



EXPERIENCE: Festivals attract all ages and lovers of a variety of music and art. Left, Splore 08, at which Tiki Taane (above) performed. Right, Rotorua's Ragamuffin festival.

Getting festive

Music fests are no longer drug and hippie hangouts. **SARAH LANG** explores why festival weekends are thriving in New Zealand

IT'S 5.15 ON Saturday afternoon at Splore08, a biennial three-day "live-in" music-and-arts festival at Tapapakanga Regional Park, one hour south-east of Auckland, in an undulating clearing between bush and sea.

On the main stage, Birmingham-based electronica-reggae outfit Overproof Sound System is sound-checking while in front of the stage a little boy and girl play cricket with their dad. Perched atop a hill, a bar tent stands sentry over the scene. There, a 30-something couple sit on the ground waxing lyrical about the festival — they come to every Splore (held every second February) and have flown up from Christchurch especially. But they don't want to be named because they're looking to buy a business and don't want anyone to know they're festival-goers because of the negative connotations attached.

It's a common perception that festivals are the domain of hippies, druggies and drunken youth — and anyone who goes along, if they don't fit into one of those categories, is, well, a little flaky or out-there.

We're not talking about lunching-ladies' food-and-wine festivals, nor highbrow arts festivals. These are mainly weekend-long, "getaway" outdoor events that generally require camping, a focus

on music and involve art, dance and other creativity.

The drug-and-hippie stereotype is something of a hangover from 70s and early 80s fests like Sweetwaters and Nambassa, our versions of Woodstock. An impression further fuelled by drug-addled 90s trance festivals, when the likes of the infamous house parties at Auckland's Normanby Rd went underground to escape cops and noise-control officers. Nor did it help the festival image when Takaka New Year festival The Gathering 2001/02 saw the Aotearoa Legalise Cannabis Party test partygoers' tablets (to let punters know exactly what they were ingesting), nor when, in 2003, two directors of fellow New Year dance festival Alpine Unity were charged with importing and supplying LSD.

While New Year festivals are generally wilder beasts than others later in the year, mud sticks.

Fast-forward to 2008 and festivals are shrugging off such stereotypes. Look around a festival such as Splore — population 6000 — and you'll see everyone from babies in backpacks to 60-something couples, bright-eyed children to midriff-flaunting university students, dreadlocked dancers to polo shirt-clad accountants.

Paddlers pause in the tide to listen

to a new song; people dance wildly, tamely, jerkily; three little girls in pink fairy costumes look up with wide eyes at costumed performers in stilts. The 30-somethings easily outnumber the 20-somethings. Sure, there will always be the up-all-nighters sporting suspiciously wide eyes but plenty of people have crawled into their tents by 1am or 2am. And while alcohol is served in restricted areas, like many festivals Splore bans BYO alcohol and on arrival there are searches for stashed six-packs and dubious-looking water bottles. Of course some get through, but no one looks all that drunk. Plenty of people are sans stimulants.

EVERY YEAR more festivals are popping up countrywide. New Year's festivals aside, January hosted Rotorua's Latin-themed dance-and-music-filled Jambalaya, New Plymouth's Parihaka Peace Festival and the 17th Christian Parachute Festival in the Waikato. Enter fest-laden February: new reggae festival Ragamuffin in Rotorua, Lake Wanaka's Rippon, alternative Camp A Low Hum near Levin, Golden Bay music/dance/art festival Luminare, Splore, and Raglan's "eco reggae" festival Soundsplash. And tonight is the hugely-popular country-hopping Womad in New Plymouth. Also this month is the new blues-and-roots festival BluesFestNZ in Whitianga. Next month: A Weekend At Littleweed in Katikati. Phew. That's not all of them, but a lot for our little population.

So what makes people shell out up to \$250, drive for miles, put up with searing

heat and bed down in a tent rather than just downloading the CD?

