

THE SOUND OF MUSIC TOURISM

From sonic cruises to snow-bound festivals, music tourism is thriving. Oisín Lunny meets the promoters and tastemakers whose hunger for new lifestyle experiences got us here

MUSIC EDITOR OISÍN LUNNY

Package holiday fever. Trolley dollies. Concorde. Much has been written about the travel and tourism revolution of the 1960s and 70s, but the trajectory of music industry tourism – which spent several more decades hanging out in boggy fields before rousing itself, slathering on sun cream and setting out to play catch-up – is less well-documented.

Stevie Jackson of indie stalwarts Belle & Sebastian reminisces on those intervening mud-crusted years with a mixture of fondness and frustration. “Back then it was either Leeds, Reading or Glastonbury, and that was it,” he says.

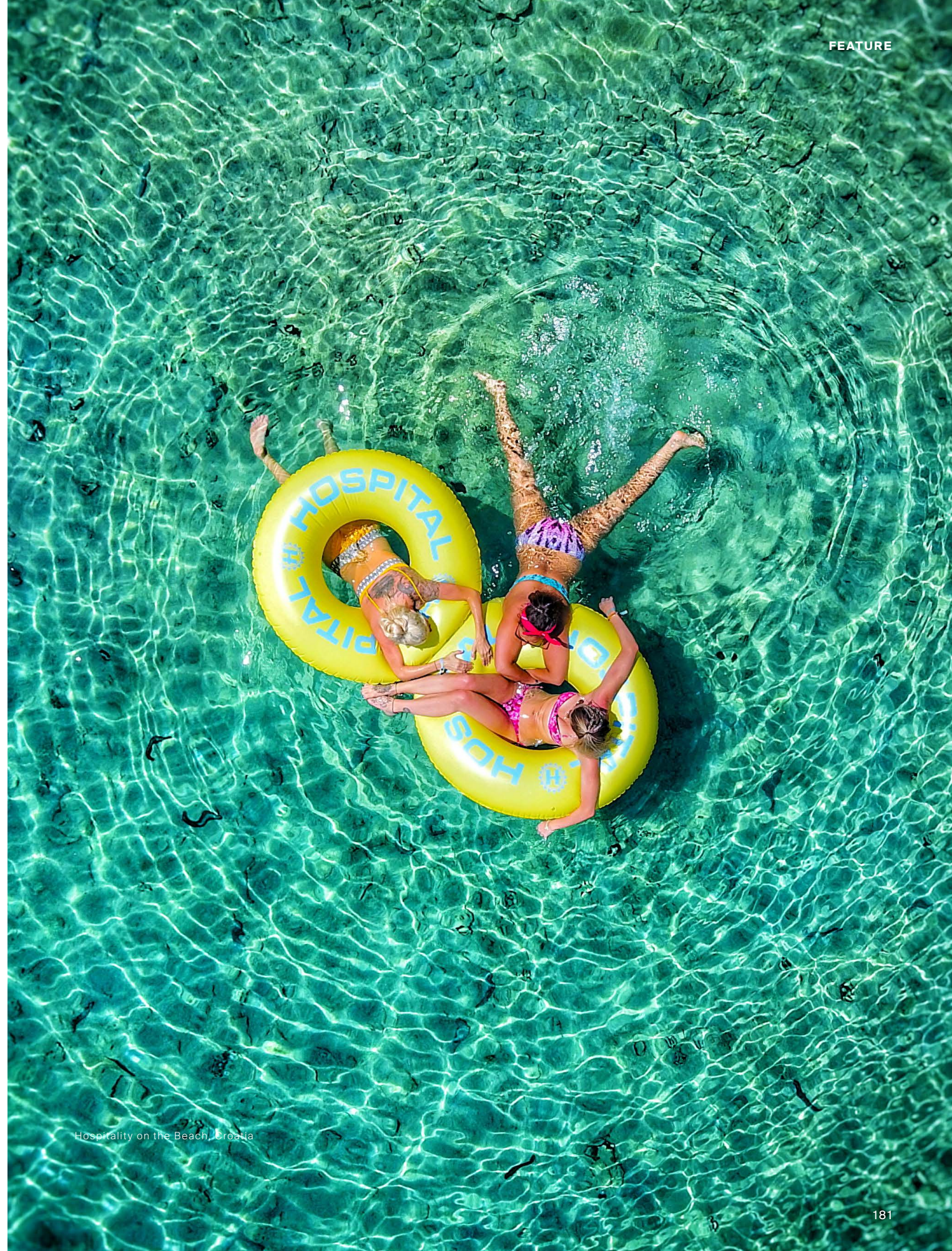
Such limited choice inspired the band to set up their own ‘Bowie Weekender’ in 1999, where people could (shock, horror) sleep in comfortable dry beds, and choose from food options other

