



Ann Abel Contributor

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The 12 Coolest Festivals Worth Traveling For This Summer

[The Festivals To Know This Summer](#)

“There is quite possibly no better way to truly connect with a foreign culture than to join in a local festival,” is the come-on line for travel designer [Asia Transpacific Journeys](#). “Asia’s festivals are as diverse as its landscape—each one a vibrant distillation of a destination’s complex history, culture, art and traditions. Festivals unfailingly prove to be our travelers’ favorite part of the journey.”

That’s not unique to Asia, of course. From a massive celebration of the winter solstice in Peru to an epic wine fight in Rioja to a gathering of thousands of dancing Papua New Guinea tribesmen, the world is at its most vibrant—and sometimes its most playful—during festivals.

As with all travel, you can wing it. Or you can plan your trip with a specialist who is an expert in that region, who can deliver access and perspective that you would never find on your own. Here’s where the best operators are sending clients this summer.

Teatro del Fuoco, Sicily

June 23–July 4

[Black Tomato](#) likes to send guests to witness this international fire-dancing festival, which kicks off in Catania, on the Ionian coast of the fittingly volcanic island of Sicily, with nightly performances by fire artists engaging in games of balance, juggling, acrobatics, cabaret, dancing and fire-twirling wizardry. From there it moves to Palermo June 28 and concludes in S.M. di Salina in the Aeolian Islands.

Inti Raymi, Cusco, Peru

June 24

[Blue Parallel](#) is a fan of this winter solstice celebration worshipping an Incan god that involves colorful costumes, lavish banquets, festive music and historical re-creations. Hundreds of thousands of devotees descend on Cusco as actors re-enact ancient rituals and the Sun King is carried on a massive throne in a royal procession to the ancient site Sacsayhuaman. Blue Parallel can get guests into VIP boxes, arrange expert scholars as hosts and organize private access to a traditional workshop where festival costumes are made.

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Hemis Festival, Ladakh, India

June 26–27

While this is an annual festival celebrating the birth anniversary of Padmasambhava, the founder of Tibetan Tantric Buddhism, it's beyond spectacular once in a generation. The main attraction of the monastery is revealed only every 12 years, and 2015 is one of them. "To witness the unveiling of the two-story *thangka* portraying Padmasambhava, embellished with pearls and semiprecious stones, is awe-inspiring," says Sasha Lehman, a destination expert with [Absolute Travel](#). Locals often walk many days from their high mountain posts to attend, sell food and wares, or just celebrate, while ceremonial dances occurring in the central square of the monastery feature demon and wizard characters portrayed by the monks.

Haro Wine Festival, Rioja, Spain

June 28–29

[Red Savannah](#) likes to introduce pleasure-seeking guests to this celebration of the grape, which culminates in La Batalla de Vino, or the Wine Fight. The event starts with a huge street party Sunday evening. The next day everyone climbs up a nearby mountain to drench one another with Rioja using sprays, buckets, water pistols and anything else they can lay their hands on. The battle moves back into town, where throwing is replaced by drinking, along with dancing and general merrymaking. Red Savannah likes to pair the bacchanalia with a visit to the nearby San Millán de la Cogolla, where the Yuso Monastery contains the finest library in Spain.

Naadam Festival, Mongolia

July 11–13

The Festival of Three Manly Arts, as this one is also known, has for centuries showcased Mongolian wrestling, horse racing and archery. The sports are full-on: Men wrestle without time limits until only one is left standing, horses race across the country steered by brave child jockeys, and keen-sighted archers vie for the titles of national marksman and markswoman. The largest festival is held in Ulaanbaatar, but Absolute Travel takes clients as far as the Gobi Desert to watch athletes become local legends. "In the rural regions it's much more than a sporting competition," says Lehman. "Naadam is *the* ultimate social event for nomads. When the locals aren't competing, the unmarried are contending in the equivalent of a speed-dating competition, dressed to impress for a rare opportunity to find a mate."

Gion Matsuri, Kyoto

July 1–31; parades July 17 and 24

The Gion Matsuri festival reaches a fever pitch on the nights leading up to the parades—extravagant productions with beautifully decorated floats and thousands of paper lanterns—when streets trade traffic for food vendors and girls in traditional summer kimonos. Old houses in the merchant district open their entryways, allowing visitors to see their family heirlooms and beautifully preserved interiors. Asia Transpacific Journeys leads guests into the heart of the proceedings with expert local guides who know how to navigate the festival and explain its cultural significance.

Mt. Hagan Sing-Sing, Papua New Guinea

August 15

Asia Transpacific Journeys sends guests with a tour leader whose long-term connections get behind the scenes at this

marvelous mélange of more than 1,000 tribal highlanders from all over the country, who share a spirited competition of costume, dance and music—which ATJ calls a “psychedelic smorgasbord of outlandish, ritualized ancient theater paraded to vocal accompaniment—each tribe’s chants alternately haunting, happy or warlike, and ranging from dizzying whoops to subtle, windlike murmurs.”

Onam, Kerala, India

August 27–30; preparations begin 10 days before
This Hindu festival, the biggest of the year in Kerala, commemorates the homecoming from the underworld of the mythical Emperor Mahabali. Ten days before the festival, Malayalis begin arranging elaborate flower mandalas (*pookalam*) in front of homes. As the festival approaches, vibrant cultural, music, and dance performances take place, as well as a grand procession in which the local temple’s resident icon is carried around the grounds by a troop of caparisoned elephants. The festivities end in a huge community-wide South Indian feast, with tens of thousands of people taking part.

Reitaisai Festival, Kanagawa, Japan

September 14–16

This three-day festival, a favorite of Black Tomato, is conducted in honor of the 800-year-old Tsurugaoka Hachiman Shrine. Expect classical Japanese dancing, tea-offering ceremonies to the gods and the greatest attraction of “Yabusame”—a spectacular ancient ritual of shooting arrows on horseback.

Esala Perahera, Kandy, Sri Lanka

September 15–30

As legend has it, 1,700 years ago one of the Buddha’s teeth was stolen from his funeral pyre and smuggled into Sri Lanka. Today the sacred symbol is housed in the country’s most sacred temple, Dalada Maligawa (Temple of the Tooth). Esala Perahera includes a parade every night, each one getting longer, more intense and increasingly colorful—think elephants in vivid finery and male dancers in exotic costumes moving to choreography dictated by whip crackers.

Thimpu Tshechu, Bhutan

September 23–25

Monks clad in colorful brocade perform masked dances permeated by chants and readings of Buddhist scripts. The festival culminates in the unfolding of a huge cloth *thanka*, a sacred scroll, depicting Padmasambhava, a visionary who is a focus of Tibetan Buddhist practice, and imagery from Buddhist pantheon. Red Savannah can organize a special audience with the *rinphoche* (head lama) and the king’s astrologer.

Fiesta de la Mercé, Barcelona

September 24

This huge party with free music, a favorite of Red Savannah, takes place in city squares and features figures from folklore such as the *gigants* (giants) and *cap grossos* (fatheads). People come out to perform the *sardana* (the traditional Catalan dance) and watch the nerve-wracking *castellers* (human towers). It climaxes in the hair-raising *correfoc*, a parade of devils and dragons brandishing fireworks.

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