Krystian Ragieli, 36, an Auckland financial analyst, is familiar with both sides of the festival barrier. Over five years he's performed at many festivals with his percussion band AKSamba but at Splore08 he's a plebian. (He's also been to Jambalaya, Soundsplash, Ragamuffin and Womad.) Originally from Poland, Ragieli says New Zealand's festival vibe is "far more mellow and non-aggressive. I love the environment, ambience, creativeness, weather, location, art, music — everything's offered up to you on a plate".

While some festivals stick to one musical genre, most are a melting pot of contemporary sounds. And they don't just tickle your hearing. Most festivals are a dais for those visual arts that are often uneasy bedfellows with galleries. While Splore is often pegged as a music festival strong on local acts, it puts art on an equal footing.

At the far end of the Splore08 site, people wander through a 24-piece art trail including "flowers" formed from water bottles and a "vending machine" that selects and ejects a piece of wearable art for \$2. The spotlight also shines on performing acts such as the cabaret, fire-breathing aerialists and other out-there acts at Splore's Saturday night "Butterfly Zoo", which recreates a 1930s Shanghai cabaret club.

And festival-goers are not just soaking up others' efforts.

Workshops are an essential ingredient of nearly every festival's menu and this year Splore introduced the Living Lounge: by night there's acoustic music, poetry slam, film, comedy and by day workshops, such as Taiko drumming, all of which were full this year.

In such an environment, says Ragieli, "you can enter a different world, leave big-city problems behind and pretend the outside doesn't exist for a few days. It's escapism".

You can't escape everyone, though. I



MELTING POT: Increasingly attracting families and international visitors and performers, New Zealand's festival scene is thriving.



PICTURES / MICHAEL HENRY, SYLVIE WHINRAY, STEVEN PARKER, KENNY RODGER, OLLIE DALE

see people from almost every echelon of my life: colleagues, ex-boyfriends, gym-goers, past interviewees, the guy from my local dairy and even girls from distant high-school days.

Self-confessed “festival junkie” Kris Thompson, a “42-years-young” audio engineer, seems to know every second person. For Thompson, buying a festival ticket is scheduling social time. “You’re in this little cell with time to catch up with people you don’t often see. I’ve made fabulous friends from all walks of life [and met partner-of-15-months Dionne at a festival]. Plus you see the same characters who’ve been going to festivals for years.” As if to demonstrate his point, a woman who



MELLOW VIBE: Financial analyst and festival-goer Krystian Ragiel loves the ambience and creativeness of festivals.

recognises him sashays over.

Thompson, who’s been to around 30 festivals in Britain, the US and here in New Zealand, is “trying to pull [his] head in a bit” and go to fewer. He’s finding it a challenge.

“I love that there’s none of that staunch you-must-wear-black High Street bullshit. Wear whatever you want — it’s encouraged. And the connotations of festival equals drugs, flaky, hippies, feral are wrong. Those people bring a nice element to it, but that’s not the usual type of person. It’s more of a ‘townies get back to basics and to nature’ thing.”

After all, New Zealand has the natural beauty and the right climate for outdoor

festivals, and most Kiwis don’t mind tents, baby wipes and layers of deodorant for a few days. Though some festivals are now running hot showers.

Small, excited faces are everywhere at Splore, Womad and other family-friendly fests. As well as letting under-12s or 13s in for free, they arrange plenty of entertainment for littlies, including interactive play-spaces. Both Splore and Womad offer “kidzones” and family camping areas where early-rising kids won’t disturb late-night partiers, and vice versa. And the kids bring a warm, feel-good element. Still, a first-time Splore-goer wonders aloud, “wouldn’t it be easier to leave them [with a babysitter] at home?”

Auckland food consultants Tim Morris and Gendie Wilkinson are meandering through Splore with excited 3-year-old Oliver and wide-eyed Sam, aged 1.

Taking the kids is no hassle and a great experience for them, says Wilkinson. “They love camping, running round looking at everything, and as a young family it’s great we don’t have to miss out what our friends are doing. It’s a great experience for them.”

Many people speak of festivals not as a sum of their parts, but as a bonding or reflective experience as a culture. Filmmaker James Solomon directed a six-part documentary series on festivals, *Nga Ahurei o te Raumati (Summer Festivals)* for Maori TV, which explored the culture created and shared by hundreds of thousands of festival-goers.