than “some kind of pasta with tomato sauce”. The band commandeered a Pontin’s Holiday camp in Camber Sands and invited their favourite acts – including The Flaming Lips, Mogwai, Mercury Rev and Snow Patrol – to join them. The weekender became an underground success and inspired the All Tomorrow’s Parties series, now a byword for offbeat music gatherings.

Events like the Bowie Weekender are prime examples of early innovations in music tourism, masterminded by promoters and punters who were hungry for new lifestyle experiences. The same goes for the endeavours of Gareth Cooper and his group of friends from Manchester, who 19 years ago decided to offer an alternative to the sonic-gruyère offered by most après-ski resorts. That event is now Snowbombing, Europe’s largest snow

and music festival, which draws in 6,000 attendees per year and has been headlined by the likes of Pendulum. Conceptual music-driven holidays like these have paved the way for the richly nuanced landscape of audio tourism we know today, where discerning travellers can listen to a pirate folk band atop the coniferous Bulgarian peaks at Meadows in the Mountains, or catch Gilles Peterson play a star-lit set on the jetty of Adriatic island festival Obonjan.

This August, Belle & Sebastian will celebrate the 20th anniversary of their original Weekender by partnering with waterborne music tourism specialists Sixthman for a new incarnation of the event, christened the Boaty Weekender. Once again, Belle & Sebastian will curate a line-up of their favourite artists, but the venue has been upgraded to the Norwegian Jade, a luxury cruise

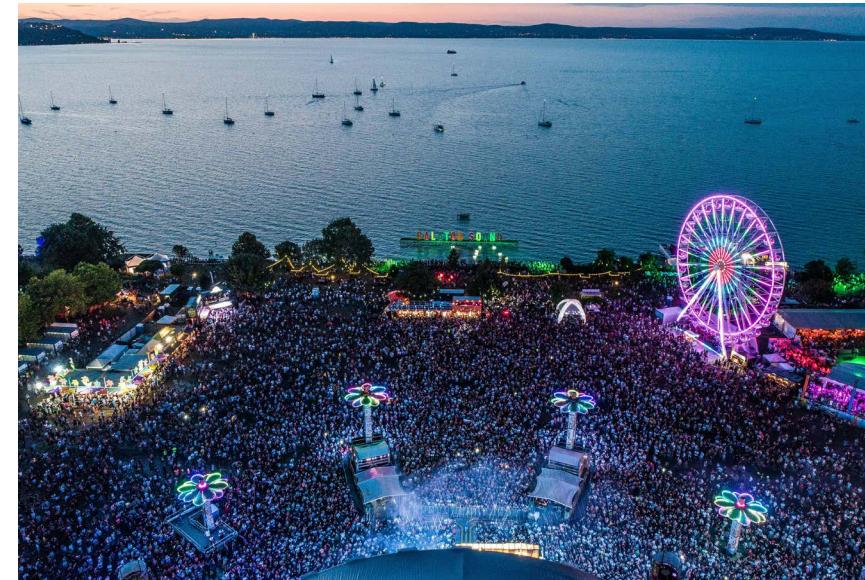


Hospitality on the Beach, Croatia



Left: Meadows in the Mountains, Bulgaria
 Top Right: Balaton Sound, Hungary
 Below Left: Sixthman Cruises
 Bottom Right: Balaton Sound, Hungary

