

# Festivals: big bucks for small towns

They're not quite on the scale of the 2010 soccer world cup, but festivals held each year in cities and towns across South Africa celebrate our heritage, encourage tourism and ultimately keep local economies ticking.



Photo: Suzy Bernstein

Festivals not only bring important economic benefits to small towns, but provide a space to celebrate our diversity and rich cultural history through the arts.

BY SHARIVAN MOODLEY

## Ficksburg, Free State

Straddling the border of Lesotho in the eastern Free State is the town of Ficksburg, characterised by its sandstone buildings and agrarian life. For a few days each year locals in this quaint town up the tempo to play host to the national Cherry Festival.

Started in 1968, it's 'the oldest running harvest festival in the country', says co-ordinator Gavin Bay, attracting up to 25 000 people over the three days from Johannesburg, Durban and elsewhere, with a sprinkling of international tourists.

In a town dependent on agricultural activity and with a high unemployment rate, cherry farming has become an important local industry. The 12 local cherry farms that supply the festival otherwise export their produce to the Johannesburg Market or abroad.

Last year the event saw R15 million injected into the town through accommodation, shopping, entertainment and food. Importantly, says Bay, it has also created a positive tourism spin-off. 'People who visit keep coming back to experience more of the area, benefiting B&Bs, food outlets and people who make arts and craft.'

There is live entertainment and various workshops covering everything



Photo: Cherry Festival

The cherry-rich Ficksburg region benefits from a food, arts and entertainment festival celebrating the fruit.

from art to cooking. Involving locals is important. 'We live in the area so we know who does what, who makes craft and who the artists are, and we approach them to get involved. They all get paid to do it and they get exposure.'

Brenda Monare, tourism officer at the Setsoto Municipality, says that while the benefits are many, SMMEs 'stand to benefit the most' because they exhibit and sell their products at the festival.

She adds that although the municipality's role 'might look minimal', provision is made for cleaning the town before and after the event, cutting grass, and having the traffic department on stand-by to assist.

The festival is set to continue growing by incorporating a jazz festival and organised cherry tours, and with the area building on its tourism potential as the gateway to Lesotho.



Photo: Marula Festival

Visitors from around the country make their way to Limpopo each year for a taste of the locally brewed marula beer on offer at the Marula Festival.

## Phalaborwa, Limpopo

The marula fruit has long had rich cultural significance for locals in the Limpopo region, but in recent years the indigenous fruit has rapidly grown in popularity for its many commercial uses. It has become a flavour of choice for fruit and alcoholic drinks, while its use as an extract in healthcare products is also growing.

As a result the provincial government in Limpopo launched the Marula Festival to help 'create hype' around the fruit's many commercial possibilities, says festival organiser Moses Ngobeni.

Started four years ago, the festival is part of a broader strategic plan by the provincial government to position marula as a major industry in the region, which has a declining mining sector. It makes sense, Ngobeni says, 'since we have an abundance of marula

and the demand is just growing'.

The festival has grown from less than 2 000 visitors in 2006 to more than 10 000 this year. With the FIFA World Cup in 2010, Ngobeni is confident it will attract as many as 15 000.

Many come from South Africa, but a number of visitors also come from neighbouring countries as well as from Europe. Ngobeni says that it is the locally brewed marula beer that visitors come to experience – about 15 000 litres of beer are consumed.

The marula is harvested by 10

co-operatives of 10 community members each established specifically to help kick-start the industry in Limpopo.

Last year more than R25 million was generated during the week of the festival. 'All 1 200 beds in Phalaborwa were booked out and some visitors were staying as far as Tzaneen, 100km away,' he says. 'One British visitor came during the first festival and the next year he came back with his friends, and the year after with his friends and family. That's exactly what we want.'

The restaurants are full until 1am. Ngobeni hopes the festival can expand from a weekend to a whole week affair, and there are plans for a cooking competition to help continue developing new, unique products from marula.

While municipalities do assist with the festival, Ngobeni says that in time 'they should all ideally take ownership. They already see the value in it because every year the festival's economic study goes into council as well as their annual report'.

## Victoria West, Northern Cape

With probably more sheep than people the little village of Victoria West is an unlikely location for a festival of any sort, but each year this tiny part of the Karoo hosts the Apollo Film Festival.

Showcasing local, independent films, the festival is a celebration of one of the last art-deco theatre complexes in the country, preserved in its original form.