“Festivals fall outside some of the normal structures you live in, some of the boxes you’re put in. You can step outside the box.”

Many festivals, he believes, challenge a materialistic culture: “not in a communist or radical way but some people come away from a festival realising the things that matter most to them — family, friends, enjoying themselves — don’t require them to be rich or to strain the world’s resources.”

Unlike long-established, non-Protestant countries which prize regular

festivals such as harvest and solstice celebrations, in many Anglo-Saxon countries like the United States, Britain and New Zealand they are no longer part of our culture, says Solomon. “So groups of us are creating reasons to celebrate — yes, it’s about having a good time but it’s also about trying to reconnect with a collective celebration that, to a large degree, we’ve lost.”

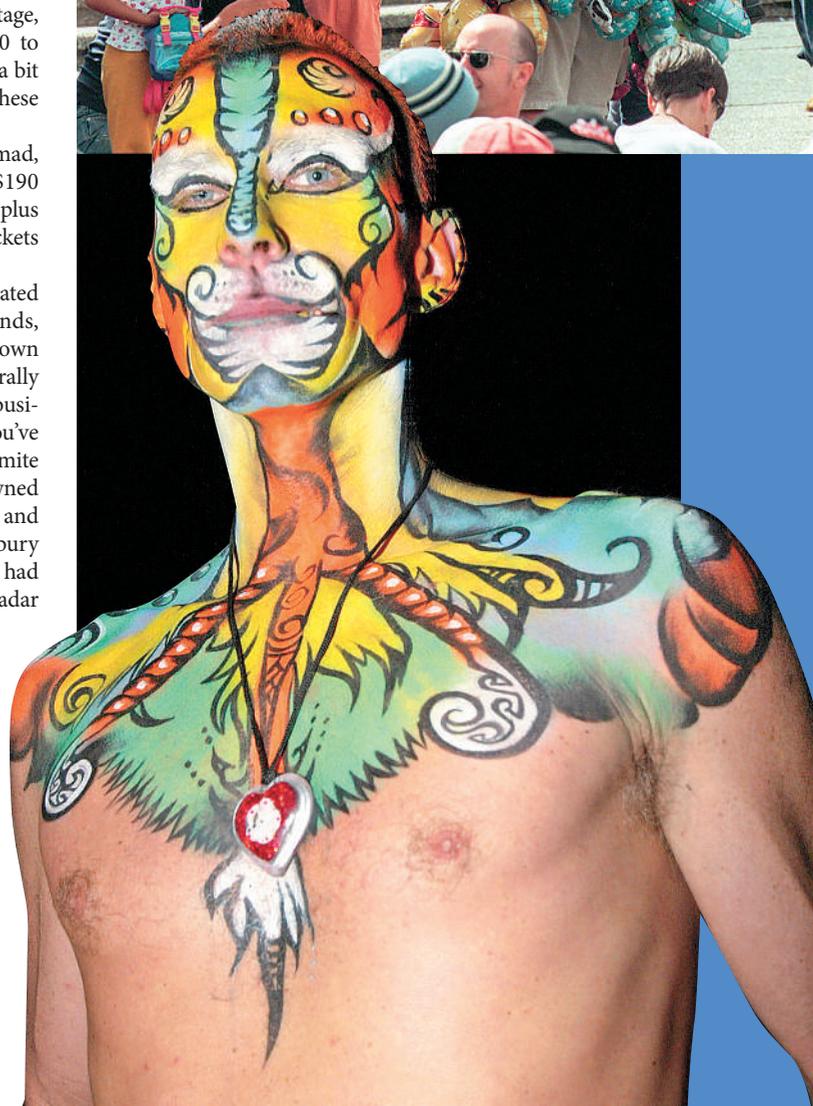
OF COURSE, plenty come just for the music, such as the young fans at Splore to see one of the hip-hop world’s biggest names, Pharos Monch.