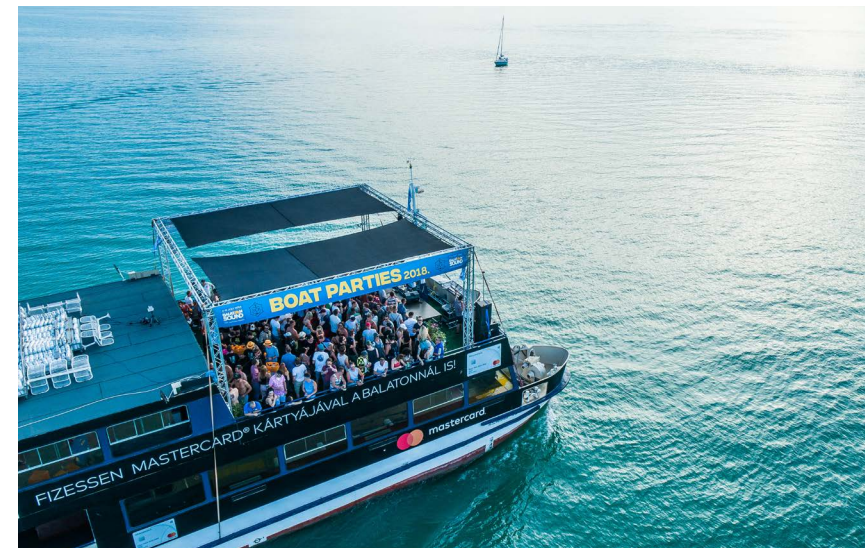
Today, music tourism is rapidly opening up established markets (in particular cruising, and to a degree skiing) to a new demographic. On Sixthman’s recent Weird & Wonderful Rainbow Ride collaboration with Kesha, the attendees were mostly females aged 21 to 35 – poles apart from the much-stereotyped 60 plus cruise passenger.



Across the pond, tourism juggernaut Las Vegas is using music to leverage interest from new audiences. From the iconic past residencies of Barbra Streisand, Sinatra and Elvis, to 2019 soirées with Beyoncé and Mariah Carey, Sin City and music have always gone hand-in-sequined-glove, but recently the sonic-sphere has pivoted into house, EDM and trap to attract a younger crowd. Visitors are now as likely to see Diplo or David Guetta at the Wynn as they are the aforementioned musicians. This shift in messaging, changing the emphasis from casinos to concerts, offsets a downward turn in the city’s revenues from gambling.

The halo effect of music tourism extends to regional and national economies too. In Barcelona, Primavera Sound festival is on course to replenish the Catalan economy with somewhere in the region of 120 million euros, with the organisers applying an exemplary 50/50 gender split to its line-up, a policy they’ve aptly dubbed “The New Normal”. Initiatives like this, which combine commercial success with a will to engender positive change, reveal the power of the industry.

In some instances, countries are using music curation not only to attract new visitors, but to redefine their national identity. Will Larnach-Jones, head of marketing at tastemaker music festival



ship which sets sail from Barcelona to Sardinia. It’s a far cry from the original weekend – less Pontin’s, more palatial – and serves as a microcosm of how the wider industry has developed, leaning increasingly towards the luxury market.

“It’s a bit uncharted in that it’s a curated festival experience but the environment is controlled,” says Jackson, who is thrilled about the creative possibilities. “All of which means we can create a world for our guests.” That ‘world’ extends to yoga classes, cocktail evenings, themed balls, games, and of course club nights and gigs. The site will be equipped with comfortable cabins and crèches, all within sauntering distance of the stages.

Sixthman, who have been offering music cruises for over a decade, was originally born out of a project devised for US band Sister Hazel, who wanted a way of spending more quality time with their fans. CEO Anthony Diaz explains that the concept was an instant hit. “On that voyage, there was an incredible connection and camaraderie between

fans and bands,” says Diaz. “A sense of community was formed and the stage was set for collaborations, activities, excursions and new friendships. That atmosphere seems impossible to replicate at shows on land.”

The secret to the cruise-provider’s success, Diaz says, is not only to “make the guest the star” but also the seafaring setting itself, which facilitates its own serendipitous magic. “It’s an environment where it takes only minutes to become best friends with other cruisers,” he says. “The

first year, fans come for the artists, but they return to meet friends they’ve made.”