The theatre, which used to seat coloured and black patrons in separate upstairs galleries, closed in the 1950s and reopened 40 years later, when the idea of a film festival arose as a way of promoting this heritage and to share with locals the social issues films explore, says former festival organiser Reggie Khanzi.

For a small town with a population of 14 000 people, the festival plays an important role in promoting the area. Since 2000 it has attracted directors, filmmakers, film lovers, the media and passing tourists, says CEO of the Apollo Development Association (ADA), Petrus Martens. The ADA is a non-profit organisation made up of community members who help run the festival and ensure that the benefits are spread throughout the community. It includes representatives from the Ubuntu Municipality and Pixley Ka Seme District Municipality.

Their focus is largely on the youth, explains Martens. 'The youth not only help organise the festival but are themselves film enthusiasts and many benefit from the scriptwriting and film-making courses during the event.' The festival also 'operates a LoveLife franchise that assists with HIV/AIDS advocacy and skills



Victoria West locals are treated to a festival celebrating local, independent film.

Photo: ADA

training among the youth.'

Through the festival, 23 part-time employees acquire skills in hospitality and administration while B&B owners benefit from some R30 000 generated between them. There are also stalls where locals can sell their goods and the festival features the work of Piet Thousand, a local artist who specialises in burning portraits into wood.

National Film and Video Foundation's Azania Muendane says that they have previously supported the festival 'because it is a local initiative to promote film and it is a community managed project that looks first inside to develop the local skills before looking outside. The success of the festival has always been due to

the community's involvement'.

She adds that because of the 'nostalgic value' of the festival, it 'has always received favourable attendance'. Martens says that the town has 'benefited tremendously. Its profile has been lifted, economic benefits have been created and the town attracted a lot of people who bought houses here.'

But he adds that the municipality 'really needs to get involved'. He believes they should use the festival to establish its tourism brand, pointing to a similar one-day film festival held in Colesberg that is organised by the municipality. 'The municipality really needs to be the driver of activities in this town.'

## Grahamstown, Eastern Cape

Getting people to support the arts in tough economic times can be extremely difficult, unless it's the National Arts Festival. The annual 10-day celebration in Grahamstown is the 'biggest festival in Africa and one of the biggest in the world', festival publicist Gilly Hemphill says. Last year, the event saw 200 shows being performed on the main programme and 400 others on the fringe across 87 venues in the region.

Once the second largest town in Southern Africa (1830s), Grahamstown is home to Rhodes University and, since the early 1900s, the town has built on its status as a centre of culture, learning and creative expression. The festival, now in its 36th year, has become an annual must for art enthusiasts, offering a creative space to celebrate the richness and diversity of our country.

In 2008, despite the economic recession, the festival recorded 170 000 visitors, a 13% increase from the year before and about 40 000 more visitors than in 2004.

Keeping ticket prices down has helped and adding heaps of free shows to the festival menu has allowed people to visit and enjoy the festivities without having to buy tickets, Hemphill says.

And although international visitors are 'just a sprinkling' many are shopping for local talent, and some shows get to perform overseas.

The economic benefits are obvious. Last year, the event saw R53 million injected into the region over just 10 days, research figures show. 'Obviously some of the money that comes in goes out again, but a fair amount stays,' says Hemphill.

While local business and the hospitality industry are big beneficiaries, the festival is also used to address poverty and build the tourism profile of the historical town.

A massive arts and craft market is an important element of the festival, helping local artisans sell and market their goods. 'We work closely with the East Cape Craft Market and we are trying to turn this into a world-class craft market, not with goods from China but from Africa.'

Over about four months, there are 300 temporary jobs created with about an extra 100 jobs in the 10 days



The National Arts Festival is the biggest in Africa and places emphasis on activities that help develop local communities in the region.

Photo: Robert Rich

of the festival.

With the Dolphin Coast region already a tourist hotspot, there is room to continue growing. The nearby area of Alicedale, once a ghost town, is now a Khoisan village

with immense tourism potential. 'The municipality has also been amazing with policing, security and traffic and with services like refuse, while all the locals try very hard to assist throughout.'



## Knysna Oyster Festival

The tourist town of Knysna has hosted its Oyster Festival for 26 years during winter. Held over 10 days, the latest figures are over 200 000 oysters sold, 71 000 bed nights taken up and an estimated R63 million injected into the local economy. Among the events are an oyster-cooking festival, where chefs cater for 800 people, and mid-week events such as a well-attended cycle race.

Photo: Knysna Tourism