

# Africa's Best Festivals and Events

It's worth planning your vacation to Africa around the top festivals and events.

## 1. Timket- Feast of Epiphany, Ethiopia



For Ethiopians, Timket is the most important religious festival of the year; for many visitors, it's the most spectacular. Thousands of Ethiopians travel to their nearby towns to join in the three-day celebration of Epiphany that starts on 18 January each year. In Orthodox churches, Epiphany celebrates the baptism of Jesus in the river Jordan, and sprinkling (or spraying!) the faithful crowd with holy water is central to this joyous celebration.

The religious rituals are only one aspect of being in an Ethiopian city or town during Timket, and before the processions and rituals start, the towns are buzzing. You wander through the streets, with thousands of relaxed and smiling people who've travelled from their homes to rejoice and celebrate. Everywhere there are people greeting friends and family, chatting and gathering in small groups to dance and sing.

The evening before Timket, priests from each church walk through the town, carrying their church's carefully wrapped replica of the Ark of the Covenant (a Tabot) on their heads. Their destination is the river or pool where they will commemorate Christ's baptism in the morning. In Lalibela there's a designated Timket park, that includes a viewing platform and cross-shaped pool so that as many visitors as possible can take part. In Gondar this part of the ceremony takes place by the castle pool.

The processions are a blaze of colorful splendor and vibrant celebration. Priests and deacons wear richly embroidered robes, and carry ornate crosses, smoking censers, and beautiful fringed umbrellas whose sequins and gold threads gleam in the sunshine. In contrast, the faithful are dressed in simple flowing white shemma (cotton robe). Swaying musicians and clapping members of the public accompany the priests, at some points chanting seriously and at others singing loudly and ululating joyfully. Underneath it all is the steady rhythm of the procession that the priests beat out with their prayer sticks.

Priests and deacons pray through the night, and a mass is held in the dark hours of the morning beside the water. Before sunrise the next day the pilgrims gather around the pool for the final blessing. Then the faithful are sprinkled with holy water, the priests using hose pipes to reach those who can't get close to the pool. Then it's time for the Tabots to be returned to their churches. The processions are reversed before the feasting begins.

The Timket happens every January 19 or January 20 of every leap year.

## **2. Festival-au-Desert, Mali**



The **Festival au désert** ("Festival in the Desert") was an annual concert in Mali, showcasing traditional Tuareg music as well as music from around the world.

The first Festival took place in 2001 in Tin Essako, then in Tessalit in 2002, and in Essakane from 2003 to 2009. From 2010 to 2012 it was held on the outskirts of Timbuktu because of security concerns which have prevented it from taking place since.

Several film documentaries have been made about or at the festival: *Le Festival au Désert* (2004), *Dambé: The Mali Project* (2008), *The Last Song Before the War* (2013) and *Woodstock in Timbuktu* (2013). The album *Festival au Desert Live from Timbuktu* (2013) has performances from the 2012 festival.

Three days of traditional Touareg art, music and dance takes place in Essakane, 2 hours from Timbuktu, Mali. International acts from Europe and West Africa round out the festivities. Everyone camps in the desert with their camels close at hand. A truly unique cultural event that is well worth the trek. It's worth taking a tour as in the past few years there have been some safety concerns. In 2015 the organizers are doing their best to find a safe spot in the Sahara to hold the festival.

Festival-au-desert takes place at the end of January/February of every year.

### **3. FESPACO-Film Festival, Bukina Faso**





FESPACO takes place every two years in Burkina Faso's capital, Ouagadougou, with the stated aim of promoting African cinema. The event is loosely modeled on the Cannes Film festival.

Fespaco received almost 1,000 submissions for 2017, far more than previous years.

The festival used to be very select with regard to which type of production is acceptable and who could compete.

Films shot on budget-intensive celluloid were the standard and the official selection was open only to continental African directors.

The restriction was lifted a year ago. So now, digital films and films from directors from the African diaspora qualify for consideration in all categories.

The large number of entries meant submissions were put through a sift, and ultimately 150 films were retained by the organizers.

But many directors are in Ouagadougou to promote work which does not feature in the official strands - so a total of 200 films are being screened during the festival.

The FESPACO take place every year in the months February and March.

## 4. Cape Town International Jazz Festival



The Cape Town International Jazz Festival is a highlight on every jazz enthusiast's calendar. It takes place on the last weekend of March each year at the Cape Town International Convention Centre.

Here you'll find on offer an eclectic mix of local and international jazz, which is why they call it 'Africa's Grandest Gathering', as the Mother City puts on a show of sexy, soulful jazz and entertains in style.

