the festival's regular performers is Tenzin Choegyal, a Tibetan exile who found a new home-away-from-home at Woodford. He now leads the Sunrise Concert on New Year's Day, while also maintaining the Buddhist prayer wheels dotted throughout the site. "For me, when I first visited here, it felt like the big teaching spaces I used to attend with the Dalai Lama in India," he reveals. "It's a similar feeling and a similar heart-space, but in a musical way."

As you've probably deduced by now, Woodford doesn't feature many mainstream headliners. Hauritz jokes: "Our marketing plan says that we're asking people to pay high ticket prices to come and listen to obscure musicians while camping in poorly maintained campsites in pouring rain or searing heat!" That's not entirely true, of course, but it typifies Woodford's long-time policy of addressing problems head-on and avoiding traditional

publicity spin – Hauritz puts himself forward for a public grilling at the end of every festival. Attendance continues to increase on the basis of personal recommendations and happy festival-goers alone. It means that those who attend, more than 60% of them with a university education, are usually seeking a deeper engagement than they might do at more commercial music festivals.

Millionaire businessmen, politicians and television personalities are among the regulars, often indistinguishable among the happy crowds whose revelry stops dead for three minutes of complete silence on New Year's Eve, and reaches its climax at the burning of specially constructed wooden structures at the closing ceremony (pictured above right) on the night of January 1. But it's the safety of the Woodford Festival that attracts families and women (who make up 60% of the audience): crime is virtually nonexistent and the event is staged with a combination of military efficiency, trademark good humour and friendly camaraderie.

As former Australian Prime Minister Bob Hawke said of Woodfordians on his fifth visit earlier this year: "There are genuine differences of opinion, but people at Woodford listen with respect to views that they don't necessarily agree with. They're here to learn, and if the world behaved like that it would be an infinitely better place!" ■

DATE The Woodford Folk Festival runs from December 27 2013-January 1 2014

ONLINE www.woodfordfolkfestival.com