Taupo wine-buyer Chris Bignall, 26, taking a quick break from the main stage, is “loving” the bands. “You’d pay \$90 to see one band at a gig — here you pay a bit more [\$160-\$175] and get to see all these guys.”

Our most expensive festival, Womad, costs \$235 including camping, \$190 without — still, not that much for 60-plus acts given some sole-act concert tickets clock in at well over \$100.

As well as a chance to see celebrated international and homegrown bands, festivals are a platform for lesser-known local acts to get exposure to a generally music-savvy crowd. Like handing out business cards to a captive audience. You’ve likely heard the success story of dynamite dubsters Fat Freddy’s Drop who’ve spawned similar bands, toured internationally and scored a coveted gig at the Glastonbury Festival 2007. But who knew they had sprung on to the national music radar when they stole the show at Splore02?

At Splore08 on Sunday afternoon a smattering of rain has cleared and the Wellington International Ukelele Orchestra takes the stage. A ukelele orchestra playing covers. Hmmm, something most people probably wouldn’t book to see — unless they’ve seen them before. Five minutes into the set and it’s hard to spy anyone not grinning, clapping and singing along. They’re also playing at Womad. Says





REVELLING: Splore campers enjoy a laid-back weekend (above and far left) and light up for all-night acoustic music, poetry, film and comedy (left).

PICTURES / SYLVIE WHINRAY, MICHAEL HENRY



member Age Pryor: "At festivals you get a focused, relaxed, well-tuned audience, and the big, diverse crowd gets word out there." Plus there's not the organisational hassle involved in tours, he says, and you're free to enjoy the festival pre- and post-performance.

No wonder organisers tell me it's relatively easy to attract a high calibre of bands. They're more worried about competition for the festival dollar in an increasingly-crowded marketplace.

"This summer's the biggest I've ever seen for festivals," says Splore director Amanda Wright who, as the festival draws its final breaths, looks like she hasn't slept for a week. "Parihaka and Soundsplash are doing similar things, so we're trying to keep our leading edge."

Splore's selling points are patently the "ultimate festival site" and the super-chilled-out vibe. But as well as continually fine-tuning and adding to festival offerings, keeping sales steady has meant upping marketing and advertising.

Wright's had no choice but to transform Splore into a tightly-run company. One of a group who set up Splore as a New Year fest in 1998/99, since 2001 she's driven it almost single-handedly. When Splore04 attendance was low, she lost a "chunk of money" and almost pulled the plug. Instead, she took on a business partner and set up a creative-thinktank trust doubling as fund-finder. Splore06 was the turning point.

"Splore's had to break through misconceptions. It's only in the last two Splores people have realised it's more than hippie trance." Now not only does Splore break even, it makes a modest profit and Wright a modest salary for what's a full-time, consuming job. "Still, it's hugely risky [financially]."

So why does she do it? "The feedback and the smiles. We all want stimulation but we don't want to go to some sleazy, stuffy bar."

OUR MOST popular festival — judging by numbers — is world-touring arts-and-cultural festival Womad: World of Music Arts and Dance. Since the first 1982 incarnation in Britain, more than 160 Womads have taken place in 27 international locations. Auckland hosted the first New Zealand outings in 1997 and 1999 before opting out; and in 2003 New Plymouth — 10 times smaller than any other host centre — got the nod.

Says Womad NZ programme director

Roger King, one of those who fought to bring it to Taranaki: "It was a huge risk. Initially everyone was terrified enough people wouldn't travel here because it's a bit off the beaten track, but word spread. We were counting on New Zealand's core, committed passionate audience, and they came."

The 2003, 2005 and 2007 biennial events were so popular — 12,500 tickets sold at each with a satisfaction level of 98.6 per cent — it was announced Womad would be annual from this year. King, who's worked in events for 30 years, says in what's the biggest year he's ever seen for festivals he expects Womad to hold its own. This weekend Womad NZ 2008 meshes workshops and a world marketplace with performances by 300 artists from 14 countries including New Zealand.

And what a spot to watch them. A 22ha park bordered by bush with glorious

WE ALL WANT STIMULATION BUT WE DON'T WANT TO GO TO SOME SLEAZY, STUFFY BAR.

Amanda Wright, Splore director

gardens and a lake, Brooklands Park and TSB Bowl feel worlds away from their central-city locale and is considered one of the world's most beautiful outdoor venues. But it's the international acts who are the real drawcard. Says Krystian Ragiell: "You get the opportunity to see acts you can't see anywhere else, unless you travel to their country."

These aren't the Christina Aguileras: they're the less commercial, more-artistically-celebrated acts. One of these is US/French gypsy-folk group Beirut, widely considered one of the best acts of the 2007 Glastonbury Festival. Another overseas festival touching down in New Zealand, for the first time this year, is BluesFest NZ in Whitianga next weekend. It's the sister event of the three-festival Australian BluesFest circuit. Headlined by blues heavyweights Buddy Guy and Keb Mo, it's netting a niche by meshing top international blues and roots artists with local talent. Says organiser/music promoter Peter Noble: "It made sense to take it across the Tasman as it's obvious

Kiwis love their festivals." After all, Byron Bay backpacker hostels book out yearly because of the 500-strong Kiwi contingent over for the town's BluesFest.

And then there's the New Zealand festival that draws people from around the world (five countries this year). Four-day "Camp A Low Hum", held for the second time near Levin in early February, is already one of just four New Zealand festivals recommended in *Lonely Planet's* summer-festival guide. Meanwhile, MTV Europe listed it as one of just eight must-go festivals worldwide in February 2008 and big-in-Britain magazine *ArtRocker*, which flew out for the event, dubbed it "quite possibly the best music festival in the world".

If you haven't heard of it, that's because it's not advertised — it's all via word of mouth, a website and a MySpace page, says organiser/music promoter Blink, aka Ian Jorgensen, an affable Wellington 29-year-old. He set it up as an "anti-festival festival" that would avoid other music festivals' problems. "It's for people who want a smaller audience, more intimate shows, no queues, no time clashes, heaps to do including when it rains." For \$200, there are four stages, 60-plus bands, a swimming pool, radio station, movie theatre, and themed parties. Jorgensen doesn't announce the lineup until the night before it starts.

"Camp's philosophy is the vibe's more important than who's performing." This year ex-pat Kiwi bands including The Reduction Agents, Lawrence Arabia, The Brunettes and Connan and the Mockasins came home to play, alongside US synth rockers Trans Am.

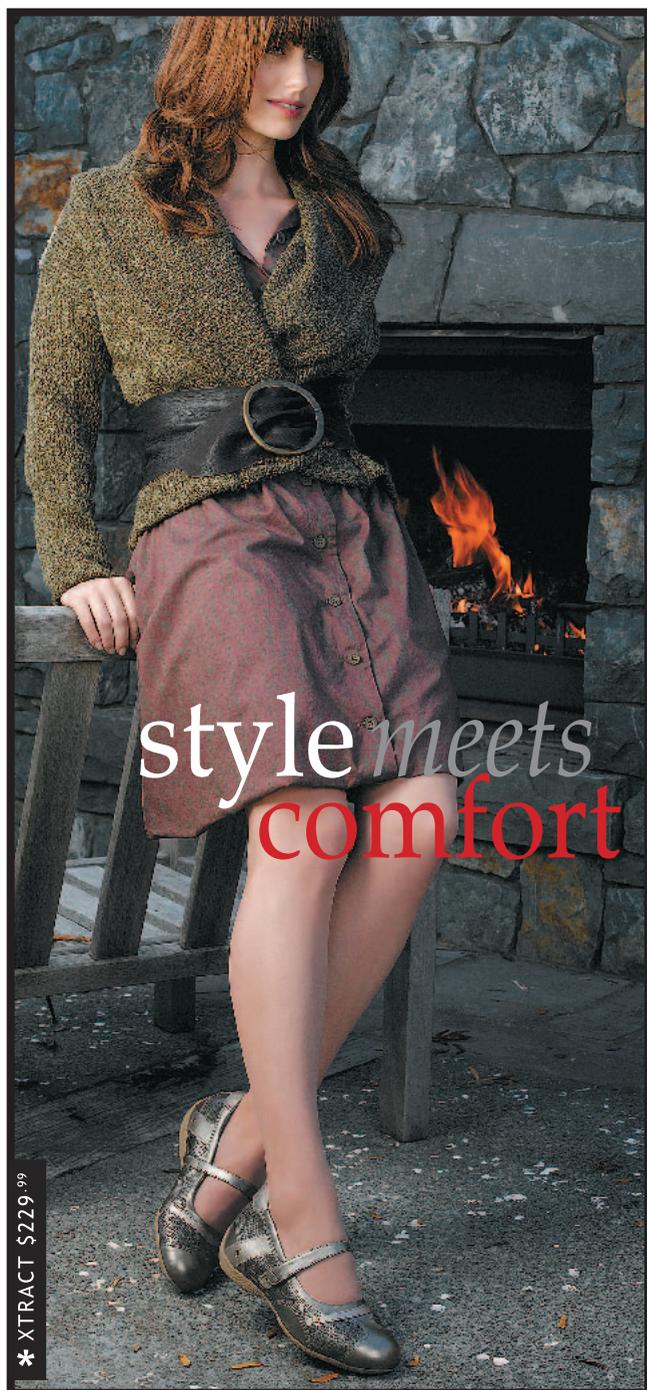
"Oh, and everyone cleans up their mess. Both years I haven't had to pick up a single piece of rubbish," says Jorgensen.

With the odd exception, the clean-up-after yourself philosophy of early festivals has faded into the history books. But modern festivals employ others to ensure the site's left as it was.

Splore has bins onsite for food scraps, recyclables, et cetera, and tractors roar through, festival-long, picking up rubbish and delivering it up the hill to Trash Palace for gloved sorting.

"I've got a condom in a watermelon!" I hear one girl exclaim. "Ew!" says her friend, holding up a nappy. "I guess it takes all sorts to make a festival." □

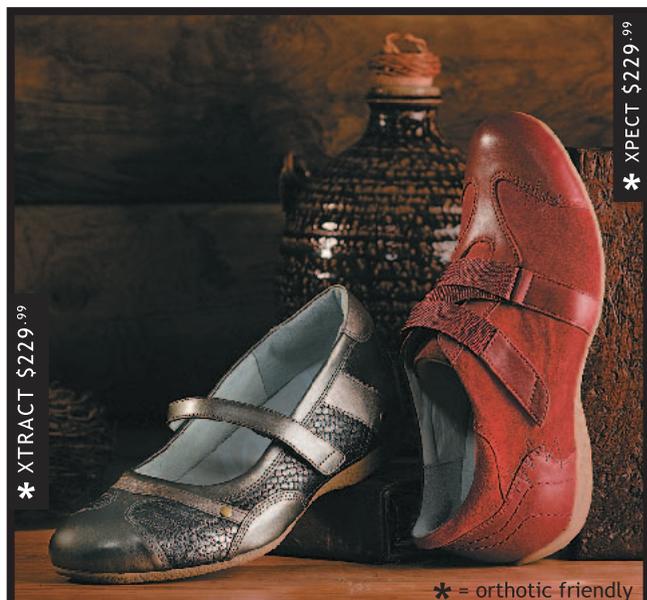
Womad is on until 11pm tomorrow, Brooklands Park & TSB Bowl, New Plymouth.



style meets
comfort

* XTRACT \$229.99

City, coast, country - Kumfs has a style to suit wherever life takes you. These fashion casuals are built for all-day comfort with super soft leather, cushioned inlays and shock-absorbing soles.



* XPECT \$229.99

* XTRACT \$229.99

* = orthotic friendly

Kumfs®

• ALBANY 414 6102 • BOTANY 271 2335 • HAMILTON
(07) 838 1061 • LYNNMALL 827 4960 • NEWMARKET 520 0220
• ST LUKES MEGA CENTRE 849 7178 • TAKAPUNA 486 3582
• TAURANGA (07) 579 4764 • WHANGAREI (09) 438 9831

www.kumfs.com