The first festival took place in 2000 and, over the years, attendance figures have grown from 14 000 to well over 30 000. The event consists of live performances from 40-plus international and African artists over two days across five stages and, for those who love music, it's a festival of note, with musicians playing to full houses.

Big names to have performed at the festival include Lauryn Hill, Dan Brubeck, James Ingram, Dave Sanchez, Dave Koz, Earth, Wind & Fire and many others. Local musical greats such as Hugh Masekela and Jimmy Dlodlu continue to thrill audiences and there are also workshops and events highlighting new, young, talents and investing in the future of South African jazz.

Cape Town's hotels are only too keen to put on special packages for festival-goers and excellent deals are available for those who want to travel to the Mother City. Pre- and post-tours include visits to major attractions such as Robben Island and Table Mountain, as well as visiting the townships for more local flavor (and more local jazz).

The Cape Town International Jazz Festival is now ranked as one of the top jazz festivals in the world and is right up there with Holland's North Sea Jazz Festival and Switzerland's Montreux Festival.

## **5. Fes Festival of World Sacred Music, Morocco**



The Fes Festival of World Sacred Music in Morocco is 10-day celebration held in mid-summer (late May or early June) that takes place in the imperial city of Fes. The festival was founded in 1994 by the Moroccan scholar and philanthropist Faouzi Skali and was created to showcase major musical traditions of sacred, spiritual music and world music. The current Artistic Director is Cherif Khaznadar, a pioneer of world music and one of the most influential Artistic Directors on the scene. Each year the festival celebrates artists from Muslim, Jewish, Christian, Hindu and other faiths to perform together in a spirit of mutual respect and collaboration.

#### **The Fes Festival is comprised of:**

A four-day Forum called Rencontres de [Fes](#) under the rubric "Giving Soul to Globalisation" where politicians, social activists, academics and religious leaders come together in dialogue to discuss the urgent issues of our times. These include conflict resolution, climate change, urban renewal, social justice and much more.

Intimate afternoon concerts at the Dar [Batha](#) Museum and its surrounding Andalusian gardens.

Art and film exhibitions, poetry readings at the Dar Bartha Museum and other locations within Fes.

A one-day excursion to the Roman ruins of [Volubilis](#) with Arc of Triumph as a backdrop setting for a musical performance.

Evening concerts at the Bab Makina Palace courtyard.

[Sufi](#) nights: Sufi Music rituals concerts that begin at midnight performed by Moroccan Sufi brotherhoods in the Dar Tazi gardens, in the heart of the Fes medina.

The Festival has featured wide range of global musicians such as Miriam Makeba, Ismael Lô, Mohamed Abdou, Tartit Women's Ensemble, Ghada Shbéir, , Sabah Fakhrih, the Blind Boys of Alabama, Jan Garbarek and The Hilliard Ensemble and the Whirling Dervishes of Konya in the dance of Odissi Madhvi Mudgal. Performers like Youssou N'Dour, Ravi Shankar and Salif Keita have been juxtaposed with less known musical genres such as Japanese Gagaku, Indonesian Gamelan and folk music from Central Asia.

The [Fes](#) Festival is unique because it has roots in spiritual values and encourages the audience to become active participants. The festival's president, Mohamed Kabbaj, wants the festival to act as an anchoring ground to teach people to learn to appreciate different cultures and to communicate better with one another.

In addition to bringing attention to various cultures, the Fes Festival has been a wonderful tool specifically in raising awareness for Moroccan culture. During the day, tourists arriving to enjoy the Fes Festival explore Fes' medina, souk, mosques and other city highlights. At night, they delight in the musical festivities.

The festival is not just confined to one square in Fes. In honor of the festival there are art exhibitions and concerts held at the Dar Batha museum, talks at Palace Jamai, free concerts in the medina and in the new city, as well as many children's activities, making it a great family destination.

In the morning, visitors can take part in seminars or round table discussions covering topics related to the theme of the festival. By attending the discussion, you can gain extra insight into the meaning of the festival.

In the afternoon, evening, and late at night, there are concerts given by performers arriving from every angle of the globe. These musicians help celebrate all the cultures and religions of the world through a multiplicity of their songs and rituals. The musical spectrum heard includes early European classical, Sufi ritual songs and trance music, Arab-Andalusian rhythms, a Bulgarian orthodox choir, Hindustani chants, Celtic sacred music, Christian Gospel, Swedish chamber choir, Pakistani Qawwali incantations, Egyptian madhi odes, flamenco-style Christian saeta, ancient Indian gwalior chants and Turkish whirling dervishes.