Grant Seuren, Director of Sail Croatia, is also a convert to the benefits of music tourism. “Our navigator cruises have been the gateway to festival heavyweights like Ultra Music Festival, Hideout Festival and Outlook Festival, which have attracted a wider audience to our Sail Croatia cruises,” he explains. “Passengers are drawn in by the incredible open-air waterfront venues and the variety of acts playing.”

In Barcelona, Primavera Sound festival is on course to replenish the Catalan economy with somewhere in the region of 120 million euros.

CULTURE

Iceland Airwaves, explains the significance. “Once, travelling to Iceland seemed as exotic as landing on the moon, but today tourism has supplanted fishing as Iceland’s primary industry, and almost 10 per cent of visiting tourists say music played a part in their decision to visit. Iceland Airwaves injects around 2 billion Icelandic króna into the economy, and festival-goers typically stay longer, with 70 per cent taking side trips and excursions.”

Those words go some way towards explaining Iceland’s reputation as the place to see ‘your next favourite band’. Once-fledgling acts like Florence + The Machine, Hot Chip and Sigrid have all rocked the Reykjavik stage, while Icelandic alumni Hatari, JFDR, Vök and female rap collective Reykjavíkurdætur are poised for international greatness.

It’s no surprise, then, that tourist boards for some seriously offbeat locations are embracing adventurous music curation as a strategy to attract more visitors. In the Azores, the stunning Portuguese archipelago in the mid-Atlantic – an area historically isolated for many years – the Tremor Festival seeks not only to attract new tourism to the island, but also to establish a thriving and connected cultural ecosystem by

featuring resident artists whose musical output is inspired by the local landscape. Attendees can bathe in the island’s geothermal hot springs, hike trails, or catch a set under a remote waterfall.

The increasing currency of audio tourism seems to indicate a deeper shift in what we think of as tourism today. Brand USA, a marketing agency promoting tourism to the USA, dedicated 2018 to music, and even made the feature film *America’s Musical Journey*, narrated by Morgan Freeman. Shain Shapiro, the founder of strategic global music consultancy Sound Diplomacy, comments that, “Music is being looked at deliberately and intentionally as the primary reason that people travel. Music tourism is becoming its own sector, and has evolved from being a ‘nice to have’ to a ‘need to have’.”

Insight from the likes of Shapiro and his peers suggest that music is no longer a supplementary soundtrack to our good times, but a defining feature of how and why we choose to travel. As another high season rolls around, bringing with it the chance to relax and forge relationships in new surroundings, pack your passport and be cast away on music tourism’s sound waves.



Left: Belle & Sebastian, Boaty Weekender, sailing from Barcelona to Sardinia

Right: Oasis Festival, Morocco



FESTIVALS: FIVE HOT TICKETS

Bilbao BBK Live

This stellar rock and pop festival takes place atop the soaring peaks of Kobetamendi Mountain in Bilbao and features The Strokes, Rosalía, Thom Yorke and Nils Frahm. 11-13 July. Tickets €145. bilbaobbklive.com

OASIS Festival

An authentic North-African holiday experience in the heart of Marrakech, Morocco, soundtracked by Four Tet, Âme and Dixon and Horse Meat Disco. 13-15 September. Tickets from €161.50. theoasisfest.com

Balaton Sound

Sziget’s sister event Balaton Sound brings a glittering dance music line-up to the picturesque waters of Lake Balaton, featuring Marshmello, Armin Van Buuren and Jess Glynne. 3-7 July. Tickets from €179. balatonsound.com

Hospitality On The Beach

Experience a powerhouse drum & bass line-up in the musical paradise of Croatia’s The Garden, Tisno, with Andy C, High Contrast, Storm and Noisia. 11-15 July. Tickets from £112.86. hospitalityonthebeach.com

Gidi Culture Fest

Described as Africa’s answer to Coachella, this West African music festival takes place on the beach of Lagos, Nigeria and features afrobeat stars Moonchild Sanelly, Patoranking and Niniola. 20-21 April. Tickets from £15. gidiculturefestival.com