Traditionally, the festival's most impressive afternoon concerts take place by the DarBatha Museum, which is set amidst a beautiful Andalusian garden and has a backdrop of the Atlas Mountains. During the evening concerts are held at the Bab Makina and Palace Boujeloud. After the last concert of the night is over, the medina is the place to head for a continuation of a once in a life time experience. Every evening at midnight, there are free "Sufi Nights". These highly popular Sufi ritual trance performances are held at the DarTazi Palace gardens where Sufi brotherhoods like the Hamadcha, the Aissaoua and The Master Musicians of Jajouka perform while you relax on Berber rugs and sip mint tea.



If you want to place the Fes Festival on your itinerary, make sure to reserve accommodations in advance as the city fills up quickly with tourists for this spectacular annual event. The most sought after location to stay in is the medina because it is central to all the concerts and main activities.

The Fes Festival is a unique experience that combines high art, popular entertainment, spiritual energy and intellectual challenges. It resonates with the essence of our times and is rooted in The Spirit of Fes.

## 6. Essaouira Gnaoua and World Music Festival, Morocco



Gnaoua is a unique blend of music and dance, a fusion of the creations of both local and international musicians. Renowned masters from all around the globe and across every genre of music flock to the Gnaoua World Music Festival to showcase their art and skills. This is the platform on which a new kind of sound is created with a balanced and masterly fusion of rock, jazz, blues, contemporary with the traditional and ethnic Gnaoua music.

Technically, Gnaoua is a combination of Arabic, African and Berber rhythms and beats which is accompanied by dance. The continent of Africa has always raised the curiosity of the world community with its subtle blend of art, culture, music, history, architecture and an amazing variety of wildlife. The North African nation of Morocco has been maintaining this legacy of a versatile land with the Gnaoua World Music Festival. This

gala event has its inception in 1998 and since then it has been a landmark in the cultural milieu of Morocco.

All the shows in Gnaoua World Music Festival is free of cost thereby offering each and every one an opportunity of a lifetime to be a part of a mind blowing and soul touching jam sessions. Thousands of visitors crowd the streets Morocco to feel the sublime atmosphere that can be created by music only.

## 7. Zanzibar International Film Festival



The **Zanzibar International Film Festival (ZIFF)**, also known as **Festival of the Dhow Countries**, is an annual film festival held in Zanzibar, Tanzania. It has been described as the largest cultural event in East Africa. ZIFF is a non-governmental organization established in 1997 to develop and promote film and other cultural industries as catalyst for the regional social and economic growth.

The annual multi-disciplinary arts and cultural festival is ZIFF's major activity; the festival is an all-arts affair, with 8 days of local and international discussion panels, workshops, 10 days of screenings of the best local and international cinema and evenings of musical concerts including a Gala each evening. All festival programs are a culmination of the realization of the capacity of film to fuse together the best of each art-



form, offering a wide range of Entertainment, Educating and Networking options for world audiences. The festival is arguably the largest multi-disciplinary art and cultural festival in Africa, and continues to lead as a tourist attraction event in the region. ZIFF now gives 12 International Awards presented by 5 International Juries. It is estimated that 7000 western tourists came to Zanzibar to attend the festival and the total festival audience was in excess of 100,000 with wide appeal across race, class and religions. Its impact on the economy of Zanzibar is unquestionable.

During the festival, films are shown in [Stone Town](#) in [Zanzibar City](#), as well as rural Zanzibar villages. The event happens annually in the month of July.

## 8. Ramadan throughout Africa



[Ramadan](#) refers to the 9th month in the Muslim calendar. All Muslims are expected to fast during the day for the entire lunar month. During the month of Ramadan, Muslims abstain from food, drink, and other physical needs during the daylight hours. As a time to purify the soul, refocus attention on God, and practice self-sacrifice, Ramadan is much more than just not eating and drinking.

Fasting during Ramadan is strictly adhered to in countries where there's a large Islamic population. Muslims account for over half the population in as many as 28 African countries. The end of Ramadan is marked by the festival of Eid and celebrations last for several days.

The months of Ramadan are June 18 - July 17 every year.

## 9. Maskel, Ethiopia



**Meskel** is an annual [religious holiday](#) in the [Ethiopian Orthodox](#) and [Eritrean Orthodox](#) churches, which commemorates the discovery of the [True Cross](#) by the [Roman Empress Helena](#) ([Saint Helena](#)) in the fourth century. Meskel occurs on the 17 Meskerem in the [Ethiopian calendar](#) (September 27, [Gregorian calendar](#), or on 28 September in [leap years](#)). "Meskel" (or "Meskal" or "Mesqel", there are various ways to [transliterate](#) from Ge'ez to Latin script) is [Ge'ez](#) for "cross".

The festival is known as [Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross](#) in other Orthodox, [Catholic](#) or [Protestant](#) churches. The churches that follow the Gregorian calendar celebrate the feast yearly on September 14.

The feast is held in Meskel Square, named after the festival, in the capital city of Addis Ababa. Religious and civil leaders preside over the celebration, and public figures give speeches and reference biblical themes and stories. Many Ethiopians who live in cities return to their villages to celebrate the national event. When it gets darker, the Demera is burned.

The Meskel celebration includes the burning of a large bonfire, or *Demera*, based on the belief that Queen Eleni, as she is known, had a revelation in a dream. She was told that she should make a bonfire and that the smoke would show her where the true cross was buried. So she ordered the people of Jerusalem to bring wood and make a huge



pile. After adding frankincense to it the bonfire was lit and the smoke raised high up to the sky and returned to the ground, exactly to the spot where the Cross had been buried.

## 10. Curee Salee Wodaabe Gerewol, Niger



One of the most important festivals in West Africa is celebration Cure Salée (Salt Cure). It's held annually and each Nomad ethnic group has its own celebration. The biggest celebration you can see at Wodaabé (Bororo) tribe, held in September around small town In-Gall, in North-east Niger. The festival takes about a week, but two days are major. The exact date is not known, it's changing every year and it's announced approximately one month before in depending on rains strength.

Wodaabé tribe is part of z gibber family called Fulani. Fulani were the originally Nomads and herdsmen, but when they migrated from Upper Nile area to West Africa, many of them converted to Islam and settled down. The rest of them remained Nomads and herdsmen are called Wodaabé. In fact, Wodaabé called themselves 'people of the taboos', with is connected to their traditional Fulani law, moral restrictions, honesty and fairness. Some of them are called Bororo which is linked to their live with cattle.

Wodaabé men have often women-like elegant faces. They believe they are very attractive. The beauty is very important for them. The most important for the parents is to have pretty child. In some cases a man who is not so pretty has to share his wife with

another more beautiful man, so the probability a pretty child is born is higher. Wodaabé women are indeed care about their beauty and surprisingly they have sexual freedom before the marriage.

During the year Wodaabé people are spread around almost all West African fields. Because their living is dependent on cattle, they bring the herds once a year to In-Gallu area, which is rich to the salt and healthy. The area is mostly visited after the raining season when there is enough to eat for the cattle. That's the right time for Cure Salée celebration. The festival is a big social and cultural event. The old friends can meet, men are searching for their wives, and people are chatting about the news.

Wodaabé join the Cure Salée celebration with their own festival Gerewol called after their traditional dance. The right time to attract woman is a beauty contest. The main event is Yaake dance. Men are dancing showing their beauty, charisma, elegance and charm. Preparation is tough. Men are decorating themselves in front of a small mirror for long hours. The face make-up must be perfect. They are carefully selecting bracelets and necklaces. When they are ready, the dance can start. It's a quite strange and different dance we are get used to. Men are dancing in a row, wobbling, rolling eyes and showing the teeth. Before the dance they usually take a stimulant drink, so they can dance for hours. It's not rare to see men dancing the whole night. Some of them are in ecstasy and need help from the others. Men beauty is scored according to their dance. Women are watching carefully and quietly selection their husbands. If the merry offer is accepted by man, he has to give a calabash of milk to her parents. If they accept it, he has to pay with three cows for the wedding celebration.

## **10. International Festival of the Sahara, Tunisia**



The **International Festival of the Sahara** is an annual festival held in Douz, Tunisia.

The festival, called the *Camel festival*, began in 1910 when Tunisia was under French rule. In 1967 it took on its modern identity according to the will of Habib Bourguiba, Tunisia's first president of the new republic, to become the country's oldest and best-known festival. M'hammed Marzougui, who dedicated his life to make people aware of and appreciate nomadic way of life and traditions, was mainly responsible for the festival's foundation. Since then, every year at the end of December for four days, thousands of people, mostly from all over Tunisia and other Maghrebien countries, flock to Douz.

After the opening ceremony, the main events take place in the H'naiech stadium in front of the desert surrounded by Bedouin tents. [Camel](#) marathons, *fantasia*- galloping Arab horses ridden by daring riders, a [Bedouin](#) marriage, *sloughi* desert hunting dogs - catching rabbits are the principal features.

In the evening, groups from visiting countries perform songs and dances. The central event is the poetry contest run by the desert poet, [Abdellatif Belgacem](#).

The festival has become an important media and touristic event followed by cameramen and journalists from all over the world.



## 11. Christmas throughout Africa



The history of Christianity in Africa dates back to the 1st century. Along with Islam, it is one of the two most widely practiced religions on the African continent. In 2000, there were an estimated 380 million Christians in Africa, with studies suggesting that that figure is likely to double by 2025. As a result, Christmas is celebrated throughout the African continent by Christian communities both large and small.

On Christmas Day carols are sung from Ghana to South Africa. Meats are roasted, gifts are exchanged and people travel far and wide to visit family. The Coptic Christians in Ethiopia and Egypt celebrate Christmas according to the Julian calendar - which means that although they celebrate on December 25th, that date usually translates to January 7th on the Gregorian calendar. Kwanzaa (the celebration of African heritage observed in the United States and often associated with the festive season) is not celebrated in Africa.

And unless you're in the Atlas Mountains of Morocco, you have very little chance of enjoying a white Christmas.



Even in some of Africa's predominantly Muslim countries, Christmas is still recognized as a secular celebration. In the West African nation of Senegal, Islam is the main religion - and yet Christmas is designated as a national holiday. This Mail & Guardian article shows how Senegalese Muslims and Christians have chosen to unofficially celebrate each other's holidays, laying the foundation for the country's famous atmosphere of religious tolerance.

### Church Services and Caroling

Going to church is usually the main focus of Christmas celebrations in Africa. Nativity scenes are played out, carols are sung, and in some cases dances are performed.

In Malawi, groups of young children go door-to-door to perform dances and Christmas songs to the accompaniment of homemade instruments. They receive a small monetary gift in return, in much the same way that Western children do when caroling. In many countries, processions take place after a church service held on Christmas Eve. These are often joyous occasions of music and dance. In The Gambia, for example, people parade with large lanterns called *fanals*, made in the shape of boats or houses. Every country has its own unique celebrations no matter how small it's Christian population.

### Christmas Dinner

As in most Christian cultures, celebrating Christmas dinner with friends and family is a key festive ritual in Africa. In most countries, Christmas is a public holiday and people make the most of the opportunity to visit family and friends. In East Africa, goats are purchased at the local market for roasting on Christmas Day. In South Africa, families typically braai; or salute their colonial British heritage with a traditional Christmas dinner complete with paper hats, mince pies and turkey. In Ghana, Christmas dinner is not complete without fufu and okra soup; and in Liberia rice, beef and biscuits are the orders of the day.

### Gift Giving

Those who can afford it will generally give gifts at Christmas, although the holiday is not nearly as commercial in Africa as it is in Europe or North America. The emphasis is more on the religious celebration of the birth of Jesus than it is on gift giving. The most common gift bought at Christmas is new clothes, usually intended to be worn to church. In rural Africa, few people can afford frivolous gifts or toys, and in any case, there are not many places to buy them. Therefore, if gifts are exchanged in poorer communities they usually take the form of school books, soap, cloth, candles and other practical goods.

### Christmas Decorations

Decorating shop fronts, trees, churches, and homes is common throughout Christian communities in Africa. You may see fake snow decorating store fronts in Nairobi, palm

trees laden with candles in Ghana, or oil palms loaded with bells in Liberia. Of course, the evergreen firs and pines favored in the West are hard to come by in Africa, so Christmas trees are usually replaced by native or synthetic alternatives.

### How to Say Happy Christmas in Africa

In Akan (Ghana): ***Afishapa***

In Shona (Zimbabwe): ***Muve neKisimusi***

In Afrikaans (South Africa): ***Geseënde Kersfees***

In Zulu (South Africa): ***Sinifisela Ukhisimusi Omuhle***

In Swazi (Swaziland): ***Sinifisela Khisimusi Lomuhle***

In Sotho (Lesotho): ***Matswalo a Morena a Mabotse***

In Swahili (Tanzania, Kenya): ***Kuwa na Krismasi njema***

In Amharic (Ethiopia): ***Melkam Yelidet Beaal***

In Egyptian Arabic (Egypt): ***Colo sana wintom tiebeen***

In Yoruba (Nigeria): ***E ku odun, e hu iye